

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Have you ever had a conversation with a good friend who both encouraged and challenged you to step out of your comfort zone? Meet your new good friend, Martha Van Buskirk! Martha has a winsome way of communicating biblical truths and practical tips that are both relevant and genuine. Her unpretentious writing style blended with well-researched information is a win for me. Enjoy the process as she inspires you to take a little risk because our community needs light and grace.

—**EDEN KEEFE**, LWML president 2023–2027

I love Martha's reminders that *every* person has value and purpose from God, no matter his or her role or life stage. Her personal stories and Scripture references help us apply the Word to our daily—and even “ordinary”—lives. . . . Great for a small group or individual study!

—**DIANE BAHN**, Texas District (LCMS) Care and Coaching Team

Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Grace is a truly inspiring resource. Right from the start, Martha invites us to explore practical ways our ordinary lives can make a big difference by taking one divinely inspired step at a time. . . . No special skills or equipment needed—simply kindness and a willingness to help others. . . . Whether you are a lifelong Christian or are new to the faith, this book provides fresh eyes on how to live a purpose-filled life anchored in God's grace.

—**DONNA SNOW**, founder of Artesian Ministries,
Christian author and speaker

“Folks . . . shine because their hearts are anchored in the Lord.” That is a wonderful affirmation from Martha to encourage all of us ordinary people. She gives practical, thoughtful, and honest insights to help us really “see” others. We can serve our families, our neighbors, and even our communities with “mobile shine.”

—**CONSTANCE DENNINGER**, co-founder of Visual Faith® Ministry

Martha adroitly weaves biblical wisdom with her own life journey to allow each of us to discover our unique role in being the hands and feet of God. *Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Grace* is a perfect resource for couples and small Bible study groups who seek to individually and collectively live out the unique role God has created for each of us.

—**LAURIE AND KURT SENSKE**, spouses, parents,
grandparents, servants

Gracious has become a jargonish adjective, overused and misunderstood. Martha Van Buskirk places the word *gracious* back where it belongs: rooted in God's saving acts in Jesus Christ and related to "our everyday shining spaces"; rooted in the biblical witness in order to be related to family, community, the workplace, and the challenges of real life.

—**REV. DR. JOHN ARTHUR NUNES**, interim president,
California Lutheran University

The beauty of this book is that it takes all the differences that separate us and boils them down to one simple truth: people need Jesus. We are all valuable souls created by God, and God uses ordinary people to share His extraordinary grace. . . . With obvious enthusiasm, Martha encourages readers to take a step in faith, follow the Holy Spirit's nudging, and get out of their comfort zones to let their light shine!

—**RUTH MEYER**, author of *Our Faith from A to Z*,
Grace Alone, and *N is for Nativity*

While we may see ourselves as ordinary, God always sees us with a higher purpose. Martha is clear that the Holy Spirit, working through Word and Sacrament, enables us in our Christian walk. Her insight into Scripture is truly astounding as she weaves God's Word to empower and encourage us to be the light of Christ where we are.

—**PASTOR WAYNE AND KATHY GRAUMANN**, Montgomery, Texas

Martha's generous hospitality and ability to shine the light in the every day are not a shiny facade. These qualities are the real deal, the light of Christ shining through her. In this book, Martha gives a glimpse into how sharing Jesus with others through everyday moments is exactly the lift our world so desperately needs.

—**REV. MARK AND LAURA PULLIAM**, pastor and director of
Christian education, Lazarus Church, Spring, Texas

Often, many of us feel inadequate . . . to share our faith in Jesus. This book provides an easy-to-read, Scripture-based explanation of how we can share our love for Jesus with family, friends, and even strangers we meet throughout our ordinary lives.

—**URSULA SOHNS**, pastor's wife and retired college English professor

Martha asks, "How can I shine this light [the Gospel] more graciously and generously in my home, neighborhood, and daily journey?" . . . Martha helps us see how even the ordinary settings of life can be places for God's grace to shine brightly.

—**REV. DR. DAVID BAHN**, congregation support specialist

ORDINARY
Lives,
EXTRAORDINARY
Grace

GOD'S PURPOSE IN YOUR EVERY DAY

Martha Van Buskirk

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

To my dear family, with love.



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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Manufactured in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Chapter 1: You Are Unique and Precious	12
Chapter 2: You Were Created for Good Purposes	24
Chapter 3: Spiritually Anchored	38
Chapter 4: Living in a Fallen World	49
Chapter 5: Worship and the Great Beyond	59
Chapter 6: Healthy Helping	69
Chapter 7: We Are Family	81
Chapter 8: All around the Neighborhood	93
Chapter 9: Everywhere I Go	103
Chapter 10: God's Purpose in Your Every Day	116
Acknowledgments	127

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had that experience when one person, one moment, one conversation or gesture or encouragement—though it was just a small thing—made all the difference in the world to you? A smile or a kind word. A listening ear or a thoughtful response. A meal or a ride to the doctor. A hug and a prayer, right in the moment. Real, specific action that caused you to feel heartened, grateful, and maybe even closer to your heavenly Father.

These small but important kindnesses can be done by anyone, but when they are done by Christians as a joyful response to the gifts and salvation that Christ has given, then they reflect the light that Jesus shines on the world. Shining for Jesus lifts the heart of the doer and the recipient. Consider “This Little Light of Mine,” a spiritual and favorite song for generations. Often sung as part of ministry to children, this lively tune is an encouragement for believers of all ages. The joy-filled, inspirational theme speaks to each of us:

This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine;
This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine;
This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Ev’rywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine;
Ev’rywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine;
Ev’rywhere I go, I’m gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Jesus gave it to me, I'm gonna let it shine;
 Jesus gave it to me, I'm gonna let it shine;
 Jesus gave it to me, I'm gonna let it shine,
 Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.¹

Perhaps you have sung the chorus as “This little Gospel light of mine,” or you have sung other verses such as “All around my neighborhood” and “Don’t let Satan blow it out.” Each adaptation inspires our witness, action, and perseverance. Each stanza encourages us to hold fast to faith, living it out and walking it out everywhere we go in everything we do, as best we can, and to be witnesses of this light:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us took time to reflect on our personal place and situation. Important and devastating things also happened during those years, adding to the world’s suffering and unrest. Hope and heartening seemed to have left the world and our own lives.

That was when I got to thinking about my own ministry. What impact could I have, if any, with my one little life? How could God use me, work through me, inspire me, and guide me for His good purposes?

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

1 The legendary Horace Clarence Boyer (1935–2009), a foremost scholar in African American gospel music, arranged a setting for these traditional words, which is included in *One and All Rejoice* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 306.

My husband is a pastor. My father, grandfather, and two great-grandfathers were pastors. All were graduates of the same seminary. Each one's calling, faith, and life work are inspirations to me. Their wives—my mom, grandmother, and great-grandmothers—lived lovingly alongside as spiritual partners, faithfully serving the Lord and shining in their own unique settings and circumstances. Certainly, my family members who served God in this hands-on way impacted people with their example and teaching.

But I wondered: Where do I fit in?

Socially, I'm often awkward, sometimes not saying anything but other times saying too much. Sometimes I don't help, but other times I try to help too much. In true "Martha" fashion, every now and then I get stuck in the world's distractions and fail to focus on what's most important. Yet I struggle along—led and encouraged by the Holy Spirit—toward increasing alignment with God's good purposes for my life.

What I need is light, and Jesus offers this light. He says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

I need this light of Jesus every day in my own heart to remind me of His saving grace, to keep me secure, and to guide my way. This light—His light—shines in me and through me so others might be blessed by Him.

Through my time in God's Word, the Holy Spirit began to lead and show me the incredible power of His love and kindness in a new way, combined with seeing—really seeing—those around me. This awareness provided a new way of noticing and attending to nudges from the Spirit: that even the small helps to others in our day-to-day lives are significant to God, lovely reflections of our faith, and door-openers to people in need.

The joy of the LORD is my strength. (Nehemiah 8:10)

I was inspired by this thought: How can I shine this light more graciously and generously in my home, neighborhood, and daily journey? To shine beyond myself, to take that next step to those around me, to move within and beyond my cozy home and beloved church?

This book flows from the inspiration of what can happen when God gives us fresh eyes (and ears) for others. What marvelous things Christ does through us when we wait and hope expectantly, when we listen to His call and guidance as we meditate on His Word. God provides places to shine His light as we open our lives to serve others. He leads and empowers us to be His witnesses to the Gospel. We are reminded, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

We can act on His noble purposes because they are—and we are—from Him:

For “In Him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we are indeed His offspring.” (Acts 17:28)

I need, and continue to need, a push to live this out, to step past what is known and familiar, to take a little risk. I wrote this book to help, well, me. With my introverted self, I would be completely comfortable with just my books, hubby Raymond, my ninety-one-year-old mom who lives with us, and our loving church family. Not stepping out of my comfort zone but enjoying a small and tidy existence.

But my community needs me, and your community needs you. Our kind actions make a difference to others and to

ourselves. Proverbs 11:25 provides an anchor for my heart and inspiration for this book: “Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.” When we share Christ with others through our ordinary actions, the Holy Spirit opens their hearts to Jesus’ light. Through us, He shines the grace of His Gospel and the truth of His Word for living.

As Christ shines through us, we bring hope to others. We bring joy to God and ourselves, which lifts our lives.

In this book, the word *shine* refers to our caring words and actions as a demonstration of our faith, as believers who are inspired, powered, and directed by the Holy Spirit. It is God working through us for good and for His glory. This is done mostly through small steps and ordinary actions, made extraordinary by the source, Jesus Christ. As noted theologian R. C. H. Lenski shares, “If our faith is the light, our works of faith are the rays that radiate from that light.”² Exactly.

The word *lift* is defined here as “joy,” “the raising of our spirits,” “a bit of hope.” (I’m ready for lift, aren’t you?) *Lift* is the joy we feel when we serve Christ, when we realize how we fit into His plans, and when we see and sense His work being accomplished.

Hope reminds us of the special place Jesus has prepared for us in heaven.

The word *grace* celebrates preeminently God’s unmerited favor, our unearned blessings, of forgiveness, life and salvation, given freely to us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast” (Ephesians

2 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 203.

2:8–9). Secondly, as reflected in the title, we also celebrate God’s *extraordinary grace* in the many spiritual gifts given to us, reflections of goodness and love; His gracious gifts of enablement to serve in various ways throughout our daily lives.

I’m thrilled you’re here, reading and serving the Lord with me. This book is meant to be an instrument of spiritual discovery for both of us, to help expand our lives as believers and find new purpose in our every day. It can be used in a group setting, such as a Bible study, small group, or book club, or it can be enjoyed alone.

A road map for our journey together: Each chapter can serve as a weekly guide. Chapters are divided into specific focus areas, with biblical anchors and key themes for your focus. As you are able, connect and involve each person in the spiritual content. It was written to be welcoming and accessible to all.

The first two chapters of *Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Grace* remind us of the glorious work God has done, His magnificent creation, His love for each of us, and our individually and spiritually directed purposes. Chapter 3 focuses on our spiritual foundations, and chapter 4 on how we can shine despite living in a fallen world. Chapter 5 celebrates worship. Chapter 6 explores healthy shining practices, with chapters 7, 8, and 9 focusing on our everyday shining spaces: our families and households, our neighbors and neighborhood, and our daily journeys out into our community. Chapter 10 is the big finish!

Each chapter begins with Scripture and is followed by a key spiritual takeaway. Each chapter closes with subject-related questions to ponder and discuss. An action challenge item provides a small-step, next-step way to shine. A special prayer completes and powers the segment.

The “Points to Ponder” section can be a rich time for discussion, fellowship, and personal contemplation. The questions are often deliberately open-ended to assist each reader in the journey of self-discovery for God’s purposes. May the Holy Spirit guide you.

An essential housekeeping note: Shining the light of Christ describes the Spirit-led outpouring of healthy kindnesses, words, and deeds. This shining of Jesus’ light, which is essential in our homes, neighborhoods, and communities today, is done with safe people in safe places in safe circumstances. If you’re feeling the least bit unsure about your safety in any way, or if you do not know for certain that a person or situation is safe, the answer is no. God will lead you to an opportunity at another time and place.

As we begin, let’s zoom in. Let’s start in our homes and day-to-day journeys. Let’s share kindness as we serve others and actively walk out our faith. Yes, we will discover new purpose. Yes, we will be lifted. Lift is a delightful benefit to the loving mindset and foundation of Christ-led caring and the extraordinary grace of God.

Our life situation, pathway, and vocations—amped and guided by the Holy Spirit—can be something powerful, wherever and wherever we are! When joined by our sisters and brothers in Christ, what joy and hope we can share as we serve those around us. Our ordinary ways seem unimportant to us, but the Holy Spirit makes them important. What blessings can be shared in our journeys and poured into our communities. What collective impact the Spirit will make through us together, all pointing back to our great God!

As we walk and stumble, step forward and back, let’s embrace our next steps and take joy in the journey. My prayer

is that you will be blessed by the reading of this book. Let's keep in touch via my website or social media. I'd love to hear about your study and adventures shining the light of Jesus!

May we serve together in the slow and small things. May we discover new purpose in our everyday lives and experience lift. May our actions benefit our homes and families, churches and neighborhoods, and give glory to God!

Soli Deo Gloria

CHAPTER 1

YOU ARE UNIQUE AND PRECIOUS

BIBLICAL ANCHOR: PSALM 139:13–16

For You formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

KEY TAKEAWAY

God created a spectacular universe and each spectacular human being. You are an original creation, a one-of-a-kind you, unique and precious, and deeply loved. The Holy Spirit lives in each believer as a God-given helper, guide, coach, and strength-provider for our individual journeys. Each believer has a divine purpose to help build the Kingdom.

One-of-a-Kind World

Our world is a big place, with more than eight billion people living on earth.³ Sometimes it's easy to feel small and

3 "Day of Eight Billion, 15 November 2022," United Nations, November 1, 2022, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/events/day-eight-billion> (accessed December 10, 2022).

insignificant when we consider the number of living human beings. It's another prophecy fulfilled, as God told Adam and Eve and later shared with Noah: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Genesis 1:28; see 9:1).

We have an incredible home. It's kept in cyclical rhythms and balance by a small, lifeless moon that's ours alone.⁴ Our life on earth is sustained and held in place by a star that is 96 million miles away, in perfect orbit—not too close and not too far away—and with just the right amount of light. Can you imagine God at creation, putting the sun in place? "Okay, a little farther . . . yep, that's just the right distance away from the earth—perfect. And let's set the temp at 27 million degrees, just right to sustain My people and their planet."⁵ Amazing.

Breathtaking evidence of our vast universe can be seen through scientific advances, including images from NASA's Hubble and Webb space telescopes, the Mars remote-controlled rovers, and other space missions. We continue to discover the enormity of God's handiwork and witness more pieces of it.

Our planet contains greatly varied geographies and diversity of plants, animals, and other living things. Just think about it. All the different plants, from the lily to the cactus to the tomato. All the different animals, from the hippo to the eagle to the mouse. A multitude of trees. All the smaller creations, the butterfly, bumblebee, and ant. And the smallest, including microscopic organisms, molecules, quarks, electrons, and protons. Such diversity!

4 "Moon Facts," NASA, <https://science.nasa.gov/moon/facts/> (accessed January 15, 2024).

5 "Our Sun: Facts," NASA, <https://science.nasa.gov/sun/facts/#hds-sidebar-nav-3> (accessed January 15, 2024).

Have you ever visited the beach or the mountains or some other natural space and felt in awe of God's creative power? Even in your backyard, consider the variety and beauty of the local birds, plants, and trees that you may be blessed to have around you. Consider the daily art show of a sunrise or sunset. Even everyday occurrences are pretty miraculous.

Scientists estimate about 9 million unique "eukaryote" species exist on earth, meaning "organisms that have cells containing complex structures within membranes."⁶ Wow, God!

One-of-a-Kind Human Being

The complexity of God's creation continues delightfully forward to include every human being. You likely know that no two humans have the same fingerprints. Additionally, our fingerprints vary between our fingers, meaning we have a unique print on each finger.⁷ We can rejoice in our unique creation.

According to the Population Reference Bureau, our current living population is 7 percent of the estimated 117 billion humans ever born.⁸ That's quite a few fingerprints.

There's more. Beyond our DNA and fingerprints, each person's facial structure, eye characteristics, and vocal patterns are individualized identifiers. Scientists also believe we each give off a combination of smells, creating a "thermal plume"

6 J. J. Wiens, "How Many Species Are There on Earth? Progress and Problems," *PLOS Biology*, November 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3002388> (accessed December 8, 2023).

7 "A Simplified Guide to Fingerprint Analysis," Global Forensic and Justice Center, <https://www.forensicsciencesimplified.org/prints> (accessed December 8, 2023).

8 "How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?," Population Reference Bureau, November 15, 2022, <https://www.prb.org/articles/how-many-people-have-ever-lived-on-earth/> (accessed November 19, 2022).

that's ours alone. Other areas of biometric identification being studied include the shape of our ears and backsides, our cardiac patterns, the way we walk, and the shape and vibration of our skulls.⁹ Remarkable.

As the creation story unfolds in the book of Genesis, we see that God created a lush planet filled with plants, animals, and other living things in a just-right natural setting. As His last, most satisfying work, God fashioned Adam and Eve and started the human race. We can wonder at and rejoice that God chose to create us in His own image (Genesis 1:27).

As image-bearers of God, we have incredible bodies. Consider these discoveries:

- Messages from our brain can travel at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour.
- Our brain has 86 million nerve cells and 100 trillion connections.
- Our hearts will beat more than 3 billion times during our lives.
- Our blood circulates about 12,000 miles a day.
- We breathe more than 20,000 times a day.¹⁰

These facts are just a small selection from the blockbuster story of the human body. Our birth and growth, emotions and memory, capabilities and functionality, higher level thoughts

9 Richard Gray, "The Seven Ways You Are Totally Unique," British Broadcasting Corporation, January 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170109-the-seven-ways-you-are-totally-unique> (accessed November 19, 2022).

10 Karin Lehnardt, "92 Amazing Human Body Facts," FactRetriever (website), updated January 22, 2022, <https://www.factretriever.com/body-facts> (accessed November 20, 2022).

and actions are all wrapped into God-created, individualized people packages.

Most important, God gave us souls for an earthly and eternal existence in heaven with Him by faith in His Son. Although He longs for each one of us to spend eternity with Him, some of us, unfortunately, choose otherwise. None of this happened by accident. It's all part of God's extraordinary plan: from creation to the redemptive death on the cross and resurrection of His innocent Son, Jesus, to save us from our sins, death, and the devil.

God has good plans for our individual lives too, as we see in the book of Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (1:5). Not everyone will be a prophet like Jeremiah, but all believers are called to serve God in special ways.

There has never been a repeat person. Every human life is created by God as a unique individual. You're the only you, ever!

One-of-a-Kind Helper

And there's more to this exciting story; we've saved the best for last. Perhaps the most miraculous feature in all creation is that God lives within believers through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. How cool is that?

Through the gift of faith, which God creates in us through the Gospel of Jesus, the Holy Spirit makes a home in our hearts, and we become a holy temple (house of worship). As 1 Corinthians 3:16 explains: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" What a privilege!

How did this come about? Once again, there was an amazing and specific plan. Before His death, Jesus shared the news that the Spirit would come as a Helper in our daily walk:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (John 14:25–26)

The Holy Spirit is a light to our spirit and the coach of our hearts, living within each believer as helper, advocate, and counselor. We can rely on this power to open the meaning of Scripture, discern God's will as made known through His commandments, lead in truth, intercede, convict us of our sin, comfort and renew, and make us holy. The Spirit knows how to make us shine, leading and nudging (okay, sometimes pushing) us forward for the good purposes of God.

This power yields spiritual fruit when we open ourselves to its guidance, leading us to live as lights in the every day:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22–23)

Sometimes I blow it when the Spirit nudges me to do something good. I miss the opportunity or get uncomfortable and run from purpose. Sometimes my selfish nature rules the day. When this happens, I can confess my mistakes to God. Share my sorrow. Ask for His forgiveness and new strength, knowing that He provides this Holy Spirit-powered operating system to help me navigate daily life as I live in God's will in accordance