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2023 Winter Edition | Vol. 9, Issue 4

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FROM THE PUBLISHER linda evans shepherd



## Got Purpose?

How do you feel about the fact that God's giving you a brand-new set of 365 days?

Regardless of your level of hope or of worry, why not face the new year with an understanding of your God-given purpose for 2023?

Yes, understanding your purpose is crucial because a people without purpose will follow every trend, no matter how destructive or devoid of God.

There's no need to suffer with aimlessness. You can hone in on your purpose by prayerfully taking my Purpose Test below. This test will help you discover the strong verb (word of action) you can claim and practice throughout the year:

**Who is your who this year?**

In other words, who is God putting on your heart? Is your "who" your children, grandkids, church, neighbors, coworkers, parents, college campus, or a tribe in New Guinea? Knowing this will point your purpose in the right direction.

**What is your how?**

To figure this out, let's start by looking at your "who." For example, if your "who" is your children, think about "how" you could influence them. Could you teach them the Word of God, set good examples, teach them to pray? In other words, what is your "how" for your "who"?

**What is your why?**

Your "why" is the reason for both your "who" and your "how"!

For example, if your "who" is your kids, and your "how to influence them" is by teaching your kids how to pray, you need to know your reason. Is it because you know prayer will help your kids grow into people of faith, stay off drugs, or point them to God when making hard decisions?

Once you've answered these three questions, then the strong verb you are searching for will start to become clear.

My strong verb is LEAD, because God is calling me into a year to lead the women of the Church. But maybe your verb is something like TEACH! REJOICE! CHANGE! LOVE! or GROW! Write your verb down where you can see it every day, because your verb will continue to point to your purpose throughout the year.

Next, besides knowing your strong action verb, you'll also need to find your word of encouragement. Pick a word like TRUST! STRENGTH! FOCUS! or REST! What word of encouragement resonates with you. Use your word as a daily reminder.

Finally, open your Bible and search for a Scripture that highlights your encouraging word.

This year, my encouraging word is BELIEVE, and this selection led me to a bold Scripture choice. Mark 11:24 says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

I'll cling to this verse so I can use it to anchor my faith through whatever 2023 brings.

Finally, turn your Scripture into a prayer to pray daily. My prayer is, *Lord, I ask that this year be blessed. I believe it and receive it, and it is mine. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Armed with your purpose, encouragement, Scripture, and prayer, 2023 could be your best year to date. ☺

Love,

PUBLISHER, *LEADING HEARTS* MAGAZINE | AWSA, FOUNDER

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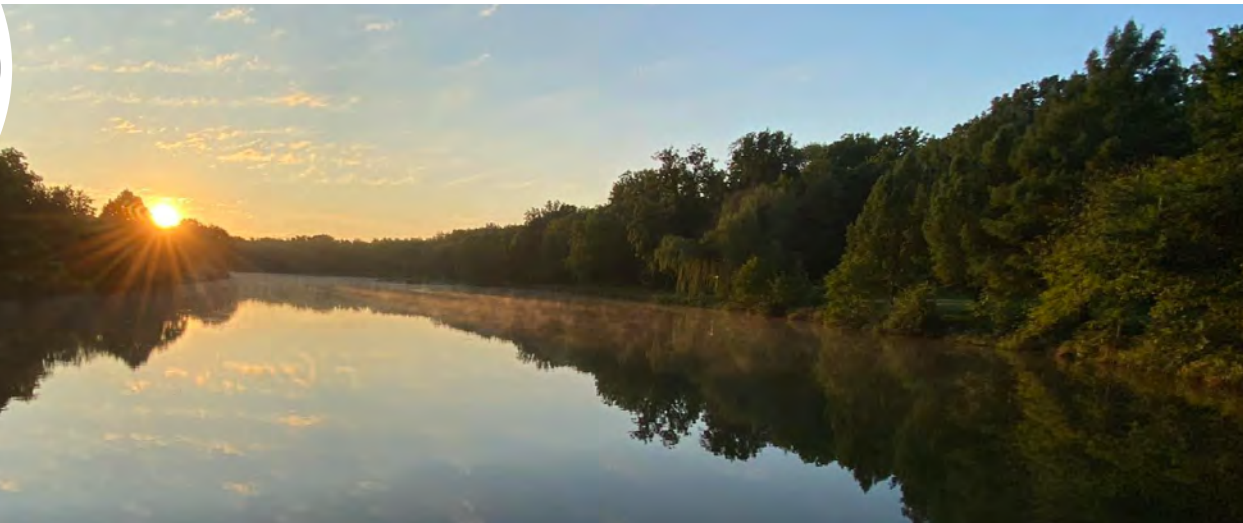
**Dawn Scott Damon**







FROM THE EDITOR amber weigand-buckley



## Take One Step, and He'll Multiply the Work

Early last spring, I was in a slump. I felt like I was swimming upstream in a river of cold molasses. I was closing in on the half-century birthday marker.

I had a monotonous, nagging feeling that “life is all downhill from here”—especially physically. I was stuck. But God spoke these words to my heart: “You take the first step, and I’ll multiply the work.”

When I shared that nudge with my hubby, Philip, we took it literally. We began going to a nearby botanical garden to walk in the wee hours of the morning (and I’m NOT a willing morning person). At first, it was a challenge to make it a quarter of the way around the pond without pain (picture above courtesy of Philip). But God continued to say, “Amber, take one step, and I’ll multiply the work.” So, I made it our goal to walk a quarter of the way around the pond every day.

The quarter mark around the pond offered the sweet reward of a park bench time of reprieve. A few weeks into our new pond trek ritual, while taking advantage of our earned resting spot, I said, “God, I believe that by this summer, You are going to take me halfway around this pond.” I had begun to set my sight on a new resting spot across the pond that held beautiful Adirondack chairs amid the shade trees right next to the water.

I told Philip, “I know God will take me halfway around this pond.” I couldn’t get discouraged in my disabilities when I trusted the God who said He’s got the multiplication covered. You know what? When I felt God’s nudge to walk a bit further to another bench (pain and all), He multiplied those steps too.

Just a few months later, (much sooner than I expected) we arrived halfway around that pond at those beautiful chairs for our oasis time. And in the days following, He increased what I

thought was possible—giving me the resilience to walk around the pond, even adding little diversions to increase our steps. However, even when I knew that I could make it around the pond without stopping, God said, “NO. I want you to sit down and rest in THESE chairs—the ones I have set aside for you and Philip—your oasis.”

That was a game-changing moment. I knew God would use my willingness to move so He could bless it and surpass my limited vision in that moment. Even in the miracle of the loaves and fishes, someone had to catch the fish, someone had to bake the bread, and someone had to hand over their lunch. However, I needed to quell my tendency to throw my energy into making it happen; it was wearing me out—physically and mentally. God in His goodness wanted to meet me in those moments with renewal and refreshing.

He encourages us all to sit and rest in the oasis where we can witness Him moving beyond our efforts. That is where He shines the brightest through HIS multiplication.

Instead of rushing ahead to the next thing on today’s list of activities, grab your favorite beverage and find your “bench” to read this issue of *Leading Hearts*. Then ask Father, “What step do You want me to take now? Act when He nudges you to move. He’s in the business of letting us take our one step and then multiplying what is accomplished into more than we can ask or imagine for His glory. ☺

Love,

—Amber

EDITOR | ART DIRECTOR *LEADING HEARTS* MAGAZINE  
AWSA, MARKETING DIRECTOR





# Are You Coachable?



As a widow and single mom, my friend faced challenges I had never encountered.

We both worked in a corporation where women were considered helpers. She aspired to be the best at technology and eventually became head of the IT department. Her strength and boldness

gave me the confidence I needed to jump over my own hurdles into the highest executive ranks of the company. I love strong women who fight for their place in the workplace and in ministry.

In her mid-fifties, my friend married a wonderful man. The two seemed the perfect couple—both successful and adventurous. He loved her and wanted to protect her, but he also thought he knew all the best answers to any situation. She recoiled at his constant directions and doggedly did everything her way. And the tug-of-war began. One day he tried teaching her to grill outdoors—the way he wanted to do it. She rebelled. He turned away in a huff, saying, “You are uncoachable!”

We laughed until we cried and the word “uncoachable” became a trigger for more laughter in the years to come.

That funny story becomes sad if we try to lead in our ability. Leadership brings with it a lot of power and rewards, but leading alone produces feelings of isolation. Trusted relationships are sparse. Responsibility is heavy. Criticism is likely. Every crisis knocks on your door.

**Adopt a new mindset and shift your thinking by following the suggestions listed below.**

## 1. Confirm you are where God has placed you.

In his second letter, Peter gave a mathematical progression to help us make this confirmation.

Start with faith. Then add goodness and knowledge. Then add self-control and perseverance. Intensify it all with godliness, kindness, and love. He said, “Do all you can to show God has really chosen and selected you. If you keep on doing this, you won’t stumble and fail” (2 Peter 1:10 CEV). Spend much private time with God confirming his calling on your life.

## 2. Open your mind and close your ego.

A closed mindset is the locked door to your growth as a leader. And the key to the lock is your ego. Hear and consider every opinion and input without looking at your phone or thinking of how to dismiss the idea. Even when you disagree with a team member’s comment, listen. Give yourself permission to learn from everyone. Try to hear and understand their perspective. Your humility—shown by listening—builds respect and cooperation.

## 3. Find a community.

Find others who hold a similar position in other organizations. For example, If you are a women’s ministry leader at a church, invite the women’s ministry directors in all the churches within a 50-mile radius to a joint meeting or luncheon. Cross denominational boundaries. Learn from each other. Share creative ideas. Solve problems together. Whether your leadership position is in a company, a church, a community, or an educational institution—connect with others who know what your life is like. The benefits will multiply as you discuss together.

## 4. Positive feedback is wonderful, but when you lead, negative criticism is inevitable.

Your response will show whether you are coachable. An event planner showed me the evaluation forms from a meeting where I spoke. The positive comments were overwhelming—compliments and praises. I admit I basked in the joy of reading each one. Until I read one critical review. I couldn’t stop the annoying and hurtful words from replaying in my mind.

A friend reminded me of the hundreds of glowing reports and helped me overcome the one bad evaluation. She said, “Consider the negative words. Were they meant to be helpful or were the comments spilling out of an unhappy, uncaring person?” Most people vent their negativity out of their own frustration, anger, or pain. Choosing to handle criticism with grace and a teachable spirit is the high road and is the exact way Jesus would respond.

Be coachable, and you will be a great coach. ●







*Lady Laura Simon*  
*Straight Talk & Honest Conversations*  
*with the Real Pastor's Wife*

# It's Official—I'M A PHARISEE

"Who picked this place?" I whispered,  
"We're having the awards banquet here,"  
responded my husband.

"There wasn't another place to have the  
banquet?" I whispered, glancing around.

"Laura, it's just another place to eat," Tony said, sighing.

"Well, I don't like it," I hissed. What are people going to think?"  
I whined.

We were at Hooters. And I was acting like a Pharisee.

## Judgmental Thoughts

I tried my best to play it off and look just as comfortable as the other parents. Nobody else seemed to be bothered about being at Hooters except for me. I was the only one looking around to see if the kids were staring at the servers. They were more interested in the wings and the ranch dip. Any real, good excuse not to have the banquet there? Nope.

Here's the definition of what was going on in my mind and in my heart: An excuse is a lie disguised as a reason.

## Arrested Arrogance

As I sat there, the Holy Spirit quietly began to work on my heart. Alright, I'm going to be honest; God started working on me. As He worked on me, my heart softened, and I loosened up and talked to the ladies who were assigned to serve our tables. They were friendly and attentive. Yes, they were dressed in tank tops, but their compression stockings were more like ones you see on senior adult women. After a while, the atmosphere (on my part anyway), lightened up. I was the only one sitting there with my face all scrunched up, arms folded, and stomach growling because of my attitude and stupid thought process.

Everyone else was engaged in conversations, while I began to feel convicted. Then the discussions changed: my sons

decided to tell the staff what their dad did for a living besides coach. Yes, they told the servers their dad was a pastor. They were so proud.

And so was I.

But I also felt ashamed. There I was, wife of the coach-pastor worrying about what people might think or possibly say. The pastor, his wife, and their kids had dinner at Hooters. They even had the audacity to have their kids' banquet there. Yes, those thoughts spun around inside my head and my heart. It was me having issues.

Sigh.

I felt as if the word "hypocrite" was etched on my forehead. These girls were just trying to make an honest living. And then there was me. Feel free to sigh deeply right here. The hypocritical-spiritual PW who knew better. Insert your I-can't-believe-her with your raised eyebrows. I'll put your "WOW" right here. There I sat hoarding the greatest award—Jesus—and was too judgmental and scared to share.

Fear gripped my heart as I listened to my eight-year-old son talk about his father, how well he preached, and that they should come visit our church. I just sat there in stunned silence. And a child shall lead them. Then my daughters chimed in with "Mom, we want to work here when we go to college."

"Okay," I said.

Whatever face you imagine me having during this conversation is probably spot on.

"That's nice." I don't believe my forced smile fooled anyone.

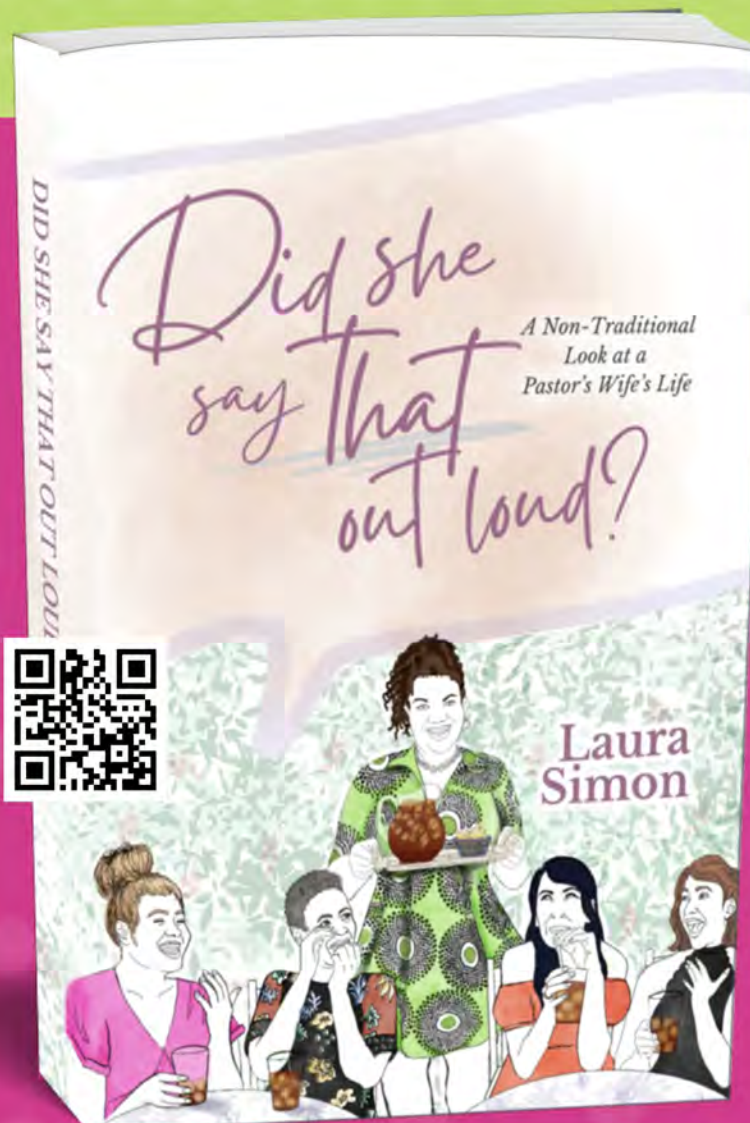
I was hiding my light under the guise of concern for the children. No, I was being gloriously judgmental. I just assumed stuff about the waitresses, and I was wrong.

continued on p. 13



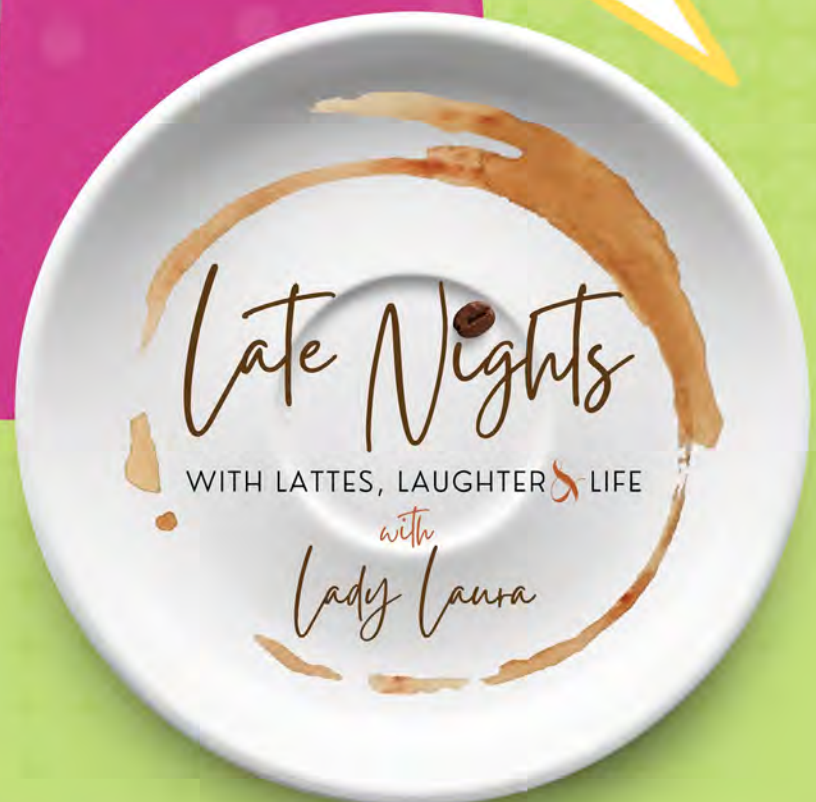


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**Did She Say That Out Loud?** delivers just that.



#ThePreachrzUF



continued from p. 11

I should've been showing the love of Christ, and I didn't. My children were witnessing and being all spiritually mature, and I wasn't.

Thankfully, God said, "Enough." He revealed this Truth to my heart: Hooters, like other restaurants, is a place where believers eat and have conversations; they can be meaningful, real, and transformative. God can do some of His best work in the uncomfortable places of our well-intentioned lives. Sometimes we hinder Him with our attitudes.

Let me explain.

Hooters wouldn't have been and wasn't my first choice. For an awards banquet. My rationale? I didn't want the banquet there because I thought it was a Gentleman's Club disguised as an eating establishment.

And there's more.

Maybe Hooters isn't your challenge, Smarty Pants. Whatever or wherever your uncomfortable place is, what's your reason? I'll wait. Oh, and one more thing, I didn't want my husband looking at another woman whose body might be in better shape than mine. Not so sure I wanted to see that. Not so sure I wanted him to see that.

Your turn. Be honest. It doesn't have to be long. Start with the truth and tuck it away in your Heart Rolodex.

## I'm a Recovering Pharisee

I often hear, "Sometimes you're the only Bible some folks read." You don't want to be a fake Bible, do you? You represent Jesus! "Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant ... Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality" (Romans 12:11-13 MSG).

How can you be inventive in hospitality? Be a better servant. Step out of your comfortable place of piousness. This is hard because it's something we don't want to admit. Friends, sometimes we're too much with our righteous indignation.

God is not happy with this separatist arrogance. God is everywhere and God is at Hooters. When I got out of God's way, people saw the goodness of God in us and wanted to learn more about this Jesus thing. When we do the "You're not saved?" we often offend or turn off potential believers.

## Hard Conversations

Hooters is part of our Eating Ministry. We have great conversations there. The Lesson: places of discomfort for the believer can be life-giving and life-changing opportunities for the non-believer, the backslider, and the new believer.

Have hard, life-changing conversations with your family and friends. The world is already showing your circle of influence what it wants them to know, why not show them what you want them to know and get ahead of the world?

"Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. ... Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody" (Romans 12:9, 16 MSG).

You can't share your Jesus if you're being supercilious. Neither will you demonstrate the love of Jesus rolling your eyes or forever folding your arms. And that passive-aggressive

"I'm just not going to say anything at all" will never win anyone to Jesus.

## Have the Hard Conversations with Yourself

Are you a Pharisee? Are you a Christian Snob? Do you act like you're better than others? Do you give the "my sin isn't as bad as your sin" vibe?

Meditate on Romans 12:9-16. What does the passage say to your heart, and is it in need of transformation?

## Don't Be a Pharisee.

When that Pharisee-ictal attitude creeps in, ask God to help you see it as an opportunity for growth, and learning about other perspectives. The Holy Spirit will love that. ☉

**Laura Simon is an award-winning author, mother, mentor, speaker, pastor's wife, and former elementary school teacher. Now she strives to write and share her honest and transparent stories about an imperfect person finding her perfect purpose. Laura lives in California with her husband, four children, and one grand-toddler-turtle named Squirtle.**

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# CREATURES *of habit*







Author Madeleine L'Engle says,  
“Sometimes idiosyncrasies  
which used to be irritating  
become endearing, part  
of the complexity of a  
partner who has become  
woven deep into our own  
selves.”

In my book, *52 Ways to Wow Your Husband: Put a Smile on His Face*, I help wives keep that lovin' feeling toward their husbands—even with their unique quirks might be bugging you a bit!

### How about your honey? Which of his idiosyncrasies drive you nuts?

One of my friends had a husband who loved fixing up old cars, so car parts packed their garage and yard. It was his only vice. He was a great community leader, father, church leader, and husband—all good—except those crazy car parts! So, she decided a good man with unwelcome car part collectibles was better than no man or a bad man. Good choice. She dug in and learned about antique cars, how to find deals on car parts, went on dates with him to car shows—and you know what? Eventually those parts became a real car, one they go on fun dates in!

### Wow Assignment

Now it is your turn. Make a list of some of the small irritations, annoying habits, and idiosyncrasies of your man. Then next to each irritation, write out the upside or why you can choose to love that part of who he is. Here are a few examples:

It drives me crazy when ... He runs late all the time. (The upside, he is a great listener and values people, so those relationships can take time.)

He spends money on tools. (The upside, he is very handy, a real Mr. Fix It!)

He is such a sports fanatic. (The upside, he has a competitive spirit that helps him achieve more in many areas of his life.)

### Wow Wisdom

Turn that irritation inside out. The Bible puts it this way: “Be gentle and forbearing with one another and, if one has a difference (a grievance or complaint) against another, readily pardoning each other” (Colossians 3:13 AMPC).

Forbearance is to endure, have patience, and persist with your mate. To pardon is to forgive AND show kindness. It is a picture of freely granting grace, not because of something he does or does not do, but because of who God is in your life. As God gives grace, be God's funnel that extends heaven-sent grace to your man.

### Wow Date

Make a big deal out of one of the small irritations you have with your mate. Turn the negative into a positive. My husband loves coffee and used to have an annoying habit of leaving used coffee mugs in any room he traveled. I would find coffee mugs in the bathroom, bedroom, the office, the garage in every vehicle, on fence posts! I decided to pray for Bill anytime I found a dirty mug and those prayers turn an irritation into fond affection. I was reminded that one of the reasons Bill loves his coffee is because he is a diligent worker—and that is a trait to be rewarded! So, for his 50th birthday, our family took Bill to a coffee farm in Hawaii, and he created his own “Bill Farrel blend”!

**Study your man's idiosyncrasies and annoying habits and see if any can be redeemed and turned into a gift to warm his heart and brighten his day:**

- If he is a sports superfan, buy a jersey of his favorite team and use it for your pj's. Or buy two tickets to his favorite sporting event and add a night's stay in a hotel after.
- If he is a fishing nut, grab a rod and reel and take him to a little cabin in the backwoods.
- If he is a car enthusiast, rent a sports car and head down a scenic highway. Double bonus if you visit a car show enroute.
- If he is a computer geek, camp out in line with him at midnight for that next new tech gadget or plan a trip to a technology conference, fair or expo.

Turn that annoying habit of his into an affectionate hug for him! ☺

— From Award-Winning Prayer Author **LINDA EVANS SHEPHERD**—

# Power-packed prayers for every moment of life



Whether life sends us trouble or blessings, we should pray. We know this, yet we often don't know what to say—so we say nothing.

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**LINDA EVANS SHEPHERD** is a bestselling author of 37 books, an international speaker, and a media personality. She is the founder of Right to the Heart Ministries and publisher of **LEADING HEARTS** magazine and **ARISE DAILY** devotionals. For more, visit [LINDASHEPHERD.COM](http://LINDASHEPHERD.COM).



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# THEBIGQ

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## Q: What is gossip, and how can we avoid doing it?

Our words carry power. More than once, I've been forced to bite my tongue when I felt my hurt feelings begin to emerge in public. It's also easy to fall into gossip during group prayer time.

So let's define gossip and discuss ways to season our words with salt.

Translators used the word "gossip" for a couple Greek words with similar meanings. *Psithyristas* means "one who whispers and causes harm," and *diabolos* means "false accuser." From these words, gossip involves saying things that cause damage or passing along information that hurts someone.

For example, my friend Jane recently discovered she had a severe health problem and preferred to keep her medical information private. We offered prayers and assistance, but we would be gossiping if we shared juicy stories about her during prayer time.

On the other hand, gossip can damage a person's reputation. For instance, my elementary school hired a stern teacher. Students characterized her as mean and harsh. When I learned she would be my fourth-grade teacher, I was horrified. However, I discovered what I heard was untrue.

She cared about her students and demanded we learn. She made me stay in during recess to learn my multiplication tables; looking back, I'm glad she did. Many other pupils hated the work she made them do. Their bad attitudes erupted in negative words and undermined her character. That's unfair.

What can we do to avoid gossip? First, we should respect a person's privacy in a medical or family emergency. This can be a tough assignment because Christians sympathize and want to help. I run to the Lord for help with keeping information to myself.

Jesus guided those addressing sensitive areas of concern with others in Matthew 18. "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. (NASB1995) Imagine if the students or parents talked directly to my fourth-grade teacher about her tactics instead of bashing her character. Hopefully, she could have made them understand her concern for them, or she might have softened her methods a little.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it may give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29, NASB1995).

The word "unwholesome" means "rotten." You would not want to eat molded fruit, so don't inflict decayed words on others. This verse gives an alternative—edification, which means to build up. Instead of ugly words, offer words of grace and encouragement.

Rather than gossip, "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24, NASB1995). Let your words reflect the beauty of Christ and make people thirsty to know Him better. ●





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## THE QUESTION OF Praying into Unity



I've often stood in front of the some 800 members of the Advanced Writers and Speakers Association (AWSA), to say, "Sisters, we

are not competitors, we are on the same team.

Let's lock arms to help one another reach our collective audiences for Christ. For we are more powerful working together, than alone."

The women nod, even despite their denominational differences. In the twenty-two years I've led this association, I've never seen a member put a irreparable crack into our unity.

Sure, we have denominational differences which we could debate, but we'd rather seek the unity of Christ. It helps that we agree on the important things, that Christ died for our sins, then rose to life again, and that we can repent of our sins and receive God's forgiveness as we follow Jesus with our whole hearts.

On the rare occasion our unity is challenged, it comes from someone struggling with pride, control, or cold love. We've remained unified, mainly because we know who we are in Christ.

Years ago, at a Christian Bookseller Association (CBA) book show, we AWSAs gathered to pray, worship, teach, and train one another, all before entering the convention floor. There we were met by an army of 10,000 authors, booksellers, and publishers who'd gathered to promote their latest books.

Twenty-foot-tall banners of famous faces hung from the ceilings while celebrity authors signed books for lines of adoring fans.

Even though the grandeur of the industry made us feel like country bumpkins, we returned yearly. After our private gatherings, we'd step into the CBA show, hugging, and praying with the vendors, authors, and publishers who came into our path.

One year a salesman stopped me. "You're the head of AWSA, right?"

He reached for my hand. "Before your ladies showed up, this was one cold place. But you brought in the love of God. That's changed everything."

This gentleman felt the love that came from our unity in Christ.

Unity matters to Jesus. Just before Jesus faced the cross, He prayed to His Father, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:22-23 NIV).

Let's stop to pray in agreement with Jesus that we will be one in Him, so we can do the work He's called us to: impact the world.

*Dear Lord, let me lock arms with my sisters and all who believe in You, pushing aside differences that don't tarnish the gospel. Help us to unite and embrace who we are in You. May we come together to help one another reach our families, our neighbors, churches, and communities for You. For You love us! You are not only with us, You are in us. Make us one so that we can point others to Your love.*

*In Jesus' name. ☺*



# An Introvert's Guide to HOSPITALITY

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**INTROVERT:** a shy, reticent person; one who gains energy from being alone.

**EXTROVERT:** an outgoing, overtly expressive person; one who gains energy from being around other people.

There you have it—day and night—black and white.

Many captions swirl around in our minds when we hear the word “hospitality.” If you are an introvert, you can want to run and hide rather than invite anyone into your home. However, the Bible teaches all of us to practice hospitality (Titus 1:8, Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9).

Some of the Scripture verses use the word “entertain.” Our purpose as believers is not to entertain but to be a blessing. Entertaining wants to impress by what we have and our gourmet cooking and always expects a return engagement. Hospitality is being a servant to those God brings across our path. The Bible doesn’t instruct how to decorate or set the table. But both introverts and extroverts can use all the resources God has given us. We can learn from one another.

I am a flaming extrovert with a spiritual gift of hospitality. I can pull together a meal quickly, sometimes with little planning, and go with what is in the pantry or freezer. It’s easy for me. I realize this is not how an introvert sees life. So, how does an introvert open the front door and invite people in, plus have the blessing of serving others?

As a young girl, I had the privilege of being the daughter of the Queen of Hospitality. My mum had an open-door policy, and we had visitors around our table probably three to four times a week. It never seemed to be a big deal. Adding a few things to make mealtime special is just as easy as serving a picnic! She taught me that little things make a difference and can make any meal special. Fresh flowers, napkin rings, tablecloths or placemats, and even little place cards can turn a simple meatloaf into a celebration.

In today’s cultural that often seems conflict-focused, it is more important than ever to be open to the Holy Spirit’s leading of hospitality. As added pressures and trials invade our lives, our home can be the light on a hill that shares God’s love, grace, and peace with those He brings into our lives.

God never expects the introvert to act like an extrovert. I teach everyone from young to mature men and women the Art of Afternoon Tea in all settings, church events, cooking, and college classrooms. I see that familiar deer-in-the-headlights look when we begin the course and start talking about table settings and recipes. The extroverts are excited and plunge ahead, while my quiet friends, the introverts, want to slide under the desk. I have learned that hospitality can challenge the core of who we are and how much we are willing to do for God. Hospitality doesn’t have to be opening the front door of our home. If it’s terrifying for you, invite someone to meet you at a coffee shop or restaurant. Stay calm with not having to fit in with the glossy pictures in *Martha Stewart Living* magazine.

“Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13).

None of us have “arrived” in the hospitality area, and we are encouraged to “practice hospitality,” which means to do it over and over! I have lost count of how many afternoon tea parties I have given. With prayer, we can allow God to use us and our homes in creative ways as a place of refreshment for others.

“He [the LORD] blesses the home of the righteous” (Proverbs 3:33).

My favorite way of sharing hospitality is preparing a traditional English Afternoon Tea. There is a lot of planning and preparation, but many years ago, I thought it would be a wonderful way to share the Christmas spirit in my neighborhood. We lived in a tiny bungalow with lace curtains and a little L-shaped dining area. I walked to each neighbor’s home and gave them a written invitation. Twenty-five invitations! Statistics show that only 10-15% would accept an invitation from someone they didn’t know. Twenty-three



arrived at my front door for our neighborhood's 1st annual Christmas Tea. Somehow, with God's smiling grace, we had an amazing time with the gospel shared with all 23 women. Amazing things happened after that tea and the next 12.

***This Christmas, I had two different teas so my little house would accommodate everyone.***

After that event, I practiced hospitality with the following eight guidelines—they work well for introverts and extroverts.

1. **Pray.** Ask Jesus for all the details and write them down. Who, What, When, and Where.
2. **Pick a theme.** A holiday or event is coming up, and you can get some great ideas for your menu and decor.
3. **Start small** with your guest list and your menu (you can even Invite just two people you know). Make familiar dishes; cook what you love. It could be as simple as a cup of tea and cookies.
4. **Keep it simple** but add some unique things—maybe fresh flowers. Also, don't hesitate to use premade food from the grocery store to add to your menu.
5. **Prepare in advance.** Start with the menu, shopping, cooking, and setting the table. When your guests arrive, you can focus on them, not the fixings.
6. **Ask your family for help.** Children exposed to hospitality in their homes will most likely practice it later. They might be the perfect co-host.
7. **Forget perfection**—tidy, but not flawless.
8. **Relax, enjoy visiting with your guests**, and reward yourself for extending hospitality afterward! A bubble bath or a movie?

You may be a gifted extrovert with many dinner parties or a timid introvert who lacks the confidence to invite a friend to lunch. Still, when we take Scripture's challenge to practice hospitality, we are showing brotherly love to those God brings our way.

## Cranberry Upside Down Cake

When cranberries are available in the produce section, I buy several extra bags and put them in the freezer. This dessert is wonderful to serve when the weather is still chilly and great when served with coffee or tea. You can use a cake mix for a quick dessert for your dinner party instead of the cake recipe here, but don't forget to add the spices.

### Directions:

Preheat oven to 350° F.

Butter the bottom and sides of a 9-inch cake pan (sides should be at least 2" high or springform pan) or a 9 "square cake pan.

### Topping:

- ¾ cup packed brown sugar
- 4 tbsp butter
- 12-oz. package of fresh cranberries (can be frozen)
- ½ cup chopped pecans



### Cake:

- 1 ¾ cups flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- pinch ground cloves
- 1 stick of butter
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 1 tbsp orange zest
- ½ cup Greek yogurt
- ¼ cup whole milk

In a small pan, place the butter and brown sugar on med heat and stir until butter melted. Mix well until melted then let simmer for 15 seconds. Stir the cranberries into the butter/sugar mixture, mix well, then pour into prepared cake pan.

Whisk together all the dry ingredients into a medium bowl.

In a separate large bowl, with an electric mixer, beat the stick of butter until smooth, then add the sugar and beat the sugar and butter until fluffy.

Add eggs, one at a time, then stir in the orange zest

Add the dry ingredients into butter mixture, alternating a third of mixture with the yogurt. Then continue until all dry ingredients are added, and stir in the milk until all is mixed well. Do no over mix.

Pour the batter over the cranberries in the cake pan and smooth out the top of the surface.

Place in preheated oven at 350°F, then lower to 325°F for about 55 minutes. The top of the cake should bounce back when pressed down.

Cool the cake just for 10 minutes—no more or the topping will adhere to the pan. Run a knife around the edges of the cake pan then invert the cake onto a cake plate.

Beat 1 cup whipping cream with 2 tbsp powdered sugar and one teaspoon vanilla. Or you can use vanilla ice cream. Enjoy! ☺





# 10 TIPS TO HANDLE YOUR social media critics



Anyone who is active on social media for any amount of time, is going to hit the criticism snag. Without meaning to, we may say something that can be taken out of context or just share something before we think and suddenly we can find ourselves in

hot water. Sometimes the criticism comes for reasons that have nothing to do with us. We're just a random target, chosen because someone wants to use us to increase their visibility and spread their message of hate.

Never forget that there are still those out there who believe that even bad publicity is better than none.

**Don't despair.** When the critics appear, we are not powerless. First, God himself walks with us—through both the easy and the difficult times. Continuing in faith is our first step, but there are also several strategies that will help us navigate a storm of criticism. There are also things we should avoid doing to keep from making the situation worse.

## **Strategies for Dealing with Social Media Critics**

**1. Pray first.** Ask God to go before you and give you wisdom, and keep you from making matters worse. This is my go-to verse for this situation: Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues (Proverbs 10:19 NIV).

**2. Don't react emotionally.** Before you post any response, give it time. Consider letting a trusted friend read your response before you post it.

**3. Take a deep breath and metaphorically count to ten.** We need to answer and move forward with thoughtful positivity.

**4. If the firestorm comes from a mistake you made, own it and apologize.** If it's something that was misunderstood, apologize for not being clear—even if you were—and explain briefly what you meant.

**5. Don't disappear from social media.** Laying low can often feed the fire and give your critics ammunition.

**6. Pray for the people who are criticizing you.** Ask God to give you His eyes to see them with love. Even if you have to continue taking steps, your heart will heal faster and you'll be amazed by how God will use you.

**7. Stay focused on what you plan to say on social media.** Stay true to your message. Don't get sidetracked from your message. Sometimes those who criticize are doing it to pull you into a fight and raise their own visibility. Don't be used.

**8. Enlist friends and supporters through private messages.** Reach out to people you trust and ask them to help you redirect and move on.

**9. If you continue to receive criticism, unfriend, unfollow, and block the bullies.** Continuing to stir up strife should be a red flag that someone has other motives. Distance yourself in a calm manner.

**10. When you stop interacting with someone, don't announce what you're doing.** Just quietly take steps to make wise choices.

I've personally experienced this type of public criticism. Although it feels like a major crisis and leaves you feeling weary and battle worn, it will make you stronger. Walking closely with God through this kind of situation will strengthen the message God wants to share through you and bless you in ways you cannot hope or imagine. ☺



ALL WORDS ARE NOT

*Equal*







## Words get a bad rap.

"All talk, no action" is a legitimate complaint. Christians, especially, shouldn't be talkers only but doers.

First John 3:18 says, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (ESV). If someone is suffering and we say "go in peace" without doing what we can to relieve that suffering, that isn't love.

Still, we mustn't be dismissive of words, especially when representing Jesus. This divide between words and actions is a uniquely human condition. God has no such conflict.

Christ is the Living Word who spoke the world into being. Right thoughts, right words, and right actions characterize Him. He has such integrity within himself that His words and actions are entirely unified.

Sin is what seeps into the fissures of human motives, creating a divide between words and behavior. So, we have every reason to hope! Jesus defeated sin on the cross and has set us free to follow a unique path. As we walk in obedience to Jesus, we will find our words and actions merging into integrated lives that have a powerful impact on the world.

I've been guilty of being dismissive of words, but the journey God has walked me through since 2020 has helped me better understand the interplay in a believer's life between words and actions. Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith and I co-wrote a book about conversations that have forever changed my behavior.

*Colorful Connections* would appear to be a book about words. We talk back and forth about what it's like to be in our skin in these times. Men and women of other skin colors also share their experiences. We introduce twelve questions we believe lead to healthy conversations about racial healing. We encourage talking.

Where is the prescribed action? What good is there in more talk? More than we can even imagine. Here is what's vital to discern.

We know there are a variety of foods available to us, but all foods aren't equal. Some nourish our bodies and lead to health, while others either do damage or pass through us, doing no good at all. It's the same with words.

The world is full of chatter. Talking heads abound over every form of media, and much of it is like conversational junk food, passing through our system like empty verbal calories or worse. Some of these unhealthy words leave dangerous deposits on our minds and souls. We walk away with the bloat of discouragement or the arterial plaque of fear and division that opens us to the danger of losing heart.

There are, however, words and conversations that result in godly action. For instance, speaking frankly with our doctor provides her information so she can act toward a remedy. Words to a judge or a legislator can lead to actions bettering our community. Couples converse, leading to marriage and

families. Conversation with God leads to action, not only in the world we see but also in the unseen realm.

**Conversations around skin color can result in healing and justice, as well as deeper bonds between individuals and united communities as we invest in one another and build the house God desires.** Godly words encourage godly thoughts that lead to godly actions empowering people to love, celebrate differences, and include others joyfully, not begrudgingly, based on respect and relationship.

**Just because there has been much talk that led nowhere doesn't mean talk is useless** any more than believing that since junk food has led to poor health, starvation is the solution. There is a time for silence, but silence as a default is a false shelter or a fallout inspired by fear, shame, or lost heart. This type of silence is not God's will for His people. Those who abandon the gift of words that lead to informed actions aren't exhibiting godly wisdom but are falling prey to a dangerous deception, creating a truth vacuum so God's enemy can fill the air with more lies.

**Action is vital.** We must act on behalf of one another out of love—caring for practical needs, advocating for justice, and building ministries and communities that reflect the variety of humanity God loves.

**But blind action can lead to greater misunderstanding and hurt. Conversations motivated by love, marked by mutual respect,** and informed by the Holy Spirit incite right actions that light up the world. God's people should be leaders in conversations about bringing people of all ethnicities together around justice and healing and then do what we say.

**There is foolish talk that occurs around the question of race.** It's not helpful to only talk with people who look like us. Another talk that isn't helpful is grumbling that someone (else) should "do something." Complaining about "those other people." Uninformed and hurtful comments about this being an "old topic" or wishing it would just "go away." These are all words that only add to the problem—verbal junk food.

**Taking the humble action, however, of going to a brother or sister who looks different from us and offering to listen to their story—leads to words that heal.** This healing can then lead to a relationship, which will lead to loving, just, informed action. This is the way the church of God ministers and heals.

**Let us resolve in 2023 to embrace renewed hope in God's gift of words.** We follow the Living Word, so we know that words have power to inspire and inform action. Let us reflect on our words and prayerfully assess which conversations lead to right action and which can be eliminated from our daily speech. Let us ask God to restore our faith in prayer and in healthy, godly conversation with others.

**Then, let us act.** Doing what is within our power to do to create homes, churches, ministries, and communities that reflect the variety God created and loves, so not part suffers, and all thrive. ●



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*The Advanced Writers & Speakers Association (AWSA) has two levels of membership.s specifically designed for Christian Women Communicators.*



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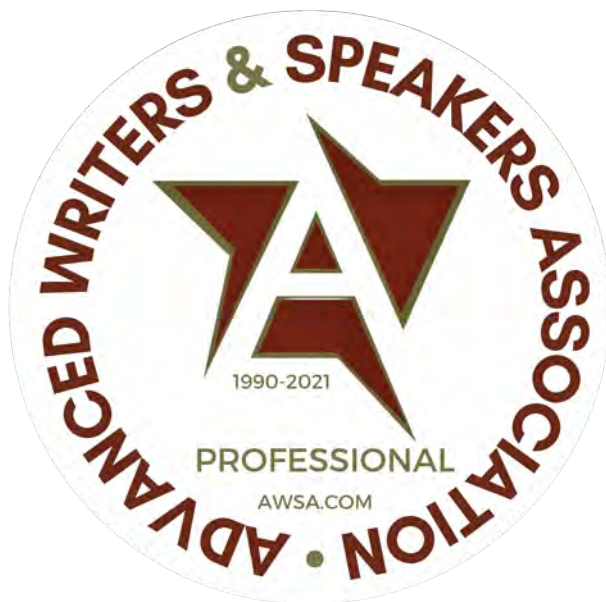
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*Chocolate  
is my  
♥ language!*



# No Counterfeit Chocolate— No Counterfeit Love



When I was a kid, I always wondered why anyone would ever choose Frankenberry over Count Chocula.

Because ... chocolate.

That was my entire reason. Of course, even though I was only a kid, I still instinctively knew that cereal chocolate didn't really count as true chocolate. It was actually the first bite of Cocoa Krispies that tipped me off. It was more like: snap, crackle, I don't think so.

I'm sorry, but I've just never been all that cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. I think it might be simulated. Simulated what, I don't know. It doesn't even smell right. It's like a cross between old baby oil and sweetened aluminum. Spoiled, oiled, or foiled—I don't know that either.

Calling cereal chocolate real chocolate would be like calling cereal marshmallows real marshmallows. I know it's supposed to be to a breakfast cereal's credit when it stays crunchy even in milk, but I don't think that's supposed to go for the mallows. Whenever you bite down on a marshmallow, you shouldn't be able to hear it. That's just not right, people. They're not marshmallows. It's not chocolate.

Crumble Ho Ho's in a bowl. Add milk.  
THERE'S your chocolate cereal.

There's always disappointment in encountering the fake. So much more so when you're talking about what is meant to distinguish us as Christ-followers. Jesus said, "By this all

people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 ESV).

We're called to love each other without anything counterfeit or artificial. Without hypocrisy. Without self-centeredness, secret agendas, or ulterior motives. Self-seeking fake-love? It's just not right, people. Because we've received the forgiveness of Christ, our love is to be sincere, deep, heart-felt—just as His is. "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22 NIV).

There's no place for counterfeit love among those who know Christ. Only the genuine article will do. Paul said in Romans 12:9, "Let love be genuine" (ESV).

## So how do we do that?

We love the Lord first and foremost. We obey His commands and allow His Spirit to work out His love through us. Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself" (HCSB).

And He will never command us to do something He won't enable us to do.

Love is more than just an emotion. It's the ability to sacrifice for another. Jesus lived and died showing us how to walk it out. "And walk in love, as the Messiah also loved us and gave Himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God" (Ephesians 5:2 HCSB).

No weird aluminum smell. A fragrant offering. When we're walking in His love, there's simply nothing artificial about it.

Because ... Jesus. That's my entire reason. ☉



**SEE, I AM DOING A  
NEW THING!  
NOW IT SPRINGS UP;  
DO YOU NOT  
PERCEIVE IT?  
IN THE WILDERNESS  
AND STREAMS IN  
THE WASTELAND.**

**ISAIAH 43:19 (NIV)**



**LEADINGHEARTS.COM**



# ♥ BUT FIRST COFFEE



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