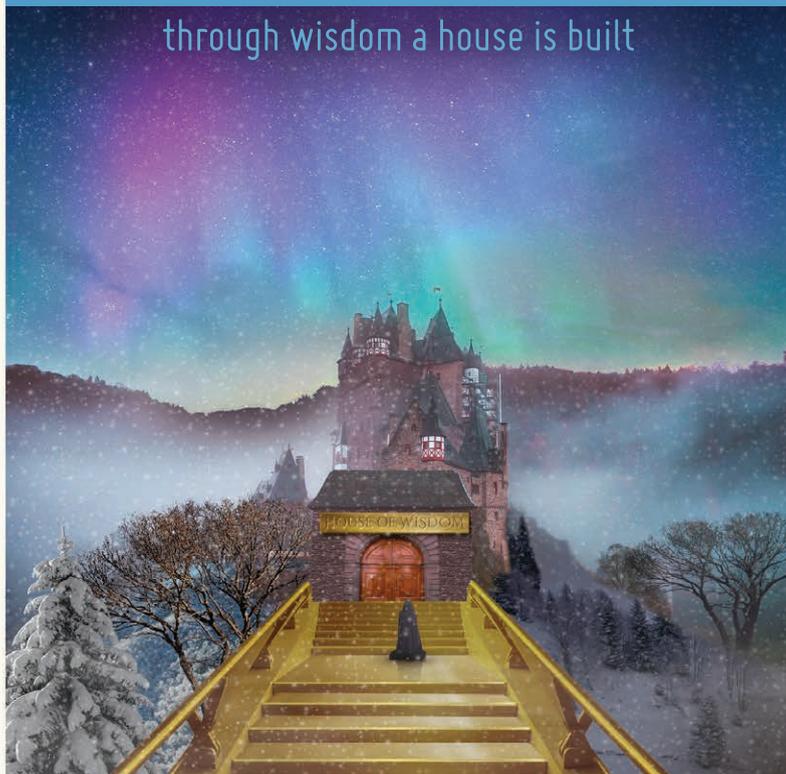


# UNLOCKED

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS

through wisdom a house is built



JANUARY • FEBRUARY • MARCH

# UNLOCKED™

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS

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Cover Story:  
*House of Wisdom*  
See page 84-85

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**INCLUDED**

READ: EPHESIANS 1:13-14; 2:11-22

**Y**ou're not part of the team. You can't come with us. You're not invited." Has anyone said something like this to you? It hurts when others make it clear you are not welcome. We all want a place to belong. Whether in a family, church community, with friends, or on a team, having a place to belong gives us a sense of value. It's a reminder that someone cares for us. And the truth is, God created us to live in community and have the purposeful work of caring for His creation together. But when humans went their own way against God, this good design was broken. Now we experience exclusion, which breeds feelings of isolation and low self-worth.

But even amidst all this brokenness, God didn't abandon us. Jesus came to be with us, and He made a way for us to be in close relationship with God and each other again. Through dying and raising back to life, Jesus has done what it takes to reverse the damage caused by our sin. One day, He will right every wrong. In the meantime, even though we may be rejected by friends, organizations, or family members in this dysfunctional world we inhabit, Jesus will never reject those who come to Him (John 6:37). He wants to include us in the family of God, and He doesn't discriminate based on our background, appearance, gender, class, age, or anything else. Jesus knows our hearts, and He wants to satisfy our deepest desires.

Even if everyone else disowns us, Jesus promises us the security of relationship with Him. When Jesus knew that His death was near, He told His disciples, "I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you" (John 14:18). And Jesus kept His promise. After He rose from the dead, He returned to His followers. Then He ascended to heaven so that He could send them His Holy Spirit. And Jesus offers us this amazing relationship with Him today. When we put our trust in Jesus, we become part of God's family, and no one can snatch us away from Him (John 10:28-29). **✦** *Cindy Lee*

- ✦** Can you think of a time you were left out, excluded from something? Jesus knows what it feels like to be rejected (Isaiah 53:2-6), and He grieves our hurts with us. \_\_\_\_\_
- ✦** If you realize you've purposely excluded someone else, Jesus invites you to turn away from wrongdoing and instead rely on His forgiveness, wisdom, and strength to treat others with kindness and dignity. Consider taking a moment to pray for the person/people you've wronged.

*Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close. Psalm 27:10 (NLT)*

## BACK TO KELITICAS

READ: LUKE 15:10-32

**K**iara slammed her mug of coffee on the blue diner counter, defeated. She had just spent the last of her sratos on what was most likely her last meal for a long time. She'd thought there was no way she'd run out of the intergalactic currency. She sighed, thinking about all she had done with the fortune of sratos her rich dad had given her when she demanded her share of the inheritance and left home. Wild parties, a new spaceship...the list went on until she'd spent the very last of what she had. She'd worked at the diner for a while, but when a recession hit, they fired her. Asking for help only earned her threats and sideways glances. And now... well, she didn't know what to do other than become homeless.

Kiara drained the coffee in her mug, then dragged herself out of the small diner and down the street. She thought about going back to her dad and asking for forgiveness, but the idea pricked her pride. She walked until her stomach growled, and she remembered the meals her dad provided for his workers every day. Shaking her head, Kiara crossed to the other side of the street. No, she really did need to go back to her dad. She headed toward the spaceport where her ship was docked—well, she called it a ship anyway. She'd traded in her new ship and now her mode of transportation was a retrofitted escape pod that felt like it was about to fall to pieces every time she took off. Kiara walked up the ramp to her “ship” and climbed into the leather pilot's seat. Maybe she'd ask to join his brigade of hired workers that took care of his large estate.

“Better that than becoming homeless,” she muttered to herself as she set her course for her homeworld of Kelticas.

When Kiara dropped out of hyperspace and landed near her dad's estate, her pulse quickened. She was nearly in tears as she walked a familiar path, thinking of all that she would say to him when she saw him. Nearing the mansion, Kiara felt overwhelmed by shame. Just then, she heard a joyful voice shouting her name. “Kiara! How I've missed you, my daughter!” Kiara's dad ran up and hugged her tightly, tears running down both of their faces.

“Come, we must celebrate!” He took her hand, leading her into the mansion. “You are home!”  *Carissa Vrugink*

*“Even so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner repenting.” Luke 15:10 (WEB)*

**🔑** This story is how one author reimagined a parable Jesus told in Luke 15:11-32. Jesus talked about the joy in heaven when a sinner repents—turns away from wrongdoing and comes home to God. We have all done wrong against God, and Jesus is the only way we can come home. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus offers forgiveness to anyone who puts their trust in Him. What sticks out to you in this story—either in the author’s retelling or in the original parable? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## STUDYING CREATION AND THE CREATOR

READ: PSALM 8; ROMANS 8:18-23; COLOSSIANS 1:15-17

**A**s Christians, how should we approach science? From forests to soil, seas to sky, planets to microorganisms, to you and me, God's creation is incredible! God calls us to be caretakers of His creation, and to best take care of something and appreciate it, we have to understand it.

But first, we have to acknowledge that our human interpretations and understandings of the world are imperfect and incomplete. Until Jesus returns, we will never fully understand how the natural world works, just like we will never fully understand the Bible. But that shouldn't stop us from studying and exploring what God has given us. When we come across something that doesn't make sense, it helps to remember that God's ways are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). If there seems to be conflict between our interpretations of science and our interpretations of the Bible, there's probably something we've missed—or haven't discovered yet. Sometimes, it might seem like science disproves what God says, but this is just because we don't know all there is to know. As we search for answers, we can rest on God and His Word. The Creator knows everything about His creation, and He is master of all (Psalm 24:1). We need to remember that the Bible is not a science textbook; it's God's story of redeeming the world through Jesus.

Science helps us understand God's creation, and that helps us learn more about God—His creation reflects His character. The complexity, detail, structure, beauty, and imagination in creation all point to the awesome One who crafted it. But creation also shows the brokenness caused by sin. God made all things good, but when people went against God, death and decay and violence entered the world. But God wanted to restore all of creation, including us. So Jesus, God the Son, came to live among us as a human. Out of His great love, He suffered and died for us. Yet death couldn't hold the all-powerful Creator. Jesus rose from the dead, and anyone who puts their trust in Jesus will also raise back to life when Jesus returns to make everything new!

Far more important than knowing exactly how the world works or how everything was created is knowing the One who created it all. God made everything with a purpose: to glorify Him. The God who is in complete control of the universe wants us to know His love deeply. As Christians, we can explore, appreciate, and care for God's creation through science, recognizing that God is the Creator and Restorer of everything. 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ Where have you seen God's goodness in creation? Where have you seen brokenness? \_\_\_\_\_

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Psalm 19:1 (NLT)*

## YOU ONLY NEED TO BE STILL

READ: EXODUS 14; MARK 4:35-41

**W**hen difficulties come, it's easy to give in to worry and fear. When problems arise, we can find ourselves shaken, beaten, and hurt. The Israelites experienced this when God was rescuing them from slavery. They were stuck between the Red Sea and the Pharaoh's army. But Moses told the Israelites, "The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:14). Then God sent an angel to block the Pharaoh's army, and God parted the sea, "and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left" (Exodus 14:22). On that day, God rescued His people. And they only needed to be still.

Sometimes when we're in trouble, God calls us to do the same. When all seems lost, don't get discouraged or give up. You need not fight because God will fight your battle for you. Just like the Israelites were helpless to save themselves from the Egyptian army, we were all helpless to save ourselves from sin, brokenness, and death. So God sent Jesus to rescue us.

When Jesus was crucified, He did not fight back. He let people beat Him, spit on Him, whip Him, and nail Him to a cross like a common criminal. It didn't look like He was winning His battle, but God, in the stillness of Jesus, fought the battle against sin and death. And God raised Him back to life on the third day.

Whatever battle you have, whatever is troubling you, whatever is pushing you down or causing you pain, remember that God is fighting for you. If you've put your trust in Jesus, you are held securely in His love and He will never give up on you. Though we will endure many pains and sorrows like Jesus did, He is always with us. Through it all, God provides peace. Sometimes, it's through stillness that He brings victory.

If you are a Christian, Jesus's Holy Spirit is in you, and He helps you to be still before God. The same Jesus who calmed the stormy sea is the God who gave us His peace (John 14:27). Nothing is impossible for Him. You can be still because He is the almighty God and nothing is too hard for Him to do. Most of all, you can live in stillness because God loves you and He will do whatever it takes to help, save, and protect you. You can trust Him, knowing that He can do great things in your life. 🕯

*Golda Dilema*

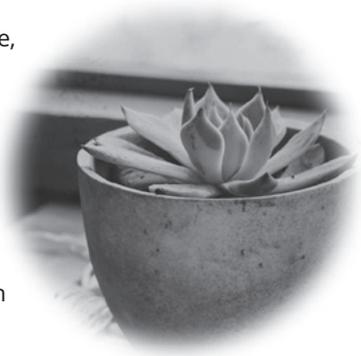
🕯 Do you feel like you're fighting your battles alone? What problems storm and trouble you? \_\_\_\_\_

*He says, "Be still, and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10a (NIV)*

## GROWING WITH GOD

READ: JOHN 15:1-17; ROMANS 5:3-5; GALATIANS 5:22-23

**M**any of us have taken care of plants at some time, whether a little succulent, a pot of herbs, a flower bed, or a field of vegetables. Some of us are more successful gardeners than others, but whether we're good at growing plants or not, there's a lot we can learn about our lives from gardens. In John 15:1-9, Jesus describes Himself as a vine and His followers as branches growing from that vine, with God as our gardener. Just like a branch needs to stay connected to its vine to live, it's only by staying connected to Jesus that we experience fullness of life and thrive in all seasons.



One essential part of gardening is pruning. When you prune plants, you intentionally cut off branches and leaves. It may look harmful for the plant, but in fact, it helps the plant grow better. A pruned plant is stronger, healthier, and more fruitful. Pruning shows a gardener cares for the plant, and so does God's pruning in our lives.

We all go through pruning seasons, hard times where we face challenges and experience loss. But we can find comfort and hope in knowing God our Gardener prunes with a purpose. As we abide in Jesus, God is working in us, transforming us to be the people He created us to be. As we remain in Jesus's love, we grow in faith and love and our lives produce good fruit. **✦ Abby Ciona**

✦ What hard things are you facing today? How might God be inviting you to rest in Jesus's love? \_\_\_\_\_

✦ While we can go through hard things that prune us, we must be careful not to equate pruning with trauma. A truly traumatic event—such as abuse—is like a tree taking an ax to the trunk. Can God use trauma in our lives? Absolutely, but it's a different category than “pruning.” It can be helpful to remember that, no matter what we experience, God is always with us and He grieves our hurts alongside us. Through Jesus, He gently and faithfully heals all our wounds as we come to Him (Isaiah 53:2-5). If you have questions about this, who is a trusted Christian adult in your life, such as a teacher, counselor, pastor, parent, or coach you could talk to?

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Colossians 2:6-7 (NIV)*

## NOBODY'S PERFECT

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-13; 1 PETER 2:24; 1 JOHN 2:1-2

**W**hen anyone becomes a Christian, it's easy to become despondent when suddenly things go wrong. The dreams you had of walking in Jesus's footsteps and showing others what He's like can quickly turn sour when you lose your temper or do something you later regret.

When this happens, don't give up or despair. It's easy to think, "I'm not good enough. I'm supposed to be a Christian, and I've really messed up. What will people think?" Or, "Does this mean I won't go to heaven? Have I blown it? Should I give up now?"

However, this is the wrong mindset. Yes, we are given a fresh start and a new heart when we put our trust in Jesus. But this does not for one minute mean we will become perfect in this life. Perfection is impossible, because ever since the first humans sinned by going their own way against God, we are all broken and flawed. Our sin separates us from God, and this is why we need Jesus. We don't have the capacity to be perfect on our own.

What we do have is an advocate who acts as the mediator between us and God (1 Timothy 2:5). When Jesus was born and lived among us as a human, He brought hope to the world. For generations, God's people had been looking forward to the Messiah—the promised rescuer. When Jesus died and rose back to life, He made a way for us to be in relationship with God. And when Jesus returns, all His forgiven followers will be totally restored from all brokenness. If we've put our trust in Jesus, His perfect love covers all our imperfections.

So when we mess up, God doesn't want us to berate ourselves and just feel terrible. Rather, His Word says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret" (2 Corinthians 7:10). When we fall short, God invites us to take a step back, acknowledge our weaknesses and wrongdoing, and admit that we need Him. Through His Holy Spirit, God helps Christians daily to repent and follow Him. Even though we will continue to mess up until Jesus returns, God still works through our lives to help others. We can be free to follow God out of love, knowing that our eternal life with Him is secure, not because of what we do, but because of what Jesus did. 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

🕯️ We are not perfect. Trying to be perfect causes pain. How might remembering that Jesus covers our imperfections help us come to Him when we fall short? \_\_\_\_\_

*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3:17 (NIV)*

## A NEW THING

READ: ISAIAH 43:5-44:5; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21

**B**ehold, I will do a new thing." Isaiah stood on a hill overlooking the once great city of Jerusalem. His shoulders were bent with age, his long beard a tangle of gray. It had been years since he first spoke the prophecy of Israel's downfall...and of the Messiah. The promised Rescuer had not yet come. Still, Isaiah clung to God's words like a lifeline: "*Behold, I will do a new thing.*"

Israel needed newness. They needed something beyond themselves, something greater. They had failed so many times, turning their backs on God, running in the opposite direction and straight into a life of slavery at the hands of their enemies. Yet even despite their unfaithful wanderings, God promised them a Savior.

Isaiah squinted over the horizon, beyond the peaks of Jerusalem, over the lush countryside, to the sun dipping out of sight. Dusk was falling. A brisk wind rustled the treetops. *A new thing.* The words sang in his memory. After hundreds of years of captivity, of endless sacrifices, and of countless prophecies, the hope of a Messiah assured him that one day they would be free from their greatest enemy. Sin. The evil that twisted everything would one day be gone forever. And this promise was not just to Israel, but to all the nations.

"Blessed are you, oh Adonai," Isaiah murmured, "that you remember your people and offer us a way of escape and redemption if only we will accept it." Isaiah let his gaze wander the horizon, remembering the toils of his life as a prophet. His journey was nearing its end, but there was the promise to wait for, and all of Israel would be waiting—breathless, anxious, and hopeful. Until his final breath, so would he. 🕯️  
*Anita Seavey*

🕯️ We are all like Israel; we fail, turn our backs on God, and run away from Him and straight into the trap of sin that brings only death. What sins are you struggling with today? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Because God loves us, He did a new thing: He sent the Messiah, Jesus, to rescue us from sin and death. How is Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy? (See page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

*"Behold, I will do a new thing. It springs out now. Don't you know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." Isaiah 43:19 (WEB)*



## PROMISE KEEPER

READ: HEBREWS 6:13-21; 13:5-6

**P**eople make promises but often fail to fulfill them. Sometimes people change their minds about the promises they've made, or lie about them, or even forget they made a promise at all. Other times, promises are broken because of human limitations or unforeseen circumstances. There are many reasons people cannot always be depended upon to keep their promises.



But when God makes a promise, He always fulfills it. Because He is not limited in any way, God cannot fail to do what He has promised. He does not lie or forget what He has said. So it doesn't matter how impossible it may seem for God's promise to be fulfilled; it will come to pass because God has said so.

One example of this is when God promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a child together (Genesis 17-18). Although Abraham and Sarah were very old and, naturally speaking, it was impossible for them to have a baby, that didn't stop God from keeping His promise. Sarah gave birth to Isaac at just the time God said she would (Genesis 21:1-3).

God gives us promises through His Word, and we see many of these fulfilled in Jesus. In the Old Testament, God promised to send a Messiah to save us. Jesus is that Messiah. Because God loves us, He came and willingly died for us, and then He rose from the dead three days later, just like He said He would (Matthew 28:6). We can rely on Jesus to do what He says He'll do. As Christians, we can know He will be with us through the Holy Spirit, and He will return one day to judge the world justly, raise us from the dead, and restore creation!

As we wait for Jesus to return, we can rely on God's promise in Hebrews 13:5, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you." And the Holy Spirit helps us believe what God says, hold on to His promises, and wait for their fulfillment. God is dependable. When the winds of unbelief and the waves of doubt come, God will still keep His powerful and precious promises to us. 🗝️ *Enid Adah Nyinomujuni*

🗝️ How are God's promises different from people's promises? \_\_\_\_\_

*God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through? Numbers 23:19 (NLT)*

## ENCOURAGEMENT IN A DYSFUNCTIONAL WORLD

READ: 1 THESSALONIANS 5:5-11

**T**here are many challenges people face every day. The world we live in is dysfunctional, torn apart by imperfection. Sin has twisted God's good creation, but Jesus came to heal the brokenness we inhabit. Because of Jesus, we have hope, and we get to share this hope with each other.

When one of my friends was facing some challenges and was desperately in need of cheering up, I decided to email her some encouragement—and a few funny animal pictures to make her laugh. What I didn't expect to receive a couple weeks later was a gift. After the initial awkwardness of, "Oh, you shouldn't have, but thank you so much," I excitedly tore open the wrapping paper to discover a sequel to a novel we'd both enjoyed reading. It was such a lovely surprise, and I was touched by her thoughtfulness—especially the kind thank-you message inside her card.

I was overjoyed that my actions had helped my friend. I was reminded that simple acts of kindness, no matter how small, can mean so much to us. Plus, writing an encouraging email also made me feel uplifted. When we have a desire to reach out, we shouldn't ignore it. Oftentimes the Holy Spirit puts these good desires inside us, and He also helps us do what God calls us to do. Let's continue to build each other up and encourage one another like Jesus taught us. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 Life is hard, but we can remind each other that we're not alone. Can you think of a time someone encouraged you in a meaningful way? What did they say or do? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Who is someone you could encourage today? Consider asking the Holy Spirit to help you think of a way to show kindness to them. \_\_\_\_\_

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing.  
1 Thessalonians 5:11 (CSB)*



## TWO BASINS, TWO TOWELS

READ: MATTHEW 27:22-26; JOHN 13:1-17

**F**illing a basin with water in the upper room, our Lord Jesus Christ washed the feet of His disciples. He then tenderly dried each foot with a towel He had hung around His waist. This included the two feet belonging to Judas. Christ knew Judas would betray Him in a few hours. Still, He washed Judas's feet, telling His disciples, "And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet" (John 13:14). Christ used the basin and towel to demonstrate His healing, cleansing love for us and to call all of us to demonstrate that love to one another.



The next day, after Christ's arrest and trial, another man used another basin and towel for a different purpose. In front of a screaming mob, Pontius Pilate used them to try to wash away his responsibility for Christ's death. To prevent a political uprising, Pilate ordered that Christ be beaten, and then he handed Him over for crucifixion. Pilate allowed people to execute Christ, who he had found not guilty (John 19:1-16).

Two basins. Two towels. Jesus used His to make His disciples clean and renewed, free from the stains of sin. Pontius Pilate used his basin and towel to try to do the same for himself. But it didn't work. Jesus alone has the power to wash us, to free us of all sin. Only His death and resurrection can make us clean and forgive our wrongdoing. And Jesus offers this forgiveness to each of us freely and lovingly. **I** *Kathy Irey*

**I** Jesus's love and forgiveness is more powerful than any sin. What needs to be restored and made new in your life today? Consider taking some time to bring this to Jesus in prayer. \_\_\_\_\_

**I** How can you remind those around you of Jesus's love and forgiveness? \_\_\_\_\_

*"I [Jesus] have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." John 13:15 (NLT)*

**(UN)COVERED**

READ: PSALM 32:1-11; HEBREWS 4:13; 1 JOHN 1:8-10

**S**ilent.

I cover up the darkness within. If I do not speak of what is hidden, I think that none shall know. But in my silence I inwardly groan and waste away. It is as if a heavy hand presses down upon me, sapping my strength like the blazing heat of summer.

Naked.

I am only deceiving myself. My guilt is already known and uncovered before the One who knows me better than I know myself. I rip away the covering and acknowledge the darkness within. All is exposed, uncovered, revealed. I know, am aware of, and renounce the evil.

Covered.

I no longer falsely cover my guilt. The One who carried, lifted up, and bore my sin away has me covered. I am forgiven, and He calls me...

Blessed.

This poem is inspired by Psalm 32. The author (King David) felt horrible when he tried to cover up his wrongdoing, but when he confessed his sins to God, God forgave him. Trying to cover our sins doesn't work. But Jesus doesn't merely cover our sins (as Psalm 32:1 prays), but even more, He forgives and removes them "as far as the east is from the west" (Psalm 103:12).

God took the punishment for our sins on Himself. Though Jesus never sinned, He allowed Himself to be uncovered. He was humbled, stripped naked, and lifted up on a cross in order to carry our sins. Jesus died, but He rose again—defeating sin and death forever. Now He asks us to uncover the ugliest places in our lives to Him through acknowledging and confessing our sins. When we humble ourselves, He will lift us up and remove the guilt and shame. Then we will know the blessings of forgiveness instead of the despair of guilt. 🕯 *Marie Cleveland*

🕯 Can you think of a time you experienced God's forgiveness? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for this.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Is there something in your life you've been trying to cover up? \_\_\_\_\_

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*How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! Psalm 32:1 (CSB)*

## HE LIGHTENS MY LOAD

READ: JOSHUA 1:1-9; PSALM 27:3; ISAIAH 41:10; JEREMIAH 17:7

I worry, a lot. I worry about mistakes I've made in the past, and I worry about the future. I worry that my actions and insensitivities may have hurt people I care about. I worry that I have not handled my responsibilities well enough. I worry that I say the wrong things, or that I haven't said enough. I worry about being a good friend, family member, and teammate.

I even worry about things that I have no control over. When we have safety drills in school, I worry about a shooter breaking in. Other times I think, *What if my dog runs off and gets hit by a car? What if one of my family members gets sick and dies?* What if, what if, what if...

What if I can change my thoughts? One thing I don't have to worry about is whether or not God loves me. Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, faced the worst possible worry of all when He went to the cross. He suffered and died, and He did that for me. Then Jesus rose from the dead, making a way for me to be forgiven and live with Him forever. God is more powerful than everything—even death. His Holy Spirit reminds me that I am one of His. I am loved and protected.

When the Israelites were about to enter the land God promised them, the LORD said to Joshua, "This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). When I begin to worry, I remind myself that God is with me and I am never alone. I can give my worries to Him and take solace in His ultimate protection. When I drop my worries at the feet of the One who loves me, I feel lighter, and I can spread the light of Jesus all around me. 🕯️ *Kelly Bakshi*

🕯️ What is worrying you today? God invites us to talk to Him about these things and ask for help. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ If you are feeling overwhelmed by worry, you're not alone. It's okay to ask people for help. If you need someone to talk to, you can set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a Christian counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service. In the United States, call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment. In Canada, book your appointment by calling 1-800-661-9800 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) and ask to speak with the care associate.

*You need not be afraid of sudden disaster or the destruction that comes upon the wicked, for the LORD is your security. He will keep your foot from being caught in a trap. Proverbs 3:25-26 (NLT)*

## WALKING THROUGH THE SCORN

READ: PSALM 23; GALATIANS 6:1-2; 1 JOHN 2:1-2

**A**shley stopped in front of the school doors and took a deep breath. Over winter break, her stomach had grown considerably larger, and it was impossible to hide it anymore. But if she didn't go in, she would be late for class. *Who cares?* She wished she could just leave, but where would she go? She pushed through the swarm of teenagers to her locker. As she hung up her coat, Ashley felt a shiver go down her neck. She glanced over her shoulder and saw a group of girls from church—staring at her. One of them whispered, another giggled. Ashley's face burned. She grabbed her binder, shoved her backpack into her locker as fast as she could, and started walking toward her first class on the far side of the building. Hugging her binder, Ashley kept her head down, but she could still feel the eyes on her belly. Then she heard someone cough, “Preggers,” and a group of guys snickered. *She would not cry. She would not cry.*

“Hey Ash, I've been looking for you.” Miles came up alongside her. Ashley breathed a sigh of relief and tried to smile, but that's hard to do when you're trying to keep tears from leaking out. “You sure you want to be seen with me?” she said.

Miles held her hand gently. “Hey, I'm not leaving you guys to fend for yourselves. You're an awesome mom, and I'm pretty set on being an awesome dad.” Then Ashley did smile. As they walked through the halls together, the glances still stung but not quite as bad.

“This morning,” Ashley said, “I was reading Psalm 23, and that's what this feels like.”

Miles tilted his head. “Which part?”

Ashley pulled a crumpled paper from her pocket. “I wrote it down: *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...*” She offered the paper to Miles, and he read the rest. “...*I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*”

Ashley nodded. “That verse is the reason I came to school at all today. But when my friends won't even look me in the eyes, it's hard to remember God is with me. So, I guess, thanks for being here. It helps me remember that God still cares about me.”

Miles rubbed the back of his neck. “I'm sorry. Sorry you have to go through all this. Sorry we didn't...that I didn't help us stop. I—I want to be here though. With you. I don't know what it looks like to follow Jesus now, but I want to.”

“Me too,” Ashley said. “Maybe we could talk to Pastor Carlos?”

Miles pulled out his phone. “Yeah, I'll text him right now.” Ashley stopped and Miles nearly bumped into her.

“Oof!” He steadied himself. “Sorry, are you okay?”

Ashley laughed. “I'm not that fragile.” She bumped his arm with a smile. “This is my class, and you should probably head to yours if you want to be on time.”

Miles put his phone in his pocket. "Sent! Okay, can I walk you to your second class after?"

"But won't you be late to your class then?"

Miles shrugged. "Maybe, but this is more important." He squeezed her hand and whispered, "I'll be praying for you." She whispered back, "You too." ❧ *Hannah Howe*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me... Psalm 23:4 (WEB)*

❧ While the characters in this fictional story didn't follow God's good plan for sex and marriage, God still loves them and their baby, and He is still working in their lives. People often make fun of us when we mess up, but God never makes fun of us. Instead, He wants to help us when we fail. How can you come alongside someone who is struggling and remind them God loves them? \_\_\_\_\_

❧ God created sex for marriage—embodying the total, permanent union of one man and one woman. And this union points to the union of Jesus Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-33). How might the gospel affect the way you view sex and marriage? \_\_\_\_\_

❧ If you've sinned sexually in any way (including lust), and you want to confess this to God and follow His good plan for sex and marriage, there is so much hope. Once you've put your trust in Jesus, you've been washed clean of every sin, and the Holy Spirit empowers you to turn away from sin. If you want to pursue gospel-centered sexuality, who are trusted Christians who could support and guide you, such as pastors, counselors, parents, or other mentors? \_\_\_\_\_

❧ No matter what the circumstances are, a baby is always someone to celebrate, a wonderful new person who God has carefully created in His image (Psalm 127:3). God's timing is perfect, and He will provide for all our needs when we seek Him (Matthew 6:25-34). If you think you might be pregnant (or if you know someone who might be), you can talk to someone confidentially at OptionLine anytime, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (chat: [optionline.org](http://optionline.org), or call/text: 1-800-712-4357). They will listen with compassion, help you think through your options, and they can connect you with resources near you, such as pregnancy testing, medical assistance, and parenting support.



## A PLAN FOR EACH OF US

READ: JEREMIAH 1:4-12; GALATIANS 1:11-16; EPHESIANS 1:4-14; 1 JOHN 4:13-19

**M**y favorite verse in the Bible is Jeremiah 1:5. This is what God said to Jeremiah when He called him to be a prophet: “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.” Just like with Jeremiah, God knew *me* before I was born, and He had a plan for my life while I was still in the womb. Life becomes meaningful when I know that I am not just an accident on planet earth.

In the book of Jeremiah, we see God calling Jeremiah into ministry as a prophet to the people of Judah. This call was according to the plan God had made for his life before he was born. Jeremiah became God’s spokesman, calling the people of Judah to repent from worshiping idols and turn back to God. He warned them of the coming disasters and the Babylonian exile that would come as God’s judgment on them for their sin if they did not repent. However, Jeremiah not only pronounced judgment, but he also gave Judah a promise from God, a promise of restoration after seventy years of exile.

God’s interaction with Jeremiah and His people foreshadows the restoration God is going to bring to the whole world. Since humans first sinned against God, humankind was doomed to face God’s judgment. But through Jesus, God has given us the hope of salvation. Jesus came to reveal God’s loving plan for the world, to save us from sin and death, and to heal all brokenness (1 John 4:14). Jesus willingly died for our sin, and He rose back to life! Now anyone who turns to God and puts their trust in Jesus is free from sin and judgment and is restored to relationship with God! As we receive God’s plan for salvation, God continues to unfold His plan for us.

According to Ephesians 1:4-5, God knew us before the foundation of the world, and He chose us in Christ. Adopting us into His family gave Him great pleasure! In Galatians 1:15-16, Paul writes, “But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace.” God was pleased to reveal Jesus to Paul, and God called Paul to share this good news. As Christians, we can know God’s plan for us is to be saved through Jesus. Let us then walk in God’s plans and purposes for our lives as His chosen ones. 📖 *Enid Adah Nyinomujuni*

📖 According to Ephesians 1:4-14, what is God’s plan and purpose for us? \_\_\_\_\_

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📖 According to Ephesians 2:10, how is it possible for us to “do the good things he planned”? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*“I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah 1:5 (NLT)*

## HOMESICK

READ: PSALM 139:7-10; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-20

I couldn't wait to go to camp—two whole weeks without parents or teachers telling me what to do. When I arrived, it did not disappoint. I met my bunkmates and our counselor, and we headed down to the lake. Tanner, who's from North Carolina, showed me how to do a flip off the dock. Later that night, marshmallow and chocolate melted in my mouth as we made s'mores around a fire. I taught Angus, one of my bunkmates all the way from Australia, how to roast a marshmallow to a perfect golden brown.

Then, a few nights in, it hit me. I missed my dog. I missed my mom's blueberry pancakes. I missed my dad's corny jokes. I missed playing video games with my little brother. I was lying in my bunk during lights out, and in the darkness I felt painfully alone. I wanted to go home. My heart hurt, and I felt empty. Had I made a mistake coming to camp? I felt overwhelmed and wondered if I'd taken on a task I was not prepared for. I whispered a prayer to God.

At breakfast the next morning, I told Tanner that I missed my dog. Suddenly, everyone at the table started talking about their pets. We shared their names, funny stories, and inevitably learned about each other's families too. And I didn't feel alone anymore.

My bunkmates have since become some of my best friends. God heard my prayer that night, and He gave me comfort through friends. No matter where I go, I know God will be with me. 📖 *Kelly Bakshi*

📖 Throughout our lives we continue to face difficult things, like family issues, moving, starting a new school or job, etc. When we feel overwhelmed and alone, it can help to remember how God has been there for us in the past. Can you remember a time God helped you? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 As Christians, we can know Jesus is always with us. He cares about all our needs, including relational needs, and He invites us to ask Him for help. How do you need God's help today? \_\_\_\_\_

*...if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. Psalm 139:8 (NIV)*



## THE PARADOXICAL GOSPEL

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 6:4-10; 12:9-10

**A** paradox is a phrase that seems to be self-contradictory, backward, and impossible—like “less is more” or “this sentence is false.” Paradoxes might seem confusing, but they make you think and often reveal deep, important truths.

The gospel, which is the good news of Jesus, is a story full of opposites, and the book of 2 Corinthians beautifully illustrates many of the paradoxes of following Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God, who is both fully God and fully human. He had all power in heaven, but in order to save us from our sin, He came to earth as a human, limited and weak. He is King of everything, yet He came to serve. Though He never sinned—never did anything wrong—He died and took the punishment our sins deserved. He let people do wrong to Him so that He could cleanse us from all our wrongdoing. And from His death, He brought life. Jesus rose from the dead and gave eternal life to everyone who puts their trust in Him.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we get to participate in the seemingly backwards gospel. Though this life is hard, when we fix our eyes on God’s promise of eternal life and live in the faith He gives us, our perspective changes. We find life in death and see that even if we have nothing in the present, we have everything in eternity. We have joy in suffering, comfort in struggles, and hope in trials. When we are weak, we can find strength in God. Even amidst uncertainty, we have confidence, boldness, and freedom because of what Jesus has done for us.

Now, as Christians, we get to be Christ’s ambassadors, comforting and supporting each other and sharing the good news of the paradoxical gospel with the world. 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ What hard things are you facing today? When we come to God, He provides the comfort, hope, and strength we need to do what He calls us to do. Consider taking a moment to talk to God about whatever is on your mind. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Where might God be giving you opportunities to comfort and support others today? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ If you want to dig deeper into the theme of paradoxes in the Bible, check out Matthew 20:1-28, John 12:23-25, and Philipians 2:6-11.

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NIV)*

## SEE HOW WE LOOK (DANIEL: PART 1)

READ: DANIEL 1

**H**ave you ever moved? If so, was it sudden or was there time to prepare and say goodbye to friends? Moving can create a lot of mixed emotions. It may be exciting in one way—yet produce anxiety in other ways. Leaving familiar people and places is never easy.

Today we are tracking Daniel, a teen who experienced a sudden move—so sudden, in fact, it's more accurate to say that Daniel was kidnapped. As the story unfolds, we find that Daniel and other young Jews from Jerusalem have been taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Not only are Daniel and others abruptly snatched away from family and home, but they are also chosen to undergo specialized training: a three-year regimen designed to teach them the history and language of their captors, the Babylonians. Talk about rubbing it in! To make things worse, the trainees had to eat a special diet ordered by the king. This diet was supposed to be the best food available, but the problem was, Daniel and his friends were Jews, and obeying God's laws meant avoiding certain foods—foods that were on the royal diet.

But God was already giving Daniel and the others favor and wisdom, and they trusted God. Notice two things about Daniel's reaction. First, he “determined not to defile himself” (1:8). Second, Daniel respectfully asked for consideration. At first, he got a “No” from the chief of staff, Ashpenaz, who feared for his head if he disobeyed the king. But Daniel did not give up. He waited and then asked the attendant under Ashpenaz for a trial period of ten days eating vegetables and water. Daniel asked, “Please test us...see how we look” (1:12-13).

That phrase “see how we look” illustrates Daniel's confidence in God. He trusted that as they obeyed God, the difference would be evident and their dilemma would be resolved. And it was! At the end of the ten days, Daniel and the other Jews looked healthier and stronger than all the others. Not only that, but God gave these four young Jews special wisdom and understanding, and they became the king's most capable advisors (1:17-21). Through His people, God demonstrated that He is above any other authority. As Daniel and his friends faced challenges, they relied on God, who continued to be faithful to them. 🕯 *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯 What challenges are you facing today? How might God be inviting you to rely on Him? \_\_\_\_\_

*But Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. Daniel 1:8a (NLT)*

## REVEALER OF MYSTERIES (DANIEL: PART 2)

READ: DANIEL 2

**H**ave you ever been the target of a bully? In today's passage, Daniel gets a dose of what a bully with clout can do. About two years have passed since Daniel and his friends were taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar as teens. Now, something else occurs that places them in grave danger: Nebuchadnezzar has a distressing dream and demands that his "wise men" (magicians/sorcerers) explain it. The catch is, he doesn't tell them what his dream was. He demands they first tell him what he dreamed, then give the interpretation (Daniel 2:8-9). Ouch!

The magicians plead with the king to tell them the dream, but Nebuchadnezzar is convinced that if he does, they will simply concoct a meaning. Naturally, they are at their wits' end. "No one on earth can tell the king his dream!" they reply (verse 10). But Nebuchadnezzar is used to getting what he wants and believes he's the most powerful guy in the world. He becomes enraged (i.e., throws a tantrum) and orders the execution of ALL wise men in the kingdom!

Unfortunately, this includes Daniel and his friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—who were appointed royal advisors. When the captain, Arioch, arrives to execute Daniel, the Bible records that Daniel responded with "wisdom and discretion" (verse 14). Take note of Daniel's actions: 1) He asks why the king ordered such a decree. 2) He goes to the king and requests more time; the king complies. 3) Daniel returns and asks his friends to pray and implore God to reveal the dream, because Daniel knows God is the One who really rules the world, not Nebuchadnezzar, and God is personally involved in the world He created.

That night God reveals the dream to Daniel in a vision. Talk about relief! Daniel hurries to Arioch; Arioch rushes Daniel to the king. After making it clear that God alone possesses the wisdom to reveal secrets, Daniel describes the king's dream in detail, then interprets it (verse 31-45). In the end, Nebuchadnezzar is astounded and ecstatic. He says, "Truly, your God is the greatest of gods, the Lord over kings, a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this secret" (verse 47). Nebuchadnezzar promotes Daniel as ruler over the province of Babylon and chief over the wise men—and gives glory to God! 🙌 *G. Kam Congleton*

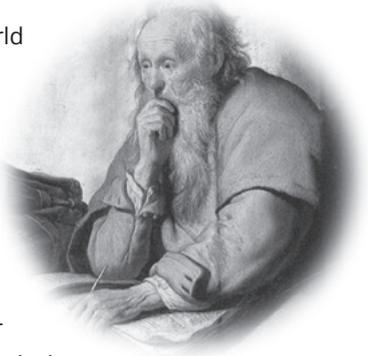
🙌 While Daniel responded to Nebuchadnezzar's bullying with calmness, sometimes God calls us to respond to injustice differently. Why do you think God calls us to respond to different unjust situations in different ways? What questions do you have about this? \_\_\_\_\_

*Praise the name of God forever and ever, for he has all wisdom and power.  
Daniel 2:20 (NLT)*

## STRENGTH THROUGH STRUGGLES: 2 TIMOTHY

READ: 2 TIMOTHY 1:7-14

**S**ickness, accidents, conflict, persecution. Our world is broken, and hardship is inevitable in our lives. But how should we respond to hardship? Paul, the apostle, was familiar with suffering. After experiencing blindness and being shipwrecked, he was put in prison, deserted by friends, and had seen fellow Christians fall away from their faith. To top it off, he knew he was going to die soon. So, while Paul was under house arrest, he wrote a letter to Timothy, a young man who Paul had mentored and who was now a leader in the church in Ephesus.



Paul was experiencing persecution, but he knew that God was with him and would be his strength (2 Timothy 4:16-18). Paul knew that God had always been faithful and always would be. No matter what happened next, Paul had the hope of eternal life with Jesus (verse 6-8). Even in suffering, Paul was able to encourage Timothy to persevere in the faith, stay strong in Jesus, and continue to lead the church and share the good news of Jesus (verse 5).

When we face struggles, as followers of Jesus we can find comfort in knowing God is with us in our struggles. He grieves our hurts alongside us and gives us strength to keep going. God is so amazingly good that He even uses something as horrible as suffering to help us grow closer to Him and rely on Him. And just like Paul encouraged Timothy through hard times, we can reach out to others and encourage them, even when we ourselves are in the midst of struggles (as Paul pointed out in another letter, see 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

No matter the challenges we face, we can find strength and hope by resting in Jesus, who endured the cross because of the joy He knew was coming (Hebrews 12:1-3). In a similar way, we can know that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed when Jesus returns (Romans 8:17-18). 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ What struggles have you been experiencing lately? No matter how big or small your suffering seems to you, God cares about all of it, and He invites you to tell Him about it. \_\_\_\_\_

*But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that I might fully preach the word and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 2 Timothy 4:17 (CSB)*

## THE VOICE OF JESUS

READ: JOHN 10:1-30; 1 JOHN 3:19-24

**G**rowing up in my village with my parents was a joyful and fulfilling experience. But I realize now that there are many things I did not bother to observe keenly during those years. My mum reared some local chickens at home, but I did not take an interest in observing their behavior. Years later, as an adult living on my own, I decided to rear local hens myself. After the hens hatched their eggs, I kept the mother hens and their chicks together in one shelter during the night, and then in the morning I let them all out at the same time.



One morning after opening the shelter, I stood by the chicken house door just to see what would happen to the now mixed-up chicks. *Would the chicks recognize their particular mothers, or would they just follow any of the mother hens?* I wondered. Then I observed that each mother hen, as she came out of the shelter, was letting out certain sounds. To my surprise and amazement, each chick began to run in the direction its mother's sounds were coming from. Each chick knew and recognized their own mother's sounds immediately. In no time at all, each hen had her own chicks with her.

Something similar happens with humans. A newborn baby learns to recognize their mother's voice as she continually talks to them. As a result, the baby learns to differentiate her voice from others' voices even without seeing her physical form.

Jesus said His sheep hear His voice, recognize it, and follow Him. We learn to recognize His voice as we spend time with Him in reading His Word and waiting in His presence in prayer. His written Word is His voice speaking to us. He also speaks to us through His Holy Spirit, who lives inside Christians. Because Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), when He speaks to us we experience peace in our hearts. 🕯 *Charity Kiregyera*

🕯 Why do you think Jesus compared Himself to a mother hen in Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 How can you tell whether it is the Lord speaking to you? When God speaks to us, He does not contradict His written Word, so the more we become familiar with the Bible, the easier it is to recognize His voice. And even when Jesus convicts us of sin, He brings hope and peace, not condemnation and fear (John 3:17). As we learn to listen to God's voice, why is it important to be in community with fellow Christians? \_\_\_\_\_

*"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." John 10:27 (NIV)*

## TAKE UP AND READ

READ: JOHN 1:1-5, ROMANS 13:8-14; 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

**T**he teacher was at his wits' end. His search for truth had led him to understand some of the gospel, but he could not escape the never-ceasing pull of "a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions" (1 John 2:16). He felt helpless and frustrated beyond measure. He sought solace in the garden behind his home, as a stroll in a verdant setting can sometimes quiet a soul's turmoil. But not so on this day. In anguish he cried out, "How long, oh Lord?!" And he began to weep. Then the strangest thing happened. He heard a child singing, "*Tolle lege, tolle lege*," which is Latin for, "Take up and read."

His prayer had been sincere, and he heard this as the form of an answer, so he grabbed the nearest book—his Bible—and opened to Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome and read these words: "Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires" (Romans 13:13-14).

Instantly, he was flooded with hope and joy and placed his faith in Jesus. Thus was the conversion of Augustine of Hippo in the year AD 386. He went on to become one of the most influential theologians and philosophers in Western history. Though Augustine was not perfect, God worked through him to help the church develop a deeper understanding of the gospel.

God's Word has the power to change you—to renew you and give you life. Jesus is called the Word made flesh (John 1:14), and the Bible contains His written words to us. Jesus came and lived among us, died, and rose again because He loves us. He has the power to change anyone. It doesn't take a dramatic afternoon in a garden to experience this in your life. Augustine spent a lot of time in the Bible before his conversion and a lot more time afterward. So whether you are a non-Christian, a new Christian, or have believed in Jesus many years, *tolle lege*; take up and read. 📖

*Cameron DeCou*

📖 The Bible is a vital part of every Christian's life because it's one way God reveals Himself to us. When you have questions about the Bible, who can you ask? What resources could help you? \_\_\_\_\_

*The Word [Jesus] gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. John 1:4 (NLT)*

## CRYSTALS

READ: MATTHEW 5:14-16; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-18

**M**y Gran collected crystal animal ornaments. They would be on display in the living room looking ordinary most of the time, until the sun shone on them. Immediately the sun's rays transformed the crystals—prisms of light would radiate across the room in dazzling displays of color. All the crystals had needed was the sun to show off their potential beauty. They changed from ordinary to extraordinary.

When someone becomes a Christian, a transformation takes place. The old ordinary self is renewed. Some people have immediate, dramatic, lifechanging experiences and are instantly cured of addictions or experience a revelation. Others do not, yet there is a powerful change inside of every believer. Through Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, He promises new life to all His forgiven followers. If we've put our trust in Jesus, He has forgiven our sin (every evil thing we've ever done and ever will do), and His Holy Spirit is in us. He continues to transform us to be more like Jesus. Through Him, we can be more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled than we ever imagined possible (Galatians 5:22-23).

When you become a Christian, people may not understand why you've changed, and you'll still struggle with sin and go through hard things, but in all these trials you're never alone. Jesus understands the difficulties of being human, the everyday challenges of life, and the deep sorrows of death. He came to defeat sin, death, hell, and Satan and to establish His kingdom. Jesus heals brokenness, and when He returns to earth He will fully restore creation.

And right now, Jesus is with us through struggles and dreams. He is at the heart of all things good (James 1:17). When we trust in Him, He gives us the strength and grace to endure difficult situations. He gives us determination to keep going and be who God has created us to be. As we follow Jesus, His good news shines through our lives. 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

🕯️ What is one thing you like about the way God made you? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ How might God be transforming you to be more like Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

*For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.  
2 Corinthians 4:6 (NLT)*

## WE SERVE BECAUSE HE SERVED

READ: JOHN 13:1-17

**O**n the night before Jesus went to the cross, He washed the feet of His disciples. This was a very unusual act that surprised them, especially Peter, because only servants were required to do this, and they would only wash the feet of those higher than them. Jesus soon after explained what He'd done. He said, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15).



Jesus served His disciples by washing their feet, and in turn He told them to serve each other. Jesus is humble, considerate, kind, gentle, forgiving, and loving...and Jesus produces these same character attributes in His followers.

Like the disciples, you are also a child of God if you've put your trust in Jesus by believing in His life, death, and resurrection. And you are called to lovingly serve others like Jesus has lovingly served you. This is an important part of being in God's community.

There are lots of ways you can serve. God has given each of us the ability to serve and help other people. Sometimes He calls us to do things that are considered lowly, like washing feet, and there are also times when God calls us to serve by using our talents, or things we're naturally good at doing.

What are you good at? What do you enjoy or love doing? Whatever talents you have, God gave you such a talent for you to enjoy—and to share with others! How might God be giving you opportunities to use your talent to serve other people? If you're feeling hesitant to serve, remember that God will equip, enable, and empower you to serve others as you rely on His love. 🕯️ *Golda Dilema*

- 🕯️ It can be challenging to follow Jesus's command to serve. When do you feel reluctant to serve? \_\_\_\_\_
- 🕯️ How are Jesus's commands to serve and to love related? (John 13:1, 34) \_\_\_\_\_

*"For even the Son of Man [Jesus] came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 10:45 (NLT)*

## HE IS WITH YOU

READ: JOSHUA 1:1-11; PSALM 23; ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20

It didn't use to think about God very often. But did you know that God is with us throughout our day, even if we're not thinking about Him?

When I was in high school, I really struggled with what people thought of me. Did people even want me around? As I read through the Scriptures, I read about the Creator of the Universe and how much He loves us and chases after us. The same God who breathed the galaxies into existence wants a personal relationship with me, and He wants a relationship with you too! That's why Jesus came. He is literally called Immanuel, or "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

The more I read my Bible, the more I find verses and passages talking about how God is always with us. In Joshua 1:9, Joshua was about to enter the Promised Land with all of the Israelites, which meant entering into battles with much bigger and stronger armies. But God said that He was WITH them, so they could take courage and didn't have anything to fear. God tells us the same thing today. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we don't have to fear or be stressed because God is always with us.

Generations after God spoke to Joshua, God spoke to His people through the prophet Zephaniah—which is one of my favorite names in the entire Bible! In Zephaniah 3:14-20, we get a glimpse of how God will save the people of Judah from exile...and how God will save the world through Jesus. This passage reminds us that, even when all seems hopeless, God has always been and always will be in control of everything. Verse 17 says, "...your God, is among you, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will calm you in his love. He will rejoice over you with singing." Not only is God with us—He's happy to be with us!

This last verse is from one of my FAVORITE Psalms: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). When life is hard, sometimes it feels like we're walking through "the valley of the shadow of death," but even then, God is with us, ready to comfort and help us.

As I look back on my life, God has always been with me. When things were good, He was there. When things were bad, He was right there too, whether I was thinking about Him or not. I wish I knew that sooner, because I spent a lot of time thinking I was alone. 🕯 *Hunter Taylor*

🕯 When do you feel alone? \_\_\_\_\_

"...your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9 (WEB)

## WAS JESUS AN INTROVERT?

READ: MATTHEW 14:22-23; 26:36-46; LUKE 5:15-16; 6:12

**W**here do you find yourself on the introvert-extrovert spectrum? People who are more extroverted tend to value their time with other people because the interaction and conversations give them energy. People who are more introverted tend to value their time alone, away from other people, because that's what fuels them. On which side do you tend to find yourself?

In the stories of Jesus in the Bible, we often find Him taking time away from the crowds and even His disciples to be completely alone with His Father. Why did Jesus do this? Did He just need some time alone from the constant pressure of the crowds wanting to see Him do miracles? Was He a more introverted person who needed this time away more than others?

We can't determine from Scripture if Jesus was an introvert or an extrovert, but one thing is clear: Jesus put a high value on His time alone with God! During that time, He could have been healing dozens of sick people. He could have been teaching people important truths about God. But He very intentionally stepped away from it all to pray. While Jesus was Himself fully God (and fully human), He still took time to be alone with God the Father. We get a glimpse of one of Jesus's prayers when He was in Gethsemane. Jesus knew He was going to be betrayed soon, and He took three of His friends with Him when He prayed in the olive grove. Jesus was in agony as He prayed that, if there was any other way, God would take away the suffering Jesus was about to endure. Still, Jesus prayed, "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42). And God sent an angel to strengthen Jesus so He could endure suffering and death as a sacrifice for our sins. And just as God promised, Jesus rose from the dead!

Through His actions, Jesus taught us the necessity of choosing to get alone with God. That may be hard for some of us who prefer not to be alone—ever! And even those of us who are more introverted have a hard time devoting that alone time to being with God. But while spending time with people can be draining, spending time with God is different—God fills us and refreshes us in His presence. The more you learn to step away from everything to be alone with God, the more you'll see that His love fills your deepest needs. 📖 *Mandy Desilets*

📖 Have you ever spent time alone with God? What was it like? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 What keeps you from making time to be alone with God? What questions do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

*But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer. Luke 5:16 (NLT)*

## REGRETS

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:10

This is madness," I sigh, trudging uphill through the snow, my face burning, the rucksack dragging me down. I'd hoped that going to Aunt Alana's cabin would be a retreat from the worries churning inside, but regrets still plague my thoughts.

"Maya," a melodic voice cries out my name.

"Hello?" I call.

No one's there. But then the snow starts melting rapidly. A gleaming light reveals a banquet on a picnic table.

"Maya, I'm here."

I turn. A man's dark eyes shine, and his ebony hands grasp my rucksack as I sit down at the table with him. Too nervous to eat, I stare at this stranger.

"You have regretted far too long," he says, pouring out the rich hot chocolate.

*How do you know?* I think to myself, sipping the drink, warmth flooding through me.

"Inside your rucksack are the shells of regret," he says, opening up the bag and handing me a conch shell. "Listen to your voice."

I put the seashell to my ear. *Oh, why didn't I listen to Skylar? She might not have moved schools.*

My breath catches in my throat, and he hands me a second shell. *I wish I'd told my Nana how much I loved her.*

The memory stings, and I reach for the third shell. *If only I'd gardened for Miss Patel when she broke her arm. I let her down.*

More and more shells reveal hidden worries. But then, the shells crumble and turn into shimmering raindrops around us. I gasp, "How...?"

My host smiles. "Your failures have been covered by the love of One greater than you. Maya, you belong to Jesus, and His forgiveness releases you from guilt."

"But..." I stammer. "I let them down. I let them all down."

"Yes, but even so, God was still working in their lives. He never stopped caring for them. He loves your Nana and Miss Patel and Skylar so much more than you ever could. And His love for you is deep and sure."

Tears collect in my eyes. "I don't know how to move on. I feel stuck."

"God will help you. Tell Him your problems, your mistakes, your sins. Remember, you are imperfect, but Jesus is the perfect One. He died and rose again to forgive you and relieve your guilt. You can rest in His forgiveness and grace."

His soothing words break down the regrets I've clung to. He smiles and disappears. The scene around me changes. Picking up the rucksack with ease, I spot Aunt Alana in front of the snowcapped cabin.

"Maya." Aunt Alana hugs me. "Come on in."

On my lips I can still taste the hot chocolate, but the regrets and bitterness have vanished. ❧ *Cindy Lee*

*"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I [Jesus] will give you rest." Matthew 11:28 (WEB)*

❧ Psalm 51:17 says, "God, you will not despise a broken and contrite heart." Can you think of a time you felt regret? How might God be inviting you to come to Him? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## THE UNEXPECTED SEEDS OF BIBLE CAMP

READ: ROMANS 10:9-15; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:11-21; COLOSSIANS 4:3-6

I have to admit, the last thing I wanted to do was teach Bible camp. Give up a week of my summer? For a bunch of little kids I didn't even know? I attended church, sure, but it's not like I was a Bible expert. Couldn't they find someone more qualified? But my friend encouraged me to try it, so I thought. *Fine. It's only a week. I'll help.*

When camp started, I was surprised. Some of these kids had never even heard of Jesus before! As one cute little face looked up at me and told me his family had never been to church, I thought, *I might be the only face of Jesus that these kids see today. Maybe that they have ever seen!* Suddenly my sense of purpose deepened. I wasn't just a glorified babysitter. *I was introducing these kids to Jesus.*

I didn't need to be a Bible expert for these kids. All I could do was let them see Jesus's love shining through me. If I could offer a friendly face and a kind heart, maybe they would start to know that Jesus is kind and He cares about them. Something as simple as a positive interaction with me might be all it would take to spark their faith! I mean, if they went home saying they loved Bible camp, those happy memories would plant a seed. They might come back next year. And the year after that. Maybe they'd even start coming to church. Maybe they'd teach Bible camp someday...and lead a whole new group of kids to Jesus!

You never know where saying yes to God will lead. 📌 *Bitsy Kemper*

📌 Have you experienced Jesus's love through someone in your life? What did this person do that showed you what God is like? \_\_\_\_\_

📌 When we experience God's love for us, sharing that love with others comes naturally. Can you think of a time when God revealed His love for you? If not, you can ask Him anytime. \_\_\_\_\_

*So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NLT)*



## DRAWING CLOSER

READ: PSALM 139

**B**lustering winds ferociously blew the trees. Sitting on the train, waiting for it to leave the station, I was mesmerized as bending branches were pulled by the wind. Powerless, they could not resist or move in any other direction. They had no choice but to bow with the wind, helpless.



Sometimes our lives can feel the same way. We are propelled toward a path we do not wish to follow and find ourselves in challenging situations. Trials in our family, peer pressure, exams, or choices about our future can consume us. We might think it is impossible to avoid or resist the direction we are hurtling toward. But there is always hope. God can set us free.

God is stronger than all our troubles. In the midst of chaos, He gives calm. He can change our course, transform our mindset, give us courage when we are terrified. In Psalm 139, David recognizes God's power and omnipresence, and he describes how God is with him in a very personal way. David acknowledges that when we are scared, we may want to flee from trouble, or even from God, but God loves us more than we will ever understand. He wants to rescue us from living fearful, anxious lives. He sent His son, Jesus, to be "God with us" (Matthew 1:23) and restore the broken aspects of our lives—and the brokenness of all creation. Even when we run away from God, He comes after us in never-failing love. He is always with us, inviting us closer to Him, promising to help us even if we struggle to comprehend why. We may not be able to run away from the messiness of life, but we can always reach toward Jesus, arms outstretched to receive His loving embrace. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 What feels out of control in your life today? How might Jesus be inviting you to experience His love and peace, even in the midst of this? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 When you're feeling overwhelmed, who is a trusted Christian in your life who could listen to you, pray with you, and encourage you? If you need someone to talk to, you can set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a Christian counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service. In the United States, call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment. In Canada, book your appointment by calling 1-800-661-9800 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) and ask to speak with the care associate.

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? Psalm 139:7 (NIV)*

## LIKE YEAST

READ: LUKE 12:1-3; 13:18-21; 1 CORINTHIANS 5; GALATIANS 5:1-12

**H**ave you ever baked bread before? It's a long, time-consuming process of mixing, kneading, rising, and baking. One of the most important ingredients in breadmaking is leavening, often yeast. Though yeast is small, it makes a huge difference in bread. Without yeast, bread is flat and dense. Even a little yeast goes a long way, and when you mix it into the dough, it impacts the entire loaf and makes it grow in size.

Yeast is a small thing that makes a huge impact on its surroundings. The Bible talks about how our words and actions can be like yeast, affecting the people around us. In Luke 12:1-3, Jesus warns about the "yeast" of some of the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and the dangerous influence of their hypocrisy.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says, "Don't you realize that this sin is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). In this passage, Paul is telling the church in Corinth that they need to discipline fellow Christians who continue in their old sinful ways of life, in hopes that these people will repent. Paul goes on to caution against associating with people who call themselves Christians but continue to indulge in sin.

In another letter, Paul says, "This false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough!" (Galatians 5:9). Paul is refuting a false teaching that was going around in Galatia. He tells the Galatian Christians that it doesn't matter whether or not they are circumcised, but rather, "What is important is faith expressing itself in love" (Galatians 5:6).

These three examples all compare yeast to harmful influences, but did you know that Jesus also compares the kingdom of God to yeast? Jesus said the kingdom spreads like yeast through the dough. And we get to receive the kingdom through putting our trust in Jesus and following Him. **📖 Abby Ciona**

**📖** Why do you think Jesus said the kingdom of God is like yeast? \_\_\_\_\_

**📖** How can we recognize hypocrisy and false teaching? A good place to start is by comparing it to the gospel, which is characterized by love and centered around Jesus (see page 104). \_\_\_\_\_

*"...the Kingdom of God...is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough." Luke 13:20-21 (NLT)*

## BREAD FROM HEAVEN

READ: EXODUS 16:1-35; JOHN 6:25-69

**F**rom naan in India to tortillas in Mexico to baguettes in France, bread has been a staple food for thousands of years all around the world. Bread plays a central role in the food of almost every culture, and it's even an important part of the Bible.

In the Old Testament, God's chosen people, the Israelites, were traveling in the desert after God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. They didn't trust God though, and they complained and worried about the lack of food in the wilderness. But God showed them grace and mercy, and He provided them with a miraculous bread called manna. Every morning, He would send down manna from the sky with special instructions for the people to gather only enough for each day. When some people tried to save extra manna for the next day, it would go moldy (except on Friday, when they were to gather twice as much because there would be no new manna on Saturday, the Sabbath). By instructing the people to collect just enough every day, God was inviting them to rely on His provision for each day and to trust Him with the future.

Just like God provided His people with bread in the Old Testament, He provides for us today—and it's even better than bread raining from the sky. In the New Testament, after Jesus multiplies bread to feed a hungry crowd, He reminds the people of the story of the manna in the wilderness, then adds to it. Jesus calls Himself the bread of life. Just as God provided His people with manna from heaven to save them from hunger, so Jesus came from heaven to save us from our sins. Before Jesus went to the cross, He foretold His death by breaking bread and giving it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body." When we take communion, we remember how Jesus died for us (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). And Jesus rose from the dead, providing for our ultimate need: forgiveness of sin. As His followers, we can look forward to the day He will also raise us from the dead! Bread may take away our hunger for a while, but when we put our trust in Jesus, the bread of life, we have something far greater: eternal life with the One who loves us. 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ Why did Jesus compare Himself to bread? Why do you think God uses everyday things to help us understand what He is like? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ If you want to know more about eternal life with Jesus, check out page 104.

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35 (WEB)*

## ACTS: THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH

READ: ACTS 2:1-47

**M**any of us hear it all the time: “I’m going to church tomorrow,” or “I attend this church.” But what *is* the church? It isn’t a place we go or something we do; it’s who we are. If you’re a Christian, you are part of the church (1 Corinthians 12:27)! God’s family is made up of all Jesus’s followers from all over the world, regardless of their background or where they meet.

Acts is a great book of the Bible to read if you want to learn more about the church. It tells the history of the first Christians after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. If you think church history is boring, think again. Acts is full of action—including riots, shipwrecks, and miracles—as the first Christians continued Jesus’s mission: sharing the good news about how Jesus came to save us, and helping each other follow Him (Matthew 28:18-20).

The book of Acts starts in Israel, where Jesus’s disciples were staying, but when Jesus sends them His Spirit, things change (Acts 2). These Christians, empowered by the Holy Spirit, begin to speak in all different languages about the wonderful things God has done, and the good news about Jesus spreads from Jerusalem and the Jewish people, throughout the entire world and to *all* people.

Acts goes on to show the early church gathering as a family in Christ, giving us a powerful example of what Christian community can look like. They love others and serve those in need, and they spend time together worshipping God and learning more about Him through Scripture. No matter what the church faced, whether persecution, threats, imprisonment, questioning, or execution, the church only grew stronger. Nothing could stop Jesus’s kingdom from spreading, and it will continue to spread until He returns!

Today, we get to continue the mission Jesus gave us thousands of years ago: sharing the good news of Jesus with the world through loving God and loving people (Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:35). 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ Throughout history, people in the church have gotten things wrong and acted in ways that don’t align with God’s Word. This grieves God, and He calls His people to repent. When you see things in the church that don’t align with God’s Word, how can you draw attention to these things? Who are trusted Christians you can talk to? \_\_\_\_\_

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*  
Acts 1:8 (CSB)

## YOUR UNIQUE GIFTS

READ: ROMANS 12:3-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-31; COLOSSIANS 3:14-16

In high school, I wanted to be like my friend Alyssa. Alyssa has a passion for loving others. She's outgoing and good at making friends. I admire how she and her family often travel to serve communities that are struggling.

I've been out of high school for seven years now, and I wish I'd known sooner that God gives us different gifts. While love and service are important to all of us who follow Christ, my gifts are different from Alyssa's. I love and serve differently than she does. And that's okay. God didn't create us all to be preachers. He didn't create us all to prophesy on street corners. He didn't create us all to be teachers.

No, in His great grace and love, God has given us each unique gifts that we can use to love and serve Him. The Bible says the church is the body of Christ. Everyone who has put their trust in Jesus is part of the body, though we are all different (1 Corinthians 12:27). There is great freedom in this truth. Imagine how boring the world would be if we all had the same gifts. Imagine how challenging it would be for the church to move together as one body.

In Romans 12:6-8, Paul writes, "If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

Friends, we are free to love God and love others with the gifts God has given us. We don't have to love and serve the same way. Like a body, the church needs different parts, and it needs people with different gifts. Let's embrace the gifts God has given us as we become the hands and feet of Jesus in a broken world. 🕯️ *Becca Wierwille*

🕯️ Have you ever wished you could be more like someone else? Consider taking a moment to thank God for how He made this person, and also thank Him for how He made you. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ What natural abilities and spiritual gifts has God given you? How might God be inviting you to use your unique gifts to serve others? \_\_\_\_\_

*We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. Romans 12:6 (NIV)*

## WHEN THINGS ARE FALLING APART

READ: ROMANS 8:22-39

**G**od is always at work. But because we are just human and we can only see a small portion of the big picture, sometimes we get so discouraged when it feels like things are falling apart...because we don't know what's going to come...next. But God does. God knows what needs to work out and what needs to fail. He knows what is best for us in the end.

God's power is amazing. So often we underestimate the things that He can do through us when we are at our weakest. In our pain, He has compassion on us; He comforts and strengthens us. When we feel like we have nothing left to give, He can still do great things through us. Even in our disappointment, we can share the hope of Jesus with others.

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Specifically, God is planning to renew His creation...including us! If we've put our trust in Jesus, we get to look forward to living in renewed creation with Him, where all our deepest desires will be fully satisfied in His wonderful presence.

Until that day, life can be really hard as we experience the brokenness caused by sin. But we can rest because God knows the desires of our hearts, and He cares about us deeply. He knows what is best for us in the end, and He is worthy of our trust. We can leave it all to Him. And when we lay our lives before Him and ask Him to work through us, we get to be part of the good things God is doing here and now!

Life isn't always easy, but we can trust that everything will turn out according to God's ultimate plan to save the world. So often we underestimate God and His power. It's mind-boggling that He can use every situation for good. He knows much more about what is going on than we do, and He is always working to defeat evil, heal brokenness, and draw us close to Himself. 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

🕯️ Can you think of one way you've seen God work in your life? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for this. \_\_\_\_\_

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (NIV)*



## THROUGH THE FIRE

READ: ISAIAH 43:1-2; DANIEL 3

**M**y absolute favorite story in the Old Testament is about these three Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were taken as prisoners to Babylon when they were teenagers, and how God was with them every step of the way.

King Nebuchadnezzar built a humungous gold statue of himself and declared that everyone in his kingdom was to bow down and worship it. He threatened that anyone who did not would be “thrown into a blazing furnace” (Daniel 3:6). Yet Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down. When they were brought before the king, I love how they declared their faith in God: “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up” (Daniel 3:17-18).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego believed that God would deliver them. Although they didn’t know how they could survive the fire, they trusted in God’s ability. And they declared that even if God did not spare their lives, they would STILL serve and worship Him alone. What awesome determination! Because God had always been faithful to them, they trusted Him and were loyal to Him above all others.

The king was furious and “ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual” (Daniel 3:19). When they were thrown into the furnace, the soldiers who took them were killed by the fire, but the king said, “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods” (Daniel 3:25). And when the three Israelites came out of the furnace, they didn’t even smell of smoke! Who was the fourth person who had been walking around in the furnace with them? Some scholars believe it was Jesus!

I love how the ropes that bound the three friends were burnt off. When we follow Jesus, our Rescuer, the sins that bind us are destroyed, burnt off, and we become freer to serve the God who goes with us THROUGH the fire! 🕯️ *Sharon J. Morris*

🕯️ How might God be inviting you to follow Him today? \_\_\_\_\_

*“Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has...rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.”  
Daniel 3:28b (NIV)*

## THE DEATH OF TRAGEDY

READ: PSALM 13; COLOSSIANS 1:15-23; REVELATION 22:1-5

**T**ragedies wrap themselves  
around my heart  
Clinging tighter. Constricting  
Squeezing and squeezing  
and squeezing until  
I can't move. Can't breathe. Can't think

Locked in place by overwhelming hurt  
Anger. Grief. Shame. Take your pick  
Each one amplifies another  
Louder and louder and louder until  
I hear nothing. But chaos

People shouting  
And oppressing. And killing  
And dying. And hurting  
Creation screaming  
HOW LONG, O LORD?

Another voice whispers a Story  
An old, old Story  
Told a million times in a million ways  
The story of brokenness set right  
Death turned to life

A King in a cradle  
Walked the earth in earth-coated sandals  
Creator covered in creation  
Crucified. Died. And buried

And, for a moment,  
my heart pauses here  
Lingering  
Though it knows it's not the end  
Because my heart needs to know  
That my King's heart knows pain  
Loneliness. Hopelessness  
Death itself

Then the rock rolled  
My heart begins to beat again  
He walked. The tragedies wince  
He smiled. Evil trembles

The Story wraps itself around me  
Like a blanket  
Covering my hurt  
My panic  
My fear

It hugs me tight  
Encircles me with love  
And proclaims  
*"Tragedy is not the end.  
All will be made right.  
Chaos will be stilled.  
Death reversed.  
Hurts healed.  
The King is coming."*  Taylor Eising

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. Isaiah 61:1 (NLT)*

- ❗ What hurts do you see in the world or in your life right now? How can the gospel bring hope to these hurts? (Hint: read what Jesus said in Luke 4:14-21.) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ❗ If you know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in you, comforting you and empowering you to follow Him. How might God be giving you opportunities to bring healing to hurting people around you? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ❗ Someday, Jesus will return to get rid of all sin, death, and brokenness forever. How could this sure hope affect the way you live now? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## OUR HELP

READ: PSALM 46:1-11

**G**od is our help. How amazing is that? The Bible tells us so many times that we can rely on God. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He is always with us (Matthew 28:20). In Deuteronomy 31:6 and then again in Hebrews 13:5-6, we are told that God will never leave us. Never. He is always on our side. In 1 John 4:4, we are reminded that God is great, and He is in us through the Holy Spirit. He is far greater than those in the world. He is bigger than our enemies and anything that we could face.

God is our help when we are in trouble. God is our help when we have decisions to make. God is our help every day. So many Bible passages talk about the way God cares for us, and the Holy Spirit reminds us that He will continue to take care of us. Whenever we are afraid, we can cling to God.

In times when everything seems to be falling apart in our lives, we can find comfort in God's words to us, like Psalm 46, which begins, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." God, the Creator of the universe, is our help. God, the One who can do anything, decided to create us. And love us. And die for us. He loves us "with an everlasting love" (Jeremiah 31:3), and not even death can keep Him from saving us. Jesus, our loving God, rose from the dead. We can rely on God to be our help. Always.  *Bethany Acker*

 Do you have a favorite Bible verse that reminds you God is your help? If not, do any of the verses mentioned above resonate with you? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

 How do you need God's help today? (Remember, we never have to feel bad for needing help. In fact, God WANTS us to come to Him for help.) \_\_\_\_\_

*You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 1 John 4:4 (NIV)*



## FAMILY HISTORY

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-28, 35-58

**S**ome people spend long hours looking into their family history. They want to find out where they came from, who came before them in their family, and which countries they have a connection to. You might have tried to look into your family history, and you might have struggled as you tried to trace things back as far as you could. Most people eventually get stuck at some point.

Yet ultimately, humans all come from the same ancestors. The same family. While it can be exciting to find out which parts of the world our ancestors called home, it's also pretty amazing that we all came from Adam originally. (The name Adam literally translates *man*.) God made humans in His image (Genesis 1:27). God gave us life, yet when humans went their own way against God, death came (Romans 5:12, 19).

But God didn't give up on humanity. Because He loves us, God came to give us new life. Jesus is fully God, but He is also fully human. The Bible calls Adam the "first man" and Jesus the "last Adam" (1 Corinthians 15:45-47). Jesus did what no other human could do—Jesus defeated death and made a way for us to be forgiven and made right with God. Because Jesus died on a cross and God raised Him from the dead, God will also raise all of us from the dead who have put our trust in Jesus!

If you are frustrated because you don't know how to track your family lineage or you don't have the information you need to find out who your ancestors are, take heart. You are a descendant of Adam, as I am. And as Christians, we have an even deeper connection with each other through "the last Adam." People from all over the world who've put their trust in Jesus are part of His unified family. And the entire Bible is the story of our family. From Genesis to Revelation, we are being told our family history in Christ Jesus. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 Have you ever tried to find out where your family comes from? Why is this important to you? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Do you sometimes long to feel a connection to a particular place or people group? How does Jesus help satisfy this longing in the family of God? \_\_\_\_\_

*For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 1 Corinthians 15:22 (NIV)*

## YOUR WORTH IN HIS EYES

READ: LUKE 12:6-8; 22:63-65; 23:32-43

**Y**ou're not good enough and nothing is ever going to change that. The words rang through his head over and over again. *Forget trying out for the team.* He turned and dashed out of the school.

The things others say about us can stick with us and cause us to have doubts about our abilities—or even our worth. We are quick to believe the hurtful comments others make about us, and those comments can affect the way we live.

But your value has nothing to do with the way other humans see you and everything to do with the One who created you. No matter how talented you are—or how lacking in talent you are—your worth is based on what God thinks of you, and nothing else.

You are valuable because God has said so. He made you in His image, and He loves you. In fact, you are so valuable to God that He was willing to suffer immensely for you. Jesus knows what it feels like to endure people's hurtful comments. When Jesus went to the cross, people mocked and insulted Him. But Jesus, in His great love, forgave them. It was worth it to Him to die for these people—and for us. But nothing could keep Jesus in the grave. God raised Him back to life, and He will also raise Jesus's forgiven followers back to life someday.

If you've put your trust in Jesus, He has given you a new identity. Not only are you made in the image of God, but you are also forgiven, justified, and a child of God—because Jesus has called you His own. And you get to look forward to eternity with Him, where hurtful comments will be no more. When people mistreat you, come to Jesus. Let Him remind you how He feels about you. When you can't get the words of other humans out of your head and you feel like giving up, take some time to remember who made you and what He thinks of you. He knows your true value.  *Emily Acker*

 Who is a trusted Christian in your life who can remind you of your worth in God's eyes, even when you have a hard time remembering for yourself? \_\_\_\_\_

*Humans do not see what the LORD sees, for humans see what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7b (CSB)*



## LOVING AFTER HURT

READ: MATTHEW 5:43-45; JOHN 15:9-17

**D**o you find it hard to love people as Jesus tells us to? I know sometimes I do, and it is especially hard to love people who have hurt you. In John 15:12, Jesus tells us to love people as He loves us. If we know Jesus, we can love others because He lives in us through the Holy Spirit, and His love overflows from us to the people around us. But sometimes sin gets in the way. Sometimes, instead of loving people, we judge them harshly for little things.

I remember one particular time when I should have loved someone, but I thought that, because of their actions, Jesus wouldn't love them, so I didn't. I was horribly wrong. Jesus will always forgive a person who turns to Him, no matter how bad the sin was. God deeply loves the person who hurt me. I ruined relationships because of my lack of love. But even though I thought I lost this person, God has brought them back to me. Now I can show this person love so that they can see God through me.

Jesus is the light in the darkness (John 8:12), and He calls us to share His light. We can do this by loving people. I still struggle with loving this person because they hurt me so much, and that's okay. Jesus offers me grace as I continue healing. And, when people hurt us deeply, forgiving that person doesn't always mean we need to be in close relationship with them. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is set up healthy boundaries.

Jesus's love is so good, and He gives us the opportunity to share it with everyone around us. He can bring healing to even the most broken relationships. 🕯️ *Kari Cuddie*

- 🕯️ Can you think of a time you experienced the goodness of Jesus's love? If not, you can ask Him to reveal His love to you anytime. \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 🕯️ When someone hurts us deeply, what might healthy boundaries look like? If you're not sure, who can you ask (maybe a parent, teacher, pastor, counselor, youth leader...)? \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 🕯️ If you've been hurt deeply and need someone to talk to, you can set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a Christian counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service. In the United States, call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment. In Canada, book your appointment by calling 1-800-661-9800 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) and ask to speak with the care associate.

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." John 15:9 (NIV)*

## LOVE STORIES

READ: GENESIS 2:4-25; SONG OF SONGS 8:6-7

**T**he book of the Bible called Song of Songs is...confusing. It uses all kinds of metaphors and imagery that make no sense to us twenty-first-century readers. And, to make it more confusing, scholars have argued about how we should read Song of Songs for centuries. Is it a love song between husband and wife? Is it all a metaphor for God and Israel? Or Christ and the church?

Most scholars agree that on some level it's all three, but it's primarily a love song between a husband and wife, celebrating the goodness of sexual love, marriage, and desire. So, if it's primarily a love song, what's it doing in the Bible?

Song of Songs belongs in the Bible because sexual love, marriage, and desire are all good gifts from God. They are an innate part of the way He designed us. We are wired for intimacy.

Sexual love is a powerful thing. It drives the husband and wife in Song of Songs to run all over town, searching for each other. They describe one another's beauty in a long series of metaphors that don't make a lot of sense to most modern-day readers. But these metaphors, mostly mentioning gardens, precious jewels, and expensive perfumes, point to the bounty found in Eden in Genesis 1-2, where the goodness of God's creation was unmarred and in full bloom.

And these good gifts point us back to God's goodness, which is revealed in Jesus. The strong desire demonstrated by the husband and wife in Song of Songs echoes Jesus's strong desire to live in union with His people, the church. He loved the church so much that He became human to live a perfect life on our behalf and take our sin upon Himself on the cross. Then, He rose again to defeat sin and death so we can live in union with Him forever when He returns. And in the meantime He sends His Holy Spirit, who lives inside every believer and constantly reminds us of God's pursuing, never-ending, ridiculous love for us.

So, while Song of Songs is primarily a human love story, it points to God in the same way that every love story does. Sexual love in marriage is a beautiful gift, and its beauty is only an echo of the beauty of the Giver. 🕯️ *Taylor Eising*

*As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. Ephesians 5:31-32 (NLT)*

- ❗ God designed sex for marriage as a way for husband and wife to show how they have given their whole selves to each other completely, freely, and faithfully. This union points to how Jesus has completely, freely, and faithfully given His whole self to His bride, the church. And because Jesus loves us so much, He offers forgiveness for any sin. If you've sinned sexually, how could it be freeing to lay these sins at Jesus's feet and rest in His grace? How can you rely on Him to help you walk in obedience to His good plans for sex?
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- ❗ For an unmarried person seeking to follow God's plan for sex, sexual desire may not feel like a blessing. In fact, it might feel more like a curse. God has created us with sexual desire (and that's a good thing!), but Satan can take this good gift and twist it for evil purposes, tempting us to lust and misuse God's good gifts. If you wrestle with these feelings, talk to Jesus about them. You can talk to Him about anything. He isn't embarrassed to talk about sex—He invented it! In addition to talking to God, who is a trusted Christian you can talk to?
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## FORGIVEN

READ: ISAIAH 43:25; LUKE 23:33-34; ACTS 3:19

**K**ing David was called a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). He is remembered as noble, a man of character and courage. In many instances, he obeyed God, but David also sinned just like you and me. We can read about two heinous sins David committed in 2 Samuel 11-12. When David should have been out fighting with the Israelite army, he stayed in his palace and had sex with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, was away at war. When Bathsheba told David she was pregnant, David tried to cover up what he'd done. So David ordered that Uriah be killed in a battle. God did not tolerate the sins of David, and He sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke David. When David acknowledged his sin and turned back to God, God forgave him.



When you fall into sin, no matter how terrible the sin is, remember that God will forgive you just like He forgave David. This radical forgiveness is possible because of Jesus. He died on the cross and rose from the dead to pay the penalty your sins deserve and give you new life. If you've put your trust in Jesus, not only has God forgiven you, He has also taken away your guilt and shame. Isaiah 1:18 says it this way: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Although God is perfect, He reaches out and accepts us even when we do wrong against Him. As forgiven followers of Jesus, we can know that nothing we do will ever make God abandon us. He loves us, and we are His children. When we fall into sin, God will help us come to Him in humility, and He will raise us up once again. When we struggle with guilt and shame, we can remember how Jesus took all our sins on Himself on the cross, and He prayed to God to forgive us. 📖 *Golda Dilema*

📖 Do you ever feel pulled down by guilt or think God won't forgive you for something you've done? What does David's story reveal about God's forgiveness? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 If you want to know more about God's forgiveness through Jesus, see page 104.

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (NIV)*

## DITCHING THE DIRT

READ: EPHESIANS 4:29-32; HEBREWS 4:14-16; 1 JOHN 1:5-10

**H**ey, Jesus, we need to talk. I have to tell you about someone we both know. She tries to follow you, but she tends to gossip. She doesn't make up lies or say cruel things, but she shares information she has heard about other people. She indulges in conversations based on rumors.

Sometimes, she tells secrets. Friends trust her with their private lives, and she betrays them. When she's sharing the information, she feels connected to whoever she's talking to, as if by spreading the gossip, the listener is in her inner circle. Yet, she knows it's wrong. And she hates feeling untrustworthy.

But since she spreads gossip, other people are inclined to share gossip with her. They know she'll be an eager listener. This makes her feel connected to whoever she's gossiping with, but the connection isn't authentic. The friendship is hollow.

Jesus, the person I'm talking about is myself. If I were to gossip about myself, that's what I'd say, I'm ashamed to admit. I feel small and petty after I gossip, so I ask you to please "set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3).

I no longer want to dish the dirt; I want to ditch the dirt. I want to stop hurting people. I want true friendships, and the only way to foster that is through love. Thank you for loving me. When I speak honestly with you, I remember how much you love me, how you died on the cross and rose from the dead for me, and I feel safe. I want to emulate your example. Help my words spread light, not gossip. 🕯️ *Kelly Bakshi*

🕯️ If you know Jesus, your value and worth are totally secure in Him. You are loved beyond measure. How might knowing that God loves you affect the way you speak about others? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we can bring any struggle to Him in prayer. He wants us to be totally honest with Him about our sins and shortcomings, and He looks at us with compassion and forgiveness. Consider taking a moment to open your heart to Jesus, inviting Him to heal your hurts and transform you more and more into His image.

*Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. Proverbs 17:9 (NIV)*



## GOD UNDERSTANDS THE TEMPTATION WE'RE FACING

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13; HEBREWS 4:13-16

"I wish God understood how hard this is for me," you whisper. You're trying to live right, but the temptation to do wrong is really strong. "This is the hardest thing I have ever had to do."

In the book of Hebrews, we are told that we serve a God who understands our weaknesses and our temptations—Jesus is a human, and He faced everything we do. As His forgiven followers, we serve a God who knows just what we are going through and just how hard it is to do what's right. We serve a God who knows that there are things all around us that are trying to pull us away from our faith and away from God's good ways.

We serve a God who invites us to come close to Him to receive the help we need to resist temptation, and grace when we mess up. We are told to get close to the One who was tempted but still did not sin. The One who loves us so much that He suffered and died to forgive our sin. The One who rose again because He is more powerful than sin and death, and He wants us to be with Him forever.

Until Jesus returns to earth, there are always going to be temptations around us, but God sees us even in those times when we are tempted. He understands, and He cares. And He wants to help.  *Emily Acker*

 What temptations get to you the most? Do you feel like God understands what you are facing? \_\_\_\_\_

 Who are trusted Christians in your life who you can be honest with about the temptations you are facing? How can you remind each other of Jesus's love and the power He gives us to resist temptation? \_\_\_\_\_

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)*



## NEVER ALONE

READ: DEUTERONOMY 31:8; PSALM 139:7-10

**H**ave you ever gotten to a point where you wondered if you'll ever have a good friend? Well, that was me in high school. I hardly had any friends, and the ones I had never really paid much attention to me. I was the youngest in my class and I always felt so out of the loop, so lonely. Sometimes I wrote about it in my notebooks, but I didn't feel better. Then I started getting bullied and things got worse. Nobody stood up for me and I felt so alone.

I'm eighteen years old now, and one thing I wish I'd known about God when I was in high school is that He never leaves me alone. That's right, God was always with me. Always watching, always guiding, and always cheering me up. I just forgot to look toward Him. Sure, I was a Christian, but I neglected the one friend who never left me alone. Jesus was always there.

Now let's move forward to my first year at university (I'm in my third year now). It was my first time away from every member of my family. I was three hours away from home, and I felt truly alone. But this time, I remembered my heavenly Father and how He never leaves me, and things got better. I stopped feeling terrible.

Now when I feel lonely, I write to my heavenly Father and tell Him how much I love Him, and I end up feeling so much better. He even reminds me about the people who love me and care so much about me.

If you've put your trust in Jesus, you are never alone. 🕯️ *Rereloluwa Bajomo*

🕯️ Jesus knows what it feels like to have friends who don't stick by you (Matthew 26:47-56). He sees you when you're hurting, and He wants to comfort you. Have you ever tried talking to God when you felt lonely? What was it like? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ How might God be giving you opportunities to reach out to people around you who are lonely? \_\_\_\_\_

*"Haven't I commanded you: be strong and courageous? Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9 (CSB)*



## LIVING LETTERS

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-18

I used to love writing letters to my pen pal. Whenever her letters showed up in my mailbox, I had the thrill of ripping into them, excited to hear what was going on in her life. The Apostle Paul wrote two letters to the church in Corinth. In his second letter, Paul calls the Corinthian Christians living letters, not written in ink but written on human hearts. When people looked at these Christians, they could see the penmanship of the living God.

To understand what Paul means in this passage, it helps to look at the Old Testament. God made a covenant (or promise) with His people, the Israelites, when He gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Following God's good laws was necessary if the people desired to have a right relationship with God. After God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face radiant with God's glory. Having been in the presence of the God of the universe, Moses was reflecting the glory of God. But the people were afraid, so Moses wore a veil to cover his glowing face (Exodus 34:27-35).

Then, even though the Israelite people knew God's laws, they continually broke them and sinned. Yet God, in His mercy, appointed priests to make animal sacrifices to cover the people's sins. Generations later, when God sent His Son Jesus to die for us and raise again, we received a new and better covenant that would cover our sins once and for all (Hebrews 7:22-28). No longer do we need to make sacrifices or have a priest intercede on our behalf—we have direct access to God the Father because of the precious blood of Jesus Christ. As Paul told the Corinthian church, when we place our trust in Christ alone to save us, the veil is removed; we now have unveiled faces that reflect the very glory of the One who is in us (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

If you are a Christian, you are a living letter to everyone around you. The more time you spend in the presence of the One who created you and loves you beyond measure, the more you will be transformed into Christ's image. The glory of God is in you, and His light is shining in your heart (2 Corinthians 4:6). Who will read you today?  Savannah Coleman

 Do you know anyone who shines God's glory? How does their life point others to Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are Christ's letter, delivered by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God—not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*  
2 Corinthians 3:2-3 (CSB)

**FREELY**

READ: ROMANS 8:1-4; EPHESIANS 2:8-10; TITUS 3:5

**C**LANG! Raymnd's sword clashed against the training dummy, his flowing movements getting faster and faster. *SWOOSH!* Raymnd was determined to become one of the strongest, fastest knights there was. As he trained, his thoughts wandered to the king. Raymnd ached to be accepted by the ruler of Fidem, King Justain. Though he would never speak it aloud, Raymnd wanted more than anything to become a close friend to the king, like a son to him.

Raymnd slashed at the straw dummy harder and harder, his determination driving him. If he could finally be good enough—even though he didn't know what good enough was—he might be able to impress the king. If, and only if, he could work hard enough to reach that point.

Just then, Raymnd's tired arm gave out and he dropped his sword. He sighed, then yelled, "I'll never be good enough!" to no one except the dented armor and mangled post in front of him. Suddenly he heard a cough behind him and spun around to see Tye, the king's steward. "The king requests your presence immediately. It's urgent!" He motioned for Raymnd to follow.

Raymnd tugged nervously at his gloves, but hope sparked in his eyes. *Maybe the king finally noticed how much I've been training,* he thought. When Raymnd entered the marble throne room, King Justain stood up from his golden throne and smiled. Raymnd knelt, pressing his fist to his chest.

"Why have you been training and working so hard?" asked the king. Raymnd didn't know what to say. Was the king displeased with his progress? "My son." The king's words took Raymnd's breath away. "I already love you. Don't you know that the High Prince has already knighted you through his own efforts and sacrifice? Through Him, my love and acceptance are yours. There is nothing you need to do—ever—to earn your place in my kingdom. In fact, I view you as my own son." The king opened his arms and embraced Raymnd. Tears of relief streamed down Raymnd's face. All this time, all his work was unnecessary. Not only was he accepted as a knight, he was even loved as a son—freely—by the king. *🔑 Carissa Vruggink*

🔑 In this story, King Justain represents God and the High Prince represents Jesus. Have you ever felt like Raymnd did, trying to do things to earn God's approval instead of enjoying being with Him? How might God be inviting you to come to Him today? \_\_\_\_\_

*...for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works... Ephesians 2:8-9 (WEB)*

## THE HOLY GOD REQUIRES HOLINESS

READ: JAMES 2:8-11; 1 PETER 1:13-16

**T**here is a truth that is unfolding before me: God is holy, and He requires holiness of us. For years, I never saw this truth. I became a Christian at age eleven and through the years I have been in church, but I never really considered the issue of holiness. I thought I was okay since I was not committing “big sins.” I had categorized stealing and murder as big sins, while I labeled telling lies, gossiping, and evil imaginations as small sins.

But James 2:10-11 says that the One who commands us not to commit adultery is the same God who commands us not to commit murder. That means if a person avoids one sin and commits another, that person is a sinner. This Scripture opened my eyes to see that all sin is a big deal to God. Whenever I do something that God forbids me to do, I am sinning against Him. I now realize that the things I considered small sins defile a person just as much as those I termed big sins.

By definition, sin is opposite to God’s goodness. Sin hurts everything it touches and points to the brokenness that invaded God’s good creation when humans rebelled against God. But because God loves us, He sent Jesus to put an end to sin, to forgive us, and to heal our brokenness. Jesus—the only human who could be holy—died and rose again for us. If we have put our trust in Jesus, He has forgiven our sins, and He also empowers us to live holy lives, set apart for God’s good purposes.

On my own, I cannot be holy. Yet Jesus Christ is my holiness, and He has made me right with God (1 Corinthians 1:30). If I am to walk forward in holiness, as Jesus calls me to do, I must rely on His strength to resist sin. And when I fail, I can come to the Lord for forgiveness, and He will continue to help me turn away from sin. 🙏

*Enid Adah Nyinomujuni*

🙏 Are there some sins in the secrecy of your life that you’ve thought God overlooks? God promises Christians full forgiveness through Jesus, and He also promises to help us turn away from sin. Who are trusted Christians in your life who could remind you of God’s love and forgiveness and also encourage you to resist the temptation to sin? \_\_\_\_\_

*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 (NIV)*



## THE UGLY BROWN SHOES

READ: ROMANS 13:12-14; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17; HEBREWS 12:1-3

In kindergarten, I owned a pair of sturdy brown shoes with thick, black shoelaces. My mom often insisted I wear them, but I hated them. I thought they were hideous and felt embarrassed to wear them. They also did not fit me well. More than once, I was enjoying the playground swings, pumping to swing higher and higher, only to witness those shoes slip off my feet and soar through the air. That brought on more embarrassment, of course. Still, occasionally my mom would pull out that pair of shoes and encourage me to wear them.

One summer day, my brother and I took a walk in the woods after a rainstorm. We played near a pond where the soaked dirt had turned into muddy soup. Another downpour began, and we hurried home. In our rush, one of those despised heavy shoes—almost the color of the soil—slipped into the muck. The soggy mud quickly swallowed it, and in the rain I didn't stop to retrieve it. I walked home with one bare foot and one (now useless) shoe. I secretly rejoiced that I could finally rid myself of that loathsome footwear.

Those ugly, ill-fitting shoes remind me of something else we should throw off. Once we come to live in Christ and receive forgiveness for our sins, God calls us to live in His love and to cast off the habits and distractions that prevent us from faithfully following Him. Jesus Christ died and rose again so that we could be free from the power of sin. He helps us throw off the sin that entangles us and everything that hinders us from running in His good ways. Those attitudes and behaviors don't fit us anymore once we have become God's children. Instead, we can clothe ourselves with Christ, who helps us honor Him with our lives and reflect His love to others as we run in His good ways. *✦ Allison Wilson Lee*

✦ Is there a sin in your life that God is inviting you to throw off? How is it possible for us to turn away from sin and run in God's good ways instead? (Hebrews 12:1-3) \_\_\_\_\_

✦ According to Colossians 3:12-17, how does God see us once we've put our trust in Jesus? What does God call us to clothe ourselves with? \_\_\_\_\_

*...let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. Hebrews 12:1 (NLT)*

## PRAYING YOU TO VICTORY

READ: PSALM 20

**W**e all struggle, and it can be both heartwarming and strengthening to know that someone is praying for us during those times. Have you ever been in a really tough situation and found yourself just wishing that someone would pray for you? Maybe you didn't feel like you could even find the strength to pray for yourself, and you just hoped that someone was talking to God about you.



When you are struggling and you want to know the feeling of someone else praying for you, you might be interested in reading the first half of Psalm 20. This is a blessing of sorts, with the writer talking about how he wants God to bless the reader. In the second half of the psalm, the writer proclaims that God can—and does—work things out for His people. And there are other places in the Bible where you can find prayers people have prayed for you. Jesus prayed for all Christians in John 17:20-23. Paul prayed for “all the Lord’s holy people” in Ephesians 3:14-21.

When you are struggling, find someone you can go to who will pray for you. Don't be ashamed to let others know you are having a hard time and you want prayer. You could also read Psalm 20 and let the words wash over you. No matter what you're facing, you have a God who loves you, and He will have the victory. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, He has defeated sin, death, and brokenness forever. And Jesus has promised to raise you from the dead when He returns to make all things new. If you've put your trust in Him, you will get to dwell with Him forever in perfect creation. This is the victory Christ offers you. And He will never disappoint. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

🕯️ Can you remember a time someone prayed for you? How did it make you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Who can you pray for today? Consider asking God to bring someone to mind. \_\_\_\_\_

*Now this I know: The LORD gives victory to his anointed. Psalm 20:6a (NIV)*

## LIFE IS LIKE A RUBIK'S CUBE

READ: MATTHEW 11:25-30

**H**ave you ever tried to solve a Rubik's Cube? I can't tell you how many times I've tried and failed to unscramble this complicated mess of colors. It amazes me that there are people out there who *can* decipher this puzzle. I once saw someone solve a Rubik's Cube in less than fifteen seconds!

I think life is much like a Rubik's Cube. Time and time again, I have struggled against the obstacles of life, doing everything in my power to put things back together, to fit all the colors into place. But each time, all I manage to do is jumble my life even more. So what can we possibly do when the Rubik's Cube of our life gets more mixed up than ever?

The answer is: turn to the One who can help. Jesus Christ, the master puzzle solver, is the only one who can sort out the problems of life. When I try to solve my troubles on my own, I quickly become overwhelmed. But Christ invites me to give all my worries and cares to Him. Instead of trying to figure out my problems on my own, I get to follow Jesus one step at a time. When I let Him carry my troubles, I can rest in the safety of His protective and guiding hand. His power alone can sort out the cares that threaten to overpower me.

Right now, God is working to bring about His good purposes. Even when I can't understand what He's doing, I can look forward to the day Jesus will return to earth to right every wrong, heal every brokenness, and restore all of creation. And I can know without a doubt that no matter how mixed-up, cluttered, and confusing life may get, God holds me in the palm of His hand. Because I belong to Christ, I no longer have to worry about solving the puzzles on my own. When I cast my cares on Him, I can be sure that He will take care of me. The Rubik's Cubes of life are no puzzle to God. 🕯️ *Eliana Canfield*

🕯️ Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the struggles of life? Consider taking a moment to bring your problems to God and ask for His help. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ How do you usually try to solve your problems? Remember that God doesn't expect us to be able to figure things out on our own. He calls us to be in community and help one another. Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with when you feel overwhelmed? \_\_\_\_\_

*...casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you. 1 Peter 5:7 (CSB)*

## HE LOVES US, FLAWS AND ALL

READ: MATTHEW 18:12-14; LUKE 15:11-24

I was a very shy kid and struggled to fit in at school. At home, my older brother teased me endlessly. Yet, I knew my family loved me. I also knew Jesus loved me and was always with me. By middle school I was also teased at school because I was tall and my pants weren't quite long enough, plus my clothes weren't the "cool" brands. I also got teased because I attended church and my favorite necklace was a gold cross my mom gave me for Christmas. Despite the teasing, I knew that I belonged to God and that Jesus loved me even if my peers didn't accept me, let alone share my faith. I felt that on some level God understood my struggles; after all, He created me and took on flesh in Jesus Christ.

But by high school it became harder to remember that God was always with me. I wanted badly to fit in and began to buckle under peer pressure. What could it hurt? Was having a little fun a bad thing? Wouldn't Christ understand me and all my human flaws?

In college, when my roommate teased me for attending a Christian group on campus, I started going to church less often, and I felt less and less lovable, especially by Christ. I felt ashamed for praying only when I needed something—like a good grade on a test. I felt like I was drifting further from the love of Christ.

Finally, my pastor from back home reminded me that our Heavenly Father never leaves us even when we turn away from Him. He wants nothing more than to love us, to forgive us, and to have us return to Him. In one of the parables Christ told, a lost son returns home after going astray, and the father and the community rejoice! Christ also told a parable of a shepherd going out to find one lost sheep. When we go astray, Christ comes after us. And when we return to God, He rejoices! *✠ Lisa A. Wroble*

✠ Have you ever felt like you were drifting away from God's love? Even when we pull away from God, He keeps loving us. How might God be inviting you to come to Him today? \_\_\_\_\_

✠ Have you experienced or observed something that caused you to wonder if God is good? In these times, we can look to Jesus, who revealed God's deep love and kindness when He died on the cross. Now the risen Jesus invites us to come to Him with all our questions, frustrations, and fears. He can take it. \_\_\_\_\_

*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.  
Jeremiah 31:3b (NIV)*

## WHEN THINGS SEEM HELPLESS

READ: ROMANS 8:18-29

**H**ave you ever found yourself desperately praying for someone in a situation that seems helpless? Perhaps it's a parent who isn't following Jesus, a sibling struggling with addiction, or a close friend who is hurting. You pray, but nothing seems to be happening, except personal exhaustion. Your hope is sapping dry.

If this is you, Jesus's invitation to you is to rest in Him (Matthew 11:28-30). God loves you and the person you are praying for. Through Jesus, you can pour out your burdens to our loving Father, who always listens. Remember, you are not the problem. And you are not the answer either. In many situations, people have to take personal responsibility to seek healing. You cannot hold yourself accountable for their problems, like divorce, addictions (alcohol, narcotics, gambling, pornography...), or if a person doesn't put their trust in Jesus.

What you can do is ask for advice from trusted adults. There might be community groups or tools available to help the person in your life who is struggling. And know that God hasn't forgotten your prayers. Remember, your safety is important to God and the people who love you. If you're being dragged into a dangerous or complex situation, get help. Our world has been broken by sin, which is why society, people, and relationships break down. But as Christians, we have hope; Jesus will walk with us through these tough times, and we can extend this hope to others.

God cares deeply for the person you are praying for, and He loves you too. It's okay that there's a limit to what you can do. Sometimes you aren't able to help or provide the right answer. In these times, you can rest in God's love and leave it in His hands, knowing that the same God who rose Jesus from the grave is by your side, and He will one day restore all His people and all of creation to wholeness. 🕯

*Cindy Lee*

🕯 Are you trying to help someone in a complicated situation, or are you in one yourself? Who is a trusted adult, such as a teacher, pastor, counselor, or relative who could help you? If you need someone to talk to, you can set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a Christian counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service. In the United States, call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment. In Canada, book your appointment by calling 1-800-661-9800 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. (Pacific Time) and ask to speak with the care associate.

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*For the LORD your God...will go with you; he will not leave you... Deuteronomy 31:6b (CSB)*

## FORGIVENESS AWAITS

READ: PSALM 103:9-13; LUKE 23:32-43

**A**ll that I've done...all the people I've hurt... there is no way I'm still worthy of being saved. Jesus might have died for some, but He definitely didn't die for me." She wiped at her eyes with a shaky hand. "There is no way I could be forgiven for all I've done. No way."

"Shh..." Her grandmother touched her shoulder, her hand warm. "Nothing you do can take you too far away from God. Jesus died for all, not just some. You can be forgiven."

"I took too long. I should've turned to Him a long time ago." She shook her head. "I knew that I could've turned to him when I was younger. I knew I could've asked for forgiveness then."

"Sweetheart, it's not too late." Her grandmother cupped her granddaughter's chin in her hands, gently lifting her gaze to see the compassion in her ancient eyes. "The God I serve wants you to know it's never too late. To a criminal on a cross, Jesus said that paradise was waiting. Moments from death, this man was offered forgiveness."

"I'm not good enough."

"You don't have to be. Jesus is enough for you."

"I don't know how to pray."

"I can help."

"I'm scared." She pulled away from her grandmother, turning her gaze down again. "Like, really, really scared."

Her grandmother embraced her. "There's no reason to be scared, sweet girl. Oh, Jesus, come be with my granddaughter right now." *Emily Acker*

🔑 Have you ever felt unworthy of being forgiven and loved by God? Many people feel this way, yet Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead are enough to pay for all our wrongdoing. He forgives everyone who puts their trust in Him. Who are trusted Christians in your life you could talk to about this? (For more about God's forgiveness, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

*Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.  
Psalm 80:19 (NIV)*



## DOING GOOD

READ: LUKE 6:31; GALATIANS 6:9; EPHESIANS 4:32

**P**eople can do good, but there is only one person who did good all His life, and that's Jesus. Even though He is fully God, Jesus came to live among us. He interacted and celebrated with different kinds of people, including the outcasts of society. Jesus was moved with compassion for a widow who had lost her son, and Jesus brought him back to life. Jesus healed a Canaanite woman's daughter who was possessed by a demon, even though this woman was not a Jew (Jesus's ministry started with the Jews and later expanded to all people groups). He healed a great number of people, always without payment. Jesus had compassion for thousands of people and fed them without condition. He did not condemn a woman caught in adultery; He forgave her. Greatest of all, Jesus died for our sins, even though we were His enemies, and He rose from the dead—making a way for us to live forever with Him!

Jesus did other wonderful things mentioned in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). One of Jesus's close friends wrote, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

In everything He does, Jesus reveals the heart of God the Father. He is good, and He made us in His image. We were created to love others as Jesus does. We were made to be kind. And even though sin has tainted our ability to do good, Jesus came to restore what's been broken. As forgiven followers of Jesus, we can love others like Jesus loves us. His Holy Spirit is in us, empowering us to be kind, to forgive, and to bring hope.

There are many ways for you to do this each day. Wherever you are—at home, at school, at work, in the community—you can help others. You can show people respect. You can share what you have. You can pray for others and invite them to draw closer to the Lord, the One who answers prayer. Once you've put your trust in Jesus, you can always choose to be kind because God has planted kindness in your heart. 📖 *Golda Dilema*

🔑 How can remembering Jesus's love for you help you love other people? \_\_\_\_\_

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12 (NIV)*

## COME AS YOU ARE

READ: LUKE 14:15-24; ACTS 10:34-43

**F**lames danced atop golden candelabras, reflecting light from crystal goblets. The marble table was laden with exotic fruits, slices of cheese, and steaming mounds of something that filled the room with a heavenly, mouth-watering scent. The Master smiled and stretched his arms wide. "It is ready! Invite them in." The servant bowed his head in joyful eagerness, then rushed out to do his Master's bidding.

But later, the servant entered his Master's home, a look of bewilderment etched on his face. The Master looked up with eyes of a knowing sorrow, tinged with anger. The servant spilled out each excuse that had been uttered by those who were graciously invited. "Master, why? Have they not been waiting all their lives and then some for this very banquet? And now, to shun your most bountiful invitation...I do not understand."

The Master's eyes blazed with conviction. "Go! Invite all the people to my banquet!" The servant paused on his way out the door. "Good Master—all?" He replied, "Yes! Invite those who are poor, who cannot walk, who are blind...Search the main and the back roads, leave no stone unturned—I want my house to be full!" The servant's face split into a wide grin and he bowed low. "As you wish, Master." He made ready to leave. "And one more thing." Master's softened voice compelled the servant to turn around. "Tell them to come as they are."

Soon, laughter rang out from the open windows of the Master's house. If you were to glimpse inside, it might be shocking. Reclining around a table, some dressed in rags, many rather unsavory and broken-looking people enjoyed a banquet with the Master. No matter their status, their dress, their past mistakes, their current physical ailments, their addictions and scars—the Master had invited them in with open arms.

If you were to listen closely, you might hear praise pouring from the servant's lips. "Ah, yes, my Master! Is he not the most generous and kind? He sees the need and meets it. He looks beyond the outward appearance and focuses on the heart. He cares for those who are sick and downtrodden and opens his arms to those who are poor. He has made a way for all to come in!" 🕯️ *Savannah Coleman*

🕯️ This story is based on a parable Jesus told in Luke 14 when He was eating at a religious leader's house and had just healed someone. What sticks out to you in this story (or the parable)? \_\_\_\_\_

...the same Lord of all richly blesses all who call on him. Romans 10:12 (CSB)

**REMIND ME**

READ: PSALM 70:1-5

**T**houghts waging war upon this tortured soul  
I want to be thankful, I long to have hope  
But some days the darkness won't seem to end  
My eyes are bone dry, my faith feels thin

Send forth Your truth to cut through the attack  
Remind me I'm Yours and I never will lack  
Your unfailing love, compassion, and grace  
Keep me here kneeling and seeking Your face

When each step is pain,  
Despair overwhelming  
Remind me that  
You are the God who sees  
Somehow You'll work this all out  
For my good  
And Your ultimate glory—  
You promised You would

Lord, find me waiting  
For wisdom I plead  
Give me Your courage  
Your perfect peace  *Savannah Coleman*

 Have you ever felt like the author of this poem? We all go through seasons in our lives when the mental or physical pain feels beyond what we are capable of enduring. When oppressive thoughts threaten to overwhelm us, we can be honest with God. Jesus knows firsthand the pain we're facing, and as His followers we can ask Him for help whenever we need it. \_\_\_\_\_

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13 (NIV)*

## THROUGH OUR WORDS

READ: MATTHEW 12:33-36; EPHESIANS 4:25-32; 1 PETER 1:13-16

**O**ftentimes, we do not think before we speak. We can be quick to speak and slow to hear (James 1:19). We tease, tell jokes, and ramble on about things without thinking. And these things may be totally fine, as long as we are not being mean with our words! But we may not often think about the dangers of speaking thoughtlessly. A harshly spoken word can hurt the person we are speaking to. Thoughtlessly spilling secrets can damage a relationship.

First Peter 1:15 says, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” And this includes how we use our words. It sounds impossible! All we say is supposed to be holy? What does “holy” speech look like? Holy speech builds people up. It shows others who Jesus is through love, gentleness, and truth. We embody holy speech when we encourage a friend, lifting their spirits and bringing them joy! Holy speech can also look like offering gentle words of sympathy that soothe a hurting heart. But how do we do this all the time?

The truth of the matter is, on our own it is impossible. But we are not on our own! When we believe in the Lord and trust in Jesus to save us from sin and death through His own death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit then comes into us. He lives inside of us! He renews us and forms us more and more into Jesus’s holy likeness, from our thoughts to our speech to our actions. He helps us glorify the King of the Universe through all our words.

Let us press on to the day ahead of us with this knowledge: through Christ living in us, we can say things that build others up. We can think before we speak. We can glorify God through our words, and we can encourage others to do the same. 🕯

*Marie Mitton*

🕯 Can you remember a time when a person’s words had a strong effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Words can hurt people, but they can also heal. Have you hurt someone with your words? If so, you can take some time to sit with Jesus and lay your guilt down at His feet in prayer. He loves you deeply, and He always forgives. Then, you can ask Him to bring healing to the person you hurt, and maybe you will get to be part of this healing. \_\_\_\_\_

*Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*  
Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)

## YOU ARE NOT TOO YOUNG

READ: PSALM 71:12-17; MATTHEW 19:13-15

I started following Jesus at age thirteen, and I constantly got comments such as, “I can’t believe you’re so young yet have a strong faith!” And yes, those comments are lovely, but they secretly struck my nerves. They made me feel belittled. The way people said my faith inspired them was in a tone that suggested my faith shouldn’t be this important to me yet. Even though this probably isn’t what those people meant, doubts started forming in my mind, and one night, I was sick of it. I cried out to God, asking Him why He chose me at this age.

I felt bad for questioning God’s plan and went to read my Bible app on my phone. It just so happened the verse of the day was 1 Timothy 4:12, which starts out, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young...”

God had answered my prayer. Why did I believe Satan’s lie that I was too young for a relationship with God? Scripture clearly says otherwise. God is infinitely greater than the enemy of our souls—and what He says about us is true. We are called to obey God, no matter what others might think about us! And a few ways to do that are listed at the end of 1 Timothy 4:12: “...in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.”

I love to write, and I can write about the goodness of Christ. Jesus *died* for us so He could be with us. And He rose from the dead, forgiving all who put their trust in Him and defeating Satan and His lies forever. Because of what Jesus has done, God sees me and smiles. He says, “There’s my child,” not, “Oh yeah, there’s that young one who follows me. I forgot about her.”

God never belittles you because of your age. He wants YOU, and you are not too young to have a relationship with Him. 🕯 *Lily Davito*

🕯 In 1 Timothy 4, Paul is writing to Timothy, who is not only a young Christian but also a leader of the church in Ephesus. Like Timothy, you also have gifts to offer the church—God’s family. How might God be inviting you to set an example for Christians of all ages? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Can you think of a time you felt belittled? God wants to heal your hurts, and He invites you to come to Him with all your frustrations, doubts, and questions. \_\_\_\_\_

*Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. 1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV)*

## STRUGGLING TO DECIDE

READ: PSALM 23; ISAIAH 28:29; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

**B**efore I entered middle school, I felt confident I'd join the school band. And I did, playing a trumpet that had belonged to my uncle. Performing with the county-wide honor band was a special memory from that year. By the next fall, our band welcomed a new director, and he envisioned expanding the brass section of our band. Specifically, he sought to add some new French horn players.

I'd known other trumpet players who had moved on to the French horn. It could be an easy transition for me, and I wanted to help meet the needs of the band. Making this choice may seem like a small matter to some people, but not to me. I felt paralyzed as I considered this decision. Didn't I enjoy the trumpet? Would I even play it anymore if I switched to a different band instrument? Was I obligated to make this change because my band director had asked me? I labored over this choice, crying many tears as I wrestled with what to do. Eventually, I elected to switch from one brass instrument to the other. But I wish I'd known then that the help I needed was not so difficult to find.

When we put our trust in Jesus, believing that He died and rose again to rescue us, we begin a relationship with Him and get access to the Lord Himself. As His children, we have an ever-present invitation to go to His throne and pour out our hearts (Hebrews 4:16). We can ask Him to help us work through every decision we face because He loves us and invites us to keep in step with His leading.

All those years ago, I might have chosen to stick with the trumpet instead of switching to the French horn. Either way, God would have led me and walked with me. He never wanted to withhold His help from me—no matter how I struggled with the decision—and He doesn't want to withhold His help from you, either. 📖

*Allison Wilson Lee*

📖 Are you struggling with a decision? God cares about every part of your life, and He offers His help freely. You can talk to Him about what's going on in your life anytime. \_\_\_\_\_

📖 How might remembering we are God's children make it easier for us to come to Him when we're struggling? \_\_\_\_\_

*For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.  
Proverbs 2:6 (CSB)*

## POWER TO RESIST

READ: MATTHEW 4:1-11; EPHESIANS 6:10-17

**W**hen Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, the devil started by challenging Jesus's deity: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread" (Matthew 4:3). Because Jesus is God, He could have turned the stones into bread. (And because Jesus is human, He was very hungry after not eating for forty days.) But Jesus didn't need to prove that He is the Son of God. He simply answered, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is the Word of God (John 1:1-14), and He used God's written Word to resist the devil's temptation.

Sin, or going our own way against God, leads to death, so it makes sense that a loving God would not want us to sin. On our own, we can't resist temptation. Only Jesus could do that, and He set us free from the power of sin when He died and rose from the dead. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we are totally forgiven for all our sin, and God empowers us to stop sinning. His Holy Spirit is in us, helping us turn away from sin and instead come to Jesus. He empowers us to stand against the devil with our offensive weapon: "The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

We can become more familiar with God's written Word (the Bible) by reading it for ourselves and talking about it with other Christians. God calls us to be in community, reminding each other of His faithfulness and encouraging one another to resist temptation. And God gave us a promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure."

Sometimes I submit to temptation because I don't look for the "way out" that God has promised me. Yet I can always ask the Holy Spirit to help me be aware of when the devil is tempting me, and I can rely on Jesus to help me resist that temptation. God will do this because He is faithful to keep His promises. 🔑

*Sharon J. Morris*

🔑 Sometimes we sin because we don't trust that God will satisfy all our needs. When Jesus was in the wilderness, how did God meet His needs? \_\_\_\_\_

*I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Psalm 119:11 (NLT)*

## SWALLOWING UP THE IDOLS

READ: DEUTERONOMY 5:6-10; ACTS 19:8-20; HEBREWS 12:1-3

I pulled the borrowed blue coat tighter around me and followed our guide. I hadn't expected the weather in Iceland to feel so cold in May.

After graduating from college, I'd ministered for a year in Romania and then returned to my hometown. When my younger brother completed his own degree, we went on a backpacking adventure around Iceland. First, we spent a few days near the capitol then traveled to a town near the Arctic Circle. We joined a group exploring an area called Lake Myvatn. We climbed in dormant volcanic craters and observed snow melting at the edges of creeks flowing with geothermally heated water. I marveled at the glory of God's creation.

However, the most awe-inspiring display of the Maker's creativity that we witnessed was the waterfall Godafoss, "waterfall of the gods." Our guide explained the history of this colossal cascade of water: Around the turn of the tenth century, there was a massive meeting of the pagan parliament and the Christian parliament that could have easily turned violent. They couldn't agree on whether Christianity should become the national religion. Eventually they all decided that Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði, a pagan priest and leader in the pagan parliament, should make the decision. After a day and night in silent contemplation (some sources say he spent this time under his fur cloak), he said that Christianity should be the national religion but that people may practice paganism privately in their own homes as long as they didn't practice publicly.

Although he himself had been a pagan priest, Þorgeir Ljósvetningagoði chose Christianity. According to legend, he then expressed his own faith conversion by throwing his Norse idols into Godafoss. Beginning his life in Christ, this man flung his idols where they could never be retrieved.

God's power—stronger than that tremendous surge of water—takes us out of sin and brings us into life in Christ when we trust Him for forgiveness. God's might overcomes our idols, whether they are physical representations of false gods or other created things we pursue when we doubt God can satisfy our needs and desires. Christ's victory, shown in His death and resurrection, conquers our idols and brings us into the life that is truly life. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

*"You shall have no other gods before me." Exodus 20:3 (WEB)*

🔑 In Acts 19:8-20, we see that “many of those [new Christians] who practiced magical arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all” (verse 19). Why do you think these new Christians burned their old sorcery books? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

🔑 Is there anything in your life that is keeping you from following Jesus with your whole heart? Who is a trusted Christian you could talk to about this? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## LONGING FOR ACCEPTANCE

READ: GENESIS 3:6-13; 1 SAMUEL 16:1-7

**T**heir opinion meant the world to me. Their acceptance was what I craved. Their attention was what I longed for. I was an outsider with the popular girls. They laughed at me, not with me. They talked about me, not to me. Their rejection was the framework I built my self-worth on. I was nothing to them, so I thought I must be nothing at all. I based my value on others' opinions and not on God's.

God is the Creator of everything. Adam and Eve found wholeness and acceptance in God's eyes as they lived in the garden of Eden. Looks, hairstyles, and their lack of clothing did not concern them. It was only after they went their own way against God—and sin entered the world—that they became aware of their nakedness and attempted to hide from God. Since that time, humans have struggled with self-worth and acceptance. We long to be liked, noticed, appreciated, and deemed worthwhile...and we look to other humans to satisfy this longing.

Jesus didn't come to earth to be popular and accepted by the world. On the contrary, He was persecuted, despised, and rejected by people (Isaiah 53:3-6). He came because God loves us. Our sin separates us from God, but He longs for us to be close to Him again. He wants to accept us into His family. Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead are what allow us to be reconciled to our Holy God. When we put our trust in Jesus to forgive our sins, we become holy and blameless in God's eyes (Ephesians 5:25-27), and we become part of His people.

Once you are redeemed by Jesus, you are invited to communicate with the Creator of the universe. He is the one who made you—carefully, purposefully. His opinion is what matters. As you grow in relationship with Him, you will find peace in His steadfast love and acceptance. The world may laugh, people may jeer and judge, but the Lord's Word and His promises stand forever. He loves you with an unending love. You are precious in His sight. And Jesus knew you were worth dying for. 🕯 *Erin Nestico*

🕯 When have you felt like an outsider? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Have you made others feel like outsiders? God loves you, and He invites you to come to Him, confess your sins, pray for those you've hurt, and rely on Him to help you love others.

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7 (NIV)*

## HEALING LOVE

READ: ISAIAH 55:6-7; JAMES 4:7-10

**F**leeing from my mind,  
My fractured soul  
How far I run  
I do not know.

Attacking my heart,  
Emotions, burning  
Branding me within,  
Fear inside churning.

Alone, I shout out,  
"LORD, HELP ME,"  
Falling down, I pray,  
"Jesus, please save me,"

Silence...until  
My tears tumbling down,  
Barriers crumble within,  
Peace is found.

Fragmented soul  
You, Jesus, restore.  
Sadness turns into joy,  
Healing me once more.  *Cindy Lee*

 When life is too much for us, when our thoughts are churning inside us, it's natural to feel like running away. But Jesus, our loving Savior, invites us to run to Him (Matthew 11:28-30). He died and rose again, and He will free us from the anguish inside our souls as we draw near to Him. What is weighing on you today? How might Jesus be inviting you to come to Him? \_\_\_\_\_

*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor. James 4:10 (NLT)*

## SHINE HIS LOVE

READ: MATTHEW 5:14-16; JOHN 13:34; ROMANS 12:14-21

**T**here will always be people who bring you down, and you can choose one of two responses: revenge or love. Some people say hate your enemies, but Jesus calls us to love and pray for our enemies—like He did. When Jesus was submitting Himself to die on the cross, there were people mocking Him, beating Him, and spitting on Him. How did Jesus handle this? He said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). This boggles my mind. Most people would try to strike back. So why didn’t Jesus?

Because Jesus is the Son of God, fully God and fully human, who lives in perfect obedience to God the Father. God loves us, even though we all sin against Him. He loves us so much that He sent Jesus to rescue us from sin. By enduring death and raising to life again, Jesus made a way for us to be forgiven and live with Him forever! Once we’ve put our trust in Jesus, His love changes us, and His Holy Spirit is in us, transforming us to be more and more like Jesus. While the enemy tempts us to try to get revenge when people cause us pain, God calls us to handle these situations differently. Through Jesus, God empowers us to shine His love.

There was a girl in my class who spoke harshly, and she was rude to everyone. But, through God’s grace, I still chose to be kind to her. Every day, I asked her how she was doing. I also invited her to come to church with me. One day, she thanked me for being so kind to her. I found out later that she had some really hard stuff going on at home.

I’ve come to realize that most people hurt others because they are hurting. God sees all this brokenness, and He has compassion on us. As Jesus’s forgiven followers, we’re called to have empathy and compassion for others. We can shine His love to people even when they are harsh, because God empowers us to love everyone.

While you may never know the hurt behind someone’s rudeness, you might be the only person in their life who treats them with kindness. Remember God’s great love for you and how He empowers you to shine His love to everyone. 🕯️ *Talia Dahlman*

🕯️ How does God’s love make it possible for us to love others? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ If someone has been cruel to you, God hurts with you and offers healing through Jesus. How might knowing that God cares about justice help you not take revenge (Romans 12:17-19)? Who are trusted Christians who can help you discern when and how to set up healthy boundaries? \_\_\_\_\_

*“But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44 (NIV)*

## GOOD GUILT, BAD GUILT

READ: PSALM 51; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-13

**G**uilt is hard. Sometimes, Satan will try to convince us that we are guilty of something terrible when we really aren't. This "bad guilt" tells us the lie that we are irredeemable, unlovable people. We can become discouraged and paralyzed, unable to do anything good. But in these times, we can come to Jesus, give our struggle over to Him in prayer, and rest knowing that we are made clean and new by Jesus's death and resurrection.

There are also times guilt can be helpful. The Holy Spirit uses "good guilt" to gently show us a specific way that we've disobeyed God. When our attitudes, words, or actions damage our relationships with others or God, good guilt shows us that we need healing and restoration.

In Psalm 51, we see David's good guilt. He had done something evil: he used his position as king of Israel to bring Bathsheba to his palace, have sex with her, and then have her husband killed. When David realized the evil of what he had done, he wept and repented, and he looked for ways to make things right. While David still had to face the consequences of his actions, his good guilt led him to restoration with God and others (2 Samuel 11-12).

We also see good guilt in 2 Corinthians 7. This is the second letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, and his first letter contained some pretty strong words about ways they were not following God. Paul knew that disobeying God's good commands would cause a lot of hurt, so it broke his heart to see that these people he loved were sinning. After reading Paul's first letter, they felt good guilt, and as they repented and turned to God, the Holy Spirit helped them follow God more closely. So when Paul wrote this second letter, he rejoiced with them!

Guilt never feels good. But good guilt leads to good change. While bad guilt (or false guilt) imprisons us in shame, good guilt spurs us on to pursue healing. It pushes us closer to Jesus and to each other. The Holy Spirit never tells us we're irredeemable, instead He invites us to come to Jesus, who always forgives and restores. 📖 *Taylor Eising*

📖 Do you feel guilty about anything right now? You can spend time with Jesus in prayer anytime, asking Him if this is good guilt or bad guilt. If it's good guilt, you can confess your sin to Him, rest in His forgiveness, and ask Him to guide you in how to move forward. If it's bad guilt, you can bring it to Jesus and ask Him to remind you what's true about you (Ephesians 5:25-27). \_\_\_\_\_

*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)*

## TRUSTWORTHY

READ: GENESIS 39:1-5, 19-23; 41:37-41

**J**oseph is only seventeen when his story begins—and he is having serious problems! Joseph is the youngest of eleven brothers and his father’s favorite. Even before their father has a colorful coat made just for Joseph, his brothers clearly hate him. Maybe the way Joseph talks about his “special” dreams is simply the last straw.

One day Joseph’s brothers spot him in the distance, coming to check on them as they tend the flocks. Realizing they are alone in the wilderness, they quickly plot to kill him, but thanks to Reuben, the oldest brother, they decide to throw him into an old well instead. Most of them are willing to let him die. But wait—a better opportunity! Along comes a caravan of traders, pleased to purchase a healthy young slave in exchange for twenty pieces of silver.

Thus, Joseph now finds himself in Egypt, a slave to an officer named Potiphar. However, “the LORD was with Joseph, giving him success in everything he did” (Genesis 39:3). Potiphar notices Joseph’s good work and trustworthy character and places him in charge of his entire household. Things are looking up! Then, another disaster. Potiphar’s wife lusts after Joseph and demands, “Come and sleep with me” (Genesis 39:7), but he refuses her, saying he cannot violate his master’s trust, nor “sin against God” (Genesis 39:8-9). Probably feeling insulted and angry, she lies about Joseph, and Potiphar throws him into prison. Great—first slavery, now prison!

Yet, “the LORD was with him [Joseph] and caused everything he did to succeed” (Genesis 39:23). Success? In prison? Yes, even in terrible situations God is there and He is working. Joseph was eventually released from prison, and he became second in command to Pharaoh! Through interpreting dreams, God helped Joseph prepare for a famine that was coming, and when Joseph had a chance to pay back his brothers for what they did to him, instead Joseph forgave them and provided for their families. God worked through Joseph to save His people.

And Joseph’s life foreshadows Jesus’s life. Jesus was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, then treated as a criminal even though He had done nothing wrong. By dying on the cross for our sin and raising again, Jesus provided the way for all people to be saved. If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, He empowers us to be trustworthy and invites us to be part of what He’s doing. And just as God was with Joseph, He is with us—our most trustworthy Friend. 🕯️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯️ How does Joseph’s life reveal that God is worthy of our trust? \_\_\_\_\_

*The LORD was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did. Genesis 39:2a (NLT)*

## AFTER A BREAKUP

READ: PSALM 34:4-18

It's over!" The shocking words crush you. "I'm breaking up with you." Your emotions are in turmoil. What can you do? First of all, don't bottle up the suffering, as this is damaging in the long term. Instead, acknowledge your pain. Take time to adjust. People tend to respond to breakups in a few different ways:

**Sadness:** The end of a relationship can feel like a bereavement. When you've become accustomed to spending time with someone and sharing your plans and dreams, losing them can create an aching void.

**Deflation:** Sometimes, after we experience a rejection, feelings of emptiness and low self-esteem can follow. *What is wrong with me? Why am I not good enough?* We might start wondering if we are inadequate.

**Anger:** It's common to feel frustrated or bitter with yourself and/or the person who broke up with you. Thoughts can spiral. *Why was I such a fool? Why did you break up with me?*

So how can you cope in the aftermath of a breakup? Allow yourself grieving and alone time. Jesus took time to be alone with God. He took time to weep. And Jesus has compassion on you in this moment. He loves you with an unchanging, never-give-up kind of love. He invites you to come to Him and receive His comfort. And if you're feeling angry, you can talk to God about it. Remember that anger comes with energy, so it helps to channel this energy into something positive like exercise, a sport, or a new project.

Breaking up with someone can be devastating. It hurts, and it can be hard to move on. Remember, you are loved deeply by the Creator. He made you on purpose and wants the best for you. If you've put your trust in Jesus, you can know that God will never abandon you. His love is divine and unfathomable. He understands your brokenness, your pain, and your innermost thoughts. As you look back on memories with the person you dated, you can rely on His comfort. And as you move forward, you can follow His trustworthy leading. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 What questions do you have about dating? Who is a trusted Christian adult in your life you feel comfortable talking to about dating? (If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future.) \_\_\_\_\_

*He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds. Psalm 147:3 (CSB)*

## SOLID FOUNDATION

READ: MATTHEW 7:24-27; LUKE 6:46-49; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:9-16

**T**he builder surveyed the land eagerly. His arms were strong for the task, his mind sharp. Every builder knew a strong foundation was the most crucial element, and this house was no exception. Jars of cement mixtures labeled in colorful script glistened in the morning sunlight, begging to be chosen. The builder gripped a jar with calloused fingers: “Family,” he read. After a moment’s pause, he opened the jar and lifted his shovel. No one could deny the importance of family. Surely this would be a solid foundation.

Months passed and the structure grew, admired by all who passed by. The builder was tempted to hang up his hat in satisfaction, for it seemed his work was complete. But then, the storm came. The rain poured down in torrents and the winds blew relentlessly against the beautiful house—and it fell with a mighty crash.

In the years to follow, the builder, never one to give up when things got difficult, resolved to find the one foundation that would survive even the deadliest of storms. He chose an emerald green jar titled: “Wealth.” He tried a glistening gold one with the word “Approval” etched in the glass. In desperation, he seized one that read “Strength,” but this too resulted in catastrophic failure and the collapse of all his hard work.

Blinking back tears of defeat, the weary builder rummaged through the remaining jars half-heartedly. In the midst of all the shimmering colors vying for his attention lay a clear, solidly constructed jar. It wasn’t fancy, and its glass didn’t catch the light, but the builder knew it was well-made. The word on it was written in bold scarlet red: “Jesus.”

As people meandered by the builder’s finished house, there were few exclamations of beauty. The years passed with several devastating storms ripping through the land. With each tempest, many were drawn to see how the builder’s house fared. Those who regarded the house agreed it was not the most prominent or majestic, yet one thing was indisputable: this house had a solid foundation. 📌

*Savannah Coleman*

📌 This story is inspired by a parable Jesus told. Family is important, good friends are a blessing, and improving your health and mind are worthy pursuits, but Jesus gives the only foundation that can stand the test of time. He alone can save us. What are you building your life on? \_\_\_\_\_

*“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” Matthew 7:24 (CSB)*

## READ IT AGAIN

READ: ISAIAH 55:8-11

I love when God speaks to me in new ways. Have you ever been reading a passage of Scripture that you've read a number of times before, but something new stands out to you, and you feel like you're reading it for the first time? That happened to me today.

Sometimes I start to skim through passages when I think I already know what they offer. "Yes, yes," I say. "I know what's about to happen, and I know what the whole point of this is going to be." I feel like I'm saving time by just hurrying through these sections.

When I slow down, though, and I'm willing to listen to what God is speaking, He often reveals messages in a fresh way, even if the passage is one I've heard countless times. Sometimes He helps me see a verse that I've never noticed before. Or He helps me understand things in a way that I didn't previously. A message in the passage I'm reading can be applicable to a specific situation that I'm in, and I can grasp its meaning more deeply. Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is alive and active." The Bible is breathed out by God, and He has many, many messages to share with us.

When Christians read the Bible, we have a special connection to what we read because the Bible is about Jesus—and we know Him! The central message of the Bible is the gospel: the good news that God saves us through Jesus's death and resurrection. Once we put our trust in Jesus, He sends the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth (John 16:12-15). Throughout our lives, He continues to unfold His wonderful mysteries to us as we seek Him. *Emily Acker*

🔑 Have you ever read something familiar in the Bible and been tempted to skip over it? Why might it be important to revisit familiar passages? \_\_\_\_\_

*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)*



## BEGGING GOD TO PAY ATTENTION

READ: PSALM 74:10-23; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-6

**T**here are times when it feels like God isn't paying attention to the things that are going on here on earth. The author of Psalm 74 felt this way too and begged God to reach down and help those who were being mistreated and oppressed.

When we feel like the world is in chaos and God isn't seeing things, we can be honest with Him and tell Him our frustrations. As we come to Him, He assures us that He does see what's happening, He reminds us that He is always working, and He promises that He will bring about justice in the end. When Jesus came and lived among us, He revealed that God loves us deeply and wants to be intimately involved in the mess of the world. Jesus had compassion for the oppressed, He brought healing and hope, and He took all the world's suffering on Himself when He went to the cross. When Jesus rose from the dead, He defeated sin and all its effects.

If we've put our trust in Jesus, God invites us to be part of the good things He is doing. When we see people suffering on the street, God invites us to cry out for Him to do something. We can ask God to heal their hurts and help them. When we hear of people dying all around the world, we can cry out to God for help. We can ask Him to move in power and stop violence, and to show Himself to people so that they do not die without knowing Him. As we notice and pray, God might give us opportunities to bless people, or He might just be calling us to pray for them and trust Him with the rest.

When we hear of injustices and people who are hurting, we can cry out as the psalmist did. We can ask God to pay attention to the things going on here on earth, knowing that He sees, He cares, and He responds to the prayers of His people. *Emily Acker*



- 🔑 Do you ever feel like God isn't paying attention? How might today's Bible passages speak into this? \_\_\_\_\_
- 🔑 What hurts do you see in the world today? Do you feel like you can talk to God about these? \_\_\_\_\_

*Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth. Psalm 54:2 (NIV)*

## WHERE YOUR IDENTITY LIES

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 1:21-22; EPHESIANS 1:11-14

One of the biggest issues I struggled with in middle school was the overwhelming pressure to find an identity. Most of my friends had their “things”—hobbies, talents, or interests that seemed to define them as a person. I had a few interests and practiced several activities, but I thought that because I hadn’t locked into one skill and perfected it, I was missing out. As it turned out, I had been consuming lies about my identity that I hadn’t even been aware of.

During my first year of high school, I went to a Christian summer camp. This experience is one of the most valuable of my life, not just because I had fun, but because I redefined what identity meant for me as a Christian. As I listened during our chapel gatherings, this caught my attention: If your hope and confidence are based on achievement, then when you fail, your feeling of significance—and your happiness—will crumble.

If you remember anything when you feel lost, remember this: You are not an athlete, an artist, an academic, or any other temporary label. These may be things you do, but they are not who you are. According to the Bible, you are a child of God. You do not have to perform for God’s love and affirmation. You already have it. You don’t have to be afraid of failure. If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you are already forgiven and faultless in God’s sight. Through Jesus, God has already made you victorious. And you are part of His people, the church—you never have to earn a place in God’s family!

Don’t listen to identity lies. Because you are a child of God, I know that you have God-given talents. They may not be something physical, like painting or playing sports; they may be gifts of encouragement, compassion, patience, or the ability to make others feel accepted. Whatever your talents are, you can be free to embrace them joyfully, without being weighed down by the pressure to perform. If you know Jesus, your identity is secure in Him—and nobody can shake that. Talents may come and go throughout your life, but Jesus’s unconditional love will last forever. 📖

*Sophia Grogg*

📖 Do you feel the need to become better than others at particular hobbies or activities, even if they aren’t competitive skills? God invites us to talk to Him about these pressures. \_\_\_\_\_

*See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! 1 John 3:1a (NLT)*

## TROUBLES CAN INSPIRE

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7

**H**ave you ever been content, then out of nowhere a problem or difficult situation replayed itself in your mind? You are not alone. One day, during some solitary time with God, a troubling memory flashed inside. It clouded my mind, and heaviness rested in my heart as I relived a particular trial I'd had. The remembrance of praying, blindly moving forward in trust, and the sheer slog of persevering returned. As I struggled through these feelings, a thought entered my heart: *Difficulties can give you strength and determination. They can help you empathize with others and be a testimony.*

The sadness threatening to ruin my day was replaced with hope that God is working for the good of His people in all situations (Romans 8:28). God can take stressful times, whether caused by school, a loss, a challenging event, or even trauma...and use them to provide us with blessings not only for ourselves, but for others too. God can use this terrible experience to bring about something good, like helping us grow in empathy and understanding. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can rely on Him to give us courage to walk through the challenges in our lives. And as we walk with Him, He draws us into a closer relationship with Himself.

As we walk with Jesus, our experiences, both positive and negative, can assist others. Bad things happen because sin has invaded God's good world. And sin has invaded our hearts, so we all rebel against God, hurt each other, and mess up. But the wonderful news is that Jesus came to heal all this brokenness through His death and resurrection. And because of His work in our lives, the trials we face can become landmarks, reminding us that God's love is steadfast, and He gives us strength beyond our imagination so that we can follow Him even in the midst of difficult situations. This can serve others as they witness how Jesus is working in our lives and find hope. Let's not allow the scars of our lives to define us, but instead use them to tell others about God's healing, extending the same comfort that God has given us. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 Have you ever felt encouraged by seeing how Jesus worked in someone else's life? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Are you going through a challenge right now? How might God be inviting you to receive His comfort today? Who is a trusted adult who could help guide you through this time? \_\_\_\_\_

*...we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.  
2 Corinthians 1:4b (NIV)*

# BEING PRESENT

READ: PSALM 19

**T**he rich scent of trees and earth fill the deep woods. Waves of alternating warm and cool breezes wash over your skin as you step from the shadows to the sunlight and back again.

Bright eyes of a cherished friend sharing a story. Wide smiles and wrinkled hands of the ones who have been there for years. Holding on to these moments that slip by far too quickly.

Rushing out the door, heart squeezing. The list is never-ending, the clock keeps on ticking. Hurrying by the friend struggling with a load to carry. Taking air in your lungs, but not breathing deep. Not allowing your fingers to linger on the cat’s soft fur or the rough bark on a tree you pass.

Being present is...a struggle. We all have demands on our time, deadlines to make, life to live. But even as we feel the push and pull of hurry, we don’t have to be mastered by it. Being present in the midst of daily life is a choice...one we have to practice. We can make time to see, hear, feel—just be in the moment God has given us. Choosing to slow down and really feel the sun on your skin, breathe deeply of a flower, gaze into the eyes of a loved one—these choices are honoring to the God who has given us good gifts (James 1:17).

God wants to give us an abundant life, a full life (John 10:10). He sent us His one and only Son, Jesus, so that we could experience the freedom and fullness of life with Him. His invitation is, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Throughout His Word, God reminds us to meditate on His unfailing love for us (Psalm 48:9). If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, He has freed us from a life ruled by rush and worry; instead, He calls us to seek His Kingdom first and focus on today (Matthew 6:31-34). Through the Holy Spirit, He helps us to be present and rest in the presence of Jesus. *✦ Savannah Coleman*

✦ Like David did in Psalm 19, you can allow your heart to take in the beauty of God’s creation and consider His unchanging goodness. What is one of your favorite things God has made? \_\_\_\_\_

✦ God created us to have sweet relationship with Him, to lovingly linger, to gaze at His beauty and enjoy His creation. How might being present to our surroundings help us grow closer to God? \_\_\_\_\_

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

## HOUSE OF WISDOM

READ: ISAIAH 30:21; JOHN 1; 6:60-69

**T**here was a golden engraving on the massive wooden door in front of me: “House of Wisdom” it read. Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the door. Inside, my eyes were greeted by a plush entryway, red velvet under my feet, and glistening ruby walls. A curved, golden staircase stretched up farther than I could see. “Come higher,” a soft whisper beckoned. The rubies sparkled on the walls, pulling at me. Perhaps if I just pocketed one or two...I was tempted, but that still small voice was greater. Ignoring the urge to indulge in the temporary treasure, I ascended the staircase.

At the top of the stairs, there were two closed doors. My heart felt conflicted within me—which one to open? I knelt on the carpet and breathed a prayer: “Show me the way.” The door to my left was made of ornate topaz, the one on the right of simple wood, but strongly built. As I watched and waited, I heard the voice call from beyond the wooden door: “This is the way. Walk in it.” Emboldened, I twisted the knob and entered through the wooden door.

The room I entered was filled with treasures. I marveled at bowls overflowing with amethysts, a pearl as large as my fist, a mirror inlaid with sapphire. In the center of the room was a throne made of emerald, and on it was a book. The voice echoed through the room: “What is wisdom? Choose wisely.”

My heart pounded in trepidation—what if I chose the wrong thing? What was wisdom, really? I approached the book and knew at once it was the Word of Life. My fingers brushed the feather-light pages of the Word and I read: “The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom. The knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). Sweet relief flooded my soul. “This. This is wisdom,” I spoke with confidence. Immediately, the Word was transformed into a Lamb. As the Lamb gazed into my eyes, I felt my entire soul was bare before Him. I fell down in worship. The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, is the true treasure. To seek and find Him is the greatest form of wisdom. 🕯️ *Savannah Coleman*

*Through wisdom a house is built;  
by understanding it is established;  
by knowledge the rooms are filled  
with all rare and beautiful treasure.  
Proverbs 24:3-4 (WEB)*



- 🔑 In this allegorical story, the search for wisdom leads to Jesus, who is the Word of God and the Lamb of God. In the Old Testament, the Jewish Passover lamb pointed to Jesus (if you want to dig deeper, read Exodus 11-12). While animal sacrifices had to be made again and again to pay for people's sin (or wrongdoing), Jesus's death on a cross took the punishment for the sins of the whole world. And when Jesus rose back to life, He defeated sin and death once and for all! Jesus knows us fully, and He loves us completely. If we've put our trust in Him, we are forgiven, and we get to enjoy life with God. First Corinthians 1-2 tells us that Jesus Christ is our wisdom. As we worship Him, He leads us in wisdom.
- 🔑 When Jesus came to earth and lived among us, He was born into a common family, not a royal one. When Jesus grew up, He worked as a carpenter and He was not wealthy. Why do you think Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, came to earth in this way? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_
- 🔑 While God doesn't promise Christians worldly wealth in this life, He gives us something far greater. Through Jesus, "we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he made to abound toward us in all wisdom..." (Ephesians 1:7-8). And when Jesus returns, we will live and reign with Him in renewed creation! In the meantime, God invites us to ask Him for wisdom (James 1:5). According to James 3:13-18, how can we tell when wisdom is from God? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## SERVING EACH OTHER

READ: MATTHEW 23:11; JOHN 13:1-17

**W**e were all lined up for the egg toss contest. Jack threw our team's egg, and... *SPLAT!* The raw egg hit my new pink blouse and broke. As it slid down the front, it left a long trail. Jack laughed so hard, his body spiraled down to the ground like water draining out of a sink. He didn't seem to mind that the *splat* meant we had lost the egg toss contest.

Jack and I were part of the same church youth group. It wasn't unusual for him to fall. Unsteady on his feet, he had difficulty walking. None of us knew what caused this. He never said, and we never asked. We just accepted it. And Jack. When he fell, we had learned not to try to help him up. Our role was to wait until he got up on his own. After that, we all continued with what we had been doing.

One year, our youth group's weekend camp retreat included a foot-washing service, following the example Jesus gave us when He washed His disciples' feet on the night before He went to the cross. We proceeded in silence as our guest speaker read Scripture aloud. My partner and I sat in chairs facing each other. "I have to be really gentle and careful," I told myself when I saw Jack's feet in front of me. Praying the entire time, I wondered how I would get the towel under his feet to wash them. Could Jack move his feet to help? If I rotated them, would I break a bone in his legs? I thought about only washing the tops of his feet. That wasn't the answer either. Jack was one of us. I would treat him that way. There was only one option left. I got up out of my seat and knelt on the cold concrete floor. I reached under Jack's feet and thoroughly washed and dried them.

I washed dozens of feet that day. Only once did I feel fully like a servant. When I left my chair—and my comfort zone—and got on my knees to wash Jack's feet. 🕯

*Kathy Irey*

🕯 When Jesus washed His disciples' feet, what did He tell them? (John 13:1-17) \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Why do you think Jesus calls His followers to serve one another in love? (Galatians 5:13) How might God be inviting you to serve other people in your life today? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Do you have mobility issues or have friends who do? It's always a good idea to ask someone what they're comfortable with or if they want help. People with mobility issues usually know what would be the most helpful, so you don't need to be afraid to ask.

*Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others. 1 Corinthians 10:24 (NLT)*

## NETS

READ: LUKE 4:31-37; 5:1-11

**T**he night had been long. Simon felt bone-weary as he cleaned his fishing nets. There on the shore, surrounded by a large crowd, was Jesus. This man had already healed many. He taught with such authority; He had even driven out a demon who called Him “the Holy One of God.”

Simon was wondering what Jesus would do next, when Jesus stepped into Simon’s boat...and looked at him in a way that made Simon feel seen and known. Jesus asked Simon to move his boat to the shallows. Shrugging, Simon complied, and Jesus sat down and continued teaching from the boat. When Jesus finished speaking to the people, He turned to Simon and said, “Put out into deep water, and let the nets down for a catch.”

Feeling like he needed to clean the wax out of his ears, Simon shook his head in bewilderment. No one fished during the day. He said, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” Simon signaled his partners, James and John, and together they lowered their nets into the water.

After a moment, James yelled, “John, Simon, look!” They peered over the side of the boat and gasped. “There’s already a bunch of fish in the nets!” The boat began to tip at the sheer number of fish flowing into the nets, their bodies shimmering in the morning sunlight.

John signaled more of their partners in a separate boat for help. The muscles in Simon’s arms strained as he gripped the net with all his strength. “The boats are sinking—there’s just so many fish!” James threw his head back and laughed in wonder. Simon looked at Jesus and fell at His feet. Surely this Jesus was more than just a man. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

📖 This story is how one author imagines Luke 5:1-8. Why do you think Simon did what Jesus asked? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 What did Simon say when he fell at Jesus’s feet, and why do you think he said that? What did Jesus say in response? (Luke 5:8-10) \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Who is Jesus? Simon (later renamed Peter) followed Jesus, and God revealed His true identity to him. Simon Peter was the first of the disciples to say that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:13-18). To find out more about who Jesus is, check out page 104.

*So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. Luke 5:11 (NIV)*

## GOD IS ON OUR SIDE

READ: PSALM 9

**N**o one cares what happens to me," you mumble, wrinkling up the paper you'd been writing on. "What's the point of even trying?"

We've all had times when it felt like it was us against the world. We had a problem we needed to tackle, and we didn't feel any support from anyone as we tried to take it on. We've all had times when we've felt alone and like no one really understands what we're going through or cares about what happens to us.

In times when you feel like no one cares, God does. In times when you feel like you're battling alone, God is with you. There is no one better to have on your side than the God who sees all that is happening and is with you no matter where you go. There is no one better to have on your side than the One who made you and cares about you deeply.

We face many tough situations in this life, but we have a God who goes to battle for us. In Psalm 9, David writes about God defeating his enemies for him, and that same God is on our side when we feel alone. This Psalm looks forward to when God would come and live among us. Jesus defeated the enemy when He died on the cross and rose from the dead to save us. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know He is with us no matter what. And we can look forward to the day Jesus will return, and sin and all its effects will be no more. Until that day, the Holy Spirit reminds us God is present with us in every moment, including this one. 🕯

*Emily Acker*

🕯 Do you ever feel like it's you against the world and no one is around to support you? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Can you think of a time you felt sure God was with you? If so, consider taking a moment to thank Him for this. If not, you can ask Him to let you know He's with you anytime. \_\_\_\_\_

*Yahweh, your God, is among you, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will calm you in his love. He will rejoice over you with singing.*  
Zephaniah 3:17 (WEB)



## PRAY FOR YOUR ENEMY

READ: MATTHEW 5:43-48; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5; EPHESIANS 4:31-32

**W**ho is my enemy? I feel like anyone who hurts me in some way is an enemy in that moment. I know I get hurt a lot, so I get lots of opportunities to pray for my enemies!

How can I do this? Asking God for wisdom in how to pray is step number one. Each of my enemies has a different personality and different needs. Even when I don't know what they need, I can ask God to bless them anyway (Romans 8:26-27). Only God, who made that person, fully understands why they are treating me in such a mean way. There is a saying, "Hurt people, hurt people." Most of the time when someone hurts me, it's because they've been hurt. And I may not be the cause of their hurt. They could be lashing out about something that happened days, weeks, or even years ago that still hurts them.

Another way I can pray for my enemy is to think about how I feel when I'm hurt and someone comforts me. Then I ask God to comfort that person, either in the same way I would want to be comforted or in a way that meets their specific needs. I can even ask God to help me comfort them if that's what He is inviting me to do.

It's also important to share with God when we've been hurt and tell Him how we're feeling. He cares about our hurts, and He wants to heal us just as He wants to heal the person who hurt us. When I'm hurt, my first response is often anger. Feeling angry is NOT sin. Instead, the Bible tells me: "Don't sin by letting anger control you" (Ephesians 4:26). When I get angry and retaliate by hurting the person who hurt me, I am sinning. But when I get angry and make the decision to give my hurts over to Jesus and pray for my enemy, I am acting like Jesus.

Jesus showed us this same forgiveness while He was on the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Even while we were His enemies, Jesus made a way for us to be fully restored to relationship with God (Romans 5:10), and now He works in us, empowering us to forgive even our enemies. 🕯️ *Sharon J. Morris*

🕯️ Who are you struggling to forgive right now? A friend? Family member? Teacher? Yourself? Consider spending some time sitting with Jesus in prayer, asking Him to heal you and the person who hurt you. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Navigating broken relationships can be complicated. If you aren't sure what forgiveness looks like in a particular situation, who can you ask for guidance?

*"But I [Jesus] say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" Matthew 5:44 (NLT)*

## THE HAWK

READ: ROMANS 6:1-12; HEBREWS 2:14-18

**O**ne morning, while out for a nature walk, I observed a group of tiny sparrows mobbing a large hawk perched in a tree. Why did they do that, when the hawk was so much bigger than them? Well, while the hawk looked harmless perched in a tree doing nothing, the sparrows knew it was a threat to their safety, their young, and other animals. The sparrows didn't want a dangerous predator looming over them, so they continued to swoop and dive at the hawk until it finally flew away.

Watching the sparrows chase away the hawk reminded me of sin in our lives. The violence of these birds is just one instance of the brokenness that entered creation when humans first went their own way against God. Like the hawk, sin may not *seem* dangerous, but its impact is huge, and even a “small” sin can have devastating results. Our sin affects more than just us; it hurts those around us. Sin is rebellion against God, the One who loves us and created the world good. Our sin brought death and suffering into the world, and every one of us has sinned, fallen short of God's goodness (Romans 3:23; James 1:14-15).

But God made a way for us to be free from sin through His Son, Jesus. He came to live among us and reveal God's love for us. He lived without ever sinning, died for our sins, and rose back to life—victorious over sin and death. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we are forgiven and brought near to God. Because of our new life in Jesus, we don't have to live under the tyranny of sin anymore.

So what can we do when sin and temptation threaten our lives? We can be like the sparrows and chase them away! Because the Holy Spirit is in Christians, we have the power to turn away from sin and follow Jesus instead. And God also provides community—fellow Christians to walk alongside us, help us be aware of the influences that surround us, encourage us to choose our actions wisely, and remind us of God's unfailing love and forgiveness. If something in our lives keeps causing us to sin, we can get rid of it. When temptations come, we can follow Jesus's example and fight off temptation with Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11). Sin may seem like a powerful enemy, but Jesus overcame sin and temptation. Because His Holy Spirit gives us His strength, we can too. 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ When we are tempted to sin, how does God help us? (1 Corinthians 10:13) \_\_\_\_\_

*So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. James 4:7 (NLT)*

## WHEN WE MESS UP

READ: PSALM 32:5; LUKE 15:11-32

In Luke 15, Jesus tells a parable where a father has two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance, even though his father is still alive. The father does not scold his son but willingly and freely gives him the inheritance, although it was not the usual thing to do—and the way the son treated his father was very rejecting.

The son soon goes to another country where he spends everything on wild living. When his last money is gone and there is a famine in the land, he feeds pigs just so he can live. He then comes to realize that he made a mistake by leaving his family. He decides to go back to his father and ask to take the role not of a son but of a servant. He journeys home humble.

When the father sees his son from a distance, he runs toward him, then embraces and accepts him as if no offense was made. Even though his son's actions hurt him, the father does not hold this against him but rejoices that he is home.

Like the son in this parable, we all mess up. Since humans first went their own way against God, we all sin—purposefully doing wrong. So often we do not think through decisions, or we merely follow our passions instead of following the God who loves us. But God invites us to come home to Him by putting our trust in Jesus—who died and rose from the dead to forgive us for everything we've ever done (and ever will do) against God.

Once you know Jesus, you can rest assured that God will not reject or scold you, even when you mess up. Like the father in this parable, He will not criticize or resent you. He will run to meet you and hug you. Like the son, all you need to do is humble yourself before God and come back to Him. 🕯️ *Golda Dilema*

🕯️ When you mess up, do you find it difficult to forgive yourself or to ask for forgiveness? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Do you ever feel like God will be harsh with you for messing up? You can be honest with Him about this and ask Him to show you what He is really like. Consider taking some time to sit with Jesus in prayer and imagine the father's reaction to his son coming home in Luke 15:20-24. \_\_\_\_\_

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (CSB)*

## SURRENDER YOUR HEART

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30

**H**ave you ever had a heavy heart—felt the physical effects of your sadness weighing you down? You are not alone. I have felt this way too. Worries, painful experiences, anxiety, grief, or guilt can burden you. It feels as if your emotional state is sinking physically into your body.

Craving solitude, I dragged myself on long walks. Alone time in the fresh air helped, and during these strolls, or at night before sleeping, I would share my deepest thoughts with God. Nothing happened straight away. It was a long process, but even though my emotions were painful, I believed that God was always on standby ready to listen and my worries were His.

Our Heavenly Father knows us and loves us deeply. He didn't create us to sit suffering in terrible silence, allowing anxieties to rattle around inside our minds. He created us to enjoy fullness of life with Him (John 10:10). And even though we live in a world that has been broken by sin, God doesn't give up on us.

Jesus came to allow us to have a relationship with God and to reassure us that He is always with us, always ready for us to reach out to Him. Jesus was born, died, rose again, and ascended to bring new life to this broken world. Jesus's sacrifice, His substitution for our sins and punishment, shows the immensity of God's love (John 3:16-17). Jesus's death on the cross is a profound act of selflessness that is mindboggling to understand, but that doesn't mean it isn't true or relevant. When Jesus died in our place and rose from the dead three days later, He changed everything. He gave us grace and forgiveness, and He sealed His promise to heal all brokenness and defeat all evil. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we are never alone. Jesus grieves our pain alongside us, and He heals us.

Surrendering your heart to Him disperses the pain inside. It is a reminder that you don't have to go through whatever trial you happen to be facing alone. In my own life, the walks, the talks in a quiet room, the tears shed before bed... helped me unburden myself and calmed my soul. I also found that God provides trusted people in our lives to help us. When we surrender our hearts to God, when we come to Him in simple trust and faith, something precious happens. He untangles the sadness within us and restores us piece by piece. 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

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



❖ Can you think of a time you felt a heaviness or sadness within you? These emotions are painful, but God loves us more than we could dare to imagine, and He wants to help us. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

❖ If you are experiencing worries, painful experiences, anxiety, grief, or guilt...you're not alone. Who are trusted adults in your life who could help you process these things? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

❖ If you need someone to talk to, you can set up an appointment for a one-time complimentary phone consultation with a Christian counselor through the Focus on the Family Counseling Service. In the United States, call 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time) to set up an appointment. In Canada, book your appointment by calling 1-800-661-9800.



## GOD'S WILL FOR US

READ: JOHN 6:25-40; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-16

**D**o you ever wrestle over what God's will is for your life? When I graduated high school, I was quite anxious about choosing the "right path." I grappled with decisions about college, wrote lists of pros and cons, prayed and sought God in tears. Since then, I've had other large decisions where I responded similarly.

Lately, I've felt like God has been prompting my heart to dig into what His will is for us, not just in daily decisions or even the life-altering ones, but overall.

First and perhaps most obvious, God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). This is the crux of life, the very heartbeat of our existence. When a crowd of people asked Jesus what God required of them, Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). The apex of God's will is that everyone who looks to Jesus has eternal life (John 6:40).

Under the canopy of being in Christ, what then is the will of God? I believe His will is to make us more like Jesus Christ. This can be accomplished in many different ways, none of which need to be labeled "the right" or "the wrong" way, as I once fretted. If we belong to Jesus, He promises to work in and through us to fulfill His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). And He equips us with everything we need to do His will (Hebrews 13:20-21).

God's plan for His children is to give us hope in Jesus and a future with Him. He wants us to remain in His love, and from this place of connection with Him, to love others (John 15:9-17). As we are transformed by the renewing of our minds and seek to live according to God's Word, we will be able to determine what His will is (Romans 12:1-2). Through Jesus, we have "everything we need for a godly life" (2 Peter 1:3), and we can rest in this promise. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

📖 Have you ever felt like there was one "right" path for your life? How might today's Bible passages speak into this? \_\_\_\_\_

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son... Romans 8:28-29 (NIV)*



## FREEDOM AND FAITH: JEHU JONES JR.

READ: PHILEMON 1:1-25

**J**ehu Jones Jr. was born enslaved in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1786. His father, Jehu Jones Sr., was trained as a tailor, and he was so skilled that the elite class in Charleston requested his exacting work. He was allowed to charge his customers a fee. He asked his slave holder if he could purchase his own manumission (freedom). The slave holder agreed, and Jehu Jones Sr. and his family became “Free Blacks.”

“Free Blacks” weren’t enslaved, but their freedom was still limited. If a free Black person left Charleston, they weren’t welcome to return. If they did, they could be jailed. Jehu Jones Sr. opened the most fashionable hotel in Charleston and became prosperous. But even with his success, he was not allowed to leave his property unless he was accompanied by a white escort. “Freedom” was precarious.

One important difference between an enslaved and a free Black person was the right to learn how to read. The Jones family optimized that freedom. Jehu’s brother Edward became the first southern Black person to graduate from college in the United States of America. Jehu Jr. became the first Black Lutheran minister, and he started the first Black Lutheran congregation in the USA.

Jehu Jr. faced many challenges and injustices. He went to New York to become an ordained minister and was arrested when he returned to Charleston. He had to relocate immediately to avoid being imprisoned and quickly said goodbye to his wife and children, including his three-day-old baby. Eventually they all ended up in Pennsylvania. Once there, Reverend Jehu Jones Jr. received very little aid to build a church, and he worked relentlessly to gain funds.

Jehu continued to serve God, speaking at various congregations and encouraging those who were sick and poor. He was a leader in Black communities and beyond. He never stopped spreading God’s Word. Jehu may have been born enslaved, but only God was master of his spirit and faith. Even when the world was against Jehu, Jesus was with him. God worked through Jehu to bring many to Himself. The power of the gospel could not be kept in chains. 🕯️ *Kelly Bakshi*

🕯️ God hates when people are mistreated, and He is always working to bring freedom. Jesus announced, “Captives will be released...the oppressed will be set free” (Luke 4:14-21). How does Jesus give us hope and endurance, even when others are conspiring against us? \_\_\_\_\_

*“He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released...that the oppressed will be set free...” Luke 4:18 (NLT)*

## THE SHADOW

READ: LUKE 4:1-13; JOHN 1:1-5; 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13

**W**hat is it I see going o'er the fields? Some shadow, beast, or ghost?  
Swooping down low. Ensnares its prey. My escape from it I cannot boast.

It has armies...no, legions! They will try to get you to follow. To listen to its lies  
and in your anger, fear, and shame to wallow.

It captures you, draws you in. Tells you, "Everything is alright."

Its traps are hidden, its temptations are strong. But truly I tell you, One can win  
the fight!

There is a light that can push back this shadow. A weapon that can defeat the  
beast. This light, this weapon, is all but a secret. You can take it, wield it, conquer  
shadow at least.

There is a book, an ancient book, in which this weapon is held. Read it, use it,  
trust it. And a solid faith you may wield. **!** *Gracee Terrell*

**!** We live in a broken world where evil brings destruction every day and lies coax us away from God. The temptations we face are strong, but Jesus is stronger. He is the Light of the World. If you've put your trust in Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in you, giving you the power to fight against temptation. What weapon does God give us? (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12)

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**!** Jesus defeated sin and death once and for all when He died on the cross and rose from the dead. He promises that He will return to heal our broken world, and sin and death will be no more. In the meantime, God has given us His Word, the Bible, and community with fellow Christians so we don't have to fight alone. When you feel overwhelmed by sin and brokenness, who are trusted Christians in your life you can go to?

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*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness  
can never extinguish it. John 1:5 (NLT)*



## FEELING FORSAKEN?

READ: PSALM 37; HEBREWS 13:5-6

**L**ife is full of ups and downs. When everything seems to be going well—when we have friends and are at peace with those around us, when we have all the material things we need and are in good health—we feel good and acceptable. But when these things are lacking or we think we don't have enough of them, we feel forsaken or abandoned, even by God Himself.

In Psalm 37, we have the testimony of an old man who had walked with God for many years through different stages of life—in his youth, in middle age, and now as an old man. His name was David, and he was the second king of Israel. He says, “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (Psalm 37:25). In his own life, David had experienced war, loss, violence, and death threats, yet He knew God was his protector, provider, and healer. He saw what happened to people who followed God, and people who didn't. In the same Psalm, he says, “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous” (Psalm 37:16-17).

What does it mean to be righteous? Psalm 37 gives several examples, but simply put, being righteous is being right with God and honoring Him in everything we do. But we can't be righteous on our own. Apart from Jesus, we are all “wicked,” and our sin leads to death. Yet God loves us, and Jesus died and rose again so that we could “become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can follow His good ways even as we rest in God's promise: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

When it seems like we do not have enough, we can remember that God cares about our needs (Matthew 6:31-34), and we can ask Him for help, remembering that He gives us strength to be content in every situation (Philippians 4:11-13). When things are not going well and we start to wonder where God has gone, let us remember the testimony of this old man David, for God is with us in every situation and He will never leave us alone. 📖 *Enid Adah Nyinomuji*

📖 Have you ever felt forsaken by those around you, even by your own relatives? (Psalm 27:10) \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Do you sometimes feel like God has forsaken you? You can be honest with God about this. As you come to Him, He will reveal Himself to you. He is trustworthy and good, and He loves you. \_\_\_\_\_

*I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken...*  
Psalm 37:25a (NIV)

## PEACE WITH OTHERS

READ: GENESIS 45:1-15; ROMANS 12:17-21

In the book of Genesis, Joseph was the favorite son of Israel, also known as Jacob. And his brothers hated him because of it. One day, they did an evil thing to Joseph and threw him into a cistern. Joseph pleaded for his life (Genesis 42:21), but they cruelly sold him as a slave to some Midianite traders. Joseph was then sold to an Egyptian official named Potiphar, and God gave Joseph success as he served in this household. Then Joseph was wrongly accused and imprisoned, but with a sudden turn of events, he was put in charge of the whole land of Egypt, and God helped him prepare for a famine that was coming.

When famine came into the land of Joseph's family, his father, Jacob, sent his other sons to Egypt to buy grain. When Joseph met them, they didn't recognize him, and he spoke harshly to them. After he had tested them, Joseph revealed his true identity and wept. He did not reject or resent his brothers. There was no bitterness in his heart. Instead of repaying them for the wrong they had done to him, Joseph accepted them. He treated them well. He forgave them. He willingly made peace with them. Joseph was at peace with God, and he was able to give that same peace to his brothers, even providing for their needs.

Joseph's forgiveness foreshadows the great forgiveness Jesus would bring to the whole world. Jesus paid for all our wrongdoing by dying on the cross and raising from the dead. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we have peace with God (Romans 5:1). And He calls us to love others as He loves us, not taking revenge but doing good to our enemies (Romans 12:17-21).

When someone wrongs you, God empowers you to forgive. Through Jesus, you can walk in the way of peace. Following Him is the path that brings healing, love, and joy. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He chose to forgive the people who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). He paved the way for peace. As you follow the way of Jesus, you—like Joseph—can live at peace with others. 🕯️ *Golda Dilema*

🕯️ When do you find it challenging to live at peace with others? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Remember, forgiving someone does not always mean being in close relationship with them. If you have questions about how to have loving boundaries after someone has hurt you, who is a trusted adult you can talk to? \_\_\_\_\_

*"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me [Joseph] here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."*  
Genesis 45:5 (NIV)

## FEAR OF MISSING FLOWERS

READ: PSALM 19:1; JAMES 1:17-18

**A**t the beginning of every spring, I get stressed. The long, harsh winter is finally coming to a close. I know the flowers will start blooming soon, and I worry that I'll miss it. That I'll miss seeing the crocuses peek up through the grass...before they're mown over. That I'll miss seeing the flowering trees full with blossoms... before the next windy or rainy day strips off the petals. I find myself anxiously looking all around me whenever I go outside, desperate not to miss a hint of the beauty I've been starved for all winter long. When I do see something alive and growing, I fear I can't appreciate it enough, can't take in the vibrance enough. I'm afraid of missing it.

But this past spring, I paid closer attention to this feeling. And I noticed something hopeful. The blossoms stayed on the trees longer than I expected them to. Not only that, but when one kind of flower finished its bloom, another kind would show itself. I'd forgotten—flowers don't just bloom in spring. Every season has its own kinds of flowers.

Lately I've been reminded that God is the giver of all good gifts—and He keeps giving them! If I miss one of His gifts today, I haven't exhausted His grace. He keeps giving good things, every day! It's who He is. Goodness just flows and bursts out of Him, like flowers erupting from every nook and cranny of the springtime soil.

If you haven't guessed already, change isn't easy for me. But it has been so helpful for me to realize that God brings beauty in the midst of change. In every stage and phase of life, He is generous. He cares about my needs, and not just physical needs like food and clothing, but also my need for beauty and wonder. He knows what my heart needs, and He delights to delight me. He longs to comfort me. To draw me near to Himself and share His good gifts with me.

And God helps me enjoy His gifts. Instead of fretting that I will miss out, I can rest knowing that I am beloved and delighted in by God, the giver of all good gifts. 🕯

*Hannah Howe*

🕯 What good gifts have you noticed God giving you lately? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for one of these! \_\_\_\_\_

*See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are! 1 John 3:1a (CSB)*

## SUPERMASSIVE BLACK HOLE

READ: ROMANS 6:23; 2 CORINTHIANS 6:2; PHILIPPIANS 3:7-12

**T**here's no time," the voice on the radio says. "You must come now." I look around the cockpit of the spaceship—*my* spaceship. The control station, the thick, curved glass of the windows, the sleek engines quietly humming in the hull below—all of it is my design. I spent years building this spacecraft, painstakingly attending to each detail so it could do what no other ship has done. I put my heart and soul into this ship. How could I leave it behind?

But then I look out the window at the black hole looming before me. A star-sized abyss that light itself cannot escape. Luminescent gas swirls around it, but the glow abruptly stops at the black hole's edge as its inescapable gravity pulls everything around it into eternal darkness.

I can feel the black hole's gravity wrapping around every cell of my body, pulling me closer. I thought my spacecraft would be able to withstand the gravity at this distance, but I was wrong. I'm being pulled in, speeding toward the darkness, and it's only a matter of time before I'll be swallowed up forever.

"Your ship isn't fast enough to escape this level of gravity," the voice says. "But mine is."

I turn to face the opposite window, where another spaceship hovers adjacent to mine. I can see the faint outline of a figure sitting in the cockpit. It must be the man whose voice is coming through my radio, telling me he can save me.

He speaks again, his voice calm but firm. "You need to come aboard my ship now."

I look at the screens and blinking lights around me. All my work—my ship, the data I'd collected, everything I'd accomplished to further human understanding of black holes—would be lost forever. But then I look out at the black hole again, feeling its gravity more acutely, and I realize it's all going to be lost anyway. Nothing can escape a black hole.

Except for this man, whose voice is crackling over my ship's radio. He can escape it. Somehow, infinite gravity and darkness are no match for him.

"Alright," I say, turning my back on the computers, the cockpit—my whole life's work. "I'm coming." 🗨️ *Courtney Lasater*

*Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Philippians 3:8a (NLT)*

🔑 According to Romans 6:23, we cannot escape the gravity of our sin, which leads to certain death. But Jesus can save us. He offers us the gift of eternal life! Romans 10:9 says, "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

🔑 Have you ever given up something to follow Jesus? Was it worth it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

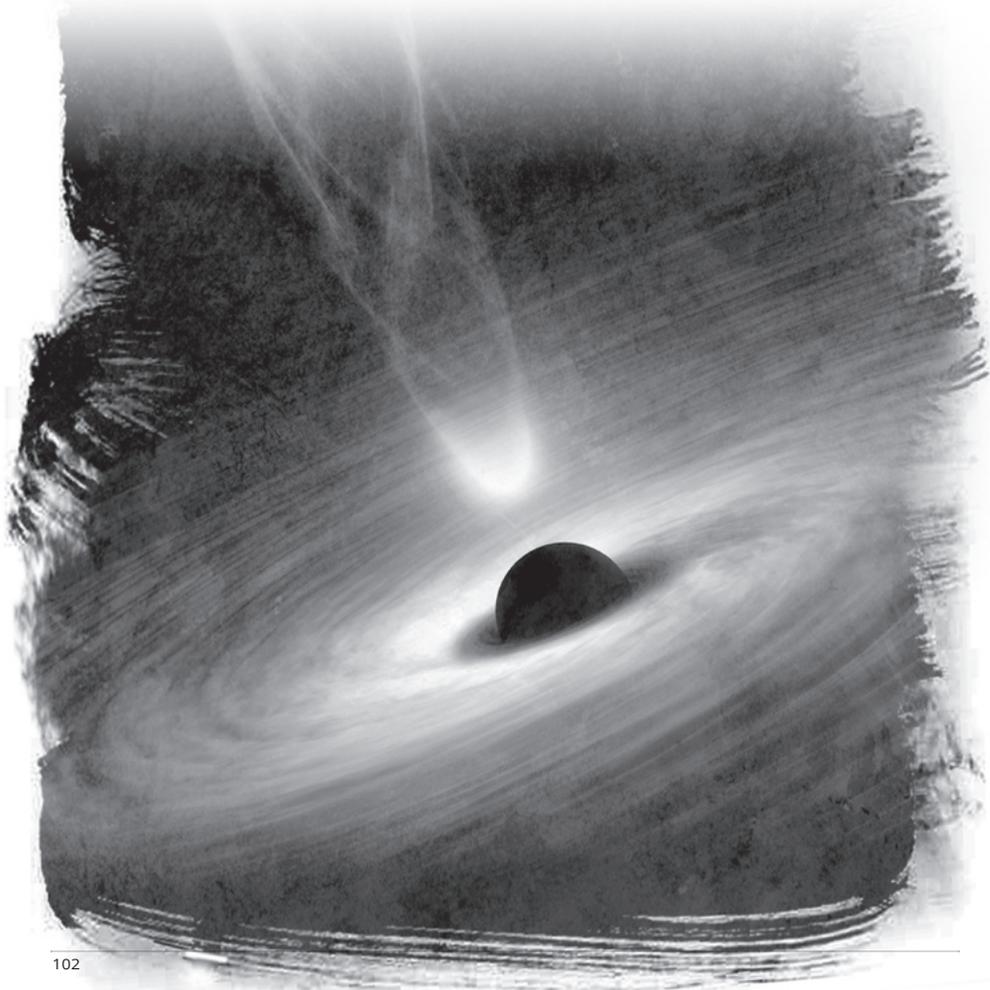
\_\_\_\_\_

🔑 If you haven't put your trust in Jesus, what is holding you back? You can come to God with your questions, frustrations, fears...anything. When we seek God, He reveals Himself to us (Jeremiah 29:13). Who are trusted Christians you could talk to about questions you have? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

🔑 If you want to know more about who Jesus is and what He's done, see page 104.



## LIFE VERSE

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11; JAMES 1:9-18

**G**rowing up, church attendance, youth group, and church camp were all regular parts of my life. However, I never really read my Bible or talked about my faith outside of “church stuff.” I probably would’ve told you that I believed in God if you asked, but I wouldn’t bring it up and I definitely didn’t live like it.

After my junior year of high school, I got a job at my summer camp as a maintenance assistant. When we arrived, I started hearing the staff talk about their “life verse.” These verses meant a lot to them, so they memorized them and used them to describe their lives. I didn’t know many Bible verses other than John 3:16, but I felt like I needed one. After searching online for “Bible verses on trials,” I settled on James 1:12, “Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

Now, one of the most important things to understand when reading the Bible is the context of any verse or passage you read. In order to understand what it means for you, you usually have to understand what the author was intending when they wrote it. I didn’t know that, and honestly, I didn’t really care. I thought this verse told me I was blessed for making it through all the difficult things in my life, and God was even going to reward me!

But James 1:12 is actually about those who love God receiving the “crown of life” or the resurrection to eternal life. If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, believing that He died and rose again, we’ll get to live and reign with Him forever when He comes back! James hung out with Jesus, and he gives us some incredible wisdom and insight for living the Christian life. We will experience trials, and God will help us be steadfast. Our focus should be on His faithfulness.

Years later, I began using Philippians 2:3-4 as my new life verse. These are both great passages, but my purpose behind using the James verse was misguided. I was using it to elevate myself. Now I want to remember that Jesus calls us to elevate others! 📖 *Hunter Taylor*

📖 Do you have a favorite Bible verse? Have you looked at the context of this verse—what verses are surrounding it, what book of the Bible it’s in, who wrote it and why, etc.? \_\_\_\_\_

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Philippians 2:3-4 (CSB)*

## TRUSTING THE RESCUER

READ: PSALM 112:6-8; JOHN 14:1-31; HEBREWS 12:2-3

**D**o you wake up at night worried sick about the future? You are not alone. Fear and anxiety are rife. Stress has become a natural ingredient in peoples' lives, regardless of their age. News from around the world provides a daily diet of issues to worry about. Communities and families all bring different problems. Concerns about school and decisions about next steps can cause unease. Family issues such as sickness, addictions, and broken relationships can incite worries. It's easy to become despondent with so many thoughts swirling inside.

When fear consumes us, it's impossible to think clearly. Worry strangles us like a nagging voice waiting for us to lose our cool and make hasty decisions we later regret. But there is hope. As the author of Psalm 112 recognized, trusting in God means that we do not have to fear bad news. Instead, as we look to God we can rest in His secure love for us—and for the world. God cares deeply about His creation, and He came to be with us.

When Jesus was walking around on earth, His disciples struggled with worry and stress the same as we do. They felt overwhelmed with their own problems even though they saw Jesus face-to-face and spent lots of time with Him. In John 14, Jesus recognized their fears, and His message for them was the same as it is for us today. Comfort and hope. When we are troubled, Jesus wants us to turn to Him and trust in Him and our Heavenly Father. In a world full of pain and confusion, Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Jesus is the only One who can save us from the sin and brokenness of the world we inhabit, and He will. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we get to look forward to the day He will return and restore His creation, and we'll live with Him forever. In the meantime, He sends the Holy Spirit, who helps us give our problems to God and rest in His love. When we follow Jesus, we have everything we need, and we can rely on Him to guide us through our difficulties. By fixing our attention on Jesus, rather than our worries, we are focusing on the One who will rescue the world from its troubled state—and who empowers us to bring some of that healing wherever we are. Our circumstances won't be trouble free, but He will help us through them. 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

🕯️ What is worrying you today? Consider bringing these things to Jesus, remembering His love. \_\_\_\_\_

*"Peace I [Jesus] leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." John 14:27 (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's 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. 📖