

Making it Look Easy: Achieving Excellent Style in Any Genre

I. Introduction: Writing devotionals: writing discipline

If you can write good devotionals, you can write successfully for any genre.

II. Elements of a great devotional

A. Personal Experience

1. Relative importance
2. Limiting the details

B. Direct connection with God

1. Sharing an insight that goes beyond mere Judeo-Christian values
2. Bible-based — writing that grows from personal engagement with scripture

C. Takeaway for the reader

1. Universal - showing the readers how to apply the writer's specific experience to their lives.
2. Exploratory tone — real people, talking to other real people about what it means to be a Christian, to live faithfully
3. Using concrete, specific language rather than abstract generalities

III. Style: Excellent writing makes the reading seem effortless.

A. Fair Trade—The payoff they get must be worth the effort.

1. Economy of expression: saying a lot with a little
2. The SURE test for choosing the best word

B. Clear, concise, and direct

1. Quick Fixes for Sluggish Style — combating wordiness
2. Quick Fixes for Sluggish Style — using language that enlivens rather than deadens

C. Concrete (rather than abstract and vague)

1. Building bridges (1) between the author and the reader through language that draws the readers in, rather than pushing them away and (2) between the physical and the spiritual by using richly descriptive, sensory language
2. Being specific with concrete examples
3. Being sensitive to denotation and connotation

D. Sensory

1. Using language that appeals to the senses
2. Creating memorable images in the reader's mind

IV. Conclusion: Writing for *The Upper Room* helps writers hone their craft because learning to write well for *The Upper Room* is learning to write well for any publishing market.

Common Themes of Meditations

- Spiritual Disciplines – prayer, Bible reading; etc.
- Christian Action – visiting the sick; encouragement; outreach to less fortunate
- Healing and Death
- Relationships
- Family Life
- God’s Love and Grace/Praise
- Testing/Growth through Hardship
- Forgiveness and Reconciliation
- Biblical Story
- Personal Relationship with Christ/Salvation
- Evangelism and Witness
- Catholicity
- Uniqueness/Personhood
- Nature/Animals
- Trust and Obedience

Common errors in meditations not chosen for publication:

- Misusing scripture -- out of context; limiting meaning, based on a single word
- Self-righteous or scolding tone (“preachiness”)
- Failing to move from one person’s particular experience to larger categories of experience (not giving the reader ways to identify with writer’s insight)
- Abstractness (ideas without anchors)
- Ineffective writing -- vague, unclear; insufficient detail; impersonal approach
- Tired examples

Evaluation Criteria

•Evaluating Meditations: Discussion Criteria

•The final decision about whether a meditation will be published is made by a group of senior editors. When our editors gather for the meeting we call “copy session,” we look at a group of meditations one by one and discuss each meditation. Editors receive the meditations about two weeks before copy session to allow time to read them (in addition to their other work).

•We use five words or phrases to remind us what to look at in each meditation:

Scripture: Are the suggested reading and quoted verse appropriate in length and connection to subject of meditation? Does the reading begin and end at a reasonable place (usually a paragraph break)? Is the story or passage taken in context? Is the passage interpreted responsibly and helpfully?

•**Theology:** Is the theology “within the range of orthodoxy”? That is, has this view been accepted as valid within Christian tradition over the centuries? Does the interpretation allow for more than one view of the scripture passage?

•**Cultural:** Will the content of the meditation make sense to readers in many cultures? Will translators have difficulty in adapting the meditation or explaining cultural elements to readers? Does the meditation reflect only “first-world” values?

•**Family:** Is the content appropriate for use in a family worship setting? Does it offer a realistic view of family life, or is everyone perfect? Does it allow for more than one view of what makes a family?

•**Reader ID (reader identification):** Is the content of the meditation universal and yet specific? Will readers in many situations find the insights helpful and be able to apply them in their life?

Guided Meditation: Mercy and Forgiveness

READ: Genesis 32:1-12; 33: 1-10

1. When have you wronged or hurt someone close to you and been reluctant or afraid to face the one you've wronged?

2. Place yourself in the role of Jacob. Look at the way Esau receives Jacob and write about:
 - a. When have you asked someone for forgiveness and been graciously received?

 - b. If you have never asked another person for forgiveness, why not?

3. Place yourself in the position of Esau. Describe an experience when someone has come and asked your forgiveness. Were you able to be gracious?

4. God told Jacob in Genesis 31:3: "Return to your country and your kindred and I will do you good." When have you felt God nudging you to face some old hurt from the past? What helped you to be willing to face it?

5. Think about the past. Is there some issue or relationship in your life right now where there is brokenness? Where do you need reconciliation and what holds you back from seeking it?

6. Jacob said to Esau in Genesis 32:10, "The way you have received me is like seeing the face of God." When has an encounter with some person been for you like "seeing the face of God?"

7. When have you been moved to make some symbolic gift or act to signal the fact that God has done something special in your life?

Ten Forms of Daily Meditations

1. First-Person Reflection: A person writes about an insight or experience s/he has had alone, such as while reading the Bible, praying, working in the garden, listening to music.
2. Interaction with Others: The writer comes to a spiritual insight or to spiritual growth through a group experience, such as participating in a committee or going on a family outing.
3. Third-person Observation: The writer reports an incident observed and draws a spiritual application or parallel.
4. Child's Mis-statement or Cute Saying: A child's innocent statement sparks an insight on the part of the hearer. Please note: We do not use material that uses children as a negative example because they are immature, do not understand, mispronounce a word, or in some other way behave as children. We do not put children down for being children.
5. Object Lesson: An object or animal in nature becomes a symbol for a spiritual truth or a window on God's activity or God's nature.
6. Bible Story: A story from the Bible is re-told and applied to a current situation.
- *7. Phrase/Motto: Some apparently non-religious phrase is set in a Christian context and used as a springboard for spiritual comment. (Such phrases can be specific to North American culture in a way that makes them unusable in editions published other countries.)
- *8. Retelling a Famous Story (novel, play, movie, fairy tale, describing a cartoon): A published familiar story is recapped in a few sentences as a springboard for comment about a spiritual truth/insight. The same cultural limitations apply to this strategy as apply to using phrases and mottoes.
- *9. Artful or Literary Meditation: Sentences follow a repeated pattern, or some repeated sound or structure begins each paragraph and shapes the meditation. We seldom use these because this way of writing tends to draw attention to itself rather than to ideas. Also, such devices often do not survive translation.
- *10. Exposition of Bible Passage: This type of meditation tells what a specific passage means. It is a sort of mini-sermon. Because this approach can easily deteriorate into preachiness, these meditations are seldom used. (Please note that this is different than seeing God's story in your story and linking your personal experience to a Bible story. We want meditations that do this.)

*The Upper Room doesn't use this type.

@ Mary Lou Redding, The Upper Room Magazine, 1997.

PREACHINESS

When preaching becomes “preachy” (sanctimonious)

1. Use of second person (“you”)
2. Imperative verb structures
3. Use of words/phrases such as *must*, *ought*, *should*, *need to*, *have to*
4. Lists/numbering (“First,” “second . . .”)
5. Absolute statements and sweeping assertions (clues: *always*, *never*, *everyone*, *most*, *worst*, and other superlatives)
6. Speaking to a situation from outside of it

Ways to Avoid Preachiness

1. Find a way to bring yourself into the situation.
2. Imagine yourself as the person and ask how you'd want to be dealt with.
3. Choose proper words/choose words carefully.
4. Let them think; don't give orders.
5. Let the Bible verse/story say it.

Failure

Read Numbers 20:7-12

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, Because ye believed me not therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.

— Numbers 20:12(KJV)

Moses was no stranger to failure. When the Israelites needed water, God told Moses to speak to the rock. But instead Moses struck it with his staff. Such a small action, with such huge ramifications.

Moses' sandal would never etch its print in the Promised Land. It's like driving for 40 years to get to Disneyland, but not getting past the admission gate.

Failure — Moses knew it. How many times a day do you suppose Moses must have rehearsed that fateful day in his mind? If only he had gotten more sleep the night before. If only the people hadn't complained so much. If only, if only.

But what does God have to say about Moses' life? Many years later, he is not only listed in the Christian's Great Hall of Faith (in Hebrews 11), but he has the most verses there. Hm...not bad for a man who thought he blew it.

How about you? Isn't it time you forgave yourself? Confess your sin, if you haven't already, and claim God's promise of forgiveness. Simple as that. No more mentally beating up yourself. It's gone.

Enjoy the fresh air again. You're out of the reach of failure's tentacles.

Revised: Many of us need to forgive ourselves for some failure. When we confess our sin, God forgives. It's as simple as that. We don't have to continue beating ourselves up. Once we turn to God, the sin is gone. We can enjoy the fresh air of forgiveness.

* * * * *

Beautiful Mistakes (BEFORE)

Read Romans 8:28-31

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28 (NRSV)

Embroidery is a hobby of mine. I bought a pre-printed cloth with roses and leaves around the border. I decided to make the roses pink and the leaves green. I embroidered one rose and then set the cloth aside. The next day I picked up my cloth and embroidered a second rose. When I had finished the second rose, I noticed the first rose was pink and the second was a light orange color. I had picked up the wrong thread! *What should I do now?* I thought.

The idea came to me suddenly: I'll make each rose a different color. I made one yellow and one mauve. Then I embroidered all the leaves a different color. I made one dark green, one light green, one red, and one blue. My embroidered cloth with the mistake began to emerge as a brightly colored work of art.

When we come to God with a personal mistake or sin, God does not throw us away because of it. Instead, God works around our mistake and weaves it into the beautiful, colored tapestry of life.

Don't be ready to give up because you feel that you failed God. Come to God, admit your failing, and resolve to try to do better. God is ready to forgive.

PRAYER: O God, thank you for your forgiveness. Help us to follow the example of Jesus in our daily living. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God can weave even our mistakes into something beautiful.

Revised: We don't have to give up when we feel that we have failed God. When we come to God, admit our failing, and resolve to do better, God is ready to forgive.

Style: The Key to Excellence in Writing

What is *Style*?

Content is what is said, style the way it is said.

Good style employs:

- Appropriate and consist tone
- Variety in sentence length & structure
- Clarity
- Economy of expression
- Appropriate diction (word choice with the right connotations)

Tone (like tone of voice in conversation)

- Definition?
 - Attitude of the author toward:
 - Role of self
 - Role of audience
 - Topic:
 - Compassionate
 - Angry
 - Optimistic
 - Reverential
 - Serious
 - Sorrowful
 - Flippant
 - Arrogant
 - Self-righteous
 - Sarcastic
 - Vulnerable
 - Chatty

Consistency of tone

Variety in sentence length and structure

- No one sentence length/structure inherently better or worse than another
- The problem is overusing our favorite length and structure (lack of variety):

Variety in sentence structure

Four basic sentence structures:

- Simple
- Compound
- Complex
- Compound-complex

SURE Test for determining : “Do I need the big word?”

S—Is the big word **Simpler**?

U—Is the big word **Unique**?

R—Does the big word add **Richness**?

E—Is the big word **Economical**?

Quick Fixes for Sluggish Style

I. Limp Beginnings

1. It is . . .
2. There is/are . . .

II. Buried Verbs

1. _____ ment
2. _____ tion (sion)
3. _____ ful
4. _____ ance (ence)

III. Empty Enablers/Lackluster Verbs

- | | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| 1. make | 2. do |
| 3. have | 4. be (all forms) |
| 5. take | 6. give |
| 7. seem/appear | 8. go |

IV. Weak Adjectives

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1. nice | 4. good/bad |
| 2. pretty | 5. your personal favorite (Ask someone who knows you.) |
| 3. interesting | |

V. Tired Intensifiers

1. Very
2. Pretty
3. (Rather)

ASSIGNMENT: Choose something you care about, something that's important to you. Then write about it in a 259 words or so, using words of only one syllable.

Six exceptions to the one-syllable-word-only requirement:

1. Any proper noun is okay. (Don't lie. If you were born in *California*, don't write *Maine*; if a name is *Machenheimer*, don't write *Clark*.)
2. You may use polysyllabic words of 5 letters or fewer — for example: *into*, *over*, *area*, *about*
3. You may use contractions of more than one syllable such as *couldn't*, *wouldn't*, *didn't*
4. You may use numbers (even those that are polysyllabic).
5. As in any published work, direct quotes—even in casual conversation—must be rendered word-for-word as they occurred, so their wording is exempt from the rules. This includes verses from the Bible—but only translations, not paraphrases (such as *The Message*).
6. Multi-syllable words for family (for which there are no single-syllable synonyms) are fine: *mother*, *father*, *family*, *sister*, *brother*, *sibling*, *husband*, *daughter*, *relative* etc.

Quick Fixes Exercises

1. It is a gloomy day.

2. There was a fight in the hall.

3. There are many opportunities in every day to serve God in small ways.

4. It is in these ordinary moments of kindness and love that I now sense the extraordinary presence of Jesus.

5. It is apparent that you didn't like the movie.

6. There is a preference among children to be entertained, rather than to be educated.

7. His petulance was a constant annoyance to his co-workers.

8. She made a report to the committee.

9. It was in 1989 that our youngest son was in the army.

10. We made a recommendation of a solution to the problem.

11. They took offense at what she said.

12. We had three meetings to plan the retreat.

13. Museums around the world have their displays of similar weapons from past centuries.

14. Achievement was the principal theme of our discussion.

15. His words were nourishment for my hungry soul.

16. The response of the congregation to her proposal was positive.

ABSTRACTION LADDER
Start reading from the bottom UP

8. "wealth"

8. The word "wealth" is at an extremely high level of abstraction, omitting *almost* all reference to the characteristics of Bessie.

7. "asset"

7. When Bessie is referred to as an "asset," still more of her characteristics are left out.

6. "farm assets"

6. When Bessie is included among "farm assets," reference is made only to what she has in common with all other salable items on the farm.

5. "livestock"

5. When Bessie is referred to as "livestock," only those characteristics she has in common with pigs, chickens, goats, etc., are referred to.

4. "cow"

4. The word "cow" stands for the characteristics we have abstracted as common to $cow_1, cow_2, cow_3, \dots, cow_n$. Characteristics peculiar to specific cows are left out.

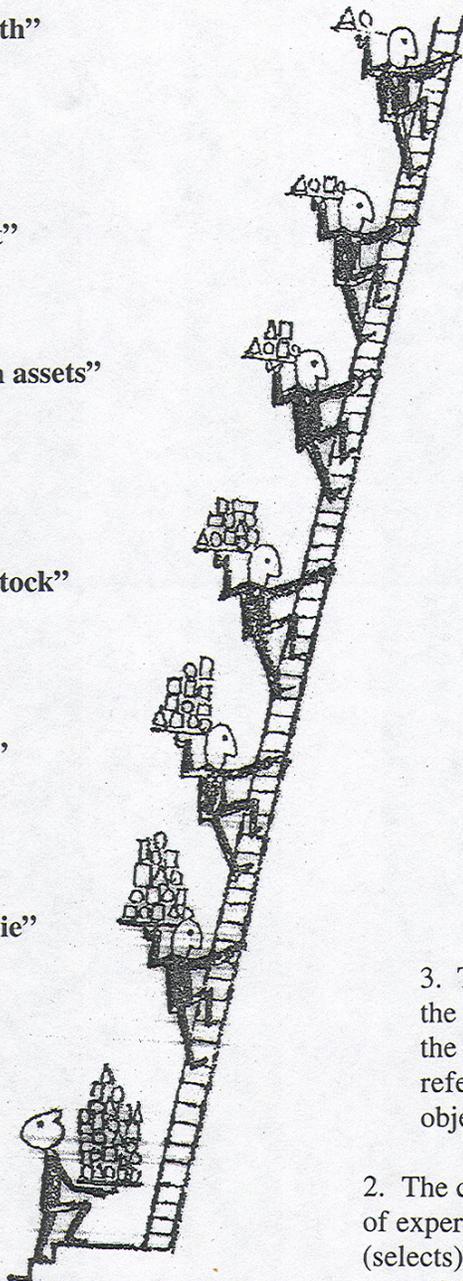
3. "Bessie"

3. The word "Bessie" (cow_1) is the *name* we give to the object of perception of level 2. The name *is not* the object; it merely *stands* for the object and omits reference to many of the characteristics of the object.

2.

2. The cow we perceive is not the word, but the object of experience, that which our nervous system abstracts (selects) from the totality that constitutes the process-cow. Many of the characteristics of the process-cow are left out.

1. The cow known to science ultimately consists of atoms, electrons, etc., according to present-day scientific inference. Characteristics (represented by circles) are infinite at this level and ever-changing. This is the *process level*.



I Believe

Read 1 John 5:6-12

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts.
— 1 John 5:10 (NRSV)

When I was in college, I concluded that all religion is simply an expression of our need to believe in a supreme being, and that the notion of God becoming human came from superstitious origins. In other words, “I threw out the baby with the bath water” as far as Christianity was concerned.

When I later accepted Jesus, it wasn’t a complete acceptance. It was simply a truce with God. I decided God was right and I was wrong, and I wouldn’t argue with God anymore. I wanted to believe, but faith was slow in coming.

It has taken many years for me to fully believe. My faith did not come through my own reasoning power but through the many times I have experienced God working in my life. I have seen God’s promises come true. Through familiar verses of scripture, God revealed to me new truths that strengthened me at crucial times in my life.

If I can lean on God’s holy Word as truth, then I can accept with my spirit those things that are impossible for me to understand with my mind.

Prayer: Creator God, teach us to believe in you, to trust your promises, and to know that your power sustains us. Help us to lean on you more today than yesterday. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Faith is the key that opens the door to knowing God.

(Mrs.) Maggi Clark (North Carolina)

Prayer Focus: PEOPLE ON THE VERGE OF BELIEVING

Encouragement to Pray

Read Matthew 6:5-15

The LORD says, “Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.”
— Isaiah 65:24 (NRSV)

These words from Isaiah are a great encouragement for me to pray. God knows the deepest desires of my heart and is working all things out for the good of those who love him. God sees my need before I do and fulfills my deep desires. In fact, God is so attentive to my need that many times the answer to my prayer is on the way before I pray. Surely this is true because God gives me many blessings for which I never thought of asking. I have also seen how God has responded to my need before I prayed.

What a great and loving God we have! God knows the thoughts and intents of our heart and is acquainted with all our ways. One of the greatest needs we all have is the faith to come to God trusting that God hears us and loves to answer our prayers. When we believe strongly in God’s faithfulness, we find encouragement to pray.

Prayer: Loving God, your mercies, gifts, and grace are new every day. We praise you that you love to hear and answer our prayers. Teach us to pray. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God is more willing to answer than we are to pray.

(Mr.) John M. Drescher (Pennsylvania)

I Believe

Read 1 John 5:6-12

Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts.

— 1 John 5:10 (NRSV)

When I was in college, I concluded that all religion is simply an expression of our need to believe in a supreme being, and that the notion of God becoming human came from superstitious origins. When I later accepted Christ, it wasn't a complete acceptance. It was simply a truce with God. I decided God was right and I was wrong, and I wouldn't argue anymore. I wanted to believe, but faith was slow in coming.

I did not come to active faith through the power of reason alone but rather through experiencing God' working out the truths of the Bible in my life. When I was in agony over my son's drug use, God gave me Psalm 37 with its "Do not fret" advice. I clung to it and tried with all my heart, and eventually the "justice of [my] cause" did indeed shine "like the noonday sun" (verse 6, NIV) when my son began to realize that his lifestyle wasn't working. When I learned I had multiple sclerosis, God gave me the promise in Exodus 14:14: "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (NIV). I had to learn to rest, but I have had very little problem with the disease.

Because I have come to lean on the Bible as truth, I can have confidence in the things that I know by faith, beyond the limitations of my rational mind.

Prayer: Creator God, teach us to believe in you, to trust your promises, and to know that your power sustains us. Help us to lean on you more today than yesterday. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

AFTER

Encouragement to Pray

Read Matthew 6:5-15

The LORD says, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear."

— Isaiah 65:24 (NRSV)

These words from Isaiah are a great encouragement for me to pray. God knows the deepest desires of my heart and is working all things out for my good. (See Romans 8:28.) God sees my needs before I do and satisfies them. I know this to be true, because God gives me many blessings for which I never thought of asking.

Years ago, two doctors urged me to have surgery immediately for a very painful nose and ear condition. However, I was in the middle of teaching seminary classes. I asked God for direction, hoping to be given a way to fit the surgery into my schedule. Instead, a few days later I felt a tingling sensation move across my face and ear. When I took a deep breath, my breathing and hearing seemed perfect, a perception the doctor later confirmed. God healed me, going far beyond what I had asked or thought.

What a great and loving God we have! God knows the thoughts and intents of our hearts and is acquainted with all our ways. We can come to God, trusting that God hears us and delights to answer our prayers. When we truly believe in God's faithfulness, we find encouragement to pray.

Prayer: Loving God, your mercies, gifts, and grace are new every day. We praise you that you love to hear and answer our prayers. Teach us to pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

CONCRETENESS:

TOO ABSTRACT:

Deep in the human heart is a need to be loved. The cry of the soul is to be valued by another, to know that who we are is cherished, esteemed, honored, respected. Indeed, we most often identify ourselves by our interactions with others, by their estimation of who we are, by their opinions of our worth, uniqueness.

To be human is to be created for relationships, to love and be loved, allowing the goodness of God to flow to us and through us – possibly because of what God has done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God took a risk, intervened in the history of the universe, came to us in human flesh, to live and walk, breathe and talk, to show the way righteous relationships are lived out. Divine love sacrifices for others; it enables, elevates, and promotes the wellbeing of someone else. Incarnated by Jesus, such love builds up, provides for, and initiates goodness, given freely so others benefit.

It's a middle-aged mother, without a high-school education, returning to the work force so her child can earn a college degree and live a better life. It's the generosity of a trusting child who shares with others, sensing that what she gives away is needed more by the other than by herself. Were we alone in this life, happiness, joy, contentment, would escape us, for we are made in God's image – and that image, that essence, is sacrificial love.

TOO MUCH DETAIL:

After my older brother and sister moved from my home of origin, I had another two years of high school remaining. Neither of them chose to extend their academic educations, but I got it into my head that I wanted a college degree. Neither of my parents had that option; in fact, both lost one of their parents when they were teens.

It meant that in many ways my father willingly became "the man of the house," to his six other brothers and sisters, riding in a rambling truck bed with others to apple orchards, dropping out of high school briefly to pick fruit and carry home a paycheck to his mother, so the family could stay together. My teen-aged mother was required to drop out of school also, caring for her younger four siblings, one still in diapers. They "grew up" fast, choosing to take on roles that were crushing, but necessary for the greater good, so that others could thrive.

As I graduated high school, attending my state university became a goal, a dream, an anomalous choice among the children of my parents, as well as my entire extended family for generations. It just wasn't in the cards for them, and as I look back, I'm amazed that it became a reality for me. After graduating from the university, I taught school in a rural area of WV. When it was time to file my first IRS return, I learned from my father that I had earned more annual income than he.

They never once were reluctant. They never once said it was a hardship or impossible to support. Instead, my middle-aged mother returned to the work force, slaving over hot stoves and grills, to supplement their income so that together they sacrificed to allow my heart's desire to materialize. That sacrificial love has never, ever been forgotten and allows a bond of oneness that only the deep love of God's nature allows.

JUST RIGHT:

After his father died, my father as a teenager willingly became “the man of the house” to his six brothers and sisters, briefly dropping out of high school to work so their family could stay together. My mother as a teen dropped out of school after her mother died, caring for her four younger siblings, one still in diapers. Both of my parents took on weighty roles at a young age.

No one in my immediate family pursued a college degree, but I got it into my head that I wanted one. My parents supported me in that dream. My mother returned to work, and together they sacrificed to make my heart's desire a reality. Neither was reluctant, never once did either say it was a hardship, but it was, indeed. Devoted Christians, they showed me what it means to love deeply and sacrificially.

God gives each of us that opportunity; we exist in relationships to love and be loved. In Jesus, God risked taking on human flesh to reveal the way righteous relationships are lived out. Love sacrifices for others and promotes their well-being. Love builds up, provides for, and initiates goodness. Love gives freely so others benefit. Made in God's image, each of us chooses if we will express its essence — costly love lavished on others.

Comparing Dictional Intensity

Low dictional texture:

The country store was an interesting place to visit. In the very heart of the it had the air of a small-town grocery store combined with a feed and hardware supply house. There were flower seeds and milk churns, coal buckets and saddle blankets, all mixed together. Walking down the crowded aisles, you felt you had gone back to the past-to the time of potbelly stoves and 'kerosene lamps and giant pickle jars. You could smell the grain, you could touch the harnesses, you could even- sit down in the old wooden chair. When you finally left the store and were once more in the activity of the city, you felt as you sometimes do when you come out of an old movie into the bright light of reality.

Increased intensity:

Charlie's Country Store was an interesting *emporium*. In the very heart of Minneapolis, Charlie's had the charm of a small-town grocery combined with a feed and hardware supply house. There were flower seeds and milk churns, coal buckets and saddle blankets, all mixed together. Walking down its crowded *passageways*, you felt you had gone back to *nineteenth-century America*—to *the lost years* of potbelly stoves and kerosene lamps and giant pickle *crocks*. You could smell the *cornmeal*, you could touch the harnesses, you could even sit down in the old wooden *rocker*. When you finally left this anachronism *and* were once more in the *bustle* of the city, you felt you sometimes do when you come out of an old *cinema* into the bright glare of reality.

A SINGLE DOMINANT IMAGE

A Sweet Savor of Christ

SMELL

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

We are unto God a sweet savor-of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish.

— 2 Corinthians 2:15 (KJV)

I live in an apartment building in the center of Cairo, Egypt. One day I took one of the two elevators of the building up to my apartment on the seventh floor. As soon as I got into the elevator, I realized that one of my neighbors had been in the elevator before me. The scent of his pipe tobacco still filled the air. The uniqueness of that aroma caused me to begin thinking of the uniqueness of my friend-and I smiled.

The next day, while going down in the elevator, I had a similar experience to that of the previous day - but with a completely different aroma. I was quite sure that another one of my neighbors had just been in the elevator because her lovely perfume was still in the air. I smiled again as I thought of her.

Each one of us makes a particular impression on others. When people hear our names, they have a certain image, a certain feeling; or a certain savor comes to mind. What image do people have when your name is mentioned?

PRAYER: Dear Lord, wherever we go or whatever we do, help us to be the sweet savor of Christ. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Do others think about Christ because of knowing me?

Albert Istebro (Cairo, Egypt)

PRAYER FOCUS: To reflect Christ's image more clearly

Eight Tons of Sand

SIGHT

Read Ephesians 4:1-16

Jesus said, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move."

— Matthew 17:20 (RSV)

I had ordered eight tons of sand for the nursery-school sandbox. When it came, the drivers hastily dumped it in the alley instead of waiting for me to unlock the gates. This left us with a problem: How could we move eight tons of sand into the, sandbox when we didn't even have a wheelbarrow?

The nursery children, ages two and one-half to five, saw no problem. Armed with their tiny shovels and painted tin cans, they set to work. Black and white children, Mexicans, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Armenians marched back and forth single file, each one carrying cans full of sand.

As they worked they sang a little song they had just learned. By lunchtime they had moved half the truckload, and after lunch they moved the remainder!

What a lesson for the church. Our tasks look difficult, but if each of us works, using the tools we each possess — whatever their size — how much we can accomplish! What mountains we can move, if each of us carries a bit more sand. And we can sing as we work!

***PRAYER:* Grant us willing hands and a singing spirit as we do Thy work, O God. Amen.**

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Mountains can be moved-a handful of dirt at a time.

Dan B. Genung (California)

Prayer Focus: Church child-care programs

*Longing Hearts***Read Matthew 7:7-11**

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

— **Philippians 4:6, 7 (NIV)**

When I was a little girl, my mother often told me about a canary that sang in her childhood home. I longed to have a canary, too. Then, one day my father surprised me by bringing one home. I yearned to hear it sing, but it remained silent. Mother said, “Don’t worry; the bird will sing when you least expect it.”

Then one day while busy outdoors I heard several clear notes of the canary’s song. Soon the air was filled with its song. I smiled at my mother working in a nearby flower bed. We listened quietly. After that, when we were outdoors, the canary often sang its joyful song.

Many years have passed, but I still remember my longing to hear the bird sing and my mother’s assurance that it would. As an adult, I often long similarly for God’s answers to my prayers. My heart grows anxious as I wait. Then I remember how the canary sang when I became intent on other tasks. I am assured that God will lovingly speak to my waiting heart as I work intently on what has been clearly set before me. I go on with what I have to do, confident that God’s answer will come.

PRAYER: Loving God, thank you for the assurance of your gentle care made known to us at just the right time. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

As I trust and work patiently, God answers the longings of my heart.

Carolyn Collard Wilson (Texas)

Lots of Butter

TASTE

Read 1 John 3:1-3

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

— 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

We all had been enjoying a fresh batch of yummy homemade rolls when I noticed our daughter buttering another one. Carefully she spread a thick layer on each side of the roll. As the generous application melted lusciously into the surface, drops of butter splashed onto her plate.

“That’s a lot of butter,” I said with in warning.

She looked at me and, smiling, replied, “I like butter!” Then she proceeded to savor every bite.

That dripping roll, lavishly spread, reminds me of God’s lavish love for us. “Lavish,” according to *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, means to bestow upon profusely, almost to wastefulness. The Apostle John says that love has been lavished upon us to the point that we are called the children of God. More than being merely called his children, we ARE his children. Like rolls that can’t hold that much butter, we are drenched with God’s love! I know why my daughter put so much butter on her roll, but I will never understand why God loves me so much. How great is God’s lavish love!

PRAYER: Father, thank you for your great love for us. Help us remember all day long what it means to be your child. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God loves us lavishly, outrageously, incredibly.

Kathleen F. Turner (Indiana)

Prayer Focus: A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF GOD’S LOVE