



*A New Focus In Life
Wading through the weeds*



A short story series

by JoAnne E Billison

Dreams of Beauty

Beautiful scenery and breathtaking landscapes fill my mind with dreams of beauty. When my husband and I began looking for a home, I expected to find a house with a beautiful lush landscape. I wanted something spectacular surrounding my home. We found a great house, but it had one drawback...no landscaping. My dream of owning a breathtaking, garden covered cottage expressing peace and tranquility was just that...a dream. My "bubble" burst when I walked around the property and found nothing but uneven ground, rocks, and plenty of dirt to play in. While this was good for my boys, it left me feeling depressed. I didn't get the serenity I was looking for, but I did get a lot of grass, a few shrubs and 2 trees. The landscape missed the beautiful scenery I envisioned in my mind.



The invasion

Eventually the unavoidable happened, weeds invaded our yard. Clover, crabgrass and dandelions were everywhere! When I ventured outside, my legs paid the price. Treading through all the prickly stems became my painful reminder. During spring, the weeds grew so tall my kids could play hide and seek in them, so pulling and hoeing weeds became a yearly event. My dream of a beautiful landscape seemed so impossible that I felt like giving up, tossing in the towel and learning to live with the daunting task of making what I had look presentable, and nothing more.



Like me, do you often find your life far from your dreams? Even though we begin walking in the dream direction, difficulties from family, work, and a fast paced world, takes a toll on our hearts. Before we know it, we are wading through the weeds of life. Often we fall prey to our failing nerves and dare I say, give up on our dreams because we believe them unattainable.

I didn't know where to begin working in my yard and I feared making things worse. I was so overwhelmed with the whole mess that I let it go for years. That, of course, made things a lot worse.

A new perspective

Most people live with "weeds" in life. Some of our weeds come from personal heart wrenching issues like divorce. Others come from emotions like fear. Our fears of failure, persecution, or rejection can stop us in our tracks and keep us paralyzed. When we remain focused on our problems in life, we weaken, become discouraged and suffer. To overcome this dilemma, we need to change our perspective. Instead of focusing on our problems, we must refocus on our new life in Christ (Heb 12:2).



When our focus is on Christ, our problems no longer define us; rather they become simply a challenge in need of a solution...one that doesn't have to be perfect. Life changed for me when I realized I was facing a challenge that I couldn't fix on my own. When I presented myself to God and asked for help, wisdom and comfort, I gained new strength to face the challenge before me. I suddenly had the courage to "do" something about my landscape issue.

In the next story you will hear how I moved from fear to creativity.

Thoughts to ponder:

- *What obstacles or challenges are you facing right now? How are you reacting to those challenges? Are you feeling afraid, hurt, or overwhelmed? If so, present yourself to God; seek His peace and courage so that you can do something about your challenge.*

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- *How do you describe yourself? Do you use words like "fat", "skinny", "smart", "dumb", "a failure", "lonely", "unlovable", or "no good"? Are you letting your problems define you? If so, redirect your focus onto Christ. Read the following scriptures: Hebrews 12:1-2; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 Pet 2:9-10. Write these or other encouraging verses onto 3x5 cards and carry them with you. Read them every time you feel defined by your problems.*

- *What are some things you can do to remain focused on Christ during challenging times in your life? Make a list and keep it within reach.*

Moving from Fear to Creativity

I struggled for many years over my landscaping. I wanted to fix it, but I was paralyzed with fear and lacked the creativity needed to start moving forward. The longer I focused on the mess before me, the more entrenched my fears became. My focus in life was in the wrong place. Once I refocused onto Christ, my fears began to fade and I suddenly became eager to learn something about landscaping. I began to search for information. I talked to friends, researched different plants, visited nurseries and questioned nursery staff. Then a dear friend of mine, who just happened to be a designer, helped me. She asked, "Do you have a plan?" After giving her the deer in the headlights look, I replied, "A plan?" She smiled and said, "A landscape plan so you'll have an idea of what you want your yard to look like." The light bulb finally went off! That's what I was missing! I needed a plan!



Sometimes in life, the biggest obstacle in our path is a lack of good planning. With the help of research and experienced people we can learn about anything in life. Knowledge helps us plan a course of action. Creativity blossoms in the wake of movement. As we begin doing, our creativity pushes our actions forward.

Getting off the couch

Usually, the first battle we face when trying to solve our problems, comes out of a struggle to get moving. We must push ourselves off the couch. We must move beyond the dreaming phase and into the action stage. While I dreamed about a

beautiful yard, I failed to do what I needed to do to get there. Nothing changed in my yard until I began to move in a direction that would resolve that issue.



Have you ever struggled to get moving on an issue in your life? Are your fears keeping you from taking the necessary steps forward? Did you know that challenging ourselves to move forward in life is a faith building experience? As we embrace the challenges before us we risk walking towards unknown possibilities. Moving towards these unknown possibilities gives us the opportunity to experience God in new ways. As we experience God in our lives; we gain confidence and learn to trust Him more fully. Trust is an essential component of our faith and one we must exercise if we are to grow spiritually strong. Asking God for help is the first step we take that gets us moving, trusting Him (to be with us as we move) covers every step that follows.

Moving forward

God helped me move beyond my fears. My friend helped me put a plan together. The rest was up to me. I remember being giddy with excitement when I started working in my yard. Once I started moving, my creativity started flowing and landscape possibilities filled my mind. I no longer feared making a mistake because I longed to see what landscape theme I could create. I finally realized that any mistakes I made could be fixed with new possibilities.



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I labored in my yard for several months. Dealing with our problems will always take hard work and effort. We can discover a principle here - working through a problem or taking a risk to reach a God given dream gives us valuable experience which builds our character. This gives us the opportunity to grow into stronger individuals full of integrity, honor, and faith. Experience is a wonderful way to achieve our common goal of becoming more like Christ.



It all starts with a focus on our new life in Christ. As long as Christ is our focus, challenges in life need not paralyze us. With a little effort and faith we can overcome.

*Stay tuned because the story is not over yet...
you will never guess what happened next...*

Thoughts to Ponder:

- *Are your problems keeping you focused on fears, anger, or a poor self image? Think of ways to redefine your problems so they become nothing more than mere challenges in need of solutions. Visualize yourself as a new creation in Christ no matter what problems you face.*
- *Think about the challenges before you. What steps do you need to take in order to put a plan of action together? For example, do you need to do research on an issue, do you need to talk to experts or friends who can help you, and so forth.*
- *What is keeping you on the couch? Challenge yourself to get moving towards a solution for your challenges? Don't wait any longer, get started now.*

When Beautiful Dreams are Interrupted

My dreams for a beautiful landscape began taking shape the moment I got off the couch and started moving. As I focused on Christ, the pressure to come up with a perfect solution for my weed infested yard soon disappeared. By facing the challenge before me, making a plan and working hard, my yard transformed. Everything fell into place and I was at peace.



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When our hard work comes together and we achieve our goal, we often sense peace. We adjust to this new stage of life and enjoy the fruits of our labor. We feel blessed and may believe ourselves entitled to exist in this new, picture perfect life. Living a life void of any hardships is a quite a beautiful dream to behold. Sadly though, our lives rarely remain in peaceful perfection. We cannot escape the fact that we are still imperfect people living in an imperfect world.

When the unexpected happens

The unexpected happened to me on a cold wet November afternoon. I was standing at the kitchen sink doing dishes around 3:30 when I heard the screeching sound of car breaks, followed by the loud crunching sounds of metal as it smacks against another object. The whole house shook like we were in an earthquake. The downstairs window in our office blew out sending shards of glass all over the room. I ran to the sliding glass door that leads to the backyard to see what happened. To my surprise, I found a twisted and mangled car sitting in the corner of my yard. My new landscape, only 2 years old, was now gone.



Walking the narrow road

Life is not easy. Accepting Christ as our Savior does not free us from experiencing difficult circumstances. Many Christians believe God has promised us a perfect life now, yet Jesus promised us the opposite; He prayed that we would be safe in Him, while we remain in this troublesome world (Jn 17:15). This means that brokenness and difficult challenges will remain an ever present force in our lives until Christ comes again. The broken state of this world became very apparent to me when a drunken young man crashed into my backyard.

Why Me?

When bad circumstances happen to us we often ask, "Where was God in this?" or "Why did God let this happen?" We want to know "why me?" No one can easily

answer those questions. I can't even begin to address why catastrophes happen to good people, but I can say this, Christ has not left us alone to fend for ourselves. We are not orphans without a loving guardian. The last words Jesus spoke to his disciples made it very clear, when he leaves another would come (Jn 14:25-27, 16:7). When the Holy Spirit moved into our lives we became family with Jesus. That means that we do not walk alone, EVER! When facing challenging circumstances, we can endure by clinging to these promises:



- *He will never forsake us or leave us alone (Mt. 28:20; Heb 13:5)*
- *We have a Comforter who understands our pain (Heb 4:15; 2Cor1:3-7)*
- *If we let God work His magic, He will turn our pain into something beautiful (Rom 8:28)*

Safe in His hands

Did you know that everything in heaven and on earth was created by Jesus? Not only was our Universe created by Jesus, it's also held together by Him (Col 1:16-18). Think about it, we are part of this gloriously created world. No matter what is going on in our lives, we are safely held in His hands. We can't be torn out of them because He holds everything together! This gives us a tremendous advantage when facing difficulties. As long as we remain focused on Christ, He shields us from feeling the full extent of any tragedy we face. We have to walk through the difficult circumstances, but we are protected from its deadly "sting".

To my surprise, I wasn't very upset about losing my new landscape. Because I was focused on Christ, the incident didn't affect me personally. I saw the damage as

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nothing more than a new challenge in need of fixing.

Next, you'll hear how tragedy can be our teacher ...

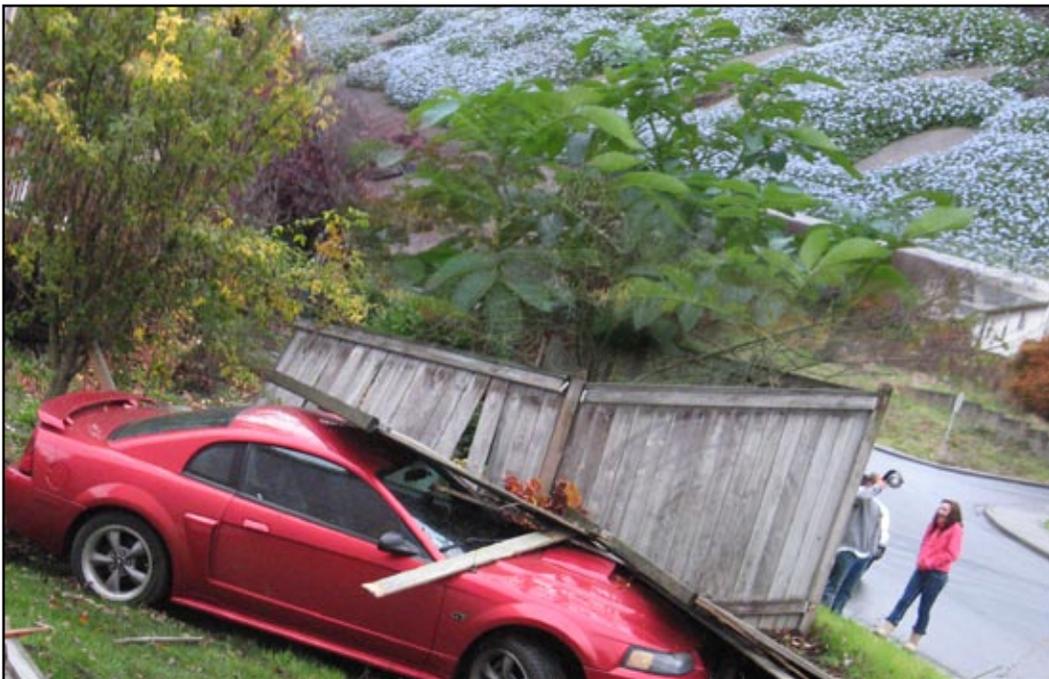
Thoughts to Ponder

- *Describe what it means to have a new life in Christ? Read the following scriptures to help you understand the details of this new life: Eph 1:3-14; Colossians 3:1-17; 2Tim 1:7; 1Pet 2:9-10.*
- *Read and meditate on scripture verses John 16:33 and 2Cor 4:7-12. What do these verses teach us about life in this world?*
- *What is the difference between these two sentences: "I believe in God" and "I believe God"? Why is it important to understand the difference between these sentences?*

When Tragedy is Our Teacher

Valuable life lessons can be learned in the wake of tragedy. The irony of having my long awaited for landscape torn to bits left me somewhat bothered, but I was determined to remain focused on Christ. So, I decided to see what I could learn from the incident.

Experience imparts the most memorable lessons. Whether joyful or not, major events shape our lives. Have you ever faced a scary situation and walked away from the experience a little bit wiser? I remember learning many valuable lessons from childhood mishaps. If you can't think of anything specific, perhaps my story will prompt a memory or two.



Oh, the memories!

When I was 5, my best friend and I did everything together. I remember one afternoon she talked me into hiding under her bed as she left to run errands with her mom. I don't know what we were thinking. All I can remember was my friend wanted me in her room when she returned.

Within a few minutes of her being gone, I became scared...really scared. My world even became scarier because someone entered the house! EEK! My mind raced with anxious thoughts, "What if they find me", and "what am I going to say?" "Someone will probably yell at me," leading up to my final thought, "I have to get out of here RIGHT NOW!" I remember my heart racing as I tip toed out of the house. I ran to my own home like a pack of dogs were chasing me.

I learned a valuable lesson that day. I learned that it was not a good idea to hang out in someone's home, alone, without permission. That lesson helped me understand proper boundaries as I grew up. Even though I made a mistake, the experience stayed with me and helped shape me into the woman I am today.

Valuable effort

Following the car incident many commented they were sorry to hear someone destroyed the work I put into my yard. They grieved for me over what was lost. They couldn't see what I gained because they didn't have the same experience with my yard that I did.

In life, we judge ourselves successful when our work achieves our desired goals. When our hard work falls apart, we feel as though our efforts were in vain. Our efforts and successfulness should never be determined by the outcome of our work. The lessons we learn, as we work towards our goals, are a better judge of our labors. If we stay teachable, God can teach us from everything that happens to us in life. The Old Testament is full of stories of men and women who developed character and learned life lessons out of their difficult circumstances. Because they were teachable, God could shape them into good leaders.

A "life changing" experience is an experience that impacts our hearts so deeply that it alters the way we think and act. Tragic life experiences can change our lives in a positive way, if we are willing to learn from them.

Developing character

David writes, "Guide me in your truth, and teach me; for you are the God who saves me, my hope is in you all day long (Ps 25:5). God guided me when I labored over my yard, and He was with me when a drunk driver swept in and tore it all apart. He used both events to sand and polish my character a little bit more. A destroyed yard can't take that away from me. Helen Keller said it best, "Character cannot be

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developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired and success achieved. It is in the most trying times that our real character is shaped and revealed."

Every challenge we face helps shape us into the men and women God meant us to become. We may find ourselves amid unwanted circumstances, but if we place our trust in God, He will bring us through and teach us along the way.

In regards to my circumstances, my primary concerns were that I have a beautiful yard. God, however, was more interested in building something more beautiful in me. By remaining focused on Christ, I put myself into the perfect position to receive all He had for me. God wants to build something more beautiful in you too. Are you ready to take your eyes off your circumstances and start gazing heavenly?

One last story will show how God turned everything into something more beautiful...

Thoughts to Ponder

- *Think about a difficult or scary time in your life. What lessons did you learn as you walked through it?*
- *How do you judge worthwhile effort? Think about the times you failed to achieve your desired goal. How did you respond to all your hard work? What lessons, if any, did you learn through the experience?*
- *What characteristics describe a teachable heart? How can you incorporate those characteristics into your heart?*

Living with Obstacles and Challenges

As Disciples of Christ, our lives will always be pitted with obstacles and challenges. The abundant life promised by Christ is not a life void of hardship; rather it is a life full of meaning and experience.

The car accident did extensive damage to my home, giving me a few new issues to experience. In addition to that, the accident happened a week before Thanksgiving adding a little more stress to my life? Amid preparing for a holiday feast, I was calling contractors and getting repair estimates. Have you ever felt this kind of tension before?

When life gets rough, naturally our focus turns to our problems and pain. Yet, when we take the focus off of ourselves and place it on Christ, we begin to see life from His perspective. You see, God views the world with beauty, compassion and love in mind. When we look for beauty, compassion and love in our tragedies, we just might come to understand or even see the good in our suffering.



Seeing with a new perspective

Paul tells us that God works everything out for the good of those who love Him (Rom 8:28). Those words are more than just an encouraging expression. I believe the words are a promise to us that says, "I'm going to use your difficult situation to bring you closer to me, so you grow spiritually and come to understand the depth of love I have for you." Again, if we are willing to look beyond ourselves, we might see where God is at work shaping our misfortune into something beautiful.

In many ways, the car incident could have ended badly. Fortunately for me, it didn't. Here are a few ways I noticed God working out His beauty, compassion and love amid my problem:

The drunk driver entered the neighborhood at 3:30 PM. My neighborhood was full of children playing in the streets. My house sits a few houses into the neighborhood, off of a main street. The way I see it, my house prevented this man from potentially hitting a child, and the life of a child is far more important than my home.

My husband sat at the computer in the office. The window shattered and blew inside yet miraculously not one piece of glass hit him.

I hired a contractor friend to repair the damage. This helped him provide for his family during the long wet winter, when his business was slow.

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I hired a landscaper to repair the yard, giving me an even more beautiful yard.



Keep Walking Forward

Managing life is not easy. We face broken families, a broken government, businesses run by broken people and all of creation buckling under the pressure of sin. But, there is still good in this world and God is still at work making all things beautiful.

The longer we remain focused on Christ, the greater our ability to comprehend God's beauty. As events unfolded in my life, I realized that God did far more than just turn my damaged yard into something beautiful. He taught me the value of focusing on Him and not my problems. Are you ready to experience this for yourself? Then give Him your heart...all of it.

Our new focus in life is birthed out of a heart to heart connection with Christ. The more we give our hearts to Christ, the greater our hearts transform, freeing us from being defined by our problems, world views, or people's opinion. Refinement always starts in the heart.

The End



Thoughts to Ponder

- *Think about the obstacles and challenges you are facing right now. View them with beauty, compassion and love in mind. What do you think God is working out in you, or through you, as a result of your situation?*
- *Think about the last difficult event in your life. Can you identify the blessings or miracles God worked out amid your situation?*
- *Dig deep into your heart and ask yourself, "Is my focus in life in the right place?" If you cannot see God's beauty emerging around you, perhaps you need to refocus.*

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