



*Priscilla Hochhalter*

I love snow (my husband, Dan, took this photo on a snowy day where we live in Portland, Oregon), but it and many other factors can create home maintenance issues. I'm not handy, but I've learned it's best to address them while they are still small. Heart maintenance is similar.

Zechariah 4:10 (NLT) says, "Do not despise these small beginnings." Small beginnings may be bad, as when glass starts to crack—or good, as when a garden starts to sprout. The main thing is, small things lead to larger ones, so pay attention. Root out the bad things, and nurture the good.

Several of this week's songs are beloved standards about rivers—accidental, but kind of cool.

*BIBLE READING: Proverbs 12:18*

One day my sister was visiting. After taking out the trash, she reported, “Priscilla, wasps have started a fresh nest in your trash can. It’s very small—but if they continue, you could have a bigger problem.”

I didn’t want stinging insects around, so I found the tiny nest and crushed it. Then I examined our eaves, knocking down any more budding nests I saw. I do believe in no-kill pest control, but I won’t debate that here. I just wanted the wasps gone. They were small but influential: they influenced me to root them out!

Like wasps, words also are small but influential.

I once heard a pastor warn against speaking ill of people. Just as our private thoughts can be sin (Matthew 5:27-28), he said the same is true of private words: If we privately bash a third party to a friend, or privately curse that driver who cuts us off, those ill words go out into the world and do damage. Somehow I’d always thought the main danger of ill words was that the subject might hear and be hurt by them. But this pastor stressed that ill words always cause harm, even if the subject never knows about them.

Likewise, good words can be small but influential, too. Do you know someone who always says just the right thing? A good word can heal wounds and bring hope.

*SONG: Language of Disciples (Twila Paris)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I know words can stab or heal. Let mine be for good, not ill.*

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*BIBLE READING: Philippians 4:2*

One day as my five-year-old niece and I played in the kitchen, she said, “The floor is wet!” I opened the under-sink cabinet and saw that two pipes had detached from each other. The fix was easy: I simply reattached them.

But the cabinet was soaked. Everything in it had to be removed, washed, and dried. Then the cabinet itself had to be aired out. In the short time the pipes were detached, it was amazing how much water had leaked. The cleanup took longer than the fix.

Pipes are meant to fit together and work as a network; if not, damage can result. Just so, believers are meant to join together and function as Christ’s body, lest damage result.

Like my pipes, the two women in today’s verse had split apart and were leaking out damage. Were they gossiping or backstabbing? Was their split over big issues or small? We don’t know. But Paul begged them to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” The goal is not just to tolerate each other at arm’s length; it is to embrace each other from the heart (1 Peter 1:22).

Jesus prayed his followers would “be one” (John 17:20-23). In matters of sin we can’t compromise—but in all other matters we have common ground in him, through who he is and what he did. In this way, we can “be one” in Christ.

*SONG: We Are One in the Bond of Love*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, in divisive times, help us distinguish matters of sin from matters of opinion—wisely addressing the former, allowing leeway in the latter, and being one in truth and love, as you and Jesus are.*

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*BIBLE READING: Mark 7:20-23*

Last winter I hired a local vendor to surface-clean our air ducts. When the time came, a young workman arrived. We discussed his home (Israel) and job knowledge (extensive). He quickly finished the basic cleaning I'd ordered.

Then he took photos deeper inside my furnace cabinet and ductwork to show how dust and dirt coated my fan blades and filter. His photos showed that after years of neglect, my ducts looked fine on the surface but were filthy inside. As expected, he offered a deeper cleaning to eliminate those pollutants so they wouldn't recirculate and be breathed in by my husband and me. Twice he slashed the price but it was still too high, so I said no. But the next day his office called with a price I could accept. Sold!

I was reminded of Jesus' warning that we are defiled by what's inside—our hidden sins. When we try to blow fresh air through our hearts, those sins just keep recirculating like the filth in my ducts, because we can't wash ourselves. We need the effective, deep cleaning of Christ's blood.

Humans see the outside, but God sees the heart. He's not fooled by a quick surface scrub; he sees deep within, where the grime really builds up. But thankfully, he doesn't leave it there. He, and he alone, can and will wash it away.

*SONG: Search Me, O God*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, I need deep cleaning inside, where no one can see. I ask you to cleanse me from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9), and I know you will.*

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*BIBLE READING: Proverbs 17:14*

As an amateur I've fixed plenty of minor leaks in toilets and tubs. (Once, while fixing a floor, we had to set one of our toilets out on the side lawn for days—very chic.) But if our roof unsafely drips water through an overhead light, that's major, so we hire a professional to patch it. Patched roofs, and clean gutters, help avert rain overflow and damage.

Like leaks, cracks also can be minor or major. We have a window crack; it's minor. But a foundation crack is major. Recently I found one outside. It shocked me. How and when did it happen? Such cracks can admit bugs, rodents, water, and other hazards. But as I write this, the crack has been buried for a week by nearly a foot of snow—very rare for Portland, Oregon! Though I can try to scoop away the snow, the trickling snowmelt may increase the damage. So again, I'll hire a professional to do inspection and repair.

Proverbs warns that stirring up strife is like letting water trickle through a crack in a dam: "first it trickles and then it gushes" (Amplified). Small issues can quickly grow big and unmanageable. So we should practice peace by refusing to pick fights, tell tales, or fuel grudges.

It's interesting that water, a metaphor for strife in today's Scripture, is a metaphor for peace in today's song.

*SONG: When Peace, Like a River (It Is Well with My Soul)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, trickles can lead to floods. Help me to hold my peace and stop little sins at the first sign, without waiting until they become big ones.*

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*BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 5:7*

My dad had a green thumb, but mine is brown. Don't give me live plants (poor plants!). Yet plants are vital.

Our trees are sprouting too many low branches. My botanist neighbor says to train them by eliminating budding branches which have no future—say, those too low, or too close to the house. So for each one I don't want, I pinch it off (literally nip it in the bud) with my fingers. Easy-peasy!

The hedge is harder to manage. Our house, ringed by six others, has a dense privacy hedge of arborvitae which once thrived but now is dying. Arborvitae experts can't find any cause. My neighbor says arborvitae can be tricky.

“Why were they so un-tricky and thriving before?” I ask.

“I don't know,” she says.

So after years of flourishing with almost zero care, these crucial privacy plants now need *deep* care—but what kind? The experts can see the problem, but no solution.

I am very sad.

Some challenges (like my tree overgrowth) can be fixed if we take the right steps promptly, and we should. But sadly, others (like my hedge ailment) can't be. In those cases we must do our best and wait on God. As God said to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

*SONG: Got Any Rivers You Think Are Uncrossable?*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, some problems are fixable, but others may never be. Bear my grief with me; help me to do whatever I can, and then entrust them all to you.*

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*BIBLE READING: Matthew 11:28-30*

Awhile ago, my husband, Dan, heard a loud *crash!* in his office. A wall shelf had fallen due to overload. Much later, another did too. We fixed both—and donated some too-heavy items to charity.

Everything has a limit. Shelving does. People do too.

Some ancient Jews, realizing that Israel's Babylonian exile was caused by sin and wishing to avoid a recurrence, reacted by creating complex "buffer" laws. For example, to God's law banning work on the Sabbath, they added laws banning activities even vaguely related to work, so no one would come near breaking the original law. Called Pharisees, these lawmakers earned respect because their goal of preventing sin was good. But no one could keep all of the laws, which became an unbearable burden.

By the time Jesus came, the Jews were crushed beneath this heavy load. Imagine their immense joy when he said: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What great news! Laws can't help us avoid sin (Colossians 2:20-23), but Jesus can. He invites us to learn from him and let him change us from the inside out. We don't measure up to God's standard of perfect holiness, but Jesus does. He fulfills every requirement, so we need not live in overload.

*SONG: Gonna Lay Down My Burdens (Down by the Riverside)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, when I'm tempted to live in overload, remind me that your yoke is easy and your burden is light. Thank you for fulfilling all holiness for me.*

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*BIBLE READING: Psalm 19:7-14*

At home, I tend to resist and ignore warnings of new maintenance issues. I hate those warnings, because for each issue I worry: What are the causes, damages, solutions, and costs? But warnings are a gift, to alert us to trouble.

What if I'd told my niece, "I'm offended! How dare you say I have a wet floor!" and never fixed the pipes? I'd have real water damage. Good thing I heeded the warning.

Similarly, in my heart maintenance toolkit, God's Word is a light (Psalm 119:105)—hands-free headlamp?—to show me issues to be fixed. Again, I hate his warnings at times, but they are a gift of grace to alert me to trouble (Ephesians 4:27: don't give Satan a foothold!). Warnings can come via people (prophets), Scripture, other sources, or common sense—like knowing our limits.

We often reject warnings. But we should say: "Thanks, God, for shining a light on this area. I know you love me and will help me change it." We don't have to go it alone.

What if we miss some warnings, or don't know how to fix things? Well, there will always be gaps and errors, and there is grace for those too; we can always seek help at any stage. But we must let God shine his light.

Ask him: Is he shining it on something in you?

*SONG: Marvelous Grace of Our Loving Lord (Grace Greater Than Our Sin)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, I want to do "heart maintenance" early and often. Keep me alert so small issues don't get big. Thank you for your light, help, and grace!*

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