Every morning I check on my vegetable garden. There is something very satisfying about pulling off the sucker branches on my tomato plants. And, it’s amazing that every morning there are new sucker branches to deal with that I either missed the day before or that grew overnight. I have been quite pleased to watch my tomato plants flourish this year. They have produced good strong branches; they are already full of plump green tomatoes; and the leaves are gorgeous green. Well, this all changed in one night! Recently, I went to check on the tomatoes and found that I have aphids – little bugs on the leaves. Then upon further inspection, I have leaves that are starting to develop those dreaded yellow and brown spots which mean they have a fungus! And that fungus – Septoria Leaf fungus – is a doozy! It won’t kill my tomatoes but it will run rampant and kill all the leaves which are necessary for protection against the heat! Later my mom came over, and I showed her all that was happening to the tomatoes and got her advice on how to deal with it. As I lamented about my plants and stated my frustration after all the great care and attention I had given the tomatoes, my mom made one comment that has given me much to ponder. Her statement: “this is because of the fall.” Yes – this is because of the fall! Great labor to work the land for food. Weeds and destruction. Sin has touched every part of creation and our lives…even tomato plants.

I have thought about this a lot the last few days. Sin has touched every part of creation! Sin corrupts! It is so prevalent. It can creep up and try to take a foothold in our lives. It delivers death and destruction! All we have to do is turn on the tv and we see it. Or, all we need to do is look in the mirror and we remember sin’s impact on our lives. This is a difficult subject to ponder except that our hope is in Jesus Christ – the One who had victory over sin. The One who removed sin’s curse. The One who will one day make all things new. The One who freed us from slavery to sin, to now walk in righteousness! Today as we ponder our sin and make confession and repentance, let us keep our eyes on the One who has redeemed us and works in us to walk not in sin but in righteousness. Let us be encouraged to press on in this walk to be more conformed to His image!

-Kristie
We are very excited about our summer study in the Book of Philippians. We know that this book will be a source of encouragement and a beautiful reminder of what we have in Christ! This summer our drop in study will look a bit different due to social distancing requirements. We will not be meeting in person (at least for the first few studies). This means that our video studies will be available online at https://briarwood.org/women-of-the-covenant/philippians-summer-study/ each Tuesday, June 9th – July 14th. If our social distancing requirements ease throughout the summer, we will keep you notified as to the changes.

Along with our summer study in Philippians, we would like to encourage you to participate in our summer Scripture Writing Plan for the book of Philippians. It is available to download from briarwood.org/women in the Philippians Summer Studies link. https://briarwood.org/women-of-the-covenant/files/2020/05/Summer-Studies-Philippians.pdf If you have never participated in Scripture Writing, I would encourage you to join us this summer. Writing slows us down to think on each word in a passage. It gives us the opportunity to reflect on a word or phrase that pops out as we write. In preparation for each Summer Study lesson, we would like to encourage you to join us in Scripture Writing Philippians.
Taylor Wilkie | Hospitality in the Midst of Social Distancing

This pandemic we are currently experiencing has been one that brings anxiety and unrest. For some, it is a time of loneliness, depression, and all around panic. For others, it is a time to rest, unplug and clear the ever evolving calendar of things that “must be done.” No matter which category you fall into, one thing remains true for all of us; we were created for community - Coronavirus or not, introvert or extrovert, rich or poor. Figuring out what community and inviting others in looks like under normal circumstances is hard enough, let alone during a pandemic. Would you walk with me as we navigate this weird and isolating time together?

I can remember in such detail what it felt like when I was the “new girl” in Birmingham. I was lonely, wanting deep relationships full of love and accountability. I decided that it wasn’t going to just show up on my doorstep, I had to put in the leg work. What I’ve learned along this hospitality journey is that you’ll be rejected far less than you think, people who seem like they have it all together are usually the lonely ones, and hospitality is more about inviting others into your life than it is about hosting parties.

During this strange time of social distancing during a pandemic, my husband and I have had to become ultra intentional with the ways that we invite others into our life. Things seem to be becoming easier with things starting to open back up, but in the beginning we had to get creative. Some questions we asked ourselves were: Who are the people right in front of me? How can I help practically and foster new and old friendships with them? Who are the people not in front of me? How can I pursue those friendships from afar?

The first couple of weeks that Covid-19 began the headlines felt more like watching a horror movie and my chest was constantly tight, resulting in relentless panic attacks. It was in the middle of my fast breathing that the Lord calmed me. It was a feeling that I will never be able to describe. In an instant, after many prayers of repentance, confusion and calling out for this all to end, I was drawn to the Lord’s hospitality to me in my life. I realized that this time has uniquely been given to us to steward well for the glory of the Lord. The anxiety was cast away and I decided to open my eyes and look around. What was in front of me? My neighbors.

We live in a townhome community and it has truly been one of the biggest blessings of my time in Birmingham so far. Kevin and I put chairs on our little front “patio” AKA little boards you click together from amazon. Nothing fancy. Fanciness is not required for invitations into lives. Every single day we sat out there, watching the neighborhood kids play, meeting their parents, and having TONS of driveway dinners with them. Already established relationships were strengthened as well. There’s something about having life slow down that allows room for us to really lean into pursuing what is truly important. We took so many walks around the neighborhood that I’ve lost count. On those walks, we would be gone for hours because we would stop and talk to every person we saw. Asking what they did for a living, where are they from, what is their family like, and inviting them to our extremely humble driveway which had become our new dinner table. Our neighbors have become more like family. My sweet husband has become the neighborhood handyman and what I love most about all of this is that our friends and neighbors know that they have someone to call on when they need something. Is this not what we have been called to do?

Romans 12:9-21 is our family passage that we cling to and strive towards. Verse 12 is one of my favorites and definitely speaks to this season of life for the entire world. Romans 12:12 says, “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” We may have joy in the fact that we have hope in Christ. Joy in the hope we have that one day we will live in a perfect world as the Lord created it to be before the fall of man. We are learning that in that joy and hope, we may be patient in affliction. Affliction means something that causes pain and suffering. Our world as a whole is going through pain, in so many areas, not just Coronavirus. My prayer is that our Father would give us patience during a time when the affliction seems that it is never ending. The end of verse 12 tells us to be faithful in prayer. This is a place that I fall short so very often. I take for granted that I am able to be in direct communication with the God who is sovereign over all things, including pandemics, social injustices and every other painful event.

My prayer and challenge for all of us moving forward is this: that we would live out Romans 12:12, that we would open our eyes to who and what is right in front of us, and that we would set aside every excuse that evil puts in our head and heart, excuses that keep us from bringing glory to our Lord during this time of social distancing, hurt and confusion.
Start your day thinking on the Lord! Every Monday – Friday in the month of June and July we will post a new daily devotional for you from different women in the church. The devotionals can be accessed through: https://briarwood.org/women-of-the-covenant/daily-devotions-on-womens-youtube-page/

The following is the schedule of the women who have shared a devotional for June 1-12. We pray that you’ll be encouraged as you hear from fellow Briarwood women as they share from the Word of God.

June 15: Katie Russell  
June 16: Elizabeth Ellerbee  
June 17: Summer Schor  
June 18: Sonja Steelman  
June 19: Amy Butler  
June 20: Wesley Burns  
June 21: Rebekah Kottler  
June 22: Molly Hendry  
June 23: Brooke Cheely  
June 24: Meredith Hamblin  
June 25: Caroline Brown  
June 26: Linda Grinnell

Prayer Journaling this Summer

Created for a Purpose is a ministry that shares the gospel of Jesus Christ through creative art projects, sound biblical teaching, worship and small groups.

This ministry has put together a Prayer Journal for the summer months. This journal provides you with a hands-on approach to the ACTS (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication) prayer model. It can be used by a family for daily prayer or by an individual for personal prayer, or both! The journal is set up so that you can slip it into a three-ring binder. The process encourages the prayer warrior to use their Bible to look up passages and use God’s word as the basis of their prayers. The Created for a Purpose Prayer Journal truly is for anyone and everyone!

Download the Prayer Journal at: createdforapurpose.org
DENISE WHITWORTH | GOD’S FAITHFULNESS, SUFFICIENCY AND ENCOURAGEMENT

“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.” 2 Corinthians 3:5

Over the last two months, I’ve been learning several things about God and about myself – I really thrive on people. I enjoy being around other people, especially those with shared interests, but also getting to know new people. When we were first encouraged to stay-at-home and stay-away-from-others and then required to do so with the city and state ordinances shutting my usual gathering places, I thought “I can do this” and “this will only take a couple of weeks”. But then the stay-at-home morphed into safer-at-home and face masks took over the usual smiling or sometimes scowling faces. God began teaching me more about himself as He is all sufficient – He is more than enough and He is faithful. He reminded me to draw my energy from Himself and His Word and not from other people. Was there some way that I could make a difference to others that were struggling with the same feelings of isolation and point others to God’s sufficiency? Maybe!

While the online Sunday morning worship service was excellent for worship and teaching, my heart was longing for the closeness of praying with my Sunday School community friends and sharing our lives with each other. After talking with several others in our SS Class who were also ready for more interaction, we setup a weekly zoom Ladies Prayer Time for our SS Class ladies. What a blessing that has been for me as we focus on a chosen scripture and then “pray around” our zoom meeting room. What sweet prayers are offered up to our Lord as we praise Him, confess before Him, thank Him, and bring our needs before Him! We have seen His faithfulness in answering our prayers and also His sufficiency as we wait for answers to prayers.

Through God showing me His sufficiency, He’s provided encouragement to me in other ways over these last few weeks. With the closing of my regular exercise class at the Y, I knew I had to continue “moving” and walking the neighborhood seemed the best way to do that. The first steps out of my driveway take me to a pretty steep hill, but I know when I get to the top, the most difficult part is done and now to just walk. Initially, I was encouraged by the beauty of spring. All the flowering trees and shrubs and some of the perennial flowers were just budding out and I loved taking pictures as I walked through the neighborhood. God was faithfully reminding me that He’s in charge of all creation. Of course, there were more walkers out on the streets with folks taking a break from working from home and homeschooling so lots of waves and “how are you doing” greetings were exchanged. I even discovered other Briarwood families that lived on my walking route. But I quickly picked up with listening to audio from our Briarwood Covenant Women site and that was the best encouragement of all! Donna Evans’ teaching on Romans was a great reminder of what I’d learned in her Thursday morning Bible Study last fall and Kristie’s teaching on True Worship prepared me for better private worship during this isolation and a richer experience during public worship even when we stream the Sunday service. I increased my daily walk with more steps in order to get a whole lesson of Esther each day and now, I’m continuing with Elizabeth and Kristie as they walk me through Joshua. Again, God is sufficient to feed me spiritually through His Word and keep me moving which encourages me. I’m still looking for how God will reveal more of Himself – His sufficiency and faithfulness which then fuels and encourages me. I still love to be in fellowship with other people, but God is more than sufficient to meet that desire and may do so in different ways, including a friendly wave or screen-time.

Denise Whitworth
Ingredients:

- 1 ½ sticks unsalted butter, room temperature, plus more for pan
- 1 ½ cups flour
- ¾ cup fine yellow cornmeal
- 1 ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ¾ teaspoon coarse salt
- 1 ½ cups plus 2 Tablespoons sugar
- 3 large eggs
- 1 ½ teaspoons vanilla extract
- ¾ cup buttermilk
- 18 ounces mixed fresh berries, such as blueberries, raspberries and blackberries (cut in half if large) plus more for serving
- Whipped cream, for serving

Directions:

- Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Butter a 9-by-13 baking pan and line with parchment, leaving overhand on long sides. Butter parchment. Whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking powder and salt in bowl.

- Beat butter and 1 ½ cups sugar on medium speed until pale and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well and scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Beat in vanilla. Add flour mixture in 3 batches, alternating with 2 batches of buttermilk and beating until just combined. Spread batter in prepared pan.

- Sprinkle berries over top, then sprinkle with remaining 2 Tablespoons sugar. Bake until golden brown and a toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, about 1 hour. Let cool completely on wire rack.

- Cake is best served the same day, with whipped cream and additional berries.
We would love for you to join us as we read Calm My Anxious Heart this summer. In our July newsletter we will provide information about when and how we will discuss our summer read.

Chesley Peed | Briarwood Counselor

We asked Dr. Chesley Peed to engage with a general scenario of how some of our women might be feeling right now. The following is the scenario and her encouragement to us as believers: My marriage was already struggling. But being in the social distancing it’s only highlighted how far apart my husband and I are. What can I do? I feel stuck.

Dear friend, I am sorry you feel stuck and an additional distance from the one with whom you are social distancing. Such a strange conundrum – one none of us saw coming. I would challenge you, dear sister, to see this highlighted moment as a blessing. If you will humor me, let’s use the example of going to the doctor for what you think is a sprained ankle only to find out you’ve broken a bone in several places. With a sprain you probably would have gone on and let it presumably heal on its own. Praise God you had someone tell you it was broken so it didn’t “heal” into a mangled mess. Time does not heal broken bones. Acknowledging a break, setting it, and properly caring for it is what heals broken bones.

You have acknowledged the problem; now go humbly before the Lord seeking restoration. Pray for your husband, your marriage covenant, and for the main sources of struggle to be revealed. Diligently seek ways you can show your husband respect and honor, by first seeking to honor the Lord in your marriage. Draw near to the Lord, and seek to draw near to your husband. It may seem like a difficult task, to draw near to someone you feel such a great distance from, or even from someone who might have done something to cause the distance in the first place. Pray for the Lord to enable you to have a forgiving heart and to move toward your husband and not further away from him.
Jehan Hicks Corbin | Briarwood Christian School Graduate | The Weight of Shame

I love to cook. There really isn't one part of the process that I don't enjoy (well...except for cleaning up). I love the planning, pulling from the pantry, organizing my ingredients, the dicing and chopping and sizzling. I love the smell of multiple flavors melding together, and creating something of sustenance out of a bunch of individual items. There are many many things I am not great at but I do happen to be a good meal planner/grocery shopper/dinner prepper person. So I cook almost every night for my family, and most nights I really do enjoy it. I watch cooking shows and read cookbooks for fun, tear recipes out of magazines, and love trying to recreate dishes from our favorite restaurants. My husband recently gave up meat for Lent so we ate quite a bit of chicken and fish in March/early April. Since Easter, we've enjoyed several nights of steaks, burgers, and pork tenderloin. Earlier this week, our second grader randomly came to me and the following conversation ensued:

Him: Mommy, thanks for making different things for dinner so we don't eat the same things all the time. But I feel like we've had a lot of meats lately. I think we need ... (searching for the words) ... not as much meats.

Me: Ok, sure! I'm happy to incorporate more vegetarian meals into our regular line up. I like variety as well.

Him: YAY!! (long pause) What does vegetarian mean?

Me: It means meatless, or without meat. More veggies, fruits, salads and stuff. Very similar to what we already eat - just without the main meat entree that I usually serve for protein.

Him: (looks over at his older brother, who is wearing an annoyed look that the vegetarian possibility had been spoken into existence) ... Oh, ok, Never mind, Mom. We want the meats. Give us all the meats.

Besides cracking me up, our conversation also got me considering about the way I think about food. As a mother and primary meal provider for my family, I'm constantly thinking about getting my kids to eat a healthy balanced diet that includes protein, plenty of fruits and vegetables, dairy, and whole grains. I'm not a Nazi about it, and we certainly don't eat perfectly by any means but I generally try to arrange our meals to include all of those things over the course of each day (not on every single plate). I take pride in doing this for the ones I love most, and believe it is part of the education and skill set God has given me to be able to contribute to their growth. When I'm mentally adding up how many servings of fruits/veggies they've had in any given week, it's motivated by the love of my little people and their well being. I'm doing it because I care deeply and want them to have every advantage as their brains grow and develop. But do I speak to myself that same loving way when it comes to food or, more specifically, my body? Not even close.

I recently read a great book by Lori Gottlieb called "Maybe you should talk to someone". The author references some of the best advice her therapist ever gave her: we talk to ourselves more than ANY OTHER person over the course of our lives but our words aren't always kind, true, helpful, or even respectful. 81 years is the current average lifespan of American women (as of 2019) so for eight decades we say a lot of things to ourselves that we would never say to people we love or care about. Why are we so hard on ourselves?

Our family watched the faith-based movie "Overcomer" Mother's Day weekend (it was our 87th family movie night in two months ... #helloquarantine). When the main character, a teenage girl who lost her parents to drug addiction and is being raised by her grandmother, meets Christ she really understands her identity in Him for the first time. During a pivotal scene, she has an epiphany that the Creator gets to define His creation. Her sentence stopped me in my tracks. The God who created me gets to define me and what makes me worthy. He determines my value, and nothing in His word indicates that I should berate myself for not wearing a smaller dress size. Why do I feel less than pleased or speak unkindly about this body He made for me? There is so much toxic chatter around this subject, particularly for women, and it usually leads to great shame. It's one thing to eat well and exercise because it makes you feel your best, and it is honoring to God to take care of the temple in which He inhabits. But it is something else altogether to constantly engage in a critical and self-loathing dialogue with the one body that will carry us through this world. This issue is deeply personal to me as it has played out as a vicious cycle in my own life. I have never been super small by anyone's standards. By age fourteen, I was 5'9" and, despite playing year-round sports and possessing a muscular, athletic, young body, I still felt huge compared to the more petite, cheerleader-type figures. I was nowhere close to being overweight but even then I didn't appreciate my body. The societal view of beauty had already inched its way inside my young psyche, I somehow "knew" that boys liked the thinner girls more, my smaller friends would be the ones nominated for homecoming queen, and I was going to need to make sure I sucked in my stomach at the pool that summer. Even at that tender age (and now looking back on it, in my physical prime), I was very aware that thin was the "ultimate", but tall and big boned was less than desirable. But I wasn't heavy or out-of-shape. That's the thing about the toxic internal narrative that goes along with self-shaming: it often isn't just a burden, it's not even based in reality.
The real irony of shame with regards to body size is that many women then resort to poor eating habits that have been developed to comfort ourselves. Eating alone late at night. Eating in secret. Eating junk food to make our negative feelings go away if just for a moment. Eating more than our appetites actually require just because we're craving that feeling of fullness and correlating that with satisfaction. At some point or another, I've done all of those things, and they all generate more shame. But the question is why are we so ashamed?? Like I frequently tell my kids, special treats are just that ... they wouldn't be special if we ate them every day.

Some of my besties were texting about this topic just last week. One of them "confessed" to eating cheese dip for breakfast occasionally if we balance things out the rest of the day or week? Why do we feel guilty for treating ourselves? So what if I'm not at risk of blowing away during the next big gust of wind? It's ok that I'm not shopping in the junior department. I'm a middle aged woman who has birthed three babies and beaten breast cancer, all factors that affect my weight and hormones. Where is the grace for myself that I so freely offer to others?

British pop singer Adele recently lost a significant amount of weight, and fans have gone crazy over her transformation. She figured out that we are not only not successful, but I bristle at the notion that she now has more to offer the entertainment world than she did five years ago. The idea that thinner is better and will somehow make us happier, better, more worthy, more successful, etc. is not only not true, it is not remotely helpful. If only I could lose 30 pounds, if only I could wear that outfit again, if only I didn't feel self-conscious at the beach, if only, if only, if only. That line of thinking does nothing but breed discontentment, unfulfillment, and, you guessed it ... more shame. Am I any less interesting or more valuable in a smaller dress size? Do I have more to offer the world because I am thin? Is my Creator more pleased with me because I finally got down to that pre-baby weight? No, nope, and absolutely not. I am enough just as I am ... the One who made me tells me so.

A friend of mine has been taking advantage of the free Peloton classes offered during the coronavirus pandemic. She particularly loves one motivating instructor who yells out during classes, "Let's have bigger dreams than a smaller pant size". This same friend also lives by the mantra, "the size and shape of my body is the least interesting thing about me". Yet another friend looks herself in the mirror every single morning and audibly says, "You are enough because you are a child of God." Yessssssss, dear reader. A to the Men. S-L-O-W clap. Could you say it a little louder for all the people in the back?!! I desire this deep-down-in-my-core belief system for myself and for all women. Especially now as I am raising a daughter who is very much aware of her own size, I am even more sensitive to issues around body shaming. I actually spent my teenage years wishing I was a petite curly headed blonde (my hair used to be dark brown and straight ... post-chemo it is curly). And in His humor, guess what the good Lord gave me? A very petite daughter with blondish curls. She was a couple of months premature and now, at thirteen, she is insecure, sweeping herself up straight hair, and was significantly taller. As I was writing this post, she brought me a colorful poster she drew for her bedroom wall that reads, "Jesus loves tiny people too". Ha! She laughed about it but I know underneath the joke is insecurity about her small stature. She hates it when people mistake her for much younger than she is. With every fiber of my being, I wish I could somehow teach her how to bypass this struggle, but it is part of our human condition. When Adam and Eve realized they were naked in the garden, shame entered in and brought about insecurities in every one of us. I'd be willing to bet that even the world's top supermodels have something they don't like about themselves. A biracial acquaintance of mine says her caucasian family members and friends all want to be thinner and possess less body fat, while her African-American community places greater emphasis on a curvaceous body with fuller breasts and a booty. This issue crosses cultures and generations - in extreme cases we want to be something different than what we are, but at minimum we would all change something about ourselves if given the opportunity. Our daughters deserve a greater confidence and contentment in their God-given bodies than generations before them, free from any shame about size and shape. I regularly tell my teen that God does not make mistakes, and He created her perfectly just exactly the way she is. How I long to believe that about myself.
I'm a breast cancer survivor. Mercifully, I am finished with active treatment but part of my post-cancer life includes a decade long regimen of hormone suppression medications that, among other things, bring my metabolism to a halt and promote weight gain. I knew that was one of the side effects going into it but I'm also committed to doing whatever I have to do to lower my risk of recurrence. Recently I had a fellow breast cancer survivor reach out to me with some questions about these particular medications. Her oncologist told her if she was "good", she might only gain 10-15 pounds but if she was "bad", well then, the sky was the limit. I'm sure this doctor didn't really mean anything by it but the wording infuriated me. There is a general delineation of thin being equivalent to good, and heavier equaling bad.

Our society is so judgmental of others just by looking at them, and there seems to be an unspoken pervasive theory that larger sized bodies can't possibly be healthy. One might look at me and think I am lazy, undisciplined, or a slob. It's not outwardly obvious that I'm taking a drug that has caused my metabolism to plummet and my joints to hurt constantly. I've gained twenty-five pounds since chemo and, believe me, it hasn't been nearly as fun as it should have been. I'm not eating any more than I was a few years ago and I'm still exercising consistently. But no one would be able to tell that just by looking at me, and might judge me for not having more "self-control". As I consider the narrative I'm spinning for myself, I also hope to more easily withhold judgment for others. None of us can truly know the shoes someone is walking in just from observation, and we could all use a little (or a lot!!) more grace for ourselves and for each other.

I'm not completely there yet in my own mind and spirit but I am 100% convinced that acceptance of one's self brings about freedom (in addition to the ultimate liberation of finding our identities in Christ). Our identity will be tied to whatever we give our hearts to, and if my self-worth is tied into my dress size, I'm in for a lifetime of disappointment...and possibly missing out on the calling God has set before me. Shame keeps us from dreaming, from believing, from trying, from reaching out. Shame tells us we're isolated and alone and provides that internal critic with a microphone. Shame weighs me down but the truth of who God says I am, who He created me to be, can overcome the greatest of shame. Our bodies are not ornaments. They are instruments to love and serve and nourish and be nourished. I've spoken negatively about my body for four decades and refuse to do it for another four. I'm giving it up, and releasing the harshest critic. When we look in the mirror, let's remind ourselves and others that the Creator gets to define His creation ... and He has deemed us worthy.

Hello from the office! We miss you all!
Moms, we want to continue to provide coloring sheets for your children. We have heard that many of you have used these while you are watching the online service. We also wanted to give you some different resources you may or may not know about. Some of these sites are helps for teaching your children about the Lord, others are podcasts and articles for moms, and finally some are great ideas for crafts and activities over these summer months. (Some of the crafty/activity sites are not Christian sites but still have some fun ideas for you and your children.) If you know of other resources, let us know!

https://redeemedreader.com/
https://tiny-theologians.com/
https://www.thebestideasforkids.com/
https://craftymorning.com/
https://www.parentmap.com/article/25-indoor-play-activities-from-a-preschool-teacher
https://www.risenmotherhood.com/
https://grow.pcadm.org/