

You'll Laugh About This Someday



DEVOTIONS

FOR FRAZZLED MOMS

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Marathon

Getting hit in the eyeball with a whipping rope was what finally sent me over the edge.

It had been one of those days . . .

I awoke to the sound of *both* babies crying and came in to find them both soaked to the skin in their own pee. My husband and I had a stupid argument before he left. One twin ate a handful of dirt from my gardenia plant while I cooked breakfast. The other wouldn't stop crying unless I held her, so I cooked with one hand (I've really become quite good at this). We left the next day's fireworks out on the table for some awful reason, and my six-year-old asked approximately forty-five times during breakfast if we could go outside *right now*, RIGHT NOW and light off this one, or that one, or how about this . . . (specific one). I yelled at the neighbor kid whose face was shamelessly smashed against our front window for ten minutes—only to discover that his mom had heard me from the driveway. She-twin spit cereal onto my new purple silk robe that I had saved a month for and worn for the first time that day. He-twin stealth-pooped all the way up his back, and of course I didn't discover it until it rubbed against—you guessed it—the purple silk robe.

Finally, I had gotten the poop cleaned up and breakfast put away to a point where I could feed the second baby. The six-year-old had decided to play cowboys, singing the same one line of the worst song on earth over and over and over. From somewhere upstairs, I could hear the three-year-old yelling, "Come wipe my bottom! Mommy! Come wipe my bottom!" The first baby clawed my leg for attention while the second refused to open her locked jaw, and the six-year-old asked whether we could light just one firework, *again*, and—right at that moment—*pow!* The end of the cowboy's rope slashed me directly in the eyeball. Burning. Blazing. Stinging.

And I Lost. My. Mind.

First I screamed. Lots of angry words. Loudly. Which made the babies both immediately start sobbing. Then I grabbed the prized rope and threw it in the trash: cue

the six-year-old to begin wailing. The three-year-old saddling the toilet was now crying from upstairs, and I figured since everyone else was crying, well, heck—I might as well join them.

We all cried together for what seemed like quite a while, my children and I. They were scared and sad and wounded by my outburst, but me—I was defeated. I began to spiral down into that dark dungeon of mommyhood where you wonder why you ever had kids to begin with, how you can possibly face another minute of this misery, and what would happen if you just stood up and walked out the door and never came back. (I am told all mommies have these thoughts from time to time. But that doesn't make it any better.)

Parenting young children has often been compared to running a marathon, and rightly so—a marathon is about training, pacing, fitness, endurance, determination, pain, suffering, misery, and victory. My communications teacher in college, Chris Blake, once told a story about a marathon he saw on TV that I think of often as a parent. Long after all the other runners had crossed the finish line, the TV cameras were following one unfortunately large woman who was about two full hours behind the crowd. And it was no wonder why—she wasn't running, she was all but hobbling, with the poise of a walrus on land. It took monumental energy just to lift one foot at a time. A paper cup casually blowing past on the street was making faster progress than she was. Not only would she certainly be the last to finish, but it was doubtful whether she would ever finish at all, at the rate she was going. This was the “fat lady,” and singing the final song would have to be upstaged by simple breathing.

But Mr. Blake noticed something that riveted him to this poor plodder. With each leaden step the woman took, she was muttering something to herself. After a minute, he realized that she was saying the exact same thing every time she smacked the pavement. Fascinated, he kept watching in hopes that the cameras would zoom in close enough to read her lips and clarify the phrase.

They did.

Every time the woman lifted her right leg, she pointedly mouthed, “Oh God.” And every time she lifted her left, she finished, “I can.”

Oh God, I can.

Oh God, I can.

Oh God. I *can*.

All the way to the finish line.

In the marathon of motherhood, this mantra really works for me. When the daily grind is grinding me just a little too fine, I try to take a second, catch my breath, and whisper, “Oh God, I can.” When each and every leaden step of the day anchors me in discouragement and self-doubt, I remind myself, “Oh God, I can.” When loneliness and exhaustion stalk me like shadows, a simple “Oh God, I can” is enough to take another step. Sometimes it's a pep talk. Other days it's a plea for help. And often

I don't even believe it initially, but the repetition has a way of rooting itself.

Later, during a quiet moment (just kidding, I don't have any of those—actually it was while I was showering to what I call the argument soundtrack), I was reflecting on the rope incident and the marathon woman, and I somehow thought of Jesus. Jesus in Gethsemane. Mud under His fingernails, clawing the ground in abject anguish. “Oh God, I can't!” He faints. Blood speckles the dust. An angel is sent to renew His strength. “Oh God, I can,” He whispers. And then, “Oh God, I *will*.” The beam's crushing weight, the nails' piercing agony—“Oh God, I can.” Calvary was His finish line, and He crossed it for me.

That marathon woman crossed the finish line too, believe it or not. Four hours after everyone else, but—she finished. And as she finally stepped over that blessed line she was still repeating, now cheering victoriously, “Oh God—I can!”

My finish line that day was bedtime, but since it was a long time until that holy hour, there were a lot of other things I realized I *could* do: I apologized to my children for losing my temper. I sent an apology note to the mother of the annoying kid I yelled at. The prized rope came out of the trash. One firework was selected and lit off. And for myself, I took a nap on the floor while one baby beat me over the head with a stuffed animal the entire time. Yes. I really did sleep.

My other finish line (besides college) is heaven. Since I'm hoping my children will cross it with me, I'm training today with them in mind. Give up a priceless hour of sleep to pray (beg) for patience and wisdom? Oh God, I can. Wrap my arms around a child I'd just as soon strangle? Oh God, I can. Model forgiveness when it's hard, endure a day of tasks I hate, make time for moments of wonder? Oh God, I can. Lavish grace as often as possible, just as grace has been lavished on me?

Oh God—with Your help—I can.

(Maybe there will be a purple silk robe waiting for me beyond the pearly gates?)

IN CASE YOU GET SIX MINUTES TO YOURSELF: STUDY GUIDE

1. What is your particular race right now—in motherhood, marriage, and life?
2. How are you running your race: at a sprint, a steady pace, a limp, or a crawl?
3. What things threaten your long-term endurance? What things strengthen it?
4. Read the chapter “Gethsemane” (chapter 74) in the book *The Desire of Ages* by Ellen White, specifically pages 690–693. What was the turning point in Jesus' marathon of grief that night? When was the exact moment and what was the exact reason that Jesus ultimately decided to go through the horrors of Calvary?
5. Read Hebrews 12:1–3, where Paul talks about running the race of the Christian life with endurance. What is the secret?
6. Where does the “Oh God, I can” belong in your life today?



The Snail

Please, Mommy! Please! Please can we buy a pet snail too! *PLEEEEEEEZE?*”

We are at the pet store on a September afternoon. We came here to replace the fish that died in the boys’ fish tank the night before. “One fish, and one fish only!” I had warned my boys all the way here. In my hands are two bags. Each has a fish swimming skittishly inside. And now they are begging me for a third animal—a snail. I am teetering on the edge of angry.

It’s not the worst thing, I try to tell myself, as I hear the birds squawking from ten aisles away. A water snail is a nice quiet pet—but wait, No! I specifically told them: One. Fish. The inner Mommy dialogue with myself begins: Do they think they can take advantage of my generosity? Do they have no respect for my clear and firm boundaries? When is it going to be time for Mommy to show that her limitations mean business around here? Today! No snail.

The “helpful” pet shop employee is staring at me. She has already spent fifteen minutes fishing out two very specific “That one! That one!” fish for me. I suddenly realize she’s waiting for my response now—snail or no snail? I have won the argument in my head, but it appears I haven’t answered my children in real life yet. *Getting to that, net-wielding lady, getting to that. She’s going to judge me if I say No to a harmless three-dollar snail, isn’t she? Oh, I am not in any mood to be judged today!*

“There is something you should know about snails,” she breaks into my self-talk. “They need algae to live on. So, I mean, if you get a snail? You like, have to make sure you never clean the tank. Ever. Just let that algae grow and grow so the snail can eat it and stuff.”

See, now she’s done it! I will never be able to say No to my children with an explanation like . . . wait. Wait. Did she just say I can stop cleaning the tank? Does that mean—forever? No more Olympic balancing moves with watery endings, no more sifting fish poop thick as volcano silt, no more tank rocks on my driveway for months? No cleaning the tank! Hallelujah!

“I will take two snails!” I exclaim with sudden glee.

“Yaaaayyyy!” my kids burst into celebration. “We are getting a snail! Two snails! Yay yay yay yay! You are the best Mommy *ever*! Snaaaa-ails! Snaaaa-ails! Snaaaa-ails!” They chant and hand-wave and hop-dance around the fish tank area. I am tempted to take their hands and dance with them, I’m so relieved. The clever employee hurriedly fishes out any two snails she pleases, before the victors think to attach to a very specific certain pair.

In a few minutes we are checking out at the registers with our *two* fish and our *two* get-out-of-tank-cleaning-jail-free snails. My boys bounce out to the car, and I carefully cradle the large bag containing our new family members. I am already planning to name one delightful snail Pac-Man and the other Roomba. My kids will understand someday, I figure.

“Tank cleaners!” I congratulate myself. “What a great day this has turned out to be. Leave the filth—the snails will clean it.”

But driving home it hit me: the similarity. I think I am the snail of my own household.

Everybody else seems to make messes at will and knowingly leave them all for me to clean up faithfully, as if that’s my sole purpose in life. As if that’s exactly what I was made to accomplish. They keep scattering toys and throwing food on the floor and dirtying clothes and soiling their own bottoms as if it’s their personal job to make sure I still have work to do. “Don’t clean anything up,” I imagine them thinking, “or Mom won’t have any reason for existing!” So they cover entire windows in hand-prints. They smear toothpaste across the counters. They pull every last book from the giant bookcase. To make sure that the snail still has duty and purpose in life.

I don’t like being the snail.

At times I have even begun to resent being the snail. Quite bitterly. I fume about being trapped in an endless exhausting cycle of running the dishwasher and emptying the drier and changing diapers two at a time and sweeping the floor that can never stay clean for longer than three minutes. And there is no way out of this cycle—I have to keep doing it, and doing it, and doing it—all day. Every day. For years and years into the future. Nobody can rescue me from it and I can’t stop, because to ignore the cleaning would make things even more miserable than cleaning is. The other day as I was sweeping the kitchen floor, I thought to myself, *I will still be sweeping this floor on the day my kids leave for college. I will never be done sweeping this floor.*

I wish someone had told me during my own college years that so much of my day would be spent doing so many menial tasks. I foolishly thought my life would be all about the ideas and concepts I was learning and loving more each semester. “Oh no, girlfriend,” I wish they had said. “You may think about those far-off ideas from time to time—but your life? Honey. It’s gonna be about scrubbing toilets and showers. You’re going to spend hours each day trying to feed a small crowd three times, and clean up after each time. You’re going to pick up the same exact toys 35,732 times.

A month. You will change more urine-soaked sheets than you could ever count. And you will lose yourself in this—it will threaten to become your identity: the cleaner. The snail.”

The truth is—I do lose myself. Often. The lists of things to clean and fix and put away can get so long that I forget there's more to my life. Sometimes I manage to remember things I used to love, dreams I used to have. But there just is no time for those things today. Or tomorrow. Maintaining takes everything I've got. It feels like one of the deepest challenges of motherhood—just fighting to remember who you were and what you wanted before you had kids.

It's after bedtime now, and I have come sneaking back into my sleeping boys' room to watch the little snails, happily scooting around the tank, leaving clean slug-print tracks through the green mosaic of algae. They never stop cleaning, I realize. They will clean all day and night. “How are you happy doing this all day and night, little snails?” I want to ask them. And why aren't I?

Mostly because I'm not actually a snail, I guess. I was made for more than cleaning all day. It isn't my calling or my identity, even if it is my constant activity. My identity is so, *so* much richer. How long has it been since I've considered the things God says about me?

One of the clearest pronouncements Jesus makes about human identity and calling is found in Matthew 5. If I try to imagine the scene, I can see Jesus looking out at the multitudes sitting cross-legged on the grassy hillsides of Galilee. With pride dancing in His eyes, He announces, “You are the light of the world” (verse 14). Having just previously been compared to salt, I assume some people's brows furrow, minds race ahead to guess what He means this time. Chins lift stiffly off palms, heads tilt inquisitively, eyes squint through the afternoon sun as Jesus goes on to explain that a city on a hill cannot be hidden. Perhaps they think of a city they've once seen, or look across the countryside at familiar buildings perched atop a nearby hill. “People don't light a lamp just to put it under a bowl either,” Jesus continues (verse 15, author's translation). Giggles escape the mouths of children who picture this silly idea, whispering to their mothers, “Why would anybody do that, Mommy?”

“I don't know, sweetie,” she answers, “but *shhh!* I want to listen!” And then Jesus delivers the punch line the crowds were waiting for: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (verse 16). A pause. A silence settles in as men scratch their beards and women stroke the soft hair of their children, digesting this new idea. Realizing that Jesus has just placed a calling upon their lives.

He's placed that calling on me as well, and on every mother who's in danger of losing sight of her purpose. We are the light of the world too. Maybe not in much of the world, but most definitely within the little worlds of our homes. I am that city on the hill that my children can see from any angle of any room. And it doesn't matter what else I am occupied with all day long—*this* is my real job. To make sure my light

is shining, free of baskets. To make sure the lamps of my faith are lit brightly enough that my children will come to recognize the familiar glow of belief. So that maybe one day if their own paths should become very dark, they will search the night for that hill-city's flickering lights, remembering the faith they first learned at my feet, and use its beacon to guide themselves home. This is my real calling, and this is no small calling.

When my husband and I hiked the Grand Canyon several years ago, we took no notice of the South Rim Village shops and windows as we descended the Bright Angel trail by daylight. But once the sun sank and the canyon fell into blackness, we noticed the village lights immediately, flickering above us on the edge of the rim. We could see those lights from almost anywhere in the camp that night, glowing in the dark, marking where we had come from. That's exactly what I am called to give my children: an internal compass of light they can see and access from anywhere. They might not notice it now. One day, however, should they plunge into blackness while desperately scanning the horizon for a light, they will remember where they came from.

How can I be sure that I'm fulfilling this solemn duty, this giant task? One thing I know for certain is that I cannot get lost in being the snail. I can't let the chores list summarize who I am. I have to make sure that God is the One telling me who I am, consistently, all day long—or at least half as often as I pick up a broom or a spatula or a dish towel. In order for Him to be able to do that, I have to create avenues in my life in which His Word can shape me. I need His voice to repeatedly remind me what my greater purpose in this house really is: that I am the light of my kids' world.

Even though I may have to spend a considerable amount of time cleaning my children's hands and faces and bottoms, I'm called to also pass on the kind of values to them that will inspire them to live clean lives. To pass on beauty and wonder, self-control, patience, gratitude, and faith. I am not merely to make clean tracks through the mayonnaise on the kitchen floor (true story), but to make tracks of faithfulness and belief through hard times. I am not in charge of cleaning up their hearts or their souls, but I am solemnly commissioned to introduce them to the only One who can. When they see my light, Jesus says it will lead them to glorify their Father in heaven. And that is, ultimately, what I want for my children the most. Alongside all the cleaning, I must make deliberate efforts to keep sight of this goal.

But in the midst of all this snail-esque cleaning and lamp-shining business, I get the added bonus of enjoying my children, every moment I allow myself to. I get to love them—oh so much—until my heart could almost burst. I get to spend carefree afternoons at pet stores basking in the joy of being the “greatest Mommy on earth” because I bought two simple snails. I get to stand here in the night and watch them sleeping, peaceful and perfect. There won't always be blueberries to clean off my walls, legos stealthily filling my rain boots, or nerf gun bullets waiting under my pillow at night. I won't always be sopping up puddles on my bathroom floor from

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where my twins happily fished elbows-deep in the toilet. All these bizarre chores together herald one very sacred truth: I have children of my own to treasure. There are so many who would do all the cleaning in the world in order to be able to say the same.

OK. It's worth it. I guess all the cleaning is worth it, in the end.

Clean on, little snails, into the night. Clean on faithfully, as will I.

IN CASE YOU GET SIX MINUTES TO YOURSELF: STUDY GUIDE

1. If you got to choose one household chore that you never had to do again, which one would it be?
2. What cycles of motherhood do you feel yourself getting stuck in?
3. Which duties of motherhood do you feel are most important? Which ones do you take the most joy in?
4. Read Matthew 5:13–16. What are some tangible, practical ways you can be “salt” and “light” to your children?
5. How can you make sure your identity as a person does not get lost during these hectic years of young motherhood?
6. How does one firmly root their identity in God instead of production?
7. Which areas of your own life could use a good cleaning right now?