

## Part 1: “Why Can’t I Have a Dog?”

Esther was dreaming about her dog. He was bigger than her wagon and very strong. After rolling in a mud puddle, he shook himself until both of them looked like they were covered in chocolate. She laughed and hugged her dog’s thick neck.

“EEEEEE-sther,” called her mom. The dream with the dog disappeared. Mom always interrupted the best dreams. “I’m coming,” she called back.

Mom and Papa had been up before sunrise. The farm they lived on had to supply all their food and the wood they needed to heat their little log home. Neighbors lived far away and they also had to work hard to eat and stay warm. No one had very much money and everyone had many daily chores to do in this dry, dusty country. Ten-year-old Esther was expected to do her share of work, but she mostly just dreamed of having a dog.

The three of them sat down to plain, watery oatmeal in their chilly kitchen. It was spring now and the wood had been used up over the winter along with most of the food. Although they were hungry and cold, Papa still sang songs of thanks to God each morning.

Esther was *not* thankful, though. “Why can’t I have a dog?” she cried. “I have no one to play with and all the other farms have one. You’re so mean!”

Mom and Papa could barely feed three people. How could they feed a dog? Plus, Esther did almost no work around the farm. She was lazy and did a poor job at her chores. She would never properly care for a dog.

“I have to visit Mr. Wyatt today,” said Papa, after Esther had stopped crying. “Why don’t you come along. I want to see how he’s fared after the winter.”

Esther immediately perked up, and they soon began their thirty minute walk along the dirt road.

Mr. Wyatt was in his 70s and always welcomed company. Mischief, Mr. Wyatt’s border collie, spotted them coming and bolted down the driveway. She danced around Esther, greeting her with wiggles and tail-wags. Mischief and Esther were good friends even though they didn’t see each other often. They were both lonely since neither of them had anyone else to play with.

Papa and Mr. Wyatt shook hands then Mr. Wyatt spoke to Esther. “Mischief has something to show you.” She led them toward the faded red barn, lifting her head a little higher as she pranced through the door. She sat down next to a messy pile of straw and within seconds a stream of tiny, sleepy-eyed, black and white furballs wobbled out from underneath.

“PUPPIES!” cried Esther.

## Part 2: The Secret

Thud! Esther instantly awoke. She was having the best dream! She was playing hide and seek among the scratchy hay bales with six little puppies. They had discovered her spot and were pouncing upon her. She rolled off the hay, but instead of hitting the barn floor, she hit her own bedroom floor. She was still laughing.

Esther had spent yesterday at Mr. Wyatt's surrounded by Mischief's two-week old puppies playing tug of war. When it was time to leave, she hugged each puppy with tears in her eyes as she and Papa said goodbye.

Mom hadn't called yet, but Esther decided to go out to the other room where she and Papa were talking. "Today I will convince them I MUST have a dog!" determined Esther.

But as she opened the door she heard Mom crying.

"I can't do all this work, Robert. I'm too weak. We cannot pay for helpers and all Esther does is dream of getting a dog. I think we need to give up the farm."

"It's all we own, Mary. How can we leave?" said Papa.

"I don't want to leave," said Mom, "but I cannot keep working like this."

Esther felt sick. Leave the farm? She peered through the crack in the door again. Her mom looked so tiny. Her clothes were torn. Papa was thin, his boots full of holes. Why had she never noticed?

"EEEEEE-sther!" It was time to start another day. Mom and Papa appeared cheerful. All seemed the same. But Esther was *not* the same. Mom and Papa looked different to her now.

After their tiny breakfast, Papa asked Esther to come to the tool shed for a few minutes.

"Mr. Wyatt and I had a long talk yesterday, Esther. He knows how much you want a dog and asked me if he might give you a puppy." Esther's heart leaped! "BUT," Papa quickly went on, "I said no."

Esther almost cried, but Papa seemed so weak now, she couldn't speak.

Papa continued. "However, I may change my mind - IF *you* can change yours." Papa sadly told Esther how little money there was. He told her that the farm would be sold unless they could get help. Esther felt terrible.

"The only way we can keep this farm is if you do more work. IF, and again I say IF, you can change to be responsible, hard-working, and help your mother, *THEN* I will allow you to have a puppy. But this will require a great deal of changing for you."

Esther jumped up. "Oh, yes! I will do *anything* to get a dog!" She hugged her papa like never before.

"Esther," said Papa seriously, "we must keep this a secret just between you, me, and Mr. Wyatt."

"Agreed!" Esther dashed off to fill the two buckets at the well.

### Part 3: Time Is a Glass of Milk

The well was the only place to get water for drinking and chores. It was very far from the house. When Esther returned with two buckets full, she was exhausted. "No wonder Mom is so tired," she groaned.

"Why, thank you honey," Mom said. She was quite surprised.

Papa called Esther to the barn. "If we keep our secret, and you can be dependable and cheerful, Mom will get stronger. She will notice how helpful you have become and I think she will agree to a dog. You must now figure out how to use your time each day to be of the most help to your Mom."

"I don't know how to do that?" thought Esther. But the dream of the puppies was still in her memory. "I will find an answer."

Mom was scrubbing clothes when Esther found her. She hated this chore! Cheerful was *not* how she felt! "If I want a puppy, I must help," she thought. "I'll scrub those for you, Mom," said Esther. "Well, all right," said Mom. She wondered why Esther was acting so strange today!

When Esther had finished, Papa asked her to take a wagon full of tools to Mr. Wyatt. "Tell him about our secret!" he called as she trotted off.

Mr. Wyatt welcomed her with a cold glass of milk and a fresh cooked egg from his chickens. As she ate, she told him about the secret. Mr. Wyatt was very happy. She hurried to the barn for a few minutes of puppy play then talked with Mr. Wyatt.

"Papa said I must figure out how to use my time each day to be the most help to my mom. How do I do that?"

*"Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts."*

"What?" asked Esther. "That's a prayer from Psalm 90," said Mr. Wyatt. "Wisdom is what you need. We wake each morning. We work and play. Then that day is gone. You cannot have that same day again, just like you cannot drink that same glass of milk again. If you do not drink your milk, you will not grow strong. If you do not plan each day right, you will not be happy when all your days are gone. God can show you how to plan your days.

"Pray every morning for wisdom then watch your mom carefully. You will quickly learn what chores are the hardest for her. Then plan ways to help."

Esther was hot and tired when she arrived home.

"Esther, can you fill these buckets again?" asked Mom. "I just need a short rest."

"So do I!" Esther *almost* shouted.

"Dependable and cheerful," Papa had said.

"Ok, Mom." She trudged off pretending she had her puppy riding in the bucket.

### Part 4: Difficult Days

Esther was soooo tired! She had been working very hard on the farm, carrying water buckets, scrubbing clothes, and hoeing gardens. Her whole body felt like one giant headache.

Every morning she prayed: "Dear God, help me to use my time today to make right choices because I *do* want a puppy and I *do* want to stay on this farm. Amen."

For several days, Esther secretly watched her mom. She learned that Mom tired quickly when she hoed in the garden. Her eyes hurt when she was sewing up clothes that had holes in them. She stumbled while carrying wood for fire to the house. Esther helped with these chores so Mom could gain her strength back. But it was hard, and she did not feel cheerful at all. The only thing that kept her from complaining was thinking about having a puppy to play with.

Esther couldn't wait for bedtime and never wanted to get up in the morning. Sleeping became the best part of her days.

Today, Mom had to call Esther three times before she awoke. Stiff and tired, she stumbled to breakfast.

"Esther," Mom said in a worried voice, "Papa and I must go to town today. We need you to do as many chores as possible today so we can plant our seeds on time."

Esther became very angry. "WHAT? Do ALL the chores by myself? I'm so sore and can barely move! I...I..." And then she saw Papa. He was looking out the window at the tool shed. In a soft yet stern voice he spoke. "*IF...IF...*"

"Yes, Robert?" Mom said, waiting for him to finish. "Oh...it was nothing...", he replied.

But Esther knew it was a very important reminder of what they had talked about in the tool shed - to be *cheerful*.

Mom continued. "I'm so sorry Esther, but we must attend a meeting today. Mr. Johnson has lost his farm and we must help move him to another place."

Esther was stunned. "How awful!" she said. "I'm so sorry. I'm just very tired. Yes...I will work extra hard today. Don't worry about anything." Papa smiled at her as he walked out the door.

"*IF* I can be dependable and cheerful, *then* I can have a dog," Esther said. "I will *not* let our farm be sold. My dog will need a nice place to run. I bet I could even teach him to pull a wagon!"

Esther pretended her dog was with her the rest of the day. She sang songs to him and told him what a good helper he was. She felt so happy, the day passed quickly. When Mom and Papa returned, they found her curled up in bed, giggling in a dream.

## Part 5: A Crisis

"Esther, wake up." Papa gently shook her out of her deep sleep.

"Oh! Did I miss Mom's call? I'm so sorry. I was..." But Papa interrupted. "No, no Esther. In fact Mom was so pleased with your work yesterday, she wanted you to sleep longer." Papa hugged her tight. "We're very proud of you, Esther. Mom cannot believe what a dependable farm helper you've become. She is feeling better each day."

"I told her I wanted you to go to Mr. Wyatt's to bring my tools back. I know you want to visit the pups. Take the wagon and return by lunchtime."

Esther ran most of the two miles to Mr. Wyatt's. The wagon banged behind her so loudly that Mischief greeted her while she was still far away.

When Esther approached the barn, four puppies, almost twice the size since she had seen them last, came bounding out. They tore at her shoelaces and jumped in the wagon. "Where's the other two?" she wondered. "And where's Mr. Wyatt?"

Esther knocked on the door. "Come in," Mr. Wyatt called weakly. He was stretched out on the couch with his foot resting on pillows. "Oh! What happened, Mr. Wyatt?"

"Fell through a rotted step last week. Dr. John came and said it's broken. Had to sell two of the pups to cover his costs."

Esther was worried. How would Mr. Wyatt care for his farm? What if he had to sell *all* the puppies to pay for help? As she looked around, she noticed dirty dishes and clothes and the messy farmyard. "I'll be right back," she said and ran out the door.

Esther collected 23 eggs from the chicken coup. She gave them fresh water and brought two buckets from the well to the house. Mischief and the pups kept her company while outside. The biggest pup kept jumping in the wagon and pushing the others aside. "You're so bossy!" she laughed. "I'll call you Big Boss." She named the others Lily, Freya, and Teeny.

"Thank you, Esther. You've been a great help," Mr. Wyatt said.

Esther left, but was very concerned about Mr. Wyatt. Would he have to sell his farm, too? "How can I help?" she wondered. Then these words came to her mind:

*"Teach us to number our days carefully so that we may develop wisdom in our hearts."*

*"Yes, I do need wisdom! Dear God, how can I help Mr. Wyatt? And please help me get a puppy."*

By the time Esther had run home, she had thought of a plan. "Could I possibly do all of that?" she asked herself. "I AM stronger now. Yes! I think I can! I'll ask Papa when I get home!"

## Part 6: The Plan

"Papa, Papa!" Esther shouted, out of breath. "Mr. Wyatt is hurt... puppies gone...too much work..."

"Whooooa! Slow down Esther," said Papa.

Esther told Papa all about poor Mr. Wyatt being hurt and unable to care for his farm.

"Papa?"

"Yes, Esther."

"I talked to God on the way home and asked Him for wisdom and I thought of a plan. Can I spend the nights at his house after my work here and help him with his chores, then come back in the morning? I think I can do it, Papa! I'm stronger now and Mr. Wyatt feeds me eggs when I come. Can I? Please, Papa?"

"Oh, Esther. That's a *huge* responsibility. I'll have to talk to Mom."

"I know exactly how much time I need each morning, and...and I so want a puppy." She looked down so Papa wouldn't see her tears.

Esther worked hard the rest of the day. At supper, Mom said, "I need your help on the farm, Esther, but I know Mr. Wyatt needs help too, and without it, he may lose his farm. So you may go. But if working on both farms tires you out, you will have to stop."

That night, Esther hardly slept. She worried about Mr. Wyatt. She dreamed all the puppies were sold. She awoke very early, tangled in blankets. Wide awake, she started her chores. By the time her parents got up, the wash was soaking and breakfast was ready. .

"Esther, you're amazing!" said Mom as she hugged her.

For the next few weeks, Esther prayed each morning for wisdom to use her time well. She thought about every chore that must be done by nightfall and planned out how to do them all.

Unfortunately, Mr. Wyatt had to sell two more puppies to pay doctor bills. Only two remained: Big Boss and Freya. She taught Big Boss to pull a little wagon and he helped carry eggs and tools.

One morning, Mr. Wyatt was up before Esther. He had recovered enough to resume his farm work. He and Papa spoke with Mom and she agreed that Esther should have a puppy.

The next week Esther made Papa run to Mr. Wyatt's to bring Big Boss home. But when they arrived, no one was home. No Mr. Wyatt. No Big Boss. "He said he would be here." Papa was worried.

Esther sat on a hay bale and cried. They slowly walked back home in silence.

As they approached their drive, a familiar shape came bounding toward them. Mischief? Yes! And what was that behind her? Was it..?

"BIG BOSS!" Esther raced ahead and hugged her big puppy.

"I decided to deliver your dog, Esther," said Mr. Wyatt, " because I wanted to bring six chickens, too, for all your help."

"Thank you!" beamed Esther. Her dreams had come true. She had her very own dog *and* now everyone had eggs to eat, too!