



PAW VERBS
~ FOR A ~
DOG LOVER'S HEART

Inspiring Stories of Friendship, Fun, and Faithfulness

JENNIFER MARSHALL BLEAKLEY

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Pawverbs for a Dog Lover's Heart: Inspiring Stories of Friendship, Fun, and Faithfulness

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For Aunt Judy.

*Thank you for getting me my first dog
and for being one of my best friends.*

INTRODUCTION

EVERYWHERE I LOOK THESE DAYS, it seems there is a picture, story, article, or post about a dog. The world is finally understanding what we dog lovers have always known: Dogs make the world a better place. And if we let them, they have much to teach us about life, about ourselves, and even about God.

I think that one of God's greatest kindnesses to mankind was giving us dogs. Canine companions are quick to forgive, always willing to play, and content to just sit with us. They provide us with living, breathing safe places to which we can retreat. These loyal friends love us unconditionally and ultimately point us to God, who is the embodiment of perfect friendship and love.

Ironically, I was afraid of dogs when I was a child, as I share in "Hi, Donnie," the first story in this book. Although I didn't have a dog to call my own until I was married, many members of my family had wonderful dogs who enriched my life. Dogs have taught me powerful lessons about contentment, speaking up for myself, not taking myself too seriously, the importance of making time for play, and the power of being present with others.

The more I have observed my dogs—and the dogs I've been blessed to



know—the more I’ve learned from them. Not just life lessons, but spiritual lessons too, glimpses of the divine hiding in the ordinary. In fact, uncovering meaningful moments in the midst of everyday life actually motivated me to write this book. My goal was to showcase how our canine friends teach us and point us to truth and hope.

Pawverbs for a Dog Lover’s Heart is a collection of dog stories, each based on a real dog and highlighting a principle or lesson found in the book of Proverbs. Several of the stories are about my own dogs throughout the years—including my current Golden retriever, Gracie. Most, however, were submitted by friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers who now feel like family. Some stories took place a long time ago and were written from memories and recollections, with names and identifying details changed for privacy, and a few timelines have been adjusted for a more cohesive story. But the heart and integrity of the stories are all based on true events.

At the end of each story, you will find a “Paws & Ponder” and a “Paws & Pray” feature to prompt you to go deeper into the story and see a spiritual truth that might impact your own heart.

My ultimate prayer is that within these pages you will find inspiration, laughter, healing, hope, and some new friends. And that you will be encouraged to “paws” and pay attention to the divine moments tucked inside of your ordinary days—divine moments that may just come running toward you with muddy paws.

Much love,

Jen







HI, DONNIE

*Unrelenting disappointment leaves you heartsick,
but a sudden good break can turn life around.*

PROVERBS 13:12, MSG

AS A YOUNG GIRL, Jen was terrified of dogs. Especially big dogs—like Donnie.

Her uncle Ron and aunt Nancy's German shepherd often accompanied them to family gatherings at Jen's grandparents' house. Jen's entire family loved Donnie. Her cousins often fought over who would get to play with him first.

But whenever five-year-old Jen caught sight of Donnie, she cowered behind her dad's leg, trembling. As much as Jen's relatives assured the little girl that Donnie wouldn't hurt her, she wasn't convinced. Consequently, her aunt and uncle always kept the shepherd outside and away from her. Their consideration helped, but it also magnified Jen's fear. She began to view Donnie as "the beast" who had to stay outside to keep him from attacking her.

Jen would watch longingly from the back door of the house as her cousins played with Donnie in their grandparents' backyard. They would play fetch and hide-and-seek, take turns shaking Donnie's paws, and ask him to roll over.

They all looked so happy, including Donnie.

Jen began to grow frustrated with herself. She loved her cousins and wanted to play with them. She didn't want to be scared anymore.

Yet every time she decided to face her fear and step outside, she pictured Donnie jumping up on her like he did to her cousin Mike. Or she heard Donnie's deep, throaty bark and slunk back down into the sofa cushions.

During one visit, Jen was tired of being cooped up inside and missing out on the fun.

She opened the back door and looked out on the porch where her granddaddy was slicing a watermelon. Uncle Ron was sitting beside him, with Donnie lying at his feet.

When Uncle Ron spotted Jen, he stood up and grabbed Donnie's collar. "I'll take him inside," he offered.

"It's okay," Jen whispered.

"Donnie, sit," Uncle Ron said.

She eyed the big dog. His mouth was open, and his tongue was hanging out. His ears were raised, and his head was cocked to the side as if he were studying her. He sat completely still.

Jen began to inch her way forward on the porch. Once she reached Donnie, she cautiously placed her right hand on the top of his head.

"Hi, Donnie," she said, timidly smiling.

As if sensing the importance of the moment, Donnie lay down, rolled over, and offered her his belly.

"Well, I'll be," Jen heard her granddaddy say.

Jen knelt down and rubbed Donnie's belly—tentatively at first and then with more confidence. Within minutes, her fear disappeared.

From that time on, Donnie continued his boisterous play with Jen's cousins, but he was always gentle with Jen. Even in her five-year-old mind, she grasped lifelong lessons from him—about patience, not judging others based on their appearance, and what true friendship looked like.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

Are you struggling with a fear today? Lay it before your heavenly Father, and ask him to help you identify and take the first step to overcome that worry. Imagine the victory you will feel after walking through that fear, a victory you will share with the God who walks with you.



Paws & Pray

Father, thank you for being stronger than my fear. Give me courage to take the first step toward conquering my anxiety. I know I will not walk alone.



LOOK UP

Ears that hear and eyes that see—the LORD has made them both.

PROVERBS 20:12, NIV

AMBER CLEARED A PATH with her foot through a pile of dirty laundry so she could get to the back door. “Ow!” she cried as she stepped on a stray Lego.

“Mom!” her son and daughter yelled in unison. “Where are the goggles?”

“The new school year cannot start soon enough, Suzie Poo,” Amber mumbled to their nine-week-old Australian shepherd–Queensland heeler mix, who wiggled anxiously in her arms.

“Hang on, girl. Let me open the door.”

Once outside, Amber set the puppy on the grass and chanted, “Go potty,” for what seemed like the eighty-seventh time that morning. Suzie’s leash dangled from Amber’s hand as she urged the puppy to do her business—hoping she would soon make the connection between the action and the appropriate location.

Amber glanced at her watch.

The kids need lunch before swim lessons.

Do I have bread?

What am I going to make for dinner?

Ugh, I forgot to put the clothes in the washer!

She jiggled the leash. “Hurry up, girl.”

Amber felt a flood of stress engulf her. She loved being a mom. Loved having this time with her kids. Loved every gift God had given her.

But she was tired.

So tired.

She needed rest. And maybe a vacation in Maui.

Look up.

The words came as a whisper to her heart. Not audible to human ears, yet clear and authoritative to her soul.

And so Amber looked up.

The brilliant blue sky was awash with swirls of wispy clouds, creating lovely white patterns. A slight breeze caused the leaves in the maple tree to rustle and dance, and she laughed at two squirrels playing fast tag up another tree.

Amber inhaled deeply, driving the racing thoughts from her mind.

She took a deep breath, then another. Each time she felt as though she were inhaling God's rest and peace and exhaling her stress and worry. Her soul felt lighter.

With one last glance toward the heavens, Amber turned her attention back to Suzie Poo. "C'mon. Let's head inside." Her life as a mom didn't miraculously slow down and become manageable that summer—and she doubted it would for quite a while. But that day outside revealed an important truth to her: True rest can be found in little stolen moments with God.

That day, puppy training time turned from a necessary annoyance to a sacred time of rest with God. He opened Amber's eyes and ears to see and hear the wondrous beauty all around her.

And while she would gladly accept a Hawaiian vacation in the future, her stolen moments with God provided just what she needed in the moment.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

When have you felt closest to God? Where were you and what were you doing? Take a moment to "look up" today—to look above your circumstances and see a glimpse of the Creator. Use your eyes and ears to look at and listen closely to the things around you. Ask God to fill your soul with rest as you breathe in his presence.



Paws & Pray

Lord, my soul craves the rest only you can give. Would you lift my head so I can see well beyond my circumstances? Help me to see past the mundane in order to glimpse the divine.



*Blessed is the one who finds wisdom,
and the one who gets understanding.*

PROVERBS 3:13, ESV

GO LEFT

*The prudent understand where they are going,
but fools deceive themselves.*

PROVERBS 14:8

JUSTUS WAS ONLY A FEW months old the first time he saw a squirrel in his backyard climbing down a large oak tree.

The small yellow Lab, whose nose had been pressed to the ground as he explored his new surroundings, was startled by the sound of claws scratching against tree bark. Justus tilted his head, wagged his tail, and then he was off. Driven by both instinct and curiosity, Justus ran as fast as he could.

The squirrel stopped his descent, confident he was safe on the tree trunk several feet from the ground.

Justus barked and pawed the tree.

Desperate to play with this new and interesting friend, he play-bowed numerous times.

The squirrel was unimpressed and chattered noisily as he scampered farther up the trunk.

Confused and dejected, Justus stared at the tree for several minutes before lowering his nose and resuming his sniff patrol.

Day after day, the squirrel descended from its nest and Justus gave chase as it turned and scampered up the tree.

Squirrel quickly became Justus's favorite word. He would bark frantically at the mere mention of the creature who refused to come down for a proper hello.

As Justus grew from puppy to full-size dog, his interest in squirrels grew from curiosity to an all-out obsession.

And yet, much to his owner Will's amusement, no matter where in the yard a

squirrel was, Justus always, without fail, ran straight to the oak tree in the middle of the backyard.

“Justus, squirrel!” Will would shout, pointing to a squirrel on the fence opposite the oak tree.

Justus would bark and paw at the door. He would see the squirrel to his left, balancing on the top of the fence. But the minute the door opened, Justus would make a hard right and run straight to the oak tree.

One day, hearing a squirrel’s distinct chattering, Justus bounded out the door, took his hard right, and then let out a yelp. He limped to the tree.

No squirrel there.

Forlorn at not nabbing the elusive squirrel, he limped back inside.

Will took his squirrel hunter to the vet, who revealed that Justus’s enthusiastic chase had resulted in a torn ACL.

“Oh, Justus,” Will whispered in his Lab’s ear while he was being prepped for surgery. “Next time go left.”

Justus recovered from surgery and lived many more happy years. But never once did he turn left.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

Has your enthusiasm for something ever caused you to run ahead of God—or miss his leading altogether? Maybe it was a relationship or an opportunity you pursued despite the Holy Spirit prompting you not to. How did that situation turn out? How can you guard yourself from making a mistake when enthusiasm swells in your heart?



Paws & Pray

Lord, so often I think I am going the right way in life, only to discover I’ve made a wrong turn. Help me to walk with you, Father—to go where you lead. Stop me from running ahead of your plans for me.







DID YOU HEAR SOMETHING?

*The righteous choose their friends carefully,
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.*

PROVERBS 12:26, NIV

AFTER LETTING THEIR TWO DOGS OUT—a gentle five-year-old rescued beagle mix named Delta and a year-old energetic Weimaraner named Wiley—Mark and Heather settled on the sofa to watch a movie. The couple had been looking forward to a date night at home. With their dogs securely playing in the fenced backyard, the house was finally quiet and movie night could begin.

Several minutes into the movie, as Heather reached for the bowl of popcorn sitting on the coffee table, she thought she heard a noise at the front door.

“Mark, did you hear that?”

“No,” he said, pausing the movie.

She strained to listen. “Okay, now I don’t hear anything.”

“Probably just the surround sound,” Mark said, clicking the remote to play the movie again.

Heather had eaten several handfuls of popcorn when she heard the noise again.

“I *know* I heard something now,” she said, getting up.

Once again Mark paused the movie. This time they both heard the unmistakable sound of frantic scratching at the front door. Heather glanced through the front window.

“It’s Delta and Wiley!” she exclaimed.

Mark opened the door, and their two dogs bounded in.

“How did you two get out?” Mark asked.

“And how long have you been standing there?” Heather continued the interrogation.

Clearly unwilling to share the details of their great backyard escape, Delta and Wiley plopped in front of the sofa and proceeded to sleep off their adventure.

The next day Mark discovered a freshly dug trench at the bottom of the fence—the perfect size for a Weimaraner to squeeze through.

Wiley!

The lanky dog with blue eyes was as striking looking as he was mischievous. Delta wanted nothing more than to obey and be rewarded for her obedience, while Wiley lived to break the rules.

Mark told Heather what he had found.

“Wiley, don’t you lead Delta astray,” Heather chided him.

At the sound of her name, Delta raised her head. Wiley simply rolled over.

“Keep your eye out for that one,” Heather whispered to Delta. “And good job leading him back home.”

Between his expert digging skills and a finicky gate lock, Wiley managed to escape several more times. But thankfully his wiser and more obedient companion Delta always convinced Wiley to follow her home—right to the front door.

PAWS & PONDER . . .

What makes a good friend? Why is it important to choose friends carefully? How can you be a good friend to someone today?



Paws & Pray

Lord, thank you for the gift of friendship. I want to be more discerning about who I befriend. Teach me to be a valued friend to others—loving them as you do and as you love me.



*Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead,
fear the LORD and turn away from evil.*

PROVERBS 3:7



PUGSLEY

*A sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!*

PROVERBS 19:24, NIV

SUSAN HAD NEVER SEEN HER DOG, Pugsley, look more pitiful than when she picked him up from the veterinary hospital after his dental cleaning. The seven-year-old pug trembled as the technician handed him to Susan.

“He did great,” the tech said, “but I know he’s ready to get out of here.”

Susan offered an apologetic smile. “I don’t know why he’s so frightened to come here. You guys are great. He’s just a big ol’ scaredy-cat, aren’t ya, boy?”

After a few parting instructions from the tech, Susan took Pugsley home, where he promptly fell asleep. After listening to him snore for several hours, Susan got up to prepare his dinner. The vet tech had suggested softening his kibble or giving him canned food for the next few days, in case his mouth was a little sore from the procedure. So Susan popped open a can of food and scooped it into Pugsley’s ceramic bowl.

“Come, Pugsley, it’s din-din time,” she called.

The pug opened an eye but did not move a muscle.

“Pugsley,” she tried again. “Come eat your dinner.”

Pugsley got up, turned in a circle, then once again curled up in a ball on the sofa.

Susan carried the bowl of food to Pugsley and held it under his nose. He looked from his bowl to Susan, then back to his bowl. Finally, he lowered his head over his bowl and began to eat.

Susan felt guilty for letting her dog eat while lying on the furniture. *Just this once—because he's been through such an ordeal*, she assured herself.

The next day, when Pugsley again refused to come into the kitchen to eat, Susan tried to stand strong.

"Pugsley, you have to come *in here* to eat. Come here," she commanded.

Her dog stepped one paw into the kitchen and then lay down. Two big round eyes stared beseechingly at her.

"Oh, all right," Susan sighed. "At least you're in the kitchen."

She again brought his bowl to him, where he leisurely ate with his front half on the kitchen's tile floor and his back half on the family room carpet.

After four days of catering to her dog—including hand-feeding him—Susan realized her dog had become quite lazy and spoiled. At his last feeding, he didn't even lower his head to the bowl, but simply waited for Susan to bring the kibble to his mouth. She knew she needed to bring Pugsley back to reality. So the following day she poured a scoop of kibble into his food bowl and placed it next to his water bowl on the floor.

"Pugsley," she called out. "Dinner!"

Pugsley sashayed into the kitchen where he sat with his hind end on the carpet and his front paws on the tile.

"Oh no, you don't," Susan chided. "You are coming in here to eat today, mister."

Pugsley turned the full force of his sad puppy eyes on her, but Susan was resolved.

The standoff lasted several hours, during which time Susan completed a lengthy list of household chores, while Pugsley stared longingly at the food bowl lying ten feet away from him.

Finally, after his pleading looks and incessant whining went unanswered, the disgruntled pug sulked his way into the kitchen, lowered his head over his bowl, and surrendered to his hunger.

Twenty minutes later Susan laughed out loud as Pugsley sank to the floor with his head on his food bowl and fell sound asleep.

Susan shook her head as she carried the pug to his bed. "You silly dog. You may be a scaredy-cat and a lazybones, but I sure do love you."

PAWS & PONDER...

A one-time indulgence resulted in an unintended pattern for Susan and Pugsley. Have you ever experienced a similar result? How did you break the habit? Or maybe you are still stuck in that routine. If so, what steps can you take today to break free of the destructive pattern of laziness and/or overindulgence?



Paws & Pray

Lord, I love to be comfortable and content, but sometimes those things can become bad habits if I'm not careful. I sometimes opt to be lazy and self-indulgent when I should be doing the work you've given me to do. Help me to fight against those destructive patterns so I can live a full and purposeful life.

