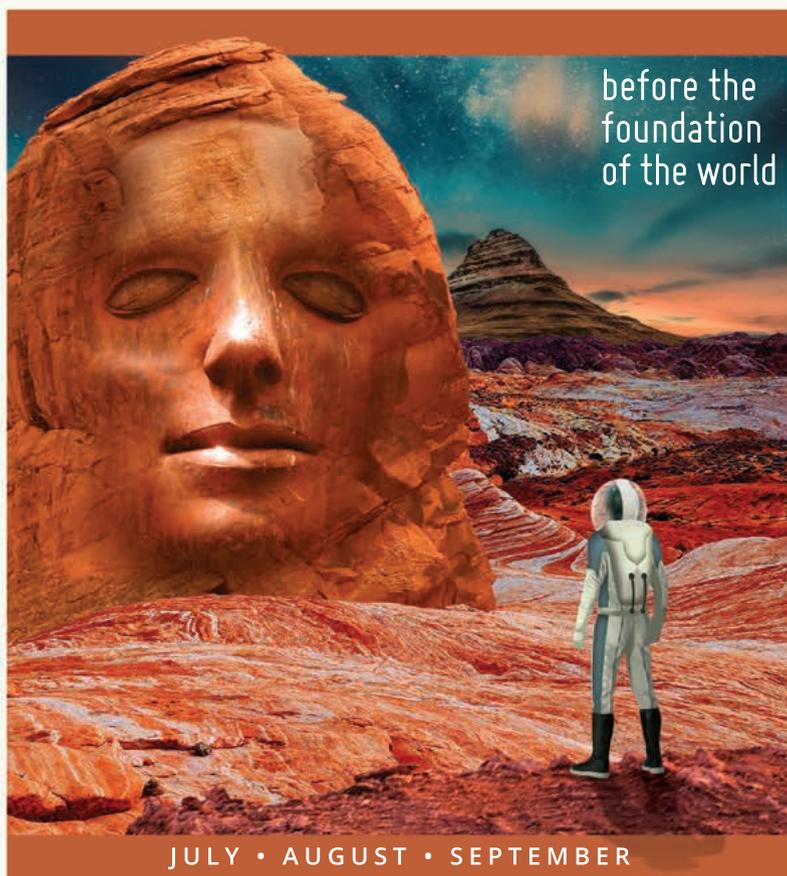


UNLOCKED

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS



before the
foundation
of the world

JULY • AUGUST • SEPTEMBER

Do you have thoughts about the first issue of *Unlocked*?

Complete the online survey at unlocked.org and get exclusive access to “Operation: Phylon-5A” and “Hunted,” two never-before-published *Unlocked* short stories!

unlocked.org/survey



Unlocked is on Instagram!

Follow us for encouragement, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and more!

[@UnlockedDevo](https://www.instagram.com/unlockeddevo)



UNLOCKED™

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS

JULY • AUGUST • SEPTEMBER

UNLOCKED.ORG



Unlocked—Daily Readings for Teens

President: Greg Yoder

Editor: Kandi Zeller

Design: Warren Kramer

Editorial Assistant: Taylor Eising

Theological review: Chad Bresson, Richard Vaughn, Kevin Zeller

Scripture quotations marked (CSB) are taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

© 2019 Keys for Kids Ministries, Box 1001, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49501-1001. Printed in the USA.

Unlocked.org

Contents

JULY TITLE	PAGE
No Matter What Happens.....	5
What If I Have Questions about God?	6
Amazing.....	7
Walk in Love.....	8
Who Wants to Be Normal?.....	9
Can We Trust the Bible?	10
Why Does the Bible Matter?	11
Good News	12
Jealousy's Lie.....	14
Governor? King?	15
Pain Point.....	16
Uniquely Created	17
Fool's Gold	18
Who Do You Follow?	19
Held Together.....	20
Questions.....	21
Why Worry?.....	22
God Shares Your Desk at School.....	23
I Can't Feel God Right Now	24
Blame	25
A Sad Day.....	26
Jesus Weeps.....	27
Be Strong and Courageous.....	28
Hey God, It's Me	29
See How God Will Use You.....	30
Between You and God	31
Nehemiah's Response to Bullying.....	32
Your Talents, God's Kingdom.....	33
A Bold Step	34
Come to Me	35
Stone Faces.....	36
AUGUST TITLE	PAGE
Do You Feel Overwhelmed?.....	38
Are You Listening, God?	39
Help—My Friend Is Grieving!.....	40
Jesus Scavenger Hunt.....	41
Symbiosis	42
Listen to the Voice of God.....	43
The Desert Storm.....	44
Do You Have Doubts?.....	45
Pointless and Silly Myths.....	46
911	47
Masterpiece	48
Live Your Life Worthy	49
You're Broken—Like Everyone Else	50
How to Love Your Equally Broken Friends.....	52

AUGUST (CONTINUED)		PAGE
Conversations with God.....		54
We Are All Runaways.....		55
Without a Mom.....		56
Loving the Lawgiver.....		57
Unshakable Worth.....		58
Stopping the Cycle.....		59
I Want to Forgive, but I Can't!.....		60
Confident in the Corridors of Power.....		62
Does God Have Good Plans for Me?.....		63
Whose Voice Is That?.....		64
Fear of Dragons.....		65
Right Now.....		66
Give Thanks.....		67
A New Creation.....		68
Me.....		69
Sharing Jesus without Fear.....		70
Nametags.....		71
SEPTEMBER TITLE		PAGE
Why Am I So Angry?.....		72
Breaking the Grip of Distraction.....		73
Father to the Fatherless.....		74
Can I Ask God Why?.....		76
A Country of Their Own.....		77
Football and Worship.....		78
Strength.....		79
Part of the Team.....		80
The Resurrection.....		81
Being Hospitable Doesn't Require Much.....		82
When God Disappoints Us.....		83
By Faith.....		84
Comparison.....		85
Give Thanks in Everything.....		86
When God Says Yes.....		87
Friends of God.....		88
Hanging Out with Sinners.....		89
Anxiety.....		90
Volleyball.....		91
Speak Up.....		92
Sticks (Part 1).....		93
Stones (Part 2).....		94
The Pain before the Joy.....		95
A Magical Formula?.....		96
Find God in Lonely Times.....		97
An Interview with Peter.....		98
Your Love.....		100
Are You Salty?.....		101
Our Father's House.....		102
Obligation: Love.....		103
Good News.....		104

No Matter What Happens

READ: LUKE 12:22-31; PHILIPPIANS 4:12-13

Anxiety seeped into my brain. What would happen? Would my dad be okay? My dad had been suffering from mysterious symptoms for the past year. Doctors told him it was anxiety, but he didn't believe it.

I was scared. *If something ever happens to my dad...I need him.*

I pulled out my Bible. My eyes skimmed the pages for something—anything—encouraging.

Suddenly, Luke 12:27 popped out at me: “Consider how the wild flowers grow....”

I kept reading, realizing I had read this passage multiple times yet only now understood the depth of its meaning: God cares for the mere flowers. Wouldn't He also care for His child, whom He created in His glorious image?

Even though life was tough, I found peace knowing Jesus would always be with me and would always be fighting for me. And, one day, I would be with my Savior forever. No more disease, decay, or death. No more fear, anxiety, or tears. Christians, including my dad and me, would be reunited with each other. And we would praise our Savior, who conquered Satan and defeated death.

But those truths didn't fix my dad's health. That's when I remembered what my youth pastor had said: “Jesus isn't just with you; He's *in* you.” The Spirit of God was *in* me, working *through* me, living *inside* of me.

I continued flipping through the pages and found Philippians 4:12-13: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”

Jesus will get me through everything, whether smooth or bumpy. So no matter what happens, I know I can find peace in Jesus, in whom I trust. 🕯️ *Emma Pamer*

🕯️ When have you needed to trust Jesus to guide you through difficult times? How did He guide you through them? _____

🕯️ How does this show that He will be with you during future struggles (Matthew 28:20)? _____

Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? Matthew 6:27 (NIV)

What If I Have Questions about God?

READ: JAMES 1:5; 2 PETER 3:15-18

Do you have questions about God? You're not alone. Why? God is infinite, which means He's always existed and always will. He's also omniscient, which means He knows everything. The apostle Paul writes with amazed words about God's complete knowledge and how what God does is often beyond what we can understand (Romans 11:33-35). God says even His thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). No wonder we get confused sometimes!

God cares about us. So He gave us His Word, the Bible, to explain what we need to understand about Him. That Word points us to Jesus, who is God and who is the whole point of the Bible. Jesus is the final and complete revelation about God (Hebrews 1:1-3).

The great news is we're not left to figure out the Bible by ourselves. God gives us fellow Christians—such as family members, camp counselors, pastors, youth leaders, and friends—to help us understand what we learn from His Word. He also gives Christians the Holy Spirit so they can grow in their understanding of His Word (John 14:26). Along those same lines, God invites us to ask Him questions. If we need wisdom, all we need to do is ask Him (James 1:5). He always provides what we need to know because He loves us.

God's Word explains that sometimes understanding Scripture is difficult, but it also encourages us to keep growing and learning in what we know about God (2 Peter 3:15-18). Sometimes things are beyond our understanding, yet we can always know that God is good and that He is with us through it all.

So when you have honest questions about God, don't be afraid to ask them. He won't abandon you when you ask. **✚** *A. W. Smith*

✚ What questions do you have about God? Have you prayed about them? _____

✚ Who else could you ask about questions you have? _____

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. James 1:5 (NLT)

Amazing

READ: ROMANS 5:6-11

Jesus Christ *died for your sins*.

Does this sentence amaze you every time you read it?

For many of us (especially those of us who have grown up going to church), this amazing statement has become so normal in our lives that we just glance over it. But that's just what this truth is—amazing. Something that inspires awe, admiration, or wonder.

Jesus' death on the cross was amazing because it accomplished something so surprising and important that it echoed into all eternity: Jesus laid down His life for people who were criminals in His sight. Most of you have a friend or relative you would be willing to die for. But imagine dying for a criminal. A murderer. Now multiply that by millions—and you've got what Jesus did for us. But don't forget the next part...

Jesus Christ died for your sins *and resurrected from the dead*, securing your resurrection. If you put your trust in Him, sin and death are not the end of the story. This is the gospel, and it is truly amazing, no matter how many times you hear it. 🕯 *Merrick Potter*

🕯 What parts of the gospel amaze or surprise you the most? _____

🕯 What are some of your favorite Bible verses about the amazing things Jesus has done for us? _____

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Romans 5:6 (NLT)



Walk in Love

READ: JOHN 1:14; EPHESIANS 5:1-2; COLOSSIANS 3:12

It was another hot day. We had been running errands all day with Mom, driving around town and feeling the sun's intense heat bouncing off our car in traffic. It was finally time to grab a bite to eat, and we were all looking forward to it.

As we drove through the intersection, I saw a frail-looking man wearing a long-sleeved shirt on this sweltering day. He carried a huge duffle bag over his shoulder, and his face and head were beaten red by the sun. I noticed he was walking to the same restaurant we were heading to.

As my mom placed the order at the drive-thru, I noticed the man had gone inside the restaurant. Within a minute, he came out looking defeated. He walked over to a nearby table and just sat there under the sun's punishment.

I kept glancing at him as we drove forward to the next window to pick up our food. I noticed the sweat coming down his forehead. My heart was stirred.

My mom collected the food and, as she drove forward, I asked her to stop.

I quickly gathered my meal, cold drink and all, swung the door open, and walked toward the frail-looking man. He looked uneasy and unsure—until I extended my hands to give him my food and drink. “You’re gonna love that cold drink right now. Just remember, Jesus loves you.”

With those words, his defeated countenance gave way to one of sincere gratitude.

I’m realizing that Jesus Christ doesn’t want us to keep Him in our hearts, but rather He wants us to live to represent Him. When we show God’s love, we encourage those who need Jesus to find Him—just like when Jesus reached out and showed His love to us so that we could know Him. **✎** *Carlos Ortega*

✎ What practical things can you do to show Jesus’ love and truth to people in your community? _____

✎ How does showing kindness point others to Jesus? _____

*Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.
Ephesians 5:1-2 (CSB)*

Who Wants to Be Normal?

READ: GENESIS 1:27; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

My first day in Psychology 101, the instructor said, “There is no such thing as normal.” That took me by surprise. It was also a huge relief because I had never considered myself normal.

God created each of us uniquely, and that is a good thing. I’m not saying God wants us to wallow in our individual sin patterns—running around haphazardly, snapping at people, and wading through a river of worries and doubts. But, even though sin twists the talents, gifts, and personality traits God has given us, Jesus restores us. When we become new creations in Christ by trusting Him as our Lord and Savior, every part of our personalities is transformed for use in the kingdom of God, all by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Obsessive planning and compulsive hard work can be transformed into a God-honoring and solid work ethic, adding to any project or team. An overactive imagination can be used by God to creatively minister to children, write uplifting notes, and come up with awesome ideas. And even though being impulsive can lead us into trouble, impulsivity can be remade into the courage needed to try something new for ministry.

In the Bible, Paul writes, “Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27).

I’ve always loved that verse because I don’t think God can find a more foolish person than me. God uses unique and imperfect people, who are totally devoted to Him, to do great things in His kingdom.

The psychology teacher was right: there is no such thing as normal. We are created in God’s image with unique gifts and abilities. And, though we still struggle with sin, Jesus is working in us. We are unique and new creations in Him. **✎ Sharon Rene**

✎ What are some of your unique traits? _____

✎ How has the Holy Spirit worked in your life through those unique traits? _____

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17 (CSB)

Can We Trust the Bible?

READ: NUMBERS 23:19; PROVERBS 30:5-6; JOHN 17:1-3, 17

The Bible claims to be God’s infallible Word and tells us that God does not lie. And that claim comes with a lot of evidence:

Prophecies written in the Old Testament (the older part of the Bible) were fulfilled in the New Testament (the newer part). Jesus Himself is the ultimate fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Acts 10:43). For example, the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 came true when Jesus was born (see Matthew 1:18-23).

- The Bible, written by eyewitnesses, includes embarrassing details about the people of God—details that wouldn’t have been included if someone had wanted to make something up to impress people. One example is Peter’s denial of Christ (Luke 22:54-62).
- Many of the people God used to write the Bible died horrible deaths to share the message of God’s Word with others. If they hadn’t believed it, they wouldn’t have died for it.
- Archeological and scientific findings continue to confirm what the Bible says. There are a number of great resources, speakers, and scholars that discuss these issues. A pastor, camp counselor, youth leader, or another Christian friend can point you to resources about these findings.

Finally, one of the biggest evidences for the trustworthiness of the Bible is that God wrote down His Word through many human writers over 1500 years, yet even over all that time and with all those people, the Bible has the same message all the way through. God’s story and His plan for salvation remain the same throughout the whole book. This points to God as its author and gives us evidence that what the Bible says is true.

If you still have questions about the Bible, that’s okay! Find someone—maybe a youth pastor, a camp counselor, or another Christian you trust—to share those questions with today. 📌 *Kandi Zeller*

📌 What evidence of the Bible’s trustworthiness presented above was the most convincing to you? Why?

📌 What questions do you have about the Bible? _____

📌 Who is a trusted Christian in your life who you could share these questions with? _____

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. 2 Peter 1:16 (NIV)

Why Does the Bible Matter?

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-8; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-16; 2 PETER 1:16-21

With all the books out there, why do Christians care about the Bible so much? Why do we make it the standard we use to measure everything in our lives?

First and most generally, the Bible is God's Word to us. Every word was God-breathed through the Holy Spirit, who used real people to write down what God wanted us to know. It's the story of God's Son, Jesus, and our place in His story. It tells us how God created everything, how humans fell into sin, and how—through Jesus Christ—God is saving His people and all of creation from sin and its effects.

More specifically, the Bible is the story of Jesus—fully God and fully man—and how He offers hope and rescue from sin for His people. God uses a number of literary genres (or types of writing) to tell His story. For example, the Bible features history books (such as Genesis, Joshua, and Esther), poetry books (like Psalms and Proverbs), letters (like Philippians and Romans), and prophecy (like Isaiah and Jeremiah), as well as other genres. God uses all these different literary forms and genres to show us who He is and how we can have a relationship with Him.

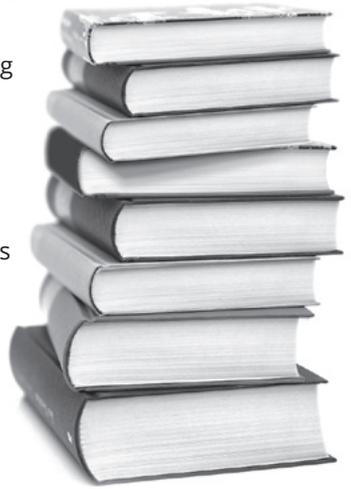
The fact that the Bible is all about Jesus is why Christians center their identity on the Bible's words. The Word of God tells us about Jesus, our King: the One who can save us from sin and all the brokenness it brings. **✎** *Kandi Zeller*

✎ What books of the Bible confuse you the most? How does the fact that all of them point to Jesus help you understand those more difficult books? _____

✎ What is your favorite book of the Bible? Why? _____

✎ How has the Bible helped you understand who Jesus is? What is one thing you have learned about Jesus from His Word? _____

And how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:15 (NIV)



Good News

READ: GENESIS 1:26-28, 31; JOHN 3:16-17; ROMANS 3:23; 6:23

The word *gospel* means “good news.” We hear this word used in the Bible and in our churches. But do we really understand how good this news is? Let’s go all the way back to the beginning.

- God created humans unlike any other part of His creation—we bear His image. He looked at all of creation, including us, and He said it was good. That’s good news.
- Sin separated us from God and broke everything in God’s good creation. Because we have all sinned, the only way to be with our good God—both now and forever—is through a perfect sacrifice to pay the debt we could never pay (no matter how hard we try). But instead of abandoning us to wallow in our sin, God, our good Father, made a good plan from the very beginning to rescue us. Because He loves us that much. God’s plan was to send Jesus, who died on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. That’s good news.
- Jesus came not only to die but to live. He lived on earth, experiencing all that we experience: celebrations, temptations, friendship, family, hunger, rejection. He knows what we experience because He Himself has lived it. That’s good news.
- Jesus took our place, living a perfect life and dying on the cross, to offer us freedom from the bondage of our sin. When we put our faith in Jesus, He gives us the Holy Spirit. Through His power in our lives, we receive freedom from guilt, shame, and a life of striving to be good enough—because we are now dead to sin. Jesus’ work on the cross and His resurrection give us the opportunity to live abundantly in Him, free from the power of sin and death. That’s good news.
- Not only are we free from the weight of our sin, but we are also loved more than we can imagine. The God who created the universe sent His only Son to live and die in our place. Our punishment was laid on Him, even though He did nothing wrong. And His love didn’t end at the cross. Jesus rose again and is in the throne room of God, advocating for us with His never-ending love. He finds us when we wander and when we are less than lovable. He delights in us. Through faith in Him, we join the family of God, and He promises we will live forever with Him. His love for us will never stop. *That’s good news.* 📖 *Cara Campbell*

For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (CSB)

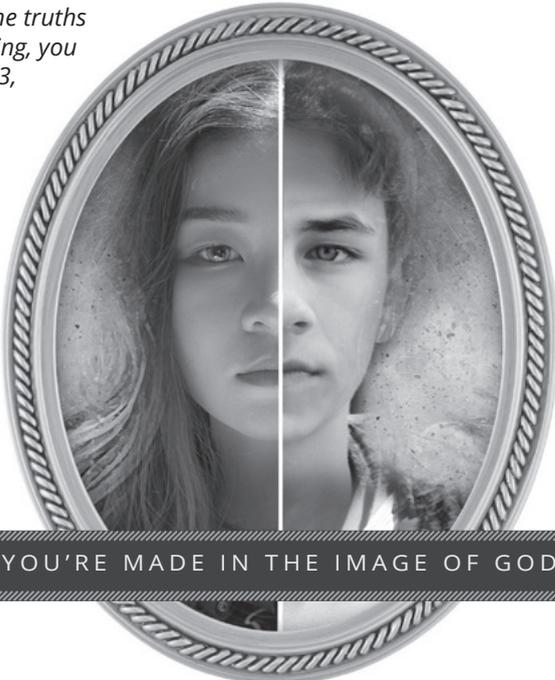
HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 What truths from today's reading stuck out to you the most? _____

🔑 What things from today's reading confused you? If something confused you, who is someone you can talk with about it? _____

🔑 Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior (Romans 10:9-13)? If not, who is someone you can talk with about what that means? (To learn more about the good news of Jesus, turn to page 104.) _____

To learn more about the truths shared in today's reading, you can check out Genesis 3, Isaiah 53:6; 59:2, John 10:7-10, Romans 6 & 8, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Hebrews 4:14-16, 1 Peter 1:18-21, 1 John 2:1, and Revelation 21:1-5.



Jealousy's Lie

READ: COLOSSIANS 3:8-15; HEBREWS 13:5

Have you ever struggled with jealousy? It's one of those sins that can be hard to beat because it goes so deeply into our thinking. In fact, like any sin, beating jealousy is impossible without Jesus Christ.

So, how does Jesus help us beat jealousy? First, He declared you made new when you first put your trust in Him as your Lord and Savior—and, in the future, He promises to raise you from the dead, free from the effects of sin. In the meantime, you have Him with you through the power of the Holy Spirit within you. Every time you experience jealousy, talk to Jesus about it. Ask Him to remind you of your value in Him and the love He has for you and the person you're jealous of. Then ask Him to replace the bitterness you have toward that person with His love.

Ultimately, realizing that Jesus loves you and the other person equally—enough to take the punishment for both of your sins on Himself—will help your thinking begin to change. Jealousy believes the lie that God is kinder to others than He is to us. We know God is just, so we must replace the lie that God is unjust with the truth that He is the definition of justice, love, and faithfulness. He promises to provide for us, and, in His perfect timing, He promises to right every wrong.

When we know Jesus, His peace can rule in our hearts, even when the brokenness of our world makes things unfair—and even when the brokenness of our own hearts tempts us to fester with envy over another person's circumstances.

In short, Jesus is more powerful than feelings of jealousy. When we remember that truth and thank Him for all He's done for us, we'll begin to experience His peace and contentment. Ask Him to remove any bitterness or jealousy from your heart and replace it with His love and peace. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Is there someone you are jealous of? If so, talk to Jesus about it. What are the lies you believe about this person and God's faithfulness to you and them? _____

✦ What promises from God's Word can you keep on hand to remember when you are feeling jealous? _____

[You] have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator. Colossians 3:10 (CSB)

Governor? King?

READ: 2 CHRONICLES 34

Six teens recently decided to run for governor of Kansas. With no age limit on gubernatorial candidates in that state, these teens debated and did interviews. They had opinions about abortion, health insurance, and education.

But they weren't the first young people involved in government leadership. Long ago, eight-year-old Josiah was crowned king of Judah.

With the help of good mentors, Josiah was ready to take over at age sixteen, and he soon rid the country of the previous evil regime. He repaired the temple of God and tore down the places where people worshiped idols. Because of this young king's leadership, the people of Judah followed the Lord as long as Josiah lived. Even at sixteen, he was a good leader because he sought after God, who was the source of his wisdom and strength.

You probably won't be king any time soon (and you probably won't be governor of Kansas either because the Kansas State Legislature is now putting some definite age limits on gubernatorial candidates). But you can be a leader.

You might be thinking, *Not at this point in my life. Other people are leading me. My parents, my teachers, my boss, and even my youth pastor.* True. But think about it—even adults are under the authority of others. You can be a leader in your group of friends, in your school, in your family, and even in your church. How? By following sixteen-year-old Josiah's example of seeking after Jesus, the one true king. *✦ Linda Weddle*

✦ If you were given the opportunity to be a government leader, what is the first thing you would do? _____

✦ Where do you have the opportunity to lead others? _____

✦ What are the characteristics of a good leader? How can you reflect Christ in your leadership? _____

He did what was right in the LORD's sight and walked in the ways of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or the left. 2 Chronicles 34:2 (CSB)



Pain Point

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

Alex approached his youth pastor. “You wanted to see me?”

Mr. Rob nodded. “Yes, Alex. Thanks for staying back. I was wondering why you’re not coming to any of the activities lately. Is everything okay?”

Alex nodded, looking at the door. “Everything’s fine.”

Silence fell between them. Finally, Mr. Rob spoke. “Has your dad found work yet?”

Alex’s eyes fell. “Not yet. I can’t ask him for money. He’s really stressed.”

Mr. Rob sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You may not know this, but I was raised by a single mom. I never went to a single youth activity.”

Alex’s eyebrows raised. “Really?”

Mr. Rob nodded. “I remember having to ask her for money for some unavoidable reason. Not fun.”

Alex sighed. “No, it’s not. I hate adding pressure when we can barely keep the lights on.”

“Ouch. Been there. You know what helped me?” Mr. Rob grabbed his Bible, flipped to Psalm 77, and handed it to Alex.

Alex read, “And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High. I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember thy wonders of old.”

“That passage helped me see that God is with me through my infirmities—the hard things I’ll experience. My pain points,” said Mr. Rob. “I remember God is faithful by thinking about the times I’ve seen Him at work in my life.”

“Hmm. I’ll remember that,” said Alex.

“And remember Jesus is with you,” continued Mr. Rob. “His grace is enough. Believe me, I would know.”  *Rebekah Love Dorris*

 What’s a recurring pain point in your life? How has God shown Himself to be faithful to you, even in hard times? _____

 We live in a broken world filled with pain points. But, because of Jesus, it won’t always be that way. Read Hebrews 4:14-16 and Revelation 21:1-5. How can these promises from God help you find peace when you face painful situations? _____

And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High. I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember thy wonders of old. Psalm 77:10-11 (KJV)

Uniquely Created

READ: PSALM 139:13-16; ROMANS 12:3-8; EPHESIANS 2:8-10

It's hard being different.

As an athlete, I found out—the hard way—that everyone is made uniquely.

In competitive swimming, there are four basic strokes: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, butterfly. Freestyle is by far the most common stroke. If you're not good at it, you're out of luck.

Well, guess what? I'm not very good at it. When you don't have the same talent everyone else has, you feel like an outcast because you have to work your tail off just to keep up with your teammates.

But God sees you. He loves you. He made you to be you, not anyone else.

In swimming, if you're not good at freestyle, that's just too bad. *It's too bad you aren't like everyone else.* But in God's kingdom, your unique gifts are a part of His plan, and He will use the gifts He's given you for His glory.

You're created uniquely. And, if you know Jesus, you're a child of God. He loves you, good at freestyle or not, because He made you with the talents and abilities you have. If you're not good at butterfly, so what?

Trust Jesus as your Savior and King, rest in His love, and embrace your special talents, even if they are unique from everyone else's. After all, who likes the same old, same old?

You don't need to fit in or worry about what others think of you. In Christ, God made you to do His work, and you'll shine, glorifying Him while you do it. 🕯

Rebecca Roskamp

🕯 What makes you different from your peers? How can you use these gifts for God's glory? _____

🕯 Aside from the talents we're all created with, the Holy Spirit gives Christians special abilities called spiritual gifts—like teaching, encouraging, or serving. What do you think are some of your spiritual gifts? If you're not sure, talk to a trusted Christian friend in your life, such as a pastor or camp counselor. _____

🕯 Do you worry about the way others think about you? How do you think your Creator sees you? _____

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith. Romans 12:6 (NIV)



Fool's Gold

READ: PSALM 19:7-11

Martin Frobisher, an English explorer, once discovered a huge hoard of gold on Baffin Island in Canada. He sent three ships, carrying two hundred tons of gold ore, back to Queen Elizabeth I in England. Unfortunately, it turned out to be nothing more than a pile of iron pyrites—otherwise known as fool's gold.

Fool's gold looks exactly like the real thing. But it's completely worthless. So how on earth can you tell the difference?

Fool's gold has sharp edges that glisten when caught by sunlight, so it glitters when you turn it in your hand. This explains why it's often mistaken for treasure. Real gold doesn't need to be at just the right angle to shine.

Gold is a soft metal. It is malleable and will bend when a small amount of force is applied to it. Fool's gold is generally hard and brittle. It will shatter if you pound it. Real gold rarely shatters. If you drop a piece of real gold into some nitric acid, it will remain completely unaffected. Almost any other metal will dissolve.

But experts agree: the best way to learn how to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit is to get your hands on the real thing. Once you've handled real gold, you're much less likely to be fooled. The same principle applies to money: bankers are trained to spot fake bank notes by consistently handling real ones.

If you consistently handle God's Word—getting to know Jesus, the One the Bible is all about—you're far less likely to fall for the devil's lies. Focus on the truth, and you'll soon become an expert at sniffing out the counterfeit. The world will bombard you with all kinds of glittering lies and false equations, but God's Word is the ultimate test of a statement's truth. 📖 *Angela Jelf*

🔑 Why is it so important to read the Word of God? _____

🔑 What are some lies you used to believe about God, yourself, or others? What truths from Scripture can you use to combat those lies? _____

🔑 What are lies that you hear in the media? How can you respond with kindness and truth? _____

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

Who Do You Follow?

READ: JOHN 10:25-30

Twitter. Instagram. YouTube. Blogs. Your favorite actor or musician. Sports heroes.

Most people follow someone or something in these categories. Or perhaps your interests are more unique—on the internet, there's truly something for everyone. Even Doug the Pug has more than three million followers on Instagram! He's literally just a little dog with funny photos and videos of his little adventures.

It makes a difference who you follow. It shapes your ideas of the world around you. That's why Jesus invites us to follow Him. When we trust Him as our Lord and Savior, He becomes central to our lives, affecting all our thoughts and actions.

When you are a follower of Jesus, people watch you. We are all role models or influencers in our everyday lives, whether it is to our siblings, classmates, coworkers, or church family. As we focus on Jesus—on who He is and what He did and continues to do—our lives will change, and God will lead us to the actions He has planned for us (Ephesians 2:10). As we follow Christ, we can encourage others to follow Him too (1 Corinthians 11:1). Regardless of our age, Jesus calls us to be an example to others (1 Timothy 4:12).

How do we follow Jesus? When we have a relationship with Him through faith, we get to know Him by listening to Him and talking to Him. We listen by reading what He said to us in the Bible, reflecting on the gospel: what He did for us on the cross and when He rose from the grave. We talk with Him by praying. Prayer doesn't require fancy language; it is simply a conversation with Jesus that you can have anytime.

Simply put, following Jesus is all about having a relationship with Him. As we get to know Him, He teaches us to filter all we think and do through the truths of the gospel. 📌 *Lauren N. Simmons*

📌 Who do you follow? They can be from the list earlier or something entirely different. _____

📌 What is the difference between the way we follow celebrities and the way we follow Jesus? _____

📌 How does following Jesus change our thinking? _____

Jesus spoke to them again: "I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life." John 8:12 (CSB)

Held Together

READ: COLOSSIANS 1:15-17

Think about everything you see around you—the sky, your house, your wallet, your computer. Now, crazy as it sounds, within each of those visible objects are invisible objects that are working together to create something tangible.

Inside the sun, tiny particles are fusing together to create something powerful enough to heat the entire earth. Around you every day is the wind, causing sailboats to float calmly down a river or crash headlong into cliffs.

And that's just on earth. In heaven, the Lord is sitting on His throne, directing the events of human history and sending out His angels to do His work.

Back on earth, all the rulers or authorities in every kingdom sit on their thrones under Jesus Christ. Colossians 1 tells us that every person in power (and not in power!) is subject to Him alone.

We know that God created all things, but verse 16 also says that all things were created *for* Him. Everything we see, as well as everything we can't see, is working under His authority.

Let's take you for example. Everything on the outside—your hands, your legs, your face—as well as everything you can't see on the inside—your heart, your lungs, your brain—was created by God and is working together *for* Him. Your heart keeps pumping, your blood keeps flowing, all because the Lord has a reason for you to be here today.

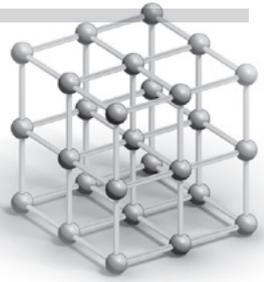
God is sovereign; He is in control. He is over everything. Nothing happens without His divine oversight. We have to start there. God is above all and in all (Ephesians 4:6). He is working behind the scenes in every situation because He is sovereign. He is working in you to accomplish something grand on this earth. 🔑

Merrick Potter

🔑 How does God hold everything together—including us? _____

🔑 What difference does it make in your life that God is in control? _____

For everything was created by him [Jesus], in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. Colossians 1:16 (CSB)



Questions

READ: JOHN 3:16-17; ROMANS 8:1-16; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17; 1 JOHN 4:18

do good deeds, and I pray every day, but I don't read the Bible.

Would I be a hypocrite if I called myself Your disciple?

I'm not going to lie to you, God, but I find the Bible boring.

I feel this guilt inside my heart, and I just can't ignore it.

When I don't read the Bible, I feel like You're upset.

It makes me feel that saving me You regret.

Then I start to question myself, so I close the Bible and try to forget.

Then I think, "Am I going to hell?" So I start to sweat.

Then I start to cry and make my pillowcase wet.

Yes, I put my trust in You, God, and I felt like we met.

But every time I don't read the Bible, I feel it's a sign of disrespect.

I'm not the only one who struggles this way.

I'm not saying that to make it look okay.

I'm so scared to meet God because of what He has to say.

I ran out of tears

From so many years—

Why is this my biggest fear?

I'm just being honest here.

God, I'm so stressed.

God, I'm trying my best.

Jesus, in Your promises, I rest.

I know You give freedom from sin—even procrastination.

I'll be more than grateful when I see you, Jesus, because You made me a new creation. 🗝

Raef Boktor

🗝 Have you ever been afraid that God will punish you because you're not reading the Bible? If you belong to Jesus, why don't you have to be afraid of God's punishment? _____

🗝 Not reading your Bible every day is not necessarily a sin. God's Word is about Jesus, and that's why it matters that we make it central to our lives. What are some ways you can spend time regularly reading, listening to, or studying the Bible—including at church with other Christians? _____

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." Romans 8:15 (NLT)

Why Worry?

READ: PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

When the knock came at her bedroom door, Lauren glanced up and was surprised to see her best friend, Darcia, open the door and walk in.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Fifth period, you said you had news to text, but you didn’t text.” Darcia flopped on the beanbag next to the bed. “So, what’s wrong?”

“What isn’t?” Lauren said. “Jared broke up with me. *And* I failed the AP Chemistry test. How can I get into a good college if I get bad grades?” She shifted on the bed, drawing her knees up and placing her head on them. “I worry *all* the time.”

Darcia nodded. “I know how that is.”

Lauren raised her head. “*You* never seem like you worry about anything.”

“Who doesn’t worry? Remember when my mom filed for divorce from my dad last year? I panicked. I didn’t know what to do. But my youth leader said something that really helped. He said, ‘I know you’re worried. But have you prayed about it? Prayer is something you *can* do.’ ”

Lauren nodded. “I know prayer is important, and I know God’s in control. But how is prayer doing *anything*?”

Darcia twisted one of her large, gold hoop earrings. “I feel Jesus’ peace when I talk to Him because I know He’s there. I know He cares about what worries me. So, want to pray with me?”

“Do you think it will help?” Lauren asked.

“Let’s try it. Are you feeling any better because you *don’t* pray?”

Lauren laughed. “Okay, good point. Let’s pray...Jesus, help me to feel Your peace.”  *Linda Washington*

 What worries you? When you’re worried, what’s the first thing you do? Why? _____

 In Philippians, the New Testament letter where today’s Scripture reading comes from, we’re told to pray instead of worry. Prayer reminds us to leave our worries with Someone big enough to handle them: God. He trades His peace for our worries. What is something you’re worrying about that you can pray about instead?

 Do you know Jesus prays for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25)? Why is this truth important when we’re battling worry? _____

Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6 (CSB)

God Shares Your Desk at School

READ: PSALM 56:8; JOHN 1:14; HEBREWS 4:14-16; 1 PETER 5:7

Did you know that God goes to school? That's right; God has attended school for as long as school has been going on. He watches all that goes on in the world, and He's with you everywhere (Proverbs 15:3). When you're struggling to make a basket in P.E.—God is there. When you can't make sense of algebra—God is there. And when your crush doesn't even know you're alive—God is there.



I remember the day I fell out of the school bus. I was in seventh grade, and I was riding the bus home from school. As I stepped off the last step, my foot caught. I tumbled to the ground, books flying in all directions. My house was at the bottom of a hill, so instead of walking that day, I rolled on home, hearing my classmates' laughter as the doors shut and the bus drove away.

I cried, and cried, and cried. It wasn't life-shattering. I didn't die, but I still remember that day, and it's been many years since then. That's why I'm thankful for this truth: God collects our tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). Our sorrows and embarrassments are so important to God that the psalmist envisions God storing them in a bottle. He must have quite a collection for me, much of it from my school days.

There will be hard days at school, but you'll survive. School doesn't last forever, but God's love does. We know this because God came as a human and experienced all our suffering here on earth in order to end suffering forever.

Why don't you stop right now and thank God that He is interested in every tear you cry? Ask Him to remind you that He accompanies you at school tomorrow and that He promises one day to wipe every tear from the eyes of His children (Revelation 21:3-4). Tomorrow won't be perfect, but it will be better knowing God is walking down those halls beside you. **!** *Sharon Rene*

! How does the idea that God accompanies you to school every day change your attitude toward school?

! Does knowing that Jesus experienced our hurts—and promises to wipe every tear from our eyes—change your perspective on day-to-day suffering? _____

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. Psalm 56:8 (NLT)

I Can't Feel God Right Now

READ: PSALM 10:1,17; PHILIPPIANS 1:6; HEBREWS 13:5-8

Sometimes life gets difficult or busy, and even if you've felt God's nearness before, He can suddenly seem absent—or at least much harder to hear.

I've experienced that feeling of distance from God at various points in my life, but I remember one time in particular. I was sixteen and struggling with the fact that my mom had been diagnosed with cancer. In my pain, I was actually pretty numb emotionally. It was hard to *feel* anything, let alone something as big and important as God's presence.

But here's the promise: God is with us, even when we can't feel Him. As believers in Jesus—who is fully God and fully human—we can know that His promises and His presence don't depend on our circumstances. He remains good and in control.

We don't need to worry about *feeling* His presence. Our feelings go up and down. But God is constant. In the midst of whatever we're feeling, the place to hear God is through His Word, the Bible. He speaks when we hear and talk about His Word at church, when we remember it through communion, and when we read it on our own. Through our time in God's Word, the Holy Spirit reminds us that Jesus is with us.

Because God promises never to leave or forsake His people, we can know that feelings of distance won't last forever. We can know that God hasn't left us. He's there, and He's still working on us. 🗝️ *Kandi Zeller*

🗝️ When was a time you felt God's presence? _____

🗝️ When was a time when you didn't feel God's presence? _____

🗝️ What things remind you that God is still there even when you can't feel Him? _____

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8 (NIV)



Blame

READ: GENESIS 3; EPHESIANS 4:31-32

When bad things happen, it's easy to start blaming people. In the beginning of the Bible, we see Adam try to tell God that Eve was responsible for his choice to eat the forbidden fruit. Since then, we as humans continue to look around, hoping to find someone else to take responsibility for the wrong things we've done and for the bad things that happen all around us. We like to find fault in others because it makes us feel better about ourselves.

But did you know we can switch our minds from negative thoughts about others to positive ones focused on the gospel? When we make that switch, we are able to recover from problems more quickly. We're also less likely to argue with those around us because we're more concerned with fixing the issue and finding the truth than with trying to blame someone.

Getting rid of our blaming habit is hard work, so we can't do it on our own. We need to lean on Jesus, the One who makes peace with others possible. As Jesus continues to work on us, our thought patterns begin to change from problem-making to problem-solving.

A prayer: God, please change the way I think about problems. I know Jesus chose to focus on the solution rather than the blame when He died on the cross to pay for the sins of the world—including mine! Help me to remember what Jesus did so I can love others the way You do. I want to be someone who is quick to find solutions, rather than someone who is quick to make others feel bad for their mistakes or make others feel responsible for my own mistakes. Thank You for always giving us the chance to repent and start again! Amen. 🕯️ *Rebecca Morgan*

- 🕯️ What would change if our first reaction to a problem was to start looking for a solution instead of a person to blame? _____
- 🕯️ When you're tempted to rush to blame others, what truths can you remember about Jesus? _____
- 🕯️ How can you help others when they do something wrong? How can others help you when you do something wrong? _____

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Philippians 4:8 (NIV)

A Sad Day

READ: PSALM 30:1-12

Editor's Note: Today's devotional reading discusses suicide.

As soon as McKenzie entered the school, she could tell something was wrong. Little groups of students were clustered along the hallways, talking in hushed tones. As she walked, she saw people swiping tears away. But why?

A voice came over the speakers: "All students please report to the gym for a short assembly."

With a sad expression, the school counselor looked out over the crowd of students. She cleared her throat. "You may have heard by now that Chloe Gardner died by suicide last night."

McKenzie's heart sank. *Chloe? Suicide? Did she feel as lonely as I do?*

"We wanted to hold this assembly so that you know we care. Many of you were Chloe's friends, and even for those of you who didn't know her, this event can be a terrible shock. My office will be open all day so you can come and talk—about Chloe or anything else you want to talk about."

McKenzie swallowed hard.

"If you need to talk, please don't pass up this opportunity," the school counselor continued, "especially if you have felt sad or uninterested recently in things that usually make you happy."

After the assembly was dismissed, McKenzie didn't even walk to her first class. She made her way right to the office. She knocked on the counselor's open door and tried to hold back the tears as she said, "Mrs. Ferris, I need some help. I've been thinking about doing something like Chloe did, but I don't want to anymore." ❧ *Robyn Mulder*

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You can also talk with someone via web chat at suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/

If your situation is potentially life-threatening, call 911 (or the emergency number for your area) or go to the local hospital emergency room right away.

If you need someone to talk to but are not in need of immediate help, you can call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a licensed counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service.

No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:39 (NLT)

Jesus Weeps

READ: JOHN 11:35; HEBREWS 4:14-16

I closed the book and pondered what I had just read. *Jesus weeps for me?* The novel I was reading explained it in such a way that I just had to stop and think. The book said Jesus is there with us in our suffering. His heart breaks over human suffering, and He mourns with us.

But He doesn't mourn because all is lost. Christ *will* come back and restore everything that is broken. All who believe in Him will be saved—restored. Instead, Jesus mourns because He loves us and *hates* to see us suffer.

I realize God *could* stop all this sin and suffering right now, but it is His plan to wait for just the right time to do so (2 Peter 3:9-10). He gave us a choice to do right or wrong. We humans chose poorly, and now we are suffering the consequences of *our* sin.

I will suffer, but I won't do it alone. I have a High Priest—Jesus Christ, the Son of God—who weeps for me because He has been where I've been, and He knows how terrible it is to be alone. He was despised by His own brothers, and one of His closest friends denied Him. He felt the sorrow of losing a loved one, and He knows the pain of utter humiliation. His heavenly Father, with whom He had a perfect relationship, turned His face away from Him because of *our* reckless choices (2 Corinthians 5:21). He knows how I feel (and more). He is my Comforter, my Healer, and my Friend.

Next time I'm suffering, I'll know that God hasn't abandoned me in my time of trouble. Instead, He has provided a way for me to be rescued out of this mess by stepping *into* it. He'll be weeping with me, comforting me, and redirecting my focus onto eternity, where—because Jesus conquered the grave—He and I won't have to weep anymore. 🕯️ *Emma Pamer*

🕯️ When have you suffered and wondered where God was? How did He help you through that time of need?

🕯️ How does it make you feel to know that Jesus has been through everything you might be going through (and more)? How does it make you feel to know that Jesus weeps with and for you?

Jesus wept. John 11:35 (NIV)

Be Strong and Courageous

READ: JOSHUA 1:1-9

Joshua had no idea what God was about to do. After following Moses, who had been the leader of God's people, Joshua had seen God do amazing things! Can you imagine seeing the Red Sea part or drinking water from a rock in the wilderness? It must've been incredible to see, but now Moses was out of the picture and Joshua had big shoes to fill.

God had proven His faithfulness, but as Joshua was preparing to lead the nation of Israel, I imagine he felt some fear and doubt. God was calling him to be strong and courageous, even though he would be facing an intimidating task.

But he wouldn't be doing it alone. While Joshua may have felt overwhelmed, God pointed him to the truths of His Word. In verse 7 of today's Bible reading, God told Joshua not to turn to one side or the other but to let His Word guide him. He was reminding Joshua that, to serve well in this new leadership role, he needed to focus on the truth: God was with Joshua, and God alone is the source of strength and courage.

Have you ever felt like God was calling you to do something you weren't sure you could do? We may never lead an entire nation like Joshua did, but as we seek to love and obey God and tell others about Him, it's good for us to remember the challenges and encouragement God gave Joshua.

When we face the challenges God puts before us, we don't need to fear, but we should trust God, remembering the truths of His Word: He has proven Himself faithful because He has saved us from sin and death. In Jesus Christ, we have a Savior who is the only One who can enable us to be strong and courageous!  *Phil Cox*

 How could God use you in your school or community to be a leader, pointing others to Christ?

 What are ways you can remind yourself to go to Jesus when you feel overwhelmed?

*Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.
Joshua 1:9 (NIV)*

Hey God, It's Me

READ: 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

Hey, God, it's me again. Remember me—Hannah? Yeah, I've been a bit AWOL lately. Sorry. When things go well, I kind of forget about You. Sorry—again.

I know You're always with me. But when I have friends around and things are going well, I forget to check in. Thank You for being there for me, even when I forget You're there.

So now I'm back, wanting to talk with You again. You know what that means, right? Yep. My friends aren't talking to me, and I just failed my algebra test. What good is it to be able to solve for X, anyway? Does it really matter? I don't think it's a skill I need to succeed in life. Is math something You even care about? Of course You do. You care about everything, especially me.

It's good to talk with You. I wonder why I don't do it more often—like every day. Of course, I know. My priorities get out of whack. I move You from the center of my life—where You belong—to the bottom of my list—where You shouldn't be. To be honest, sometimes You're not even on the list. Sorry, God. Will you forgive me, please?

Jesus, I need Your help to remember that You care about every part of my life and that we should talk through it all. Show me how to begin each day with You and check in each night before I sleep. And as I shuffle through the day, help me remember that You're there. I forget that we can talk then too.

Thanks for listening. Thanks for forgiving me and for what You did on the cross. Jesus, thank You for Your love. **✚** *P. D. Haan*

✚ When do you pray? What does the Bible mean when it says to pray continually? _____

✚ What are ways you can integrate prayer into your everyday life? _____

Pray continually. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NIV)



See How God Will Use You

READ: MARK 2:1-12

Two teens in Tennessee risked their lives to save an unaccompanied toddler who ran toward a busy highway. With an oncoming truck barreling down on them, the teens snatched up the toddler just in time. Two other teens came to the rescue of a capsized boat in the Florida Keys, saving six people—including a four-year-old and a three-month-old baby. What do these stories have in common? Each time, the teens saw something and believed they could help, so they acted on that belief.

They are not the only ones who have acted on what they believed. Back in Jesus' day, four men had a friend who had a tremendous need. They heard Jesus was in town and knew He was the only One who could help their friend. So, they carried their friend—who was paralyzed—to Jesus because they believed He could make the difference in their friend's life.

When they arrived at the home where Jesus was preaching, there was no more room. Not even at the door to stand and listen. So, they went up to the roof. Opening the roof, they let their friend down on the bed he was lying on. "Seeing their faith, Jesus told the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (Mark 2:5). These friends acted on their belief that Jesus is the One who heals our brokenness. And Jesus went on to tell their friend to get up, carry his mat, and walk home—which he did. Those who witnessed the healing "were all astounded and gave glory to God" (Mark 2:12).

Maybe you will never get to jump in and save someone as dramatically as the teens in the above news stories. Yet there are probably people you see who need Jesus. Could you be like the four friends who brought *their* friend to the only One who could truly help him? Step out in faith and see how God will use you! 🗝️ *Deborah del Villar*

🗝️ Who do you know who needs Jesus? _____

🗝️ What are some practical ways you can step out in faith to show them the same love and truth that Jesus showed you? _____

Seeing their faith, Jesus told the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Mark 2:5 (CSB)

Between You and God

READ: LUKE 22:54-62; JOHN 21:15-25

W*ill I go to hell for how I am?*

This question invaded my mind on too many occasions for me to count, especially after observing other people's Christian walks. Usually, they were extremely holy people who appeared to have their righteous lives intact. Nothing fazed them, they committed no wrongdoings in public, and they referred to their prayer lives often. Reading the Bible and speaking to God through prayer seemed like second nature for them. It didn't for me.

I struggled for years to pray and read my Bible daily. But it wasn't that I lived my life separately from what I heard on Sundays or that I didn't even think about God throughout the week. I just had a difficult time setting up good habits.

During that time, I kept wondering about God's tolerance of my lackluster performance. Especially, I thought, in comparison to my clearly better-suited fellow humans. They seemed *much* holier than I was.

Cue teenage me discovering the passage for this devotion. It's uncoincidentally located right after Jesus reinstates Peter as a disciple following his denial. Peter feels he is getting the short end of the stick, being called out like that. He immediately points the finger to John, asking Jesus in an accusatory voice, "What about him?" That's when Jesus said one of the most liberating things I've ever heard: "What's it to you?"

The last thing Jesus wants us to do is selfishly worry about others' relationships with him; that's not our concern. Jesus has given each of us grace, and that is the grace we are to be concerned with. Focus on *your* relationship with Him, not the apparent relationships of others with Him. **🔑** *Carson D. Jacobs*

🔑 How do you usually prefer to talk on the phone? Pacing? Sitting down? Figure out which way is most comfortable for you and mimic that while praying. _____

🔑 In what ways might you be focusing on others' relationships with Jesus instead of your own? _____

"If I want him to remain until I come," Jesus answered, "what is that to you? As for you, follow me." John 21:22 (CSB)

Nehemiah's Response to Bullying

READ: NEHEMIAH 1:1-4; 2:1-5, 9-10; 4:1-3

Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king when he found out about the state of Jerusalem's walls: they had been burned down. Jerusalem had been the place God's people had lived before the tragic exile, brought about by Israel's consistent rejection of God. Now Jerusalem, where their ancestors were buried, was a sad, broken-down city with burnt-down walls.

When Nehemiah found out the sad news, he was busy living his life, being successful. He prayed about what to do.

God had led Nehemiah to see this need and care about it. He heard Nehemiah's prayer and answered it. One answer to that prayer? The king helped Nehemiah by letting him leave and also supplying needed materials.

Nehemiah went to Jerusalem with a plan to rebuild the walls. When he arrived, he was ridiculed—bullied by Sanballat and Tobiah, two neighbors filled with hate.

Just like Nehemiah, things may be going fine for us. We might be doing well in school, in sports, or in whatever our interests are. Then we see a need. It may be near; it may be far. But it hits us and concerns us. And then we decide to show the love of Christ by helping with that need.

Yet, even if we seek to do God's will, we may face opposition when we serve in God's kingdom. Have you ever been opposed or bullied simply for doing the right thing?

What was Nehemiah's response to bullying? He continued to rebuild the walls (Nehemiah 4:6). Despite being bullied, he continued to do the right thing.

How could he do this? He remembered the promises of God, saying: "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome" (Nehemiah 4:14).

In the same way, Jesus is with us. Because we are His, we don't have to be afraid of what He calls us to do. 🕯️ *Melody Delgado*

🕯️ When was a time you faced opposition for doing the right thing? _____

🕯️ What are Christlike ways to respond to bullying or persecution? _____

🕯️ Who are trustworthy mentors, friends, or teachers you can talk to when you need wisdom about a bullying situation? _____

*Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.
Nehemiah 4:14 (NIV)*

Your Talents, God's Kingdom

READ: EXODUS 35:30-36:3; ROMANS 12:4-8; EPHESIANS 2:10

Do you ever feel unimportant, maybe a little invisible? Like you can't make a difference? These feelings come from our enemy, Satan. If we feel small, he is doing his job well. But God encourages us to be led by what He says about us, not by how we feel. His Word is truth and, like good food, gives us nourishment—deepening our understanding of Jesus, who is the source of life (Matthew 4:4; John 14:6; 1 Timothy 4:6).

Through faith in Jesus, you are an important part in God's kingdom. Part of your role in this kingdom is the gifts God has given you. Think about it: What are your hobbies or interests? What activities do you take part in? Maybe you thought of sports, cheerleading, or the band. Those are perfect examples, but there's so much more. All kinds of talents can be used in God's kingdom!

God gives His people a number of important and special abilities for the work He has called them to. In Exodus 35, the Holy Spirit was filling many of His people with some remarkable talents for the construction of the sanctuary. Bezalel was given artistic abilities, especially for creating masterpieces in gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. Besides these artistic talents, God gave Bezalel and a man named Oholiab the gift of teaching. Additionally, there were embroiderers, weavers, and designers! Because God equipped them, these people were able to craft many important parts of the sanctuary—creating a visible and central place for the people to worship God in community.

What about you? Do you love to read, crochet, or shoot archery; how about cook? Whatever you are good at, that is a blessing from your heavenly Father. Because of Jesus, you can use your talents, whatever they are, to glorify God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. **✦** *Carrie Cwynar*



✦ What talent surprised you the most from Exodus 35? _____

✦ What are your talents? What are some ways your talents can be used to glorify God? _____

*I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.
Psalm 86:12 (NIV)*

A Bold Step

READ: PSALM 23:1-3; 116:7; MATTHEW 11:28-30

Let me take you several thousand feet above sea level. It's a warm, summery day, and the sun shines hot on your head. Sweat runs down your back. You've just climbed from the bottom of Yosemite to the top of a mountain. Green trees fill the park as far as you can see. Mountains surround you. The normal response would be to sit down and enjoy the view, right?

I was a really busy high schooler. Between classes, being part of a college orchestra, musicals, a leadership team, band, homework, and friends, I felt like I was always busy.

Sometimes it's easy to forget, but Jesus is in control, so we don't have to work all the time. Just like resting was appropriate after I climbed that mountain, it's good to rest after working hard. Jesus is working even while we rest.

Psalm 23:1 says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." I've read that Psalm so many times, but recently someone pointed out that Jesus *makes* us lie down in those green pastures. As our good shepherd, He knows we need rest because we still live under the exhausting curse of sin.

Resting is worship because it's a physical way to show our trust in what Jesus can do, not in what we can do. That's a bold step, especially when culture seems to define success by how busy we are.

Success is resting in the power of Jesus. It's following Him through every season—the busy and the slow. That's called trusting and that, my friends, brings glory to Jesus!

Let's pray our enjoyment of all He is becomes second nature because we love Him more than our busy agendas. If we can rely on Him in the quiet moments, we can rely on Him in the chaos. It's in the quiet moments of rest that our hearts are changed, and, when a changed heart meets the busy world, we get the privilege of impacting it for Him! *🔑 Sarah Rexford*

🔑 What keeps you from resting? _____

🔑 Rest doesn't just mean "not doing" something. Rest can be doing something you enjoy that helps you feel refreshed. What are some activities you can find rest in? _____

🔑 How can you rest today and show you trust Jesus' timing more than your own abilities to get things done? _____

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake. Psalm 23:1-3 (NIV)

Come to Me

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30; HEBREWS 4:9-10

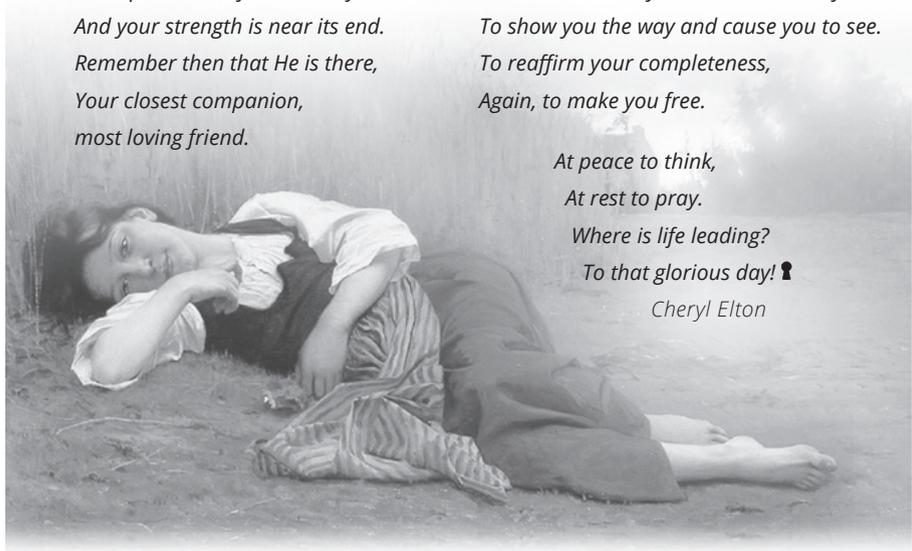
Too tired to think,
 Too tired to pray.
 Where is life leading?
 Too tired to say...

*Perhaps at times you're weary,
 And your strength is near its end.
 Remember then that He is there,
 Your closest companion,
 most loving friend.*

*He's there to give you all you need
 And lovingly touch your heart with strength.
 To smooth the rough edges of your thoughts
 And make them peaceful and kind again.*

*He's there to heal you, whatever it may be,
 To show you the way and cause you to see.
 To reaffirm your completeness,
 Again, to make you free.*

*At peace to think,
 At rest to pray.
 Where is life leading?
 To that glorious day! 
 Cheryl Elton*



 What do you do when you're feeling stressed, discouraged, or overwhelmed? Have you ever felt too tired to pray? _____

 Why do you think Jesus wants us to come to Him when we're weary or burdened? _____

 Jesus promises to give us rest because He already completed the work on the cross and when He rose from the grave. What are some ways you can remind yourself of the promises of God found in His Word? _____

 Read Revelation 21:1-5. What are some of the promises we can look forward to on "that glorious day" when we see Jesus? _____

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
 Matthew 11:28 (NIV)*

Stone Faces

READ: ROMANS 8:18-39; EPHESIANS 1:3-10

Below is a science fiction allegory of Ephesians 1:3-10, which shares that God's love for His people is eternal. His love was there before creation and will continue forever, so, in Christ, nothing we do can separate us from God's love and promises to make all things new (Romans 8:18-39).

I trudged along, compulsively checking the pressure and temperature of my suit every few seconds. I was taking a shortcut back to the spaceship through an unexplored canyon, and I didn't want my suit to go out on a place that wasn't on our map.

The first face took me so completely by surprise that I didn't move for two minutes. I gasped inside my suit, shaking. It looked like a human face, carved into the alien rock of the planet. In this strange place, so distant from my homeworld, to see something terrestrial was jarring.

But terrestrial it was. The face was that of *Homo sapiens*, with a bushy beard and large nose, all highly detailed. Further on into the canyon, I could see more.

The faces mesmerized me. They were of male and female—all young and happy, with no creases of stress or sorrow. Their eyes beamed hopefulness, and their smiles radiated goodwill.

Some features I recognized as being from Asia, or the Pacific Islands, or Europe, or Africa. I thought about all those continents, so far away. Why were these faces carved here? Was an unknown intelligence watching the people of Earth?

If so, they had an idealistic view of humanity. The warmth and joy radiating from the stone faces was the kind only seen in flickers back on Earth.

Light was fading from the canyon, and I had made very slow progress. I knew my companions had to be wondering where I was. I also knew I had to share what I had found, so I decided to radio back to the ship.

I opened my mouth, but it never closed. In front of me was another face. I had stared into a mirror long enough to recognize the features, even if the expression was different.

No forced smile. No silent pleading for acceptance. No fear of hatred.

Just love—as if it had been etched there from the beginning of the universe. 🗿

Kevin Zeller

For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. Ephesians 1:4 (CSB)

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 Read Romans 3:23; 6:23, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21, and 2 Peter 3:9. What do these verses tell you about who God is? _____

🔑 About His goodness? _____

🔑 About His grace? _____

🔑 How do these verses show that God is faithful even when we aren't? _____

To dig deeper into these truths, check out the book of Romans in the Bible and talk to a pastor, youth leader, or other trusted Christian in your life. You can also learn more about what it means to know Jesus by turning to page 104.



Do You Feel Overwhelmed?

READ: PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

From a bad day at school to feeling betrayed by people we thought were our friends—when life isn't easy, sometimes we don't know how to respond. And then we become overwhelmed.

Feeling overwhelmed or anxious is a common problem, but God has not left us to deal with it on our own. What does the Bible, His Word, remind us to do when we feel overwhelmed and anxious? In Philippians 4, Paul has some advice that is as fitting for us today as it was for the Philippian church back then.

First, Paul reminds them (and us) to find joy in Jesus. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). Jesus is our real source of hope and meaning, so our focus should be on Him.

That sounds good, right? But it's still hard to do. How do we remember Jesus and rejoice when we don't feel like it? In verses 6 and 7, Paul says when we feel anxious, we should turn to God in prayer, telling Him the burdens we're carrying. Then, Paul shares an awesome promise: peace from God will guard our hearts in Christ Jesus!

Paul doesn't stop there though. In verses 8 and 9, he challenges us to set our minds and hearts on the right things. Sometimes we feel stressed out and overwhelmed because we buy into the lies people tell us and forget the truth of God's Word. Paul says to dwell on things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, morally excellent, and praiseworthy.

Until we see Jesus, there will be times when we feel overwhelmed, anxious, or unsure. But we can know Jesus is always with us, and we can turn to His Word to learn more about Him—for He is the source of true peace. 🗝️ *Phil Cox*

🗝️ What are three or four things you find overwhelming that you can take to God in prayer today? _____

🗝️ Why is it important to pray when you feel anxious and overwhelmed? _____

Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6 (CSB)

Are You Listening, God?

READ: PSALM 145:18-19; EPHESIANS 5:18; 1 JOHN 5:14

5/30/19: God, please help my family. I don't like it when my stepmom, Anna, drinks. I want to love her, but it's hard when she's drinking because she turns into a completely different person. I've avoided coming to my dad's house because her drinking is pulling our family apart. Please help.

6/16/19: Today was Father's Day. While I'm grateful for my dad and Anna, it was uncomfortable for me to come and visit. I get nervous when she drinks around me. I know that, at a certain point into her drinking, I can't talk to her at all. At least I can talk to You, Jesus. Can You help my family find a solution?

7/1/19: Today we had an intervention for my stepmom's drinking. I organized it. My dad, sisters, and I all shared how her drinking has affected us. While it was a painful experience to go through, I'm glad we did it. I think it has brought us closer together. We even learned that Anna wants to go back to school to get her MBA! That is so awesome! I'm proud of the progress our family is making.

7/10/19: Anna and my dad began attending Alcoholics Anonymous classes together. They both stopped drinking. Thank You, Lord, for helping Anna overcome her addiction.

8/2/19: So I found out the news when I came home from school today. In fact, no one had to tell me. I spotted a red wine stain on the floor, and then went upstairs to find Anna drinking! I thought You were going to help our family out, Lord. Now she's spiraling into this addiction again—I can't take it! Why are You putting my family through this? To test our faith? What are we supposed to do? My family is broken and only You can restore us. Please help us, Jesus. 🙏

Amber Metz

🙏 Have you tried to help a loved one with an addiction? Who can you talk with about these tough issues—such as a counselor or someone else you trust? _____

🙏 Jesus is always there. He knows your hurts, so you can talk with Him about anything (Hebrews 4:14-16). What things from your life can you cry out to God about today? _____

*The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
Psalm 145:18 (NIV)*

Help—My Friend Is Grieving!

READ: JOHN 11:1-44; REVELATION 21:1-5

Grief is awkward and hard. It's also appropriate when there has been a death; God calls death the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Why? Sin broke everything, and it is what causes all the hurt we see. It makes God sad too, which is why He came to earth to suffer with us, beating sin and death when He died on the cross and rose from the grave. And that's not all. He's coming back to make all things new—free from sin and its effects, the worst of which is death.



When someone close to you is grieving, it can be hard to know what to say. So, start by being silent and by being present. In other words, because everyone grieves differently, allow your friend to share (or not share) as they feel comfortable. Let them know that you're available to talk and be with them, as they have need: "I know you're going through a really tough time right now. Let me know if you need to talk, and I'll just listen. Let me know if there is any way I can pray for you or help you during this time."

As your friend shares the hurt, continue to be kind and listen. If you get really stuck and aren't sure how to help your friend, talk with another person you trust, such as a youth pastor or a counselor. Through it all, share the situation with Jesus. He loves you and your friend very much, and He feels our sadness with us (Hebrews 4:14-16). As you show God's love to your friend, you can know two things: (2) the Holy Spirit will give you wisdom about what you should say and (2) Jesus will one day return to right every wrong. **✦ Kandi Zeller**

✦ Do you have a friend who is grieving? If so, how can you pray for them during this tough time? _____

✦ When you have gone through grief, what was something helpful someone said or did? _____

✦ If you're struggling with how to help a grieving friend, who can you talk with? _____

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.
Psalm 34:18 (NLT)*

Jesus Scavenger Hunt

READ: JOHN 20:31; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:10-16; 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

I love Jesus, but the Bible is confusing, I thought. God's Word seemed disjointed—disconnected from my relationship with Jesus. And that was the point. We can't understand the Bible without a focus on Jesus because He is the One the Bible is all about. When I learned that truth, I started doing "Jesus scavenger hunts" in every passage, looking for pieces of the gospel:

- how God is the definition of good and the source of life;
- how people rebelled against God by disobeying His good commands—rejecting Him, life, and all that is good in the process—leading to death and brokenness;
- how God desires a relationship with His people;
- how God is faithful to the promises He makes to His people;
- how Jesus offers freedom from sin and death through His death and resurrection;
- and how He is coming back to make all things new.

When I looked for whispers of the above gospel truths, I found they overflowed from every verse of God's Word—even the most unexpected passages. Although Jesus doesn't make a for-sure, in-the-flesh appearance until the second half the Bible, He is the point of all of it. It was written in different historical eras, in different genres, and by a diverse group of Holy Spirit-inspired people, but the Bible's message about the promised Savior remains consistent.

Look for Jesus—who is God—in any passage, and you'll find Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. As you continue to read, He'll help you grow in your joy of the Bible and its Subject. **I** *Kandi Zeller*

- I** How does knowing God will help you understand His Word make you feel about reading harder passages?

- I** Try a Jesus scavenger hunt for yourself. Use the bullet points in today's reading as a guide for some themes to look for. Try to find Jesus in Genesis 3:1-15. (For help, pay special attention to verses 14 and 15 and check out Romans 16:19-20, Colossians 2:13-15, and Revelation 20:1-3, 7-10.) _____

He [Jesus] is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name. Acts 10:43 (NLT)

Symbiosis

READ: GALATIANS 6:1-2; EPHESIANS 4:11-16

Do you know what a symbiotic relationship is? It's when two beings interact, live near each other, and have a relationship that benefits both of them. The animal kingdom is filled with these kinds of relationships.

The clown fish lives in an anemone, and it scares away the butterfly fish, one of the anemone's enemies. The anemone has sting cells that will attack anything that tries to attack the clown fish.

A crocodile gets its teeth cleaned by the Egyptian plover, a bird who gets its food from the crocodile's teeth.

A zebra hears if an enemy is coming and warns the ostrich, who can't hear well. An ostrich sees if an enemy is coming and warns the nearsighted zebra.

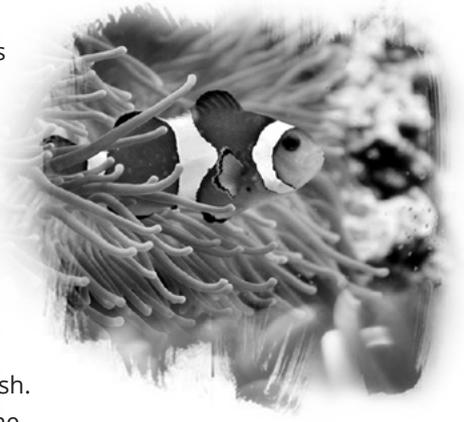
A shark lets a remora fish attach to it and ride along, allowing the fish to eat the shark's leftover food. The remora fish also eats all the parasites that attack the shark, keeping it clean and healthy.

When we know Jesus, God gives us symbiotic relationships with other Christians. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we need each other. We—as the church, the body of Christ—help each other remember to focus on Jesus by reading His Word together, keeping each other accountable in our battles against sin, and encouraging each other through the good and bad times of life. Through it all, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we work together to share who Jesus is with each other and the rest of the world. 🕯️ *Melissa Yeagle*

🕯️ What are some specific ways that you can encourage your brothers and sisters in Christ? _____

🕯️ Can you think of a time when a friend helped you in your walk with Jesus? _____

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
Galatians 6:2 (NIV)*



Listen to the Voice of God

READ: GENESIS 1:27; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:21; 2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

There are many voices of the world that we hear every day—through social media, sports, television, music, and our peers. These voices can get inside our heads, and Satan can use things from our everyday lives to convince us of his lies. Satan even tries to get us to believe that God doesn't love us. This is not true!

God created each of us in His image with unique interests and gifts, for His glory. He loves us no matter what we look like or how we act. That's why He sent Jesus, to offer everyone an opportunity to be saved from sin and death (John 3:16-18).

Yet, we often choose lies over God's voice. In our society, we are taught stereotypes that put people in boxes rather than defining people by what their Creator says. For example, the world teaches us that all men should be athletic and good at sports—even going so far as to call men names when they don't enjoy these activities. Girls are also taught lies about themselves—being told that they have to look perfect. In our world, the way a woman looks matters so much that, as a society, we are taught that the makeup women put on or the clothes girls wear define who they are.

These are just some of the lie-filled messages that we all fall into. But, instead of listening to these lies, listen to the voice of God, found in His Word, the Bible. In your life, you will get judged by people, but don't let their opinions stop you from finding your identity in Jesus—trusting and obeying Him in every area of your life. Because no matter what the world thinks of you, God loves you. 🗝

Briana VanderVelde

🗝 The Bible, God's Word, is the place to hear God's voice, and it is the standard for figuring out if something is a lie (2 Timothy 3:16). Why is it important to be defined by what God says about you rather than what the world says about you? _____

🗝 Talk with a friend, camp counselor, or youth pastor. What lies have you heard recently? What are truths from God's Word that refute those lies? _____

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. Romans 12:2 (NLT)

The Desert Storm

READ: JAMES 1:2-5

Boom! Thunder crashes. Lightning illuminates the house as the walls shake and dishes rattle in the cupboards, followed by an even louder thunderclap.

I grew up in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. Most of the year, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. But during monsoon season, the rain came with a vengeance. Streets flooded, dry washes became roaring rivers, trees were ripped up, yards washed out, and cars were stranded in floodwaters.

It might sound terrifying. But I've never seen it that way. As a kid, I loved to go out after it rained, jump in the puddles, and throw leaves in the streams running down the street. As I got older, I loved the smell of creosote that always came before the rain. Even now, I love the awe of the power of the storm.

But I don't just appreciate monsoons. I also understand why we need them.

Though the Sonoran Desert is indeed a desert, it's filled with beautiful cacti, flowers, and creatures who need rain to survive. The raindrops pelt the dust, cooling the scorching ground and creating streams from which to drink. The storm seems scary, but the desert is far more beautiful after it.

Many people compare trials in the Christian life to storms. They talk about weathering the storm and making it to the other side. But I think sometimes we forget that God is using the storm. If everything was always sunny, we would never grow, just like the desert plants.

Storms are hard. Things get pelted, uprooted, destroyed. But if we can weather the storms from inside the safety of God's love, we can begin to appreciate their beauty. And after they pass, we can praise Him for the life and growth they bring. *✦ Alyssa Roat*

✦ What storms are you going through right now? How can you trust God in the storm? _____

✦ Have you gone through storms in the past? What growth has God produced in you through them? _____

✦ Read Revelation 21:1-5. Will suffering last forever? _____

The LORD is good, a stronghold in a day of distress; he cares for those who take refuge in him. Nahum 1:7 (CSB)

Do You Have Doubts?

READ: 1 JOHN 5:12-14

Dear God, if I didn't mean it last time, I really mean it this time! That was my prayer. I knew the facts, but I didn't feel like a Christian. I knew God loved me and had sent His Son to die for me, but I didn't feel loved. I knew He had risen with power over death and sin, but I didn't feel His power. In desperation, I cried out to God.

When I was three years old, I asked Jesus to save me. But as I grew older, I had doubts. Major doubts. *Could God really love me? Could I really know I was saved?* I just didn't feel like I was saved.

You may know the feeling. If you don't feel saved, I have good news. You can *know*.

1 John 5:12-14 says that it was written so we could *know* that we belong to Christ.

How? The key is in verse 12: if you have the Son, you have life. It's that simple. Salvation is a fact, not a feeling.

When I was sixteen, I gave up—I realized it wasn't about me. I couldn't give myself assurance of my salvation any more than I could give myself salvation. I had to sit back and give it to God. I told Him that I didn't feel saved, and He reminded me to just trust Him.

If you're not sure you're saved, make sure! Give your life to Christ and put your trust in His free forgiveness (Romans 6:23; 10:9). Then, let go. Trust Him. When you don't feel saved, tell Him, and then trust Him.

Let Him be your assurance. And remember the truth: if you have the Son, you have life! **!** *Priscilla J. Krahn*



! What does it mean to be saved by Jesus? (To learn more, check out page 104.) _____

! Are you basing your salvation on feelings or facts? _____

Whoever has the Son [Jesus] has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. 1 John 5:12 (NIV)

Pointless and Silly Myths

READ: 1 TIMOTHY 4:6-10

Have you ever faced a situation like this? One time, a man from church came over for dinner, and, for the duration of supper and dessert, he talked about crazy conspiracies, wild rumors, and out-there theories supposedly based on the Bible.

Whether this man turns out to be right or wrong about the conspiracy theories he shared, sometimes we as Christians miss the point of the Bible when we get so caught up in debates or arguments. When we make a nonessential issue more central to the Bible than Jesus, we've lost our focus on Christ in order to win an argument. When that happens, there's no point in winning the argument in the first place.

The point of the Bible isn't to shed light on an international scandal or an elite group of individuals controlling the world. Satan would love for us to get so caught up in conspiracies that we lose our focus on our true mission: sharing the gospel of Jesus.

When we get so involved in minor and controversial debates, we miss the real reason God gave us the Bible. Our mission from God isn't to prove to everyone that our particular ideology or theory is right. No, our mission is to spread the good news of Christ. In our daily lives, we live in light of Christ's truth and love, sharing the gospel without living in fear about the future. We belong to Jesus, and we should keep our eyes on Him alone.  *Emma Pamer*

 When have you gotten carried away by nonessential issues and lost your focus on Christ? What directed your eyes back to God? _____

 How can you keep your eyes on Jesus today? How can you show His love to others? _____

But have nothing to do with pointless and silly myths. Rather, train yourself in godliness. 1 Timothy 4:7 (CSB)

911

READ: MATTHEW 28:20; HEBREWS 13:5; 1 PETER 5:7

What number do you call in an emergency? In the United States, people call 911. In Hong Kong and Kenya, the number is 999. In Denmark, it's 112. In many countries, there are different emergency numbers depending on whether you need an ambulance, the police, or a team of firefighters.

When you call an emergency number, you are immediately in contact with a trained person who can get you the help you need, and they usually stay on the line with you until the professionals arrive.

Do you ever wonder why they stay on the line? They do it for a couple of reasons. First, they want you to know you're not alone. This will help you stay calm so you can face your situation with as clear of a mind as possible. Second, they want to make sure help arrives. If help doesn't arrive, they find out why to ensure you get the help you need.

As Christians, we are never alone. God is always with us. While He never promised us we would live a problem-free life, He did promise we would not face our problems alone. Through prayer, we can talk to Him anytime we want or need.

No matter what problems we face, we don't have to be afraid because we know that our trustworthy God will be with us. 🗣️ *Melissa Yeagle*

🗣️ Are any problems too small for God to care about? _____

🗣️ Read Hebrews 4:14-16. Why can we approach God with any need we have? _____

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. Psalm 120:1 (CSB)



Masterpiece

READ: EPHESIANS 2:8-10

When we come to know Jesus, we become God's masterpieces. The word translated *masterpiece* in Ephesians 2:10 comes from the Greek word *poiema*, from which we get the word *poem*. When we put our trust in Jesus, He saves us from our sins (the things we do wrong) and makes us new, giving us a new life doing what we were made to do: serve and glorify our Creator in amazing ways through everything we do. In fact, 2 Corinthians 5:17 says we become new creations in Christ.

One of the most amazing parts of being God's new-creation masterpieces is that He gives us special abilities called spiritual gifts to help in serving His kingdom well. For more on spiritual gifts, see Romans 12:4-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, and 1 Corinthians 12-13.

Apart from spiritual gifts, God created each of us with talents. These are also part of the masterpiece He's creating out of your life. Maybe you're good at writing, playing sports, building or fixing things, acting, singing, planning, thinking, or something else! What are things you could do (or are already doing) to use the gifts your Creator has given you as part of the masterpiece of your new life in Christ?

If you know Jesus, you can live as a new creation now, and, one day, Jesus promises to make everything new, including raising you from the dead—finally free from sin and its effects. As Christians, we have the exciting opportunity to use our spiritual gifts, as well as the talents God originally created us with, to point others to the good news of Jesus right now. And we look forward to living forever with Jesus and His people, glorifying God eternally as His masterpieces through the gifts He's created us with. **!** *A. W. Smith*

! What do you think your spiritual gifts might be? Who is a pastor or youth leader who could help you figure out what they are? _____

! What are some talents God has given you? _____

! How can you use these things to share the good news of Jesus with others? _____

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)

Live Your Life Worthy

READ: MATTHEW 22:36-40; PHILIPPIANS 1:6, 27

Watching professional sports is one my favorite things to do. I love to watch the players compete and work together for a common purpose and goal. But to be a professional athlete, there is a standard each player strives to live up to.

A professional athlete maintains certain levels of personal fitness, knowledge of the game, and knowledge of their opponents to be worthy of their professional status. If they were to stop practicing and working out or even stopped playing well, they would eventually no longer be found worthy of being a professional athlete.

Paul writes to the church in Philippi and gives them a huge challenge: he says, “Live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Paul tells them that, as Christians, their lives have a standard, and that standard is Jesus.

Living lives worthy of the gospel means—through the power of the Holy Spirit and not by our own strength—we are to live lives that point to our hope in Jesus, showing others by the choices we make and the words we say that we know Jesus and He will resurrect us at His return.

This doesn’t mean we become robots that don’t have fun; it means that how we live matters in God’s kingdom. Because we belong to Jesus, we are free to live for Him, and He gave us two commands to frame our lives around: (1) to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves. Without Christ, we are sinners, so we can’t do these things without the power of His Holy Spirit in our lives. We live our lives worthy of the gospel when we live in light of these truths.

When we know Jesus, He will help us show His love to others with our actions and words. He is the One who will enable us to live our lives worthy of the gospel. 🗝️ *Phil Cox*

🗝️ What is a question you have about living worthy of the gospel? _____

🗝️ Why is it important that we can’t live our lives worthy of the gospel without Jesus’ help? _____

Just one thing: As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Philippians 1:27 (CSB)

You're Broken—Like Everyone Else

READ: ROMANS 7:18-8:2

My eyes snapped awake, and I searched inside myself: *Do I still feel the attraction?* One second of introspection revealed the dreaded answer: *Yes. I'm still attracted to her.*

I felt like this shouldn't be. I was a pastor's daughter. I led worship and small groups at my church. I loved Jesus as much as I knew how, and here I was: a Jesus-loving-and-fearing woman who was attracted to other women.

I had been in a secret same-sex relationship for months, but I didn't even call her my girlfriend. We were simply two Christian best friends who loved each other deeply...and yet...there was this sexual aspect to it. I both hated and loved it.

I felt a lot like Paul in Romans 7: "I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. . . . Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"

I knew the answer Paul stated in the next verse. I did not like it: "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

But how? I questioned God. *I love You, but here I am, wrestling with what most Christians won't even call a "sin struggle."* I feel I am automatically categorized as the worst type of human until it is gone. But I couldn't stop. I could not pray the attractions out of me.

I wish present-day me could go back into that moment, cup my face in my hands, and say some words of hope: Dear one, it's okay. Everyone has broken sexuality. This is simply your version. Find someone you can talk to about this, who will love you as you are and will teach you not only to *know* Jesus' love but also how to *experience* it. Then you will be empowered to daily surrender all your brokenness to Him (Ephesians 3:19).

Those words would come to me soon, but I offer them to you today: You are not the worst. You're simply broken—like everyone else. 🖱️ *Laurie Krieg*

May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Ephesians 3:19 (NLT)

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

- 1 How can you relate to this story—either yourself or with someone you know? _____

- 1 Do you view people who wrestle with same-sex attractions differently than those who struggle with heterosexual lust? Why? _____

- 1 Do you wrestle with shame or self-hatred because of your sexuality? How can you take the next right step to reach out to someone who can help you know and experience God's love for you *right now*? _____

- 1 Why is it important to know that we are all broken and struggling with sin—that we are all in need of Christ and His forgiveness (Daniel 9:9; Romans 3:23-24; 10:9-13)? _____

Learn more about Jesus and why we all need Him on page 104.

If you're wrestling with your sexuality and need someone safe to talk with, reach out to Hole in My Heart Ministries, who can offer you loving and nonjudgmental support and point you to people you can talk with and/or resources that may help you in your journey: HIMHMinistries.com/contact



How to Love Your Equally Broken Friends

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 13:3-7

You, like many Christian students, are faced with your friends coming out as LGBTQ+. You may wrestle with knowing how to respond. Should you still be friends with them? How much do you agree with your friends, and how much don't you? What does "love" mean in this scenario?

Although this could be (and should be) a much longer conversation, using three characteristics listed in 1 Corinthians 13, we will dive into how to love our friends when they come out to us.

Love is . . . kind (13:4).

I am giving you permission to be kind to your friends—no matter how they identify. It is God's kindness, tolerance, and patience that lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Additionally, our friends who identify as attracted to the same sex may not need repentance from it. They are simply telling us how they are tempted sexually. Temptation of any variety is not a sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Love . . . rejoices whenever the truth wins out (13:6).

I have watched people change their theology of marriage overnight when a friend comes out. They see their friend genuinely in pain over what they reveal (or happy for the first time in a long time), and they conclude, "We must have gotten marriage wrong." The church has unquestionably gotten loving people in the midst of *any type of wrestling* wrong, but the Bible isn't wrong when it comes to marriage. Loving your friend well means loving them toward daily surrender of any type of sin struggle.

Love never gives up (13:7).

If your friend rejects you, don't reject them. If they wander from the faith, you stay connected. As one friend said to me, "You are so annoying in your pursuit of me—and so like Jesus!" Be annoying like Jesus—just like He was in His pursuit of you—as you love your equally broken friends. Never give up on them.

Truly loving someone is not easy—it is costly. But it is the only way I know how to demonstrate the heart of the One whose name is Love. 🕯️ *Laurie Krieg*

Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. 1 Corinthians 13:7 (NLT)

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 If we are all equally broken with sin and in need of Jesus, how does that affect the way you interact with people who struggle with different temptations than you do? _____

🔑 Read Hebrews 4:14-16. Why does it matter that Jesus Himself was tempted yet was without sin? _____

🔑 Who do you know who is wrestling with their sexuality right now? Have you responded to them in love? _____

🔑 How can you do the work of love today—specifically in being kind, rejoicing in the truth, and never giving up? _____

If you're struggling with how to best love your LGBTQ+ friends, reach out to Hole in My Heart Ministries, who can offer you loving and nonjudgmental support and point you to people you can talk with and/or resources that may help you in your journey: HIMHMinistries.com/contact



Conversations with God

READ: HEBREWS 4:14-16; 1 PETER 5:7

Think of your favorite singer, actor, or athlete. Imagine you have free tickets to see them at a big event. Next, imagine you have a backstage pass and can join a special group of fans getting autographs. Can you handle it so far? How about this? The star you admire so much comes out to meet you, gives you their phone number and says you can call or text anytime you want to talk! How cool would *that* be?

Here's the strange thing: We have that kind of "pass" from God, but we often forget to use it. No matter what time it is or where you are, you can talk to God. Your Creator loves you more than anyone else ever could and He wants to spend time with you. Because of what Jesus did—and no matter what you've done—you can approach God's throne with any need because He cares for you.

So what are some ways you can make talking with God a regular part of your day? One of the best ways is to find activities or chores that you do alone and make those special times to pray. For example, you can pray while brushing your teeth, taking a shower, washing dishes, folding laundry, or walking your dog.

You may not get everything you pray for, but you can trust that God always hears and answers your prayers, even if His answers surprise you. If what you've asked is in His will, He may say yes. If He knows that what you've asked for will not be good for you, He may say no. And sometimes He may want you to wait a while before He does what you prayed for. However He answers, you can know that He is good and that He loves you. **!** *Ann-Margret Hovsepian*

! Think of some things you have prayed about before. How do you think God answered? _____

! What are some practical ways you can make conversations with God a normal part of your life? _____

Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.
Philippians 4:6 (NLT)



We Are All Runaways

READ: JONAH 1-3

Picture this: God asks me to go to a new school. You know, the one *all the way* across town. I have no friends there. A new, quiet kid like me could be turned into creamed cauliflower before lunch.

As if changing schools isn't enough, God wants me to share the gospel with my peers. Tell them about *Jesus*.

I'm a goner!

Everything I'm feeling—the roiling in my gut, the clenching of my teeth—is nothing compared to how Jonah must have felt when God called him to the city of Nineveh. Nearly six hundred miles away from his hometown and overflowing with wickedness and debauchery, Nineveh was one of the nastiest places in the known world. It was filled with people who were running away from God.

So, what did Jonah do? *He* ran away from God. He jumped aboard a ship headed to Tarshish, a city around twenty-five *hundred* miles away. He tried to hide from God.

But God didn't lose sight of him. And when Jonah ended up in the belly of a fish because of his foolish choices, God was with him there too.

In the same way, even when we chicken out, turn tail, and run at the sight of danger, God keeps relentlessly chasing after us. He never loses touch with us, even when we lose touch with Him. Even though we are all runaways from God—like Nineveh or Jonah—God loves us and reaches out anyway.

When we run away from God, He continues to pursue us through Jesus Christ. So, wherever we are—even when we're lost and afraid, even when we're dying to just *run away*—we can lift our eyes to Jesus and cry out His name. He'll forgive us, restore us, and enable us to share His love wherever He sends us.

Guess that means I need to get my grade transcripts ready. 🗝️ *Taylor Bennett*

🗝️ What does it mean to run away from God? When are you most tempted to run away from Him and what He calls you to do? _____

🗝️ Why is it important that Jesus is faithful even when we aren't? _____

I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O LORD my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!
Jonah 2:6 (NLT)

Without a Mom

READ: JOHN 16:22; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-14; 1 PETER 5:6-7

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Through my father's sobbing and slurred speech, I could piece together the message: Mom had died.

It didn't really register for me then, but now, a year and a half later, it has. In the moment, accepting what I'd just heard was impossible enough, but to even consider that a future existed seemed as likely as *Star Wars* becoming reality.

Whether I knew it or not, life, in its entirety, had changed. As the months passed, more and more realizations set in every day. She would never see me graduate, never see me get married, never meet her grandchildren. All these life events that should be celebrated would always be shrouded by a thick set of black clouds.

Even so, people approached me during the viewing and funeral, trying to comfort me with sentiments of "It'll be okay" and "She's in a better place." I would have appreciated these statements if they were said after those first couple of months. When the world has crumbled, logical beliefs don't mean much.

It was well after the funeral that I recalled a verse that would bring healing and a modicum of understanding to my soul: Revelation 21:4. Reading that verse and others like it quiets my heart and soul, finally giving them a moment—even if it is just a moment—of peace and understanding.

In my overwhelming grief, I've had one hope to cling to: Mom is with Jesus forever. We will be reunited because He rose from the grave. And then there will be no more tears. **I** *Carson D. Jacobs*

I Have you lost anyone close to you? How did that affect you? _____

I Read Revelation 21:1-5. Why is the promise of the resurrection so important? _____

*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.
Revelation 21:4 (CSB)*

Loving the Lawgiver

READ: PSALM 119:33-40

I know the laws: don't steal, don't murder, drive the speed limit. But I don't love them or get excited about them. Usually, if I consider them at all, I think of them as a nuisance.

On the other hand, I love one particular law officer. My dad has been a police officer for more than twenty years. When I'm with him, I see the law differently. He doesn't enforce the rules because he wants to spoil the fun or dole out punishment; he wants to keep our city safe.

Why do I need to wear a seatbelt? That's dumb. I wouldn't want to listen to some rules on paper. But when my dad tells me to buckle up, it's different. I know it's because he cares about me.

Why can't I drink and get crazy? The government can't tell me what to do. But when my dad tells stories of the awful things that have happened due to underage drinking, it makes sense.

My dad keeps the law, but it's not because he wants to ruin my fun. In fact, we have a blast when we're together. Instead, he just wants to keep me safe. He's seen the consequences of breaking the law, and he wants better for me.

When we see our faith as a list of rules to follow, it's easy to get annoyed, not care, or even purposely rebel. But God doesn't want our faith to be limited to following boring rules. He wants a loving relationship with us, like the one I have with my dad. God makes the rules because He's good. All His laws are centered on creating loving human relationships with God and others (Matthew 22:35-40).

God is our Creator, and He cares about us. It isn't about loving the law on its own; it's about loving the Lawgiver. *✦ Alyssa Roat*

✦ Can we ever follow all God's commands by ourselves (Romans 7:4-7; 8:1-5)? Why or why not? _____

✦ Does thinking of God as a good and loving Father change the way you feel about His commands? _____

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Psalm 119:97 (NIV)

Unshakable Worth

READ: GENESIS 1:27; PSALM 139:13-16; ROMANS 8:39

Self-worth is something we all struggle with. Airbrushed and filtered images are plastered on every magazine, in every store, and all over social media. All the while, our accomplishments are advertised and our shortcomings are hidden. The world tells us that looking good and being successful are the two most important things to strive for and that if we aren't achieving greatness by our looks or performance, our value as a human significantly decreases. Or does it?

While the world uses these things to define value, God would say success and our looks have nothing to do with the measure of our worth. Humans have value because we have each been created in the image of God. He loves us so much that, when we were separated from Him and broken because of our sins, He reached out to us anyway. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice before we were even born, and He invites us to join the family of God through faith in what He did. There is nothing we need to earn.

Each child of God has a unique purpose in God's kingdom, and this is not based on whether their successes or beauty outweigh their weaknesses. God's power is made perfect in weakness anyway—weakness doesn't lessen our worth as image-bearers of God or as children of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

We are each of magnificent value simply for being created in the image of God. And, as Christians, our identity is anchored in being known and loved by God. When we know Jesus, there is nothing we can do that would separate us from the love of God and nothing we can do to lose or lessen our worth. We are forever—eternally—valued by God. Therefore, we also ought to value ourselves. Treat yourself as the daughter or son of the great King that you are and give others that same dignity. 📖 *Lauren N. Trittin*

📖 When was the last time you felt truly valued by others? What did they do to make you feel your worth?

📖 How does what Jesus did—when He died and rose from the grave—make it so that you don't have to perform to be loved by God? _____

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (NIV)

Stopping the Cycle

READ: PSALM 34:17-18; ROMANS 6:6-8; EPHESIANS 4:31-32

Jessie hid her head under the pillow. She couldn't take another shouting match. Her parents were just warming up, and lately the fights had lasted late into the night before freezing into a contest of "whoever talks first loses."

Something was different. Usually about this time of evening, cabinet doors would slam before Dad made some quiet remark that made Mom explode. Not tonight. Suddenly the house was still.

Jessie ventured into the hallway just in time to see the front door slam. The car fired up and roared out of the driveway.

Before Jessie knew to stop her, Mom was gone. Just like that. Her nightstand was empty, and so was her closet. Jessie didn't see her mom a lot after that.

She tried to let it go—this ache and anger toward her mom that sometimes threatened to sweep her away. When she had to spend time with Mom for some unavoidable reason, Jessie found herself unable to carry on a conversation without exploding in anger or freezing in stone-cold silence.

Finally, after an argument over hairspray that ended in the hottest words she'd ever shot at her mom, Jessie locked herself in the bathroom.

She was glaring at her reflection when the thought hit her: "I'm turning into Mom."

The realization sent her to the floor. She trembled as she prayed, "God, take this anger from me. It's killing me. Remind me that I belong to You."

Something melted around her heart, and she knew what she had to do: "Jesus, help me to forgive Mom. Thanks for showing me how she feels when she explodes."

She paused and then continued, "Give me Your love for her in the meantime... Because I can't talk to her right now."

Jessie hugged her knees sitting there, and peace flooded her. "Jesus, thank You for being with me even when I'm angry." That truth gave her hope. 🕯

Rebekah Love Dorris

🕯 What things does your family struggle with? What are your sin struggles? _____

🕯 How does bringing these sin struggles to Jesus help? How does the Holy Spirit help (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Galatians 5:13-26)? _____

🕯 If your family struggles with anger, who is someone you can talk with about it? _____

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.
Psalm 34:18 (NIV)*

I Want to Forgive, but I Can't!

READ: PSALM 35:19-24; MATTHEW 6:9-15; LUKE 23:33-34

If you struggle with forgiveness, don't be discouraged. Forgiveness is hard because someone has hurt you. It's okay to feel that hurt, but it's not okay to hate the other person.

Jesus knows forgiveness is hard, which is why He included it in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-15). He knows we need Him in order to forgive. If you've put your trust in Jesus, He's forgiven your great debt of sin, and He is with you, giving you His power to forgive others when they sin against you. But what does that process look like?

Step 1: Let It Out. Pray about what hurt you. No emotion is too strong for God. Go to Him with everything, even deep anger and sadness. The book of Psalms in the Bible is filled with prayers like this.

Step 2: Let It Go. After the psalmists shared their hurts with God, they remembered who God was. God is just, so He will punish every wrong (Romans 12:19; 1 Peter 2:23). If you know Jesus, He's already punished your sins by taking the punishment on Himself when He died on the cross (1 Peter 3:18). When you remember Jesus paid your great debt of sin, you can begin to let go of other people's sins, trusting God to handle them.

Step 3: Look to God. To forgive means to stop holding the wrong someone did against them. It doesn't necessarily mean trusting the other person, especially in a dangerous situation. Instead, the goal is to stop wanting bad things for them and to start wanting good things for them. This will be a process, and you can trust God to complete the work He started in you (Philippians 1:6).

Step 4: Put on Love. As Jesus chips away at bitterness in your heart, He fills that space with His love for the person who hurt you (Matthew 5:44-45; Colossians 3:8, 12-14). Talk to God about this, and start praying for the person who hurt you. If possible, look for specific ways to bless them. Pray for wisdom and talk with trusted people to find the best ways to love the person who hurt you. *—A. W. Smith*

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34 (CSB)



HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 Have you ever struggled with forgiveness? What made it hard for you? _____

🔑 What confuses you about forgiveness? _____

🔑 What did you learn about forgiveness from today's reading? _____

🔑 If you're struggling with forgiveness, who can you talk with about it? _____



Confident in the Corridors of Power

READ: 1 PETER 2:9-10

My senior year in high school, I won a scholarship to a camp in Washington, DC. As part of the experience, we went to the Capitol Building. There were hundreds of people on tours, but many areas were heavily restricted. Tourists could look at the building, but they definitely couldn't talk to senators!

Ordinarily, I would never have dared enter the representatives' offices or the Senate floor. (And they wouldn't have let me either!) However, I was given a special name card. All I had to do was show it to security, and then they let me right through. I was allowed to stand outside the Senate Chamber and talk with one of our state's senators, enter offices to speak with representatives, and see the Capitol behind the scenes. I wasn't a senator or otherwise important person, but the name card I was given gave me full confidence to enter the corridors of power.

As Christians, God has given us our own special name cards: the name "child of God." Through prayer, we can enter His throne room with full confidence, and no one will kick us out. Though we were once sinners unable to stand before our holy God, being His children through Christ gives us a new identity, a special clearance. And we have no need for insecurity. **✦***Alyssa Roat*

✦ Imagine being able to enter the Oval Office whenever you wanted. God's throne room is far more impressive, and, in Christ, you have full access (Hebrews 4:14-16). Does this make you think about it in a different way? _____

✦ Do you take advantage of your ability to come before God anytime you want? _____

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:6 (NIV)



Does God Have Good Plans for Me?

READ: ROMANS 8:18-28; EPHESIANS 2:10; REVELATION 21:1-5

In Christian circles, you'll often hear the phrase "God has good plans for me." And this is true. But what are the good plans God has for every Christian? Especially since Christians experience suffering?

God's good plan is to restore the whole universe from sin and its effects. He is our good Creator, and He intends to rescue all of His people and all of creation from the brokenness caused by our sin.

In more specific terms, Jesus—who is God—is calling people to trust in Him as their Savior and Lord. He came as a human, took the just punishment for our sins on Himself by dying on the cross, and beat death's power by rising again on the third day. He ascended to heaven, gave His people the Holy Spirit to help us, is in the throne room of God, and will one day return to make everything new—free from sin and its effects. Making everything new includes raising from the dead and restoring those who put their trust in Him.

So, if we know Jesus, we are called to live our lives in such a way that we honor Him and His plans. We use our talents for His kingdom by doing our work with excellence and by pointing people directly to the truths and promises of God's Word. Through the power of God's Holy Spirit, we are called to exciting work in God's kingdom, and that work will continue after He returns and makes everything new!

When you hear "God has good plans for you," remember that this means we can trust Jesus and His good purposes. He is making all things new and free from sin—that's why we can trust Him with our lives. Even in the bad stuff or the stuff we wouldn't have chosen, God has good plans for His people and all of creation, to His glory. And He is with us every step of the way. 🗝

Kandi Zeller

🗝 How do God's good plans and promises affect the way we live now? _____

🗝 How can you use the gifts and abilities God has given you for His kingdom? _____

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Whose Voice Is That?

READ: JOHN 10:25-30

Every time I get a voicemail from my mom, I smile. I've heard her voice almost every day of my life. So if I know anyone's voice, it's hers. What always makes me smile is the fact that she still feels the need to tell me that it's *her* leaving the voicemail.

It's not just my mom's voice that I hear and instantly know. I have some close friends and family members I talk with all the time. They can leave a voicemail without a name, and I know who they are. But if someone I didn't know very well left me a message without a name, I would have no clue who they were.

Jesus says His sheep hear his voice and follow Him. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, we become His sheep. He is our good shepherd (John 10:11). So, as Christians, we spend time listening to His voice so we can know it and follow it. We can do this by absorbing the truth of the gospel—of Jesus and what He did, found in the pages of God's Word, the Bible—which will allow us to know God's voice in Christ. Then, we will be able to tell the difference between truth and lies. 📌

Melissa Yeagle

📌 Why is it important to know God's voice? How do we know if something is God's voice or not (2 Timothy 3:16-18; Hebrews 1:1-2)? _____

📌 What are some practical ways to get to know God's voice? _____

My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me. John 10:27 (CSB)



Fear of Dragons

READ: ROMANS 8:31-39; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

When dragons still roamed the mountains, a group of merchants were traveling to market along a quiet forest road. The first rushes of wind in the evergreen trees didn't alarm them, but the blasts grew stronger...and hotter.

The trees around cracked and fell. An enormous golden dragon, eyes glowing with mischief, swept into the newly formed glade. As the merchants scattered fearfully, the bold voice of the lizard halted them. "Don't run, humans! It will only make things worse!" Licking his scaly lips with a forked tongue, he crouched in front of a young woman. "You—what is it that you fear?"

Her face twitched, but she didn't speak.

"All humans fear it," rumbled the beast. "They dread and flee from it, but it ever finds them, chasing on the wings of darkness!"

The woman squinted while all the others cowered.

"I'll give you a hint," the dragon said. "It starts with the letter *D*."

"Dragon?" squeaked one of the men.

"No!" roared the dragon, sitting up on his haunches. "Death, you numbskulls! I was thinking of the word *death*!"

The dragon reared back to incinerate a merchant, when the woman yelled back at him. "I do not fear death," she said. "Try again!"

The dragon turned back to her. "Excuse me?"

"I have no fear of death," she said again. "I do not want to die, but even if you burn me to ashes, my Lord can raise my body again, and I shall live forevermore. You can do nothing, lizard. Your works shall perish with you."

The dragon raised a scaly eyebrow.

"So, tell me, worm," said the girl. "What do you fear most?"

"It starts with a *D*!" someone shouted. 🗝️ *Kevin Zeller*

🗝️ Does death make you afraid? _____

🗝️ Jesus will raise our bodies back to life when He returns. What does this mean for our perception of death? _____

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Romans 8:11 (NIV)



Right Now

READ: ROMANS 10:9-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

The first time I met Freddy, we were locked in a small concrete room with no windows, no chairs, and sticky floors.

He started plainly telling me about the first of two men he had killed in his lifetime. He was only twelve when the first one happened. He had saved his mother's life.

Growing up without a father had had a profound effect on the man before me. His face, covered in obvious gang symbols, told the stories of many hardships beyond his years.

Later, as one of our services at the correctional facility concluded, Freddy stepped up and asked how he could be baptized while in jail. Freddy's only religious background had taught him that baptism was essential for salvation.

Baptism, however, is more like a uniform that we put on as Christians. Putting a police uniform on doesn't make you a police officer, but if you are a police officer, you will wear the uniform and it will have meaning. Once we explained these truths to Freddy, we read Romans 10:9-10 with him.

The moment we were done reading, Freddy was on his knees. "Right now," he said. "I want to pray right now."

The Bible is clear that Christ paid the price in full for our sins, and he paid it once and for all (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 10:10). A Christian baptism publicly identifies us with the people of God through Christ, but it's not required for salvation.

I will never forget Freddy, and I know that the Lord will not either, even if he never gets an opportunity to be baptized. *✠ Harry Brown*

✠ Read Mark 16:15-16, Colossians 2:12-14, Titus 3:3-7, and 1 Peter 3:18-22. Why is baptism important? What does it show us about Jesus and our relationship to Him? _____

✠ Christians do have different understandings about the timing, methods, and specifics of baptism, but we agree that Jesus is the One who saves. To learn more, talk with your pastor, camp counselor, or another trusted Christian in your life. _____

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.

1 Corinthians 1:17 (CSB)

Give Thanks

READ: PSALM 100:1-5; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:18

We're called to give thanks to God at all times. But how? When I was thirteen, I had to wrestle with that question.

Things weren't going well for me, and I was depressed. My parents were divorced. My mom got remarried to a man I had trouble getting along with. Then, when my mom lost her job, we lost our house and car. We ended up having to move to a cheap apartment in another town, so I had to leave my hometown and all my friends behind. And, with no car, we had to walk everywhere we went. All I could think about was how bad my life was.

One Sunday, a member from our former church came and picked us up for church so we could visit all the people we'd had to leave behind when we moved. It was such a treat to see my church friends!

During the worship service, we sang a song about giving thanks. I remember grumbling in my head, *I don't have anything to give thanks about.* Then, I looked down at the floor. When I did, I saw my shoes.

That got me to thinking: I could be thankful because God had provided the shoes on my feet. So I began by thanking God for them, and then I began thinking of more and more things I could thank Him for. That moment, my focus changed from thinking about how bad my life was to how much I had to be thankful for. My life situation didn't immediately improve, but my perspective did.

Even when we suffer, we can always remember the promises of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus came here, experienced our suffering, died for our sins, and beat death's power by rising again. We can go to Him with our hurts, and He will remind us of all we have in Him. 🕯 *Melissa Yeagle*

🕯 What are some hard situations in your life right now? _____

🕯 What can you thank God for, even now? _____

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. Psalm 100:4 (NIV)

A New Creation

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21; EPHESIANS 4:21-32; PHILIPPIANS 1:6

I was riding my bike with Ragnar, my husky, running beside me and attached to my bike by a pole made especially for riding a bike with a dog. All was perfect. Ragnar was happy to be out on a cold day, and I was enjoying the beauty of God's creation. Until...

A big white dog came barreling out of his yard. Loose. Growling. Hackles raised.

Ragnar loves other dogs, so I wasn't concerned he would fight back, but he leaped toward the dog, pulling my bike sideways and dislodging my entire seat post. I fell across my handlebars, injuring my shoulder.

Seemingly oblivious to my pain, my neighbor—the owner of the big white dog—just smiled, saying, "It's okay. He's a friendly dog."

This neighbor was also someone I had spoken to recently about Jesus. But, in response to her too-calm attitude, I was hardly a glowing example of God's love. I was hurting, furious, and struggling to hang on to my crippled bike and my crazy husky.

"Get your dog," I demanded between clenched teeth. The rest of what I said wasn't exactly neighborly.

Was my neighbor's casual attitude toward the accident hurtful? Yes. Could she have been a more responsible dog owner? Yes. Was it okay for me to let her know I was hurt? Yes. But did I demonstrate Christ's love in *how* I spoke to her? No.

Memories of my earlier talk with my neighbor flooded my mind. She had rejected Jesus because she found Christians treated her with the same rage and backbiting she could find without bothering to get up early on a Sunday morning.

I wish I had taken a deep breath and considered how I could have shown Christ's love in that situation. We're all sinners who can be unkind with our words. But, in Jesus, we become new creations, free to reflect His love and truth in all our interactions—and free to seek forgiveness from God and others when we do mess up.  *Vicky Kaseorg*

 If you know Jesus, you are a new creation. How does your identity in Christ affect your words and attitudes? _____

 How can you show Christ's love when you are genuinely hurt? How can you apologize when you mess up? _____

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17 (CSB)

Me

READ: PSALM 139:1-18; JOHN 3:16-18

Isabel, at age eleven, is an amazing dancer. She has already performed with a major ballet company in several productions. Isaiah, age thirteen, just started attending college. Derek, at age fifteen, was considered one of the best BMX racers in Texas. Do you know someone like that? Someone gifted in academics, sports, acting—you name it. That was not me.

I was just an average student. I was and am a slightly-better-than-average salesperson. I'm good at a lot of things, superstar at none. It used to bother me until someone pointed me to Psalm 139.

When I read it, I was in awe. God—the only wise God, the Creator of the universe, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords—made you and me! Not only did He make you and me, but He loved us enough to come down to offer us freedom from sin and death so that we could be with Him forever.

Whether God has given you an amazingly obvious talent or if your talents don't seem as striking as those of your peers, live a life of thankfulness, knowing that God created you in His image with unique gifts and abilities for use in His kingdom.

Try reading Psalm 139 every day for a whole year—you will be changed. It will give you a reason to praise God for His amazing creation: you! 🗝

Bonnie Haveman

🗝 Do you envy others' abilities? _____

🗝 What do you do well? How can you honor God with those abilities? _____

🗝 Have you spent time thanking God for making you? _____

And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person. 1 Corinthians 12:6 (CSB)



Sharing Jesus without Fear

READ: 2 TIMOTHY 2:23-26; 1 PETER 3:15

Sharing the good news of Jesus can be awkward and difficult, but God calls us to share Jesus in a loving and clear way. But how do we strike that balance of gentleness and honesty?

Remember God's love. Remember, God doesn't want anyone to perish because they chose sin (2 Peter 3:9-10). God is just, and He is also loving. Reflect that same understanding with the people you meet.

God is in control. The way people react to Christians can be scary sometimes. (For that matter, Christians can be scary to other people!) But you don't need to live in fear; you have the power that raised Jesus from the dead inside of you through the Holy Spirit. God is with you, He's in control, He's good, He's faithful, and one day He will raise you from the dead. Nothing can separate you from Him, even the worst of interactions with other people. Approach people in love and gentleness, keeping these promises from God in your mind.

Move gradually. Truth can be hard to absorb. So be patient with people. Share truth, but don't give people a glut of information. Give people silence and time to consider and think.

Just do it! God will equip you with His Words (Exodus 4:12; Matthew 28:20). Go out in the love and strength of Jesus, and He will provide courage and opportunities. Talk to Him about it today. *✚ Kandi Zeller*

✚ What questions have people asked you about Christianity? How did you respond? _____

✚ How would you describe the good news of Jesus? Try to get it down to one or two sentences so that you have an easy reference point if someone asks you what you mean. _____

✚ If someone says something mean to you about Christianity, what is something you could say or do in response instead of exploding with anger? _____

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Ephesians 4:15 (NLT)

Nametags

READ: GENESIS 1:27; JOHN 1:12; 1 CORINTHIANS 6:19; 1 PETER 2:9

As I brushed my teeth, I examined the reflection of my nametag in the bathroom mirror. By now, the words were so familiar I could even read them backward: "CHILD OF GOD." I smiled as my other names echoed through my head: "Image-bearer." "Chosen People." "Ambassador." "Temple of the Holy Spirit." They each flashed onto my nametag briefly as I spat out my toothpaste before gathering my backpack and walking outside.

Today will be different, I told myself. Today, I will be kind. Today, I won't sin. Today, I will remember that I am a Child of God. I kept this promise really well...at first. I made it all the way to the school bus! Then Rick called my shoes "ratty" and went on and on about how my parents couldn't buy me new Jordans because they were poor.

I cringed as new nametags appeared elsewhere on my jacket, identifying me as "Ratty" and "Poor." Burning with anger, I spat back, "At least my family cares about me! Your parents just buy you stuff to make you shut up!" A nametag with "Unloved" appeared on his sleeve as his fist collided with my nose. By the time the fight ended, we each had a few bruises, a week's worth of detention to serve, and several more unflattering nametags.

After school, I slumped onto my bed, exhausted. *Why, Lord? Why can't I control myself? Why am I such an awful sinner?* I sighed as "Sinner" arrived on my chest. *I just need to be better. I just need to try harder. I just need...* Silence filled my head.

"You need Me," Jesus' voice answered.

One by one, the nametags I had accumulated throughout the day disappeared. With each one that left, a weight lifted off of my heart. Finally, nothing was left but my one, true nametag: "CHILD OF GOD." 🕯️ *Taylor Eising*



🕯️ Reread today's verses. Who does Jesus say you are? What does it mean to have your identity in Him?

🕯️ When you sin, do you get frustrated with yourself and resolve to try harder? Or do you bring your sin to God, confess it, ask for His forgiveness, and remember who you are in Him? _____

But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name. John 1:12 (CSB)

Why Am I So Angry?

READ: MATTHEW 6:9-15; LUKE 23:32-34

Anger flowed through me as I pinned my friend against a tree, with her feet dangling two inches above the ground. My older brother, a football player, could barely pull me off Cathy. I don't remember what I was angry about, but I do remember how anger controlled me.

I read the Bible and prayed daily, and I loved Jesus, but anger was a part of me as well. I'm not talking about righteous anger, the kind Jesus demonstrated when He drove the money changers away from the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). No, I mean sinful anger (James 1:20).

Two years after I pinned Cathy against that tree, God started pursuing me about my anger. Finally, I asked myself, "Why are you so angry?" I truly didn't know.

Later, God made it clear to me that my anger came from harboring unforgiveness in my heart. Lying prostrate before God, tears streaming down my face, I turned the whole sordid mess over to my Lord. God forgave me the minute I asked for His forgiveness.

That wasn't the end of my sinful anger, but it was the beginning of the end. I would give my hurt over to the Lord, and then I would take it back. I did this again and again. The more quickly I would give it back to the Lord, the easier it became to leave it all at His feet. As He slowly taught me to let go of my unforgiveness, I felt anger lose its grip on me.

If anyone has the right to harbor unforgiveness, it's our heavenly Father. After all, we were responsible for nailing His perfect Son to a cross. Yet Jesus never stops forgiving us. The Father extends mercy and grace to us without measure. As Christians, we have no right to cling to unforgiveness. Hand it over to Jesus and let the Holy Spirit chip away at the anger in your heart. **✚** *Bonnie Haveman*

✚ Do you struggle with anger? Confess your struggle to God, who is faithful to forgive, and ask Him to show you what is making you so angry (1 John 1:9). _____

✚ Why should we forgive others? _____

✚ Do you believe Jesus has forgiven you? Why or why not? (Learn more about what this means on page 104.) _____

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember the Lord forgave you so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

Breaking the Grip of Distraction

READ: PSALM 73

Recently, while driving on the interstate, I noticed the car behind me gently swerving over the lines as it drew closer. My rearview mirror revealed a woman texting while driving—illegal where I live. As I carefully maneuvered into the next lane to let her pass, I thought of how quickly distracted driving can turn bad, even fatal!

Distractions can also cause us to lose focus on our relationship with God. In Psalm 73, we find Asaph questioning God about why evil people in the world prosper and seem to live problem-free lives. As he remains distracted by dwelling on what others seem to have, he becomes increasingly distressed and miserable. He concludes, “Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside” (verse 21).

Eventually, as Asaph returns his attention to God, he says: “Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked” (verse 17).

When we lose sight of Jesus and what He has done for us, we can quickly find ourselves like Asaph—distressed, anxious, and miserable. As we turn to Jesus, distractions and problems lose their grip on us. We realize we’re not alone. We have a Lord who understands our weaknesses, helps us, and gives us peace. We need only rest in Him. 📌 *Cheryl Elton*

📌 What distractions take your focus off Jesus? _____

📌 What are some ways you can look for Jesus in the situations around you? _____

Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.
Psalm 73:25-26 (NLT)



Father to the Fatherless

READ: PSALM 10:14; JOHN 1:12; ROMANS 8:14-23

What do marshmallows and missing dads have to do with each other? In one study, researchers asked a group of kindergartners if they wanted one marshmallow right then or two marshmallows a few minutes later. Some kids snatched one marshmallow right away, and others waited so they could have two.

The researchers followed their subjects over the next several years. Turns out, the kids who waited for two marshmallows generally made better life choices than those who ate one right away. Over the years and in similar studies, researchers have found a pattern: *children who ate their marshmallows right away—and later made poorer decisions in life—very often did not have a dad at home.*

If you don't have a dad at home, you may be thinking, *I make wise decisions all the time, thank you very much.* I know. I get it. Those studies irritate me too, because I grew up without a dad, and I'd like to think of myself as wise. But the scary truth is, as an adult, I would make wiser, stronger choices if I'd had a dad at home when I was a kid.

But God is faithful, and because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can have a restored relationship with God, with full access to our heavenly Father's wisdom (Hebrews 4:14-16; James 1:5).

For example, two famous characters in the Bible—Esther and Joash—lived without earthly dads but were able to rest in their heavenly Father. A cousin raised Esther, but God chose her to become queen of a heathen nation and save her people from slaughter. An aunt raised Joash, but God raised him to power as the youngest king of Judah ever, even enabling Joash to throw off the yoke of a tyrant. While Esther and Joash may have lacked an earthly father's guidance, God worked through them in situations that required His extraordinary wisdom. You can read their stories in the book of Esther and in 2 Chronicles 22-24.

While having a father on earth can be a tremendous blessing, having a heavenly Father is a better one. Through Jesus, you can enjoy the guidance and blessing of a Father whose wisdom is available to all who ask...even to those who prefer their marshmallows now. 🕯️ *Holland Webb*

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.
Psalm 68:5 (NIV)*

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 Why does everyone—whether they have an earthly father or not—need Jesus in order to make truly wise decisions (Proverbs 2:6; Romans 3:10-24)? _____

🔑 Reread the verses from today's devotion. How does Jesus provide us with a new family? _____

🔑 Even though earthly fathers are imperfect, every believer in Jesus will always have a perfect heavenly Father. Does it comfort you to think of God as your Father? Why or why not? _____



Can I Ask God Why?

READ: PSALM 13; LAMENTATIONS 3:21-25, 31-33

It's not bad to ask God, "Why did You allow this?" or "Why did this happen?" We live in a world filled with sin and brokenness, and until Jesus makes all things new, there will be hurt. During the hurt, it's completely natural to wonder, "Why?"

In fact, it's important to go to God when you don't know why something is happening. In the book of Psalms in the Bible, we see lots of prayers to God during hard times. Often, the psalmists asked God, "Why?" Sometimes they asked, "Are You even still with me, God?" But they always came back to the truths they knew: that God was good, that they had a relationship with Him, and that He would never leave them.

So when you ask, "Why?" go to God. Tell Him your hurts and questions, lay them all at His feet (sometimes over and over), and rest in His comfort. While you may not get answers right away, know that He loves you and is working everything together for His good purposes (Romans 8:28, 38-39).

Because He's fully God and fully human, Jesus knows the pain you are feeling, so you can talk with Him about it (Hebrews 4:14-16). He's always with you, and you can know that pain won't last forever because Jesus promises He will one day destroy sin, death, and tears (Matthew 28:20; Revelation 21:1-5). 🕯

Kandi Zeller

🕯 Have you ever asked God why something happened? What did you learn through that experience?

🕯 What are some Bible verses that remind you that God remains faithful even when we don't understand?

🕯 What things are you currently asking why about? Talk to God about them today. And, if you have more questions, talk to a trusted Christian in your life—a pastor, youth leader, or friend.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

A Country of Their Own

READ: HEBREWS 3:3-6; 11:13-16

Home, sweet home,
*The volatile, the vile memories
 Of tears, and shrieks, and all the while
 The place meant to be safe is anything but,
 And the place meant to bring warmth . . .
 Freezing, we are exiles.*

*Exiles battered by the pounding rain of
 Bruises and divorce, of foreclosures
 And, of course, the silence that wraps us
 In a home sweet homely hug.*

*Home, sweet home,
 How sweet the sound of
 Thy kingdom come and heavenly bound.
 No tears, no screams . . . just light beams,
 Reflecting off the golden streets.*

*This country I seek,
 The here but not yet here.
 When it comes, shining as the sun,
 I'll crumple to my knees, sighing.
 "Home at last. Home at last." ❗
 Hope Bolinger*



❗ What does home mean to you? How does our heavenly home with Jesus differ (Luke 23:43)? _____

❗ Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Revelation 21:1-5. What will life look like after Jesus' return and our resurrection? _____

❗ What are some ways you see God's coming kingdom in the here and now? _____

*People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.
 Hebrews 11:14 (NIV)*

Football and Worship

READ: GENESIS 1:31; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:26; PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21

Appalachian State stuns the college football world!"

After mowing over the block "M" I had created in the grass the day before, I went back to sulking. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone.

How could Michigan lose to Appalachian State? How could the coaches have been so stupid? How could the players have played so poorly? Why was everyone so excited about it?

I didn't like feeling this way, but I couldn't help it. My identity was wrapped up in what happened in college football stadiums all around the country every autumn Saturday. It was an obsession.

That obsession was wrong, but my enjoyment of football wasn't. As my relationship with Christ has grown deeper, my love for football has also grown. That's because I now see it through a different lens.

Football is good. It's a sport in which humans use their God-given bodies and minds to compete. Christ created our bodies, so He is honored by the feats performed on the field because sports celebrate the goodness, intricate design, and value God gave to our bodies as His image-bearers. After all, He took on human flesh in the incarnation, and He raised it from the dead in the resurrection. Jesus will always have a human body, and so will we—because He will raise us from the dead.

Therefore, because of my identity in Christ, I enjoy football even more. Watching it with family, talking about it with friends, and even playing it can be done as worship to our Creator—through the excellence shown on the field and the attitude we have while participating.

So, if the worship is going to God, then I am free to *not* live or die emotionally with the fate of my favorite team. I'm also free to enjoy watching other teams play, even Ohio State! It can all bring glory and honor to God. 🕯️ *Kevin Zeller*

🕯️ What honors God—as the Creator—about your favorite activities or interests? _____

🕯️ What are specific ways you can reflect Christ in those activities and interests? _____

*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
1 Corinthians 10:31 (NIV)*

Strength

READ: JOHN 14:27; 1 PETER 5:10

Being a teenager is hard. There are so many voices shouting at us all the time: from social media to kids at school. Between those voices and the other issues we have to deal with—like self-image, grades, and extracurriculars—life can get pretty overwhelming.

I personally struggled a lot with finding self-worth. I was adopted at a young age, and it made me a little wary of where I fit in. I'd get really down on myself, and oftentimes I thought about what it meant to be alive. *What is the point?* I'd ask myself. I spent many nights crying myself to sleep and then waking up to fake a smile at school.

I got really bad, but the summer of 2016 I attended a Christian camp. My counselor had dealt with and was still struggling with many of the same issues I faced, but she told me a secret: God has the strength.

Really, that's all you need in hard times. His strength, not your own. And His strength is infinite and eternal—His strength raised Jesus from the dead, and someday He will do the same for us. That is the strength He gives us, as we deal with the hard things in our lives. My favorite verse became 1 Peter 5:10 because it talks about the power God gives us through Christ.

I still struggle with leaning on God's strength, but I know He is all I need. And I know that as long as I keep trusting in Him, I can make it through the hard times. Even if I don't know *exactly* where I fit into the puzzle just yet, Jesus does. 🕯

Hannah Flowers

🕯 Have you ever prayed for strength? What happened? _____

🕯 What is something you need God's strength for right now? Give that problem over to Him by telling Him about it in prayer. _____

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.
1 Peter 5:10 (NIV)

Part of the Team

READ: 1 SAMUEL 16:7; EPHESIANS 2:19-22; 1 JOHN 3:1-2

Once again, I'm about to be chosen last or near last for a team. My name is called, and the other students roll their eyes. They grudgingly put me on their team.

I know I'm not the most athletic person in the world, but I am human. My gifts are just more mental than physical. My "friends" want me on their team for math and history competitions, but they disappear when it comes to soccer or baseball.

Not being chosen hurts. I see the same hurt in the eyes of the others who are not chosen. I just want to be welcome on a team and cheered on—accepted.

How does God feel about all this?

Jesus chose His disciples. Did He look for the elegant, educated, well-spoken types of followers? No. His disciples were blue-collar workers...rough on the exterior and broken on the inside. They were not the winners of society: fishermen, tax collectors, and more. God didn't choose them by how they looked, and the same is true today. Jesus looks at the condition of our hearts, souls, and minds. Like the disciples, we are all broken with sin and need rescue.

Jesus chose me to be part of His family. I have no special talent for this. I'm rough around the edges and broken with sin, but He chose me. I said yes to His invitation to join His family, and my life has never been the same. I am on the winning team forever! No eye-rolling or being put in the background. In Christ, I'm brought up front, accepted, and joyfully welcomed. 📌 *Kathy Bruins*

📌 Have you been chosen last? How did that make you feel? _____

📌 Have you said yes to Jesus' invitation to be a part of His family (John 1:12; 3:16)? (Learn more on page 104.) _____

You did not choose me [Jesus], but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. John 15:16 (NIV)



The Resurrection

READ: ROMANS 8:11; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

In an instant, the atoms of the universe had been realigned. Particles that had separated centuries or millennia ago, drifting aimlessly through the cosmos, were reunited in one moment. Hearts beat again. Blood pumped. Eyes fluttered. Brains came alive with electrical activity.

Cemeteries, silent for years upon years, stirred with conversation. Quiet fields where only birds and squirrels had lived now stood peopled. The desert sand was pockmarked by living people singing songs of joy. Far out in the deep oceans, hale bodies broke the surface, breathing for the first time in decades, centuries, millennia.

The faithful rejoiced, but those who believed in puny gods shuddered. Their trivial hopes in mechanistic systems fell to pieces at the sight of this power. This power that knew no limits—that made the world and constantly, meticulously sustained every particle and followed each path with all-knowing eyes peering from the window of timelessness.

Each body, renewed in usefulness and health, looked like another body that had risen long ago in Palestine. That had been the first part of the great plan, and this was the second. As He descended to meet them, and the faithful rose to meet Him, the outsiders could see the resemblance. All of them were strong. All of them had two arms and two legs. All had two eyes and two ears, teeth and hair and nails, five fingers and toes.

Their faces were all the same. Not the same features or colors—those were all various, in the most extreme way. But they all wore the same expression of love, joy, peace, and good humor. There were no frowns. No internal conflict played across the sparkling eyes. They were content. They saw the One they had lived their lives for and would continue to do so forever. Their expressions mirrored His. *Kevin Zeller*

🔑 The God Christians worship is all-powerful. Would the resurrection be possible if this wasn't true? _____

🔑 At the resurrection, believers will be made like the risen Christ (in His human nature). What kinds of changes in our bodies or personalities will this entail? _____

🔑 Is it important that God raises the very same bodies that died? _____

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die." John 11:25 (NIV)

Being Hospitable Doesn't Require Much

READ: LUKE 14:12-14; ROMANS 5:8

A dear friend of mine wrote me to tell me her grandmother had passed away. I remember her grandmother: a sweet, gentle soul who had a spark in her smile and a twinkle in her eyes. One summer, she even invited me to stay with her for six weeks while I attended college. What a tremendous blessing she was to me during that time! We ate together and had many great conversations. I'll always have fond memories of her as the generous person who opened her home to me and welcomed me with warmth and hospitality.

Hospitality demonstrates the love Jesus gives to us. The Bible says God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son to die for us on Calvary (John 3:16). Then, He rose from the dead, providing a way for us to live forever with Him. God loves us more than anything, and Christ was born to live out that love to the world. When we were sinners, He did everything so we could be with Him. Now that is what I call hospitality!

God loves people, and we should too. Hospitality says the following: "I accept you. You are welcomed. And I love you just as you are." That is what Jesus says to us, and that is what we should say to others. He takes us just as we are, slowly transforming us to be more like Him.

Remember that we are to encourage those who need love—students, missionaries, the aging. We may not always see them as lovely, but God loves them. In Christ, we're called to love them too. You might be surprised by how blessed you are when you show God's hospitality to others. 📌 *Erendira Ramirez-Ortega*

📌 Who has shown hospitality to you lately? What did they do for you? _____

📌 It can be difficult to offer hospitality when you are young, but God has given you unique resources and gifts. How can you use them to show hospitality to others? _____

Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. 1 Peter 4:9 (NKJV)



WELCOME

When God Disappoints Us

READ: MATTHEW 11:1-6

Have you ever been disappointed in the way God allowed a situation to develop? You have company. Matthew 11 talks about a time John the Baptist asked Jesus if He truly was God’s promised Messiah or if John should keep waiting for someone else.

John the Baptist was not an uncommitted believer. In fact, he was in prison for preaching that Jesus *was* the Messiah—a prison sentence that eventually led to John’s death. He knew Jesus was the Messiah. So why is he asking, “Are You the Messiah?”

I think it was because Jesus didn’t look like the Messiah that John had expected. He didn’t do what John had expected Him to do. John had a right to be disappointed, didn’t he? I mean, he was in prison.

Actually, no. When God doesn’t do things the way we expect Him to, it doesn’t mean He’s doing them the wrong way. In response to John’s question, Jesus told John to look at what was happening, not at what he believed should be happening.

Every time I read this passage, I ask myself, “When God doesn’t answer my prayers in the way I want Him to, how do I react?” Is my reaction to pull away from God or to draw close and ask Him to help me see from His perspective? There are times in life when God’s way seems so wrong and unfair. Can we trust Him even if we have reason to doubt, from our human perspective?

I want to do more than just pray, “God, Your will be done.” I want to choose to believe that His way is the best way. I want to choose to believe that He is good all the time, even in those times when He doesn’t answer the way I think He should. **📖** *Bonnie Haveman*

📖 Have you ever stopped praying because you didn’t like God’s answer? _____

📖 What does it look like to trust God even when He isn’t doing things the way you think He should? _____

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.” Isaiah 55:8 (NLT)

By Faith

READ: HEBREWS 11:1-10

Hebrews 11 is full of examples of people who trusted God even when it seemed foolish. Abel burned up some of his best livestock as a sacrifice for his sins because he believed in the power of God to forgive sins. If he hadn't had faith, it would have seemed like a waste of food or income. Enoch's deeds are not mentioned specifically, but his faith pleased God and Enoch went to be with Him without dying, something that was only possible by God's power.

It is encouraging to read Old Testament accounts of God's faithfulness. When people put their lives at risk to obey God, He often showed His faithfulness by physically protecting those people in their particular situations—like He did for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). Other times, people suffered or even died for their faith, like Stephen (Acts 6-7). God was faithful to those people too; they had faith in God's promise to give His people resurrection and eternal life with Him.

Although we may endure situations that seem hopeless or unrewarding, faith allows us to recognize that God has a plan for His people (Romans 8:28). In Christ, God has given us promises to lean on while we endure difficult times. In Hebrews 13:5, He promises not to leave or forsake us. In Matthew 21:22, He promises to answer prayers asked in faith, although they often aren't answered in the ways we expect. In John 3:15, He promises that those who believe in Jesus will have everlasting life.

Like the above heroes of the faith, we have times when obedience to God leads to uncertainty. They knew that God is trustworthy, so they believed God's promises and acted on them. God fulfilled His promises to them, and He will fulfill His promises to us. 📖 *Karen Niewoehner*

- 📖 What are some ways God has been faithful to you in your life? _____

- 📖 Who are some people you know who walk in faithful obedience to God? What about their faith in Jesus do you admire? _____

- 📖 Through the power of the Holy Spirit, how can you act in faithful obedience to God (Romans 15:13)? _____

*For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!"
And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory.
2 Corinthians 1:20 (NLT)*

Comparison

READ: GALATIANS 1:10; PHILIPPIANS 3:7-11

This is a letter written in the style of The Screwtape Letters by C. S. Lewis. In this fictional book, Screwtape, an experienced demon, teaches his nephew how to tempt a human into following the path of Satan instead of following Jesus.

Greetings, fellow demon,

You mentioned being frustrated about your human's new friends. You said you were hoping to discourage him by keeping him isolated. I assure you: a person can be lonely even with many friends.

An excellent way to make him feel lonely is to convince him that his friends are all better than he is. Are any of his friends talented at something, such as music, a sport, or any of the other little skills humans find so important? Make him feel as though, since he is not as good at these things as his friends are, there is something wrong with him.

Of course, we know that Jesus made your human with unique gifts and abilities to serve God's kingdom, but humans lose sight of this so easily! They fall into Satan's trap of comparing themselves to others. When they find they aren't as good at something as they want to be, they become discouraged.

Whatever you do, keep your human from remembering that he should compare himself only to Jesus. If he does this, he'll be reminded of everything Jesus has done for him. This will cause him to feel grateful and comforted—the exact opposite of what we want for him.

Instead, keep your human worrying about how much worse he is than his friends. Make sure he can't think about anything else. Then you will succeed at causing great discouragement.

Signed, A superior demon 🗡️

Hannah Zeller

🗡️ Do you compare yourself to others? Why? _____

🗡️ What unique gifts and abilities has God given you? How can you use those for Him? _____

🗡️ How can you rest in all Jesus has done for you (Ephesians 2:8-10)? _____

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. Galatians 1:10 (NIV)

Give Thanks in Everything

READ: COLOSSIANS 3:1-4; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

No one understands! I'm a failure—useless. People would be better off without me. I didn't want to feel like this, but the thoughts came anyway. *Would anyone notice if I was gone?*

Have you ever felt like this—hopeless and discouraged? If you're a child of God, Satan is going to want to stop you. What better way to stop you from serving God than to make you feel useless and like a failure? But what does God say in His Word?

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul writes something shocking: “Give thanks in everything.” Paul, the man who had faced more discouragement than most—the man who had been beaten multiple times, imprisoned, stoned, shipwrecked, mocked, and who was struggling with a thorn-in-the-flesh health problem—tells us to give thanks! Not only that. He goes on to say it's God's will for us to be thankful.

Didn't Paul feel discouraged? Absolutely! He admits he wasn't naturally thankful or content; it was something he had to *learn* (Philippians 4:11). When Paul told us to give thanks, he knew it would be hard. He knew heartache, pain, discouragement, and depression. But he also knew God.

God doesn't want us to be hopeless. When we give thanks, it turns our focus onto Him and the hope He has given us through His death and resurrection. If we dwell on our difficulties, we will be discouraged, but when we turn to God, thanking Him in every situation, He gives us His joy.

Is it easy to give thanks during the hard things? The times your friends betray you, the times your mom is in the hospital, and the times you don't fit in? No. But, while far from easy, this command from God points us to the only true healing for discouragement: setting our minds on Christ, the true source of joy. 📖

Priscilla J. Krahn

📖 What are some good things God has brought from difficult things in your life? _____

📖 How does the gospel and the coming return of Christ affect our understanding of giving thanks in every situation? _____

*Give thanks in everything; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5:18 (CSB)*

When God Says Yes

READ: ACTS 12:1-17

Weeping believers gathered at Mark's mother's house. Only a few days ago, their beloved pastor had been martyred. And, now, another of their pastors, Peter, had been arrested too.

As Nicolas stood up, a hush fell over the group. "Brothers and sisters, shouldn't we be praying for deliverance and boldness for Peter?"

"But we prayed for James, and he was killed," a discouraged voice protested. "Why should we expect anything different this time?"

Kindly but resolutely Nicolas spoke again. "Don't you remember how the Lord told us to never give up praying, even if we grow discouraged by the answers or how long it takes to get them? Just because God allowed Herod to kill James doesn't mean He won't save Peter. Let's pray and see what He'll do."

With renewed hope, the believers began praying, wondering how God would intervene in such an impossible situation. There wasn't a break in the praying. But, despite the innumerable prayers and tears offered during those long days, nothing had changed on the night before the scheduled execution. Deep into the night, the believers were still desperately asking God to rescue their pastor.

Nobody paid attention when Rhoda got up to let another believer in to join their vigil. Then, suddenly, she ran into the room, laughing and crying. They could hardly understand her excited news: "Peter is at the door!"

Surely not. She must be imagining things.

But when the hubbub died down, the knocking continued. Finally, someone opened the door. There stood Peter—free, without having denied the Lord! It was a miracle!

The believers praised God. They knew that no matter what had happened, they could have hope in Jesus and His promises. This time, though, they rejoiced that God had answered their prayers with a resounding yes! 

Christina Joy Hommes

-  When God says no to one of your prayers, how do you respond? _____
-  No matter how He answers our prayers, Jesus is always listening and is faithful to fulfill His promises. How does this truth help carry you through the no's in your life? _____
-  When has God said yes to one of your prayers? _____

*So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.
Acts 12:5 (NIV)*

Friends of God

READ: JOHN 15:15-17

Relationships of any kind—family or friends—
are important to God. From

the beginning, God made us to live in community. Shortly after He created Adam, the first human, God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him” (Genesis 2:18). So He made Eve, Adam’s wife and the first human friend in history.

Besides Adam and Eve, there are lots of amazing friendships in the Bible. David and Jonathan, King Saul’s son, were best friends and took care of each other when they faced tough times. Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were very loyal to each other, even when they both lost their husbands and faced poverty.

Jesus had friends too—He had twelve followers called disciples who were especially close to Him. And do you know what’s really amazing? If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you are a friend of God (John 15:15; James 2:23). That’s because Jesus is God’s Son, and He made a way for you to be close to Him by taking the penalty for your sins (John 14:6).

If you know Jesus, not only are you a friend of God, but you also have a whole family of friends—other Christians! All those who trust in Jesus are adopted by God and are brothers and sisters in Christ. They make up God’s family. Throughout the Bible, God encourages His people to love and care for one another and to tell others how they can be friends of God too.

Simply put, community matters to Jesus, and it should matter to us too. 🗝

A. W. Smith

🗝 What does it mean to be a friend of God? (Learn more about this on page 104.) _____

🗝 What are some ways Christians around you act as a family? How can you act like a brother or sister toward them? _____

I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. John 15:15 (NLT)



Hanging Out with Sinners

READ: MATTHEW 9:10-13

Have you ever noticed how Jesus often spent time with people who were doing some pretty bad stuff? You may have wondered, *If that's how Jesus acted, what should I do—especially if I'm supposed to avoid sin?* Sometimes Christians even ask, “Can I be friends with non-Christians?” The answer is, “Of course!”

In fact, one of the ways people come to know Jesus is through friendship. God will help you show His love and truth to all your friends, whether they're Christians or not. As you interact with your friends, remember these things:

- If you have a friend who isn't a Christian, don't expect them to act like one.
- Don't encourage friends to sin or participate with them in doing things that are wrong.
- Learn what your friends believe so you can understand them better.
- Talk to your friends about what Jesus has done in your life. Be bold and kind!
- If a friend shares a struggle with you, offer to pray with them. They may take you up on it; don't force them though. Either way, pray for them on your own. Then, check back later to see how they're doing and if there's any other way you can help.

Ultimately, our friendships with others always point back to the most important friendship of all—our friendship with God. With our Christian friends, we can encourage each other in our walks with the Lord. With our friends who don't know Jesus, we can invite them to become friends of God by showing them who He is by being a good friend to them.

Because Jesus first loved us, we can show His love to others through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:19). Ask God who you can share Jesus' amazing love with today. Trust Him to guide both your words and your actions as you do. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 Why is it hard to strike a balance between showing kindness and showing truth? _____

📖 How can you show Jesus' love *and* truth? Who do you know who doesn't know Him? _____

While he was reclining at the table in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came to eat with Jesus and his disciples. Matthew 9:10 (CSB)

Anxiety

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17; 1 PETER 5:6-11

Yeah, but what if...? That phrase is so common in my speech and thoughts that when I was growing up, my mom would say, “No more yeah-buts!” The worst-case scenario was where I often lived my life (and I still visit quite frequently).

Anxiety is a real thing. It’s an issue that requires retraining your thought patterns and often requires counseling and sometimes medication and other treatment. These things are important to overcoming this awful part of the broken world we live in.

But the central piece of any anxiety treatment and recovery is finding identity in Jesus and His promises. Jesus is our Creator and Healer, the One who restores and promises to one day resurrect His people so that they are completely free from brokenness. For me, it helped to realize that my worth wasn’t in perfectionism and never failing. My worth comes from who I am in Christ—I’ve been declared “not-guilty” of the sins I’ve committed because of what Jesus did, and I’m an adopted daughter of God, loved and called to amazing purposes in His kingdom.

My purpose, then, is not to hyper-analyze, but to proclaim the truth. God already knows everything and He’s in control, so I don’t need to obsess over terrible what-if scenarios. Instead, I need to focus on who He is, what He has promised, and what He has called me to do—which He will enable me to do through the power of His Holy Spirit who dwells within me because I am a new creation in Christ. **✱***Kandi Zeller*

- ✱** Do you struggle with anxiety? Who can you talk with about your struggle? _____
- ✱** When you experience anxiety, what is a verse or short prayer you can say to help you remember that God is with you? _____
- ✱** What things make you the most anxious? How does knowing that God is good and in control affect your perspective on these things? _____

So we may boldly say: “The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” Hebrews 13:6 (NKJV)

Volleyball

READ: LUKE 5:1-11; COLOSSIANS 3:17

I like to play volleyball. Being on the court fills me with joy. It's fun to be on a team, to work together and win the match. When things mesh, there's a regular rhythm to volleyball that feels so good.

Bump. Set. Hit.

I love to play volleyball. I try to play several times a week. My team is my squad. I'm an outside hitter, and I love to spike the ball. When I do, I feel strong. There's a driving rhythm to how I play that makes me feel powerful.

Bump. Set. Spike.

I live to play volleyball. I wish I could play every day, even twice: before school and after. Weekends too. My team is my family, even better than the one I live with. Each day I improve. I can block better, jump higher, and spike harder. And when I do, I often get a kill. I lead my team in kills. I'm their star. They rally around me. When I'm on the court, I'm alive.

Bump. Set. Kill.

I can't play volleyball anymore. I messed up my shoulder. I try to watch my team play, but it's hard to sit in the stands when I long to be on the court. I just want to cry. It hurts so bad. My former teammates mostly ignore me. Yeah, they still know who I am, but they don't talk to me much anymore. No more fist bumps when I walk down the hall. I'm no longer a star. My bum shoulder took volleyball from me. I built my life on playing, and now it's gone. What's left? What can I do? What's my reason for living?

Bump. Set. Jesus. ❗ P. D. Haan

❗ Read Colossians 3:1-4, 17 and 1 John 5:20. Why is Jesus worth more than anything else? Why is it important to place our identity in Him? _____

❗ Does focusing on Jesus mean we can't enjoy other things? How can we follow Jesus using the gifts, talents, and passions He has given us? _____



And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus. Luke 5:11 (NLT)

Speak Up

READ: PSALM 10:12-18; EXODUS 2:23-25; MICAH 6:8

Editor's Note: Today's devotional reading discusses sexual abuse.

Matt* sang with a traveling choir from the Christian college I was attending. The group would perform at a church and then pairs of the students would stay overnight at the homes of families in the congregation. One night, Matt was sexually accosted by his traveling partner. While he changed traveling partners soon after, Matt never told anyone what happened.

Lacy's brother was raping her every night. When she went to her dad for help, he said, "Get used to it, Lacy. Women were made for men's use."

John was on his way home from school when a group of bullies raped him. They also threatened him not to tell anyone or it would be worse for him the next time.

There are more people, more events, but you get the point. Sexual abuse is a type of slavery. It violates the hearts, minds, and bodies of people who are made in the image of God.

If you are being or have been abused, speak up. Ask God to show you who you can trust as you seek freedom. (See the resources below.) You are not at fault. God weeps for you.

If your family won't listen, go to a person at church or a teacher you trust. If the offender is from church, talk to your parents or a school counselor. If you are in danger, go to the police. If you know of someone who is being abused, speak up.

This is not a secret worth keeping. Speak up. God hears the prayers of our hearts. He will provide a way. **✚** *Bonnie Haveman*

✚ Is there anyone you know personally who is or may be suffering abuse? What can you do to help?

✚ God is just, so no wrongdoing will go unpunished (Psalm 103:6; Revelation 20:11-15 and 21:1-8). Why is this so important? _____

If you are in danger, call 911 (or the emergency number for your area).

If you need someone to talk to about your current situation or about past sexual abuse, you can call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a licensed counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service.

You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror. Psalm 10:17-18 (NIV)

**Names have been changed.*

Sticks (Part 1)

READ: 1 PETER 2:21-24; 1 JOHN 2:1-2; 4:17-18

My knee-jerk response was to cower. To live in shame. I was a sinner—someone who had broken God’s good commands. I knew God was good, and I knew Jesus had saved me. I even knew God loved me. And yet I was beyond a healthy fear or reverence of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10).

My mom would say over and over, “Sweetheart, God doesn’t have a big stick.” I always took issue with that statement. *God is the righteous Judge of our sin. He does too have a big stick! And He has every right to use it.* Therefore, I responded by cowering in fear toward Him.

But here’s the amazing thing about our good God. Yes, in His justice, He has the ability and right to punish all of us sinful humans in an instant. But in His love, He took the big stick of His just wrath and turned it on Himself.

Jesus died a brutal death on the cross—a criminal’s death and punishment meant for us. He took on our shame and the actual beating we deserved. Therefore, if we know Him as our Savior, we don’t have to beat ourselves literally or metaphorically.

My sins were nailed to the cross. And Jesus’ goodness or righteousness has become who I am. I’m no longer a sinner in God’s eyes. I was once rightly under the stick of God’s wrath, but I’m now redeemed and made new by the very stick—the cross—that was meant to condemn me. That is God’s amazing love. God took His own good wrath on Himself, freeing us through faith in Christ. 🕯️ *Kandi Zeller*

- 🕯️ What is the difference between fearing God and fearing punishment? How does knowing Jesus help us approach God with both reverence for His holiness and confidence in our relationship with Him (Hebrews 4:14-16)? _____
- 🕯️ What questions do you have about the fear of the Lord? _____
- 🕯️ If you know Jesus, how does the fact that He took your sins and gave you His righteousness affect your life? _____

For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NLT)



Stones (Part 2)

READ: LUKE 19:1-10; JOHN 8:1-11



If God has shown mercy to us, how should we respond to others? Too often, as Christians, we respond by throwing stones at other sinners—as if we ourselves are not sinners saved by Jesus’ grace through faith. As if Jesus did not spare *us* from a deserved pelting of stones for our sins.

In Luke 19, Jesus eats a meal with Zacchaeus, a tax collector. In Jesus’ day, tax collectors tended to be thieves, so people hated them. Because of this encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus was confronted by God’s love for him and his need to turn from his sins. After coming to know Jesus, Zacchaeus’ whole life changed, including his approach to how he worked (no more theft, and he repayed the people he had cheated).

This was not an unusual story either. People were changing like this all the time when they met Jesus. With such known positive results, others should’ve been happy to see Jesus reaching out to someone like Zacchaeus. Instead, people responded to Jesus’ kindness toward Zacchaeus by complaining that “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner” (Luke 19:7).

Did you catch the irony in that statement? All the people grumbling were sinners too! Isn’t it the same with us? As Christians, we often get so hung up on the sin of non-Christians that we don’t even try to love them. We forget Jesus had to save *us* from our own sin, and we try to get people who don’t know Jesus to act like they do. Just like a similar incident in John 8:1-11, we start to throw stones at people—we condemn them—even before Jesus condemns them.

God is merciful, and He is patient in His just judgment (2 Peter 3:8-13; Revelation 21:1-8). Let’s remember that truth in our interactions with not-yet Christians. Let’s put our stones down and instead point to the cross, where *we* found mercy because the punishment for our own sins was put on Jesus. 🕯

Kandi Zeller

🕯 How can you show both love and truth to a friend who is not a Christian? _____

🕯 Why is it important to remember that all people have sinned (Romans 3:23)? _____

*“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”
John 8:11 (NIV)*

The Pain before the Joy

READ: PSALM 46

All I want is to rest,
To sleep and never awake,
For my body is weary
And my heart about to break.

*I cried out to You, Lord,
For my pain to be relieved.
You did not grant my request,
But Your peace I have received.*

*I feel Your presence;
I feel You here with me.
Though darkness surrounds me,
You're the only One I see.*

*I know You are greater
Than all of my fears.
I know that Your blessings
Outnumber my tears.*

*Why should I resent You
For the things I face today?
You have saved my soul;
Should I scorn You for bruises along the way?*

*Though all evil tries to shake me
And my suffering is long,
I will stand firm in You, Lord.
On Your promise I will stand strong. 🕯*
Alyssa Roat

- 🕯 Have you ever felt like you couldn't go on? Who did you turn to? _____

- 🕯 When God doesn't give you what you want, are you still able to rest in His peace? _____

- 🕯 What is the hope we always have as God's people (Romans 8; Titus 2:13)? How can you remind yourself of God's love and future for you when things get tough? _____

Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:39 (NIV)

A Magical Formula?

READ: PSALM 119:9-16; 1 TIMOTHY 4:13; HEBREWS 4:12

Making a habit out of reading the Bible is hard, and it can be intimidating to know how to even start. It can be boring at times, and at other times, you may be so caught up in your reading that time almost disappears.

Scripture is all about Jesus, so being in God's Word regularly—both at church and in your daily life—deepens your relationship with Him. Knowing Jesus affects every area of your life, and you will grow in wisdom as you seek Him through His Word. Reading about the hope found in Jesus can give you an anchor in hard times and can provide peace during stressful and anxious ones.

Is there a magical formula for making a habit of reading the Bible? No. Remember, we're all created differently. Jack loves to read the Bible cover to cover. I prefer a different way. I choose to read a book of the Bible, or a passage, over and over. Then, I break it down into small pieces to digest. Lastly, I put it back together and read it as a whole. Jack and Charity like music playing in the background. Joshua walks around with his Bible open, reading as he walks. Find what works best for you!

What's important is that you are seeking Jesus through His Word. Find ways to integrate it into your everyday life and decisions. **✦** *Bonnie Haveman*

✦ Which way do you prefer to study your Bible? What part of the day works best for you? _____

✦ Why is it important that Jesus is the point of the Bible (Luke 24:44-48; Acts 10:43)? _____

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path. Psalm 119:105 (NIV)



Find God in Lonely Times

READ: PSALM 16:7-11; MATTHEW 28:20

Allie sat in her room all alone. She tried to ignore the voices from the party downstairs.

No one had sent Allie to her room, but the room called to her. There was something inside of her tonight that made her too worn out to deal with everyone.

Her dad opened her bedroom door. "Aren't you going to come downstairs? Your grandpa's asking about you."

"I'm tired," Allie said. "I think I'll just stay up here." Allie loved spending time with her grandfather. But she had so little energy tonight.

Her dad hesitated before giving a nod. "Okay. I'll let him know."

When she was alone again, Allie's eyes filled with tears. *Why can't I be like everyone else? Why can't I enjoy the party? What's wrong with me?*

A quiet knock came at her bedroom door. "Can I come in, Allie?" Her grandfather's soft voice came from the hallway.

Allie found herself engulfed in her grandfather's arms as soon as she opened the door.

"Why don't you tell me what's going on?" her grandfather asked.

"I don't know what's going on. I just feel like being alone."

"Sometimes we push people away when we really need them around."

"I know." Allie sighed. "I just can't imagine being a part of the party right now."

"I understand," her grandfather said. "I need time to be alone sometimes too." He looked her in the eyes. "You're feeling lonely?"

Allie nodded.

"Even when you're up here all alone, you know that God's with you, right?" Her grandfather spoke in a low voice. "Even if you don't feel up for being with people, Jesus is right here with you."

Allie nodded again. Slowly this time. *God is with me. Please, God, be with me.* 
Emily Acker

 Do you ever have times when you just want to push the world away and be alone? _____

 Do you feel God with you in those times? Why is it important to talk with Him when we feel lonely?

For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you. Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)

An Interview with Peter

READ: LUKE 22:52-62; JOHN 21:15-19

The man sitting across the table from me makes me uneasy. His failures bear resemblance to mine. Yet, even with his failures, he has been with Jesus. Jesus loved this man.

I eye him suspiciously, wondering if he's lying about knowing Jesus and being chosen by Him.

"How can I know you're telling the truth?" I blurt out before I can stop myself. I feel my face flush but continue speaking anyway. "Why would Jesus want you after the way you failed and betrayed Him?"

I wince at my judgmental tone, but Peter smiles, neither surprised nor put off by my blunt questions. "I don't know," he says. "Jesus certainly shouldn't have chosen me."

I'm struck by the calmness with which this man states that God shouldn't have chosen him. Where is Peter's confidence in his abilities? Where is his refutation of my claim that Jesus shouldn't have chosen him?

"I know Jesus didn't choose me because of who I am," Peter continues. "He chose me because of who He is, despite my failures."

This man must be crazy. No one, especially the God of the universe, would choose someone who failed them, right? I look around, eager for an excuse to leave this conversation. But as he continues talking, I become wrapped up in Peter's words as he recounts his time with Jesus and speaks of His great mercy.

"He called me by name," Peter tells me with tears in his eyes. "He called me by name and just asked me if I loved Him. I said I loved Him, and, in the midst of my failures, He chose me."

My skepticism falters. Though it seems crazy, I can't help but believe it might be true. I can't keep my lips from pulling upward into a smile that mirrors Peter's. I thank him for his time and leave.

Could it be true? I wonder. Could I be chosen to follow Jesus? I begin to pray, "I love You, Jesus. I want to follow You."  Julia Frontz

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. John 15:16 (NIV)

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

🔑 What does it mean to know Jesus? (Learn more on page 104.) _____

🔑 Read Ephesians 2:8-10. Does God value us for our successes? _____

🔑 What would it look like for you to live your life in light of the reality that God has chosen you in Christ?



Your Love

READ: 1 JOHN 4:9-11

Your love is bigger than I can imagine.
 Like the oceans that rise and the tides that roar,
 It pulls at me.

Jump in. Fall in.

Your love is more important than I could understand.
 Like the air I breathe that keeps me alive,
 Without it, I would cease to exist.

Breathe in. Live.

Your love brings greater joy than I can grasp.
 Like the beat to my melody and the splendor of a worldwide concert,
 It moves my soul.

Laugh. Enjoy.

Your love heals my broken heart.
 Like stitches to a gash and medicine for disease,
 It sets me free.

Be healed. Be whole.

It overflows from my soul onto those around me.
 Like a fountain bubbling and a geyser bursting forth to drench those near,
 It covers the world.

Reach out. Love. **✎**

Alyssa Roat

✎ How has God shown His love for us (John 3:16-17; Romans 5:8)? Have you put your trust in that love?

✎ How can you express God's love to others? _____

How priceless your faithful love is, God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. Psalm 36:7 (CSB)

Are You Salty?

READ: MATTHEW 5:13-16

Do you like potato chips? They can be so addicting! Sometimes, you start eating them, and before you know it, the whole bag is gone. There are so many flavors to choose from: dill pickle, sour cream and onion, chili cheese, and many more.

The one thing most potato chips have in common is salt. Salt gives them flavor. Have you ever tried chips with reduced salt? Did you notice they had a little less flavor than normal?

The Bible calls Christians “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). In other words, we are salty. While salty can mean “bitter” or “angry,” today we’re going to use a different definition. To be salty in a biblical sense means to be thoroughly seasoned with God’s love and truth. We are called to reflect God’s love in the world by loving Him and loving others.

The Bible says in John 13:35 that people will know we are Christians by how we love one another. That’s how we can be the salt of the earth. Matthew 5:13 goes on to say that salt that has lost its saltiness “is no longer good for anything.” When we, as Christians, don’t show God’s love and truth to others, we are not doing our job. But, when we remember God loves us so much He sent Jesus to die for us, we naturally reflect His love, pointing others to Jesus.

We don’t have to show love in big gestures; it can be in small, everyday ways. For example, you could offer to share your bag of chips with someone nearby or talk to someone who is going through a hard time. Show people Jesus. Then, watch Him work.  *Melissa Yeagle*

 Do you believe God loves you? How does this help you love others? _____

 How can loving someone show them who Jesus is? _____

 What are some ways you can show love to others on a daily basis? _____

A new command I [Jesus] give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13:34 (NIV)

Our Father's House

READ: LUKE 2:41-50

Twelve-year-old Jesus has been at Passover all week with His family, where they have worshiped, prayed, eaten, and sang. At the end of the week, when everybody is ready to go home, Jesus stays behind and heads to the temple.

In the temple, He sits among some of the greatest teachers of the time, having a conversation with them. Now, at twelve years old, Jesus has been training His whole childhood with the rest of the boys in His Jewish community by memorizing the Torah (the first five books of the Bible).

Simply put, Jesus knows His Scripture. He knows what He's talking about. And He's listening to these teachers speak—listening so well that He asks some incredible questions. Then, when *they* ask questions, *His* answers leave them amazed.

Mary and Joseph, Jesus' parents, eventually find Him and ask, "What are you doing?" To which He replies: "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49).

Mary and Joseph don't understand. In fact, they are astonished, which tells us this is unusual behavior for Jesus.

His Father's house?

This is a pivotal moment in Jesus' life. Jesus is becoming more aware of His identity. That feels weird to say because we often only think of Jesus as the divine Son of God. He should know who He is, right? We forget He was also the human son of Mary, and this truth matters a lot.

In order for Jesus to redeem you and me, He had to live a fully human life. Which means He had to be fully a twelve-year-old boy. Jesus was and is fully God and fully man and, because of that fact, His death and resurrection make it possible for us to be saved from sin and death. This is the good news! 📌 *Adam Aldridge*

- 📌 Have you ever felt like you don't know who you are? Where do you look to form your identity? _____
- 📌 Jesus placed His identity in the truths of Scripture—God's Word. Why is it important that God is the source of our identity? _____
- 📌 Why is it important that Jesus is fully God and fully human? _____

So the Word [Jesus] became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. John 1:14 (NLT)

Obligation: Love

READ: MATTHEW 22:36-40; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Picture someone who has done a great favor for you. You thank them profusely and ask if there is anything you can do for them. They ask you to take care of their dog for the next month. You agree, so you feed, water, and bathe the dog, as well as take him for walks. When the month ends, you take the dog back to its owner, completing your obligation.

Now imagine you have your very own dog. Now, you feed, water, bathe, and take *your* four-legged friend for long walks. Your attitude is completely different toward this dog—your dog—than toward the dog you simply took care of for a month. The first time, you were fulfilling an obligation, but now you are invested financially and emotionally.

How do you see God? Is He an obligation or do you love Him? Do you do what He asks out of duty or simply because you love Him? In Colossians 3, the Apostle Paul gives a long, and even overwhelming, list of ways believers are supposed to be living.

But, guess what? You can't live the kind of life Paul is speaking of by fulfilling an obligation. The kind of life Paul is encouraging you to live requires a heart that is made new by Jesus Himself through a relationship with Him (Jeremiah 24:7; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

God doesn't desire a perfect, duty-driven servant. He desires a loving relationship with you. And that loving relationship spills over into your relationship with other believers, which is built on love, not obligation. 🔑

Bonnie Haveman

🔑 Love isn't a feeling. It's about relationship with God and others. We love because we are loved by Jesus, and, in Him, we no longer live in fear of losing love (Romans 8:38-39; 1 John 4:18-19). So, as Christians, our only obligation is to love God and love others through Him. Through Jesus, what are ways you can love God and others? _____

🔑 Can you engage in following God out of love—and then turn it into an obligation? Can you engage in following God out of obligation—and then turn it into an act of love? _____

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19 (NIV)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW JESUS? AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Christianity rests on four truths about Jesus, the One the Bible is all about:

- 1. Jesus is fully God.** He is the Creator of the universe, the definition of good, the giver of life, and King over all.
- 2. Jesus is fully human.** He came to earth to save us from our sins. Sin is doing anything against God's good commands. Sin twists and breaks everything it touches, and it's the root cause of brokenness and death. It broke our relationship with our holy (or perfect) God, who must punish sin or He wouldn't be good or just.
- 3. Jesus offers us the only possible rescue** from sin and death. We can be rescued by putting our faith in Jesus. He is perfect, yet He took the punishment for our sins: dying on a cross. Then, He beat death by coming back to life. Knowing Jesus through faith restores our broken relationship with God because Jesus forgives our sins and clothes us in His sinlessness, as if we never sinned. He also gives us the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to begin to reject sin and live as new people in Christ.
- 4. Jesus is coming back** to make everything new. God's people will be raised from the dead, living forever with God and each other, free from sin. But those who have refused His offer of rescue and relationship will face eternal judgment (or punishment) for their sin.

Romans 10:9-10 sums up these truths: *"If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved"* (NLT).

So, if you believe and that belief compels you to openly say that

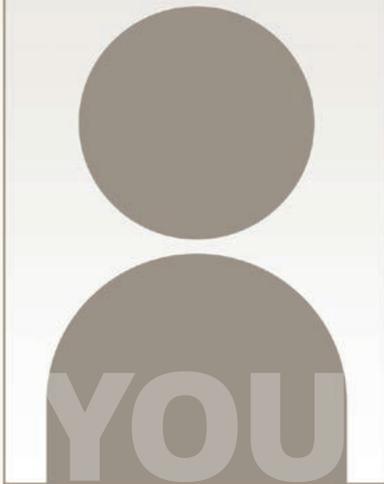
- you are a sinner,
- Jesus is Lord, the true God and King of the universe,
- you trust Him as the only way to save you from sin and death...

then you are a Christian.

Some people say a prayer when they become a Christian. There are no magic words, but you are welcome to use the following prayer as a guide: *"Dear God, I'm a sinner. I need to be saved from sin and death. You are the only way to save me because You are the living God and King over all. I trust You to save me, and I acknowledge that You are good and in control. In Jesus' Name, Amen."*

Still not sure? That's okay! If you need more details about what it means to know Jesus, dig into the Bible—God's Word to us—and talk to a trusted Christian in your life, such as a camp counselor or pastor. Some great books of the Bible to start with are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Romans. 📖

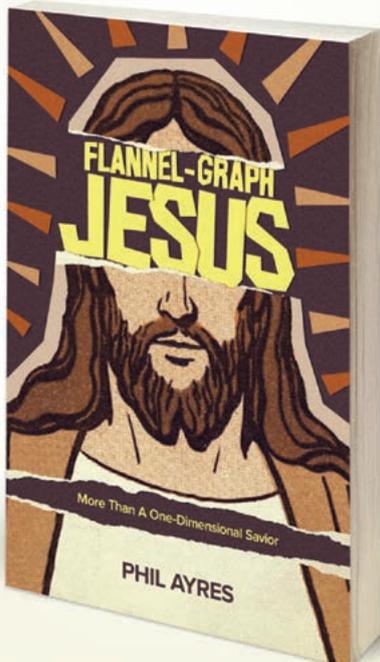
About the Author



Call for Teen Submissions

Want to write for *Unlocked*? If you're 13 or older, you can write and submit devotional pieces from all different genres. Find our writer's guidelines at:

unlocked.org



Did you know Jesus was funny and kinda rebellious?

Did you know He had brothers and at least one sister? If your image of Jesus was formed by storybooks, TV, and movies, it may be somewhat one-dimensional. Phil Ayres provides unique insights into a multi-dimensional Savior.

Old price: \$12.95, now **\$9.99**

shop.keysforkids.org
or 1-888-224-2324



Unlocked posters

Get *Unlocked* cover art as a 12"x18" poster, with the corresponding Scripture verse.

\$12.95 Special introductory price: \$9.95 with free shipping (U.S. only)

shop.keysforkids.org
or 1-888-224-2324



Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Grand Rapids, MI
Permit No. 772

UNLOCKED

Keys for Kids Ministries
Box 1001
Grand Rapids, MI 49501-1001
Electronic Service Requested