

UNLOCKED

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS



APRIL • MAY • JUNE

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Unlocked—Daily Readings for Teens

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Cover Story:
The Abundant Life
See page 28-29

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WHEN YOU CAN'T PRAY

READ: ROMANS 8:22-30; 1 JOHN 5:13-15

Have you ever been in a situation where you couldn't pray? You are not alone. Why does this happen, and what can we do? Living in a world that has been broken by sin means that problems often arise, and we experience moments of crisis and times of suffering. Worry, anxiety, and grief can be destructive, leaving an emptiness. Sometimes, praying feels impossible.

If you are ill and aching, your heart may desire to pray, but the pain is too intense and your mind becomes distracted. You may be on medication and so are unable to focus. No matter what kind of situation you find yourself in, it's okay to ask someone else to pray for you. You can also be open with God and tell Him you are struggling to pray. Remember that He knows the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

There are times in life when grief and sadness can tear your heart in two, making your emotions raw. You may be angry if you have suffered a tragedy. Share your grief with the Holy Spirit—also known as the Comforter (John 14:16). Remember that Jesus is fully God but also fully human, and He understands your pain (Hebrews 4:15). He invites you to come to Him, even when you're angry with Him. Expressing your grief and feelings to God is a form of communication.

When there are no words, for whatever reason, you can sit or lie down in the silence. Say nothing. Listen to God. Trust our loving Father who knows your needs. He invites you to rest and enjoy being in His presence. Our willingness to be close to God is a form of prayer even if we can't articulate the words. And, as Christians, we have an Advocate—the Holy Spirit—who will always intercede for us, praying on our behalf.

Speaking, singing, listening, asking other people to pray for you, or simply sitting in God's presence are all ways of praying to God (Psalm 62:5). This might go against your perceptions of prayer, but just spending time with God is enough. He knows what you need and will direct you. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 Have you ever felt like you couldn't pray? What did you do? _____

📖 Consider taking a moment to pray for someone in your life who is struggling.

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. Romans 8:26 (NLT)

GREAT LOVE

READ: ROMANS 8:31-39

Sometimes, I wonder how God loves me so much. Me. A “normal” person. A messed-up person. A person who sins. What have I done to deserve what He gives me? How can I show Him how much His love means to me?

The Bible talks about God “quieting” us with His love (Zephaniah 3:17). When the world is crazy and we can’t find peace, His love is there. Jesus gives us His peace (John 14:27). When we are tired but we can’t calm down, He is there with us. He invites us to come to Him, and He will help us relax (Matthew 11:28-30).

God knows we can’t do anything to earn His love. We sin. We mess up. We are not worthy of the abundant life Jesus came to give us. Yet God sacrificed for us despite all of that. It was because of His love that God gave Jesus as a sacrifice for us (John 3:16). Jesus was willing to die a death He didn’t deserve so that we could be with God forever. And because Jesus rose from the dead, we can know that God’s love is more powerful than anything.

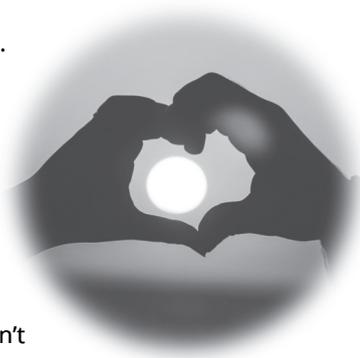
The Bible talks about God’s love being steadfast. It’s always there for us. When people abandon us or hurt us, we don’t have to worry that God and His love are going to disappear. As followers of Jesus, we can know that His love is always with us (Psalm 23:6).

I cannot imagine my life without the love that God has shown me and continues to show me each day. I know I don’t deserve that love, and I am so thankful for the gift of love that God gives me. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 Can you think of a time you felt loved by God? If not, you can ask Him to reveal His love to you anytime.

📖 Have you ever felt like you needed to do something to earn God’s love? How might today’s Bible verses speak into this? _____

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God... Ephesians 2:8 (NIV)



THE PERFECT PIZZA

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; COLOSSIANS 3:12-14

In high school, I became a vegetarian and avoided eating meat for a number of years. I often skipped school lunches since they usually featured a main dish that included meat. And I only took the time to pack a lunch once in a while. By the end of most school days, I'd feel famished, sometimes having eaten nothing since breakfast. On the afternoons when marching band practice followed a full school day, I could barely wait for rehearsal to finish so I could go home and scrounge up a snack.

My friend Tracy also marched in the school band, and she had a free period at the end of the day. So, Tracy had time to go to her own house between classes and band practice. Sometimes, she microwaved a cheese pizza while she was home and then brought me a slice when she came back to school for rehearsal. Every time I saw Tracy approach me carrying her baton in one hand and a triangle wrapped in aluminum foil in the other, I was overjoyed! Even though I wasn't actually perishing, in that moment I felt rescued from starvation by Tracy's kindness.

In Colossians 3:12-14, the apostle Paul urges the Christians in Colossae to clothe themselves with compassion and kindness, among other virtues. And these virtues don't come from us. Rather, because we belong to Jesus, we are able to love others because God's love overflows from us. God showed us the ultimate kindness. He rescued us, people who were perishing, by giving His own life for ours. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead to forgive us and restore us to relationship with God.

If we've put our trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit is in us—transforming us and making us new. As new creations, we possess God's power to clothe ourselves in attitudes and actions that flow from a heart transformed by Jesus Christ. This is what my friend Tracy did. She was not just a classmate but also a sister in Christ, and she put on kindness toward me by sharing that delicious, meat-free pizza on a handful of afternoons. 🍷 *Allison Wilson Lee*

🍷 Can you think of a time someone was kind to you? What did they do? _____

🍷 How might remembering Jesus's kindness to us help us be kind to others? _____

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 7:12 (NIV)

BIRD CALLS

READ: EPHESIANS 2:1-10; 1 PETER 5:6-11

I examined the scroll. The instructions were clear, but sometimes hard to interpret.

I nodded my head confidently as I rolled up the scroll and stuffed it into my satchel. I would need to make my way through the Whispering Forest, cross Chelsey's Chasm on the second bridge, then travel through the Ash Trenches.

Simple enough, but not easy. Still, my steps had a joyful bounce. I was glad the Son of the High King had periled through our country to clear a path for us. A friend from my village had given me the instructions spoken by the King Himself, and I had started the journey right away.

"Be sure to follow the path exactly," he had said. Then he whispered, "And beware the Prince of the Air."

All shuddered when speaking of the thief prince.

I was deep in the forest when a raspy screech startled me. Crimson-beaked black birds crowed, "Away! Away!" I had to catch my beating heart. I suppose those birds had always been there, but I noticed them more now.

I made it through the forest, the birds still following me, screeching, "Away! Away!" When I came to the first bridge, I was so relieved. I almost set foot on the bridge thinking, *A way across!* But then I laughed as I remembered I needed to cross on the second bridge. Once I found it, I crossed the chasm and started toward the Ash Trenches. This was the part I feared the most.

"Away! Away!"

The landscape became rocky and hazardous the closer I got to the trenches.

"Away! Away!"

Finally, I came to the first trench. Its walls were steep and jagged, and the birds were silent for the first time.

Away! Away! I heard inside my head. I looked around the trench and saw the rocky plains. I started backing away from the trench. Maybe I was supposed to go away from here and instead go through the plains?

I tripped on a rock and fell on my satchel. I remembered the scroll. I checked it quickly.

"Yep. The way is through the trench." 🐉 *Abigail Scibiur*

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. 1 Peter 5:7-8 (NIV)

- 1** Jesus faced every temptation we do, and He overcame them all (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus was the only one who could live without sinning, and He has compassion on us. Because of God’s great love, He gave His life for us—dying on the cross and raising from the dead so that we could be totally forgiven and free from sin. He calls us to follow His good ways, but even when we do give in to temptation, Jesus extends His grace and mercy to us (1 John 2:1). When we are experiencing temptation, how might it be comforting to know that Jesus understands what we’re going through and wants to help us? _____

- 1** We face various challenges that come in many forms on our journey with God. What specific tools has God given us to help us combat these challenges? (Ephesians 2:1-10) _____

- 1** Throughout our lives, the enemy tries to lead us away from where God is leading us. But as we follow Jesus, He empowers us to overcome the pull of the enemy. Can you think of a time you didn’t know what to do, but then something in the Bible helped you? _____

- 1** Many temptations are hard to spot in the moment. How does the Holy Spirit help us in these moments? (John 14:25-26) _____



CAN I BE ANGRY AT THE CHURCH?

READ: LUKE 19:41-48; ACTS 2:42-47; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27

Have you ever been mad at the church? I know I have. And sometimes, that's okay. Now, when I say "the church," I mean all of God's people around the world and throughout history. And I absolutely LOVE the church. Walking alongside my brothers and sisters in Christ as we live into our new God-given identities is one of the greatest blessings I can imagine. Without the church, I would not be who I am today.

But sometimes, I get furious at the church. I see corruption, power trips, greed, false teaching, apathy, assault, division, and so, so much sin and brokenness. And it hurts. It leaves me wondering how we wandered so far away from the gospel. Where is Jesus in all of this?

In these moments, Jesus grieves too. We see this in Luke 19:41-48. When He saw the lack of peace among God's people in Jerusalem and the corruption and greed in the Temple, He was overcome with grief and anger. And in Revelation 2-3, Jesus demonstrates His anger, grief, and love as He critiques seven specific churches. Jesus reminds me that He is angry at sin, yet He has mercy on sinners who turn to Him. He shows me that I'm not the one in charge of fixing the church—that's His job. And He is a God of restoration and wholeness. He died and rose again for the church—including me. My job is just to follow Him.

The church—including me—is broken. It always has been, and it will be until Jesus returns to make all things new. And until then, I will probably always be angry at the church's sin, because there will always be sin to be angry at. But I pray that this anger flows out of love. A deep, deep love for the church and a desperate desire to see the church whole and holy, healed of every hurt and sin. And I pray that my anger is always wrapped in humility, knowing that I am just as sin-stained as everyone else and my judgment is far from perfect.

While I may not be able to fix the whole church, Jesus can help me bring healing—which sometimes includes correction—in my circles. As I follow the Holy Spirit's leading, He shows me where people are hurting and how the gospel can bring them hope. And He uses the people around me to bring healing to my heart. This is the beauty of the church—people who love Jesus and each other, following Him together. That is the church I love. 📖 *Taylor Eising*

📖 Do you see injustices in the church—places we lost the gospel? You can bring these to Jesus. _____

📖 What have you seen in the church that you love? How does this reflect the gospel? _____

Let's consider how to provoke one another to love and good works. Hebrews 10:24 (WEB)

WAITING FOR A MIRACLE

READ: LUKE 5:12-16; JOHN 11:1-45

We have friends who have prayed for a miracle for years. But they haven't yet received their miracle. They haven't heard an answer from God. Why do some people get miracles, while others seem to spend their lives waiting? It's easy to feel like God answers some prayers and ignores others. But what if our Creator has a different way of moving mountains? What if there is a reason for the waiting?

One of my favorite Gospel stories is the account of Lazarus. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. But when Jesus heard Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was for two more days. If I had the ability to heal someone I loved, I think I would leave to see them as soon as I heard the news. But Jesus waited. And there was a purpose in waiting.

When Jesus got to Lazarus, he had been dead four days. Jewish people believed the soul stayed near the body for three days. But Jesus waited until people would've thought Lazarus had no hope of rising again. Then, Jesus raised Lazarus back to life. By waiting, Jesus proved His power over the grave. He foreshadowed that His own coming death would have no hold on Him.

Not all stories end like Lazarus's. We live in a broken world filled with suffering and pain. Jesus healed many people while He was on earth, but not everyone had the chance to meet Him. We don't all get the miracles we hope for, and we may never know the reasons why.

But Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And one day, everyone who has put their trust in Him will be raised from the dead. We will live with Jesus, free from every sickness and sorrow. Until that day, the Holy Spirit helps us to trust Him. Trust there is a reason for the waiting. Trust an answer is coming, even if it's not the one we've hoped for. Trust God is with us, even when life feels terribly hard. Because God is always the God of miracles, even when we don't understand how He is working. 🕯️ *Becca Wierwille*

🕯️ Have you ever prayed for a miracle, either for yourself or someone else? _____

🕯️ How might it be comforting to know that Jesus weeps with us as we wait for Him to make all things new, including our bodies? (John 11:33-36) _____

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" John 11:25-26 (NIV)

SHATTERED HOPE

READ: PSALMS 42; 71

Late evening sunlight filtered through the tree leaves as I walked the wooded path, breathing deeply. Looking down, I saw pieces of a broken bird's egg, shards of sky blue scattered in the dirt. My heart sank, and for a moment I felt tears surge. This egg was once filled with hope—the promise of a new life—and here it was, dashed to pieces. Hope shattered.

As I continued down the trail, I thought about how often my hopes end up like that poor bird's egg—broken and unfulfilled. I contemplated several years back when I felt the most hopeless. Upon waking up one morning when I was 30 years old, I could hardly stand, much less walk, due to severe pain in my feet. This began a long struggle of intense pain, visits to top clinics and doctors, the endless search for relief and answers. No answers were ever found. After suffering greatly for a year, I was finally able to walk a mile for the first time due to a lumbar sympathetic nerve block.

Here I am, six years later, walking! I still struggle with some pain and discomfort. There is no name for what I have, but I can walk. I am able to stand to make dinner for my family, or take a trip to the store, or walk up a hill. All these things I do not take for granted, for there was a time when I thought I would never be able to do them again. My hope was like that egg—beyond repair.

Yet, God reminded me of Psalm 71:14, “As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.” How can we cling to hope when we feel overwhelmed by our current circumstances, ambushed by physical pain, emotionally crushed? The answer is found in Psalm 42:5, 11—to put our hope in God and keep praising Him. Our hope is sure because Jesus has risen from the dead. He endured terrible pain for us—because He loves us. He grieves our hurts alongside us, and when He returns, He will put an end to our suffering forever. And even now, He is with us, comforting and strengthening us.

When we choose to place our hope in God instead of our health, physical comfort level, ease of circumstances, etc., He will fill us with the only thing that can truly satisfy and renew us: Himself. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

📌 Have you gone through or are you currently going through a season where you feel hopeless? _____

📌 If you've put your trust in Jesus, you have full access to the God of hope and the joy and peace He offers. What do you think it means to “overflow with hope” (Romans 15:13)? _____

May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you. Psalm 33:22 (NIV)

THE LOST TREASURE OF CORDORO

READ: MATTHEW 6:19-24; 22:37-40

Aurelia looked at the tattered map in her hand, then up at the mountain. This was it. The place she had been searching for all her life, ever since she had heard the tales of the lost treasure of Cordoro as a little girl. According to the legend, the inhabitants of Cordoro had traveled far and wide in search of priceless treasures and hidden them deep inside this mountain. Then some unknown tragedy had befallen the city, and Cordoro and its treasure became nothing more than a fable. But Aurelia had believed the stories and dedicated her life to finding the lost city's hidden treasure. Now it would soon be hers.

She followed the map to a cave, then lit her torch and made her way along its dark, twisting passages. Then she saw it—a door. She turned the ancient handle, and the heavy metal groaned as it cracked open. She stepped inside and held her torch high. The sight that met her brought her to her knees. Gold. Gold as far as her eyes could see.

She found a row of torches on the wall and lit them one by one. Light filled the room, and mounds of treasure glinted back at her. She laughed and threw herself into a sparkling heap, letting a handful of coins seep through her fingers.

That's when she heard it; a low hum that seemed to pulse through the pile of gold. Curious, she began to dig, and the faint, rhythmic sound became louder. As she plunged her hand into a nest of diamonds, she felt something soft and wet. When she pulled it out into the light, her screams reverberated off the walls of the cavern. It was a heart—a human heart—beating in her hand. She hurled it away from her with all her might, but the pulsing only grew stronger. It wasn't the only one. She could now see that each pile of gold had its own heart beating within it.

So this was the cause of Cordoro's downfall. The mountain didn't just hold the inhabitants' lost treasure—it held their hearts too. Aurelia ran for the door as fast as she could, leaving the treasure of Cordoro and the hearts devoted to it behind in the cold depths of the mountain. When she finally stumbled into the sunshine, tears of relief flowed down her face. Cordoro's treasure had lost its grip on her heart. Now she was free to seek a greater treasure—one she had ignored in her lustful quest for gold. A treasure that brought life instead of death. 🕯️ *Courtney Lasater*

🕯️ All sin, including greed, leads to death. But through Jesus's death and resurrection, He forgives us, gives us new life, and transforms our hearts and desires. How might this truth give you hope? _____

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:21 (NIV)

EVERY HURT

READ: PSALMS 34:17-18; PSALMS 147:3

Every hurt that
Spills from your eye,
Slips down your cheek,
And falls from your chin,
Is caught.
Is treasured in a bottle.
By a loving Father
Who values His children's tears,
Knows why they cry them,
And draws them close.
Yes, the hands marked with nail scars,
Are drawing you,
Broken as you are,
Closer to His heart,
Into a heavenly embrace.  *Eliana Canfield*

 What hurts have you experienced lately? _____

 God knows each of your sorrows and always wants to comfort you when you're hurting. Jesus carried all your sorrows when He went to the cross (Isaiah 53:4), and when He rose from the dead, He guaranteed His promise to return and put an end to all pain—forever (Revelation 21:4). But in the meantime, Jesus grieves your hurts alongside you. How might it give you comfort to know that God values your tears, and He invites you to take time to grieve? _____

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

JESUS'S TRIUMPHANT ENTRY

READ: MATTHEW 21:1-11; MARK 11:1-11; JOHN 12:12-16

Christians around the world celebrate the triumphant entry of our Lord Jesus Christ as we remember Jesus riding on a donkey into the city of Jerusalem. This is popularly known as “Palm Sunday,” because the people went out to meet Him with palm branches, and it is exactly one week before we celebrate Jesus’s resurrection on Easter.

Why do we celebrate Palm Sunday? Why is it important to our lives, and what are its spiritual implications?

When we set aside time on Palm Sunday for the remembrance of Jesus’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, we are also remembering the fulfillment of promises, proclaimed by prophets of old thousands of years back. One of these prophecies was from Ezekiel, who said that God left the temple but would return one day. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, this was God’s long-awaited return. God has confirmed to us that none of His words will ever fall to the ground (Joshua 21:45; 1 Samuel 3:19; Isaiah 55:11). What God proclaimed for us will surely come to pass, no matter how long it takes.

We can also see that Palm Sunday is called a “triumphant entry.” This is because Jesus was prepared to triumph over the devil, who had held humankind captive for ages past. Though the people did not know it, Jesus knew He was about to suffer in the flesh for the sins He never committed. But above all, He would triumph.

Before Jesus entered the city, He instructed His disciples to bring Him a donkey colt, and He rode on it. Thus, He fulfilled another promise: that the king of Israel would come “riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus is the King of all kings (1 Timothy 6:15). He is worthy of all honor, dignity, respect, and reverence. No wonder the people were shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” 🕯 *Shadrach Goni*

🕯 Palm Sunday shows us that God always fulfills His promises. What promises did Jesus fulfill when He entered Jerusalem? _____

🕯 How did Jesus triumph over Satan, sin, and death? (Find out more on page 104.) _____

They took palm branches and went out to meet him. They kept shouting: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord —the King of Israel!” John 12:13 (CSB)

TIME TO CELEBRATE

READ: PSALM 149:1-5; ECCLESIASTES 2:24-25; 8:15

The Bible is full of celebrations! Moses, together with the Israelites, celebrated their escape from slavery in Egypt after God brought them through the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15). Later, the Israelites celebrated the victory of David and his warriors. God also gave His people several festivals that are described in the Bible—time set apart to thank God, rest from work, and enjoy His gifts (Leviticus 23). If there is anyone who loves celebrations and happy gatherings, it's God!

God is the author of merriment and celebrations. Jesus often attended gatherings and even made His first miracle turning water into wine at a wedding (John 2:1-11). Later, Jesus fed over 5,000 people to their satisfaction (Matthew 14:13-21).

God loves making people happy because He loves us. God gives us good gifts—the important things and even the small things (James 1:17). Making us joyful is one of the ways God makes us feel loved by Him.

God is not a killjoy. He invites us to do things that will make us happy, and He guides us in what these are. Sometimes, we may think that sin will make us happy, but in the end, sin hurts us and those around us. When we turn away from sin and follow Jesus instead, we find true joy. Jesus said, "I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). If we've put our trust in Jesus, we are forgiven, and as we yield to His Spirit in us we are freed from the power of sin. And we have the greatest joy—being united with the God who loves us!

God likes it when we feel the joy of being blessed by Him. He gives us family and friends so we can enjoy living with them and spending time with each other with glad hearts. In addition to our natural families, God has also made us part of His family, the church. Together, we can enjoy and be happy with everything God has given us, thanking God for blessing us. **🕯** *Golda Dilema*

🕯 What are some of your favorite ways to celebrate? _____

🕯 Why do you think God instructs His people to celebrate together? _____

*Let Israel celebrate its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
Psalm 149:2 (CSB)*

THE LAMB OUR SHEPHERD

READ: PSALM 23:1; JOHN 1:29-34; 10:11-18

Out of all the animals mentioned in the Bible (and there are over one hundred), sheep are the stars. They are found in the book of Genesis on through to Revelation. They are led by shepherds who go ahead of the sheep, calling them to follow. Their babies are lambs.

In the Old Testament, God instructed the Israelites to sacrifice lambs for the sins of the people. A lamb, with its soft nose and fluffy wool coat, was a picture of purity and holiness. In John 1:29, Jesus is called the Lamb of God by His cousin, John the Baptist. John announced that Jesus is the One who “takes away the sin of the world!”

But Jesus’s connection to sheep doesn’t stop there. Sheep were part of a herd and were under the constant care of a shepherd who ensured they were fed, watered, and kept safe from harm. They could be hunted by wolves, or become wounded, or fall into rushing water where their wool became so waterlogged, they could drown.

In John 10:14, Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. He knows each of His sheep by name. That’s you and me. Jesus is both the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd, all at once. He is both the perfect sacrifice and the perfect caretaker of His flock—the church.

Sometimes, we call people sheep when we think they are blindly following a person or an idea we think is bad. But if we, as trusting sheep, follow only the Good Shepherd and accept the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the forgiveness of our sins, we are the most blessed flock in the world. Jesus will always shepherd His people in all that is best for us. He calls us by name to follow Him, and He seeks us when we’re lost.

At Easter we celebrate the abundant life the Good Shepherd gives us. We rejoice in the ultimate sacrifice of the beloved Lamb of God, who died on a rugged wooden cross long ago for His precious sheep...and then rose again to lead us into new life. 🐑
Susan Sundwall

- 🐑 What do you like or dislike about being compared to a sheep? Why do you think God says that we are like sheep, and He is the shepherd? _____
- 🐑 Is it easier for you to picture Jesus as the Lamb of God or the Good Shepherd? Why is it important that He is both? _____

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
John 10:11 (NIV)*

FOLLOWING JESUS TO THE CROSS

READ: LUKE 9:18-23; 18:31-34; 23:26-27; JOHN 3:14-16

I sense myself struck dumb with the overwhelming horror, walking without strength—drawn by the crowd—drawn to be with you, my Lord, no matter where this ends...

I had hoped...

I had thought...

But my dirty legs carry me amidst this angry and rollicking crowd—their shouts and laughter a muddy din to my ears. Tears form but do not flow. My throat is dry and stuck—I cannot swallow. My heart, too exhausted to hurt, is held in a tense, quiet ache. It is dying with you, my Lord.

All my hope...

All my love...

Dying with you.

As they prod you on...you're so weak.

You fall again and again.

I can't move to help—I'm just part of the current.

It seems surreal.

A man, a man picks up your cross.

He carries it for you.

You walk on...blood flowing down your legs...

I walk in the path of your bloody footsteps.

Where are you taking us?

We followed you.

We follow you still. None of us say a word, our eyes fixed on you. We can't look away.

Oh Lord, Oh Lord, Oh Jesus.

Let it not be.

Yet somewhere inside me I know it must be.

This is where it all led...from the very beginning...somehow.  Jeri Howe

 Even though Jesus had foretold what was going to happen to Him, His followers didn't understand His prediction. How might it give you comfort to know that Jesus walked that long, painful, sorrowful walk to the cross because of His great love for you? _____

And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Luke 9:22 (NIV)

CLEANSED WITH HYSSOP

READ: EXODUS 12:21-22; 24:6-8; LEVITICUS 14:4-6; JOHN 19:28-30

Have you ever heard of hyssop? Hyssop is a plant with long, hairy leaves that grew in ancient Israel. And it shows up several times in the Bible.

First, in Exodus 12:21-22, God tells the Israelites to dip hyssop branches in lamb's blood and spread it on their doorframes during the first Passover. This happened while the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, and God sent ten plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. The final plague would kill every firstborn son, but the son would be spared if his house's doorframe was painted with lamb's blood.

Later, in Exodus 24:6-8, Moses and the Israelites make a covenant with God, promising to obey His commands and follow Him. As a sign of this covenant, Moses took a hyssop branch (see Hebrews 9:19), dipped it in the blood of young bulls, and used the hyssop branch to sprinkle the blood on the Israelites around him. This blood signified that the people belonged to God. Then, we see in Leviticus 14 that priests used hyssop branches to sprinkle people with water or a bird's blood to make them ceremonially clean (so they could enter God's holy temple).

And finally, we come to John 19:29. After centuries of animal sacrifices that brought God's people temporary holiness, Jesus—the final and perfect sacrifice—was on the cross. Beaten, bloody, and exhausted, He asked for a drink. A Roman soldier took the dried stalk of a hyssop plant, attached a sponge soaked in wine vinegar to the stalk, and lifted it up to Jesus.

And as the Roman guard stretched up to lift the hyssop stem toward Jesus's bloody lips, I have to wonder if he looked like an Israelite father reaching up to paint the top of his doorframe with a bloody hyssop branch, trusting God to be merciful. I wonder if he felt Jesus—God in flesh—fulfilling centuries of prophecies and purity laws as He took every ounce of brokenness and uncleanness onto Himself. I wonder if he knew that God's people would never need a hyssop branch again.

He probably didn't. But we do. *✠ Taylor Eising*

✠ Because Jesus took our sins on Himself, died, and rose back to life, we can be free from sin and death. Have you put your trust in Jesus? What questions do you have? (See page 104.) _____

✠ Have you ever felt sinful or unclean? Jesus can cleanse any sin. You can talk to Him today. _____

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Psalm 51:7 (NIV)*

CRUCIFIED

READ: MATTHEW 27:35-48; MARK 15:24-34; JOHN 19:13-30

After all Jesus went through at the hands of His accusers, they proceeded to have Him crucified on a cross. This was a form of execution developed by the Roman Empire. It was a long, painful, shameful way to die. And according to the traditions of Israel, it was one of the worst penalties given to a criminal, as Deuteronomy 21:23 says, “Anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” They treated Jesus as the worst of criminals, though He had done nothing wrong.

Everything Jesus did on earth has great significance, and His crucifixion has special significance to all those who have accepted Him. Jesus was willing to be put to death on the cross to ensure the redemptive work that would restore humanity back to relationship with God. The sins of humanity have been nailed to the cross—those things that held us captive have been defeated (1 Peter 2:24).

As Jesus was dying, He cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). In that moment, Jesus was bearing the sins of the whole world and suffering God’s holy judgment. This was the only way to save us, because God is just and doesn’t uphold iniquity. Yet He was willing to take our sin on Himself—because He loves us.

Before He gave up His spirit, Jesus—God in flesh—said, “It is finished” (John 19:30). This means everything needed for you and me to be redeemed has now been met. We can be free from the dominion of Satan and sin. There’s new hope for all people who identify with Jesus because all that caged and kept us bound has been dealt with and taken to the cross.

The apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” So you see, beloved, the same thing is true of all Christians today because Jesus has dealt with the curse that held and bound us. On the cross, He became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). He defeated the curse—and defeated death itself. Hallelujah! Glory to God! *Shadrach Goni*

🔑 Why is it significant that Jesus was put to death on a cross rather than dying another way? _____

🔑 Are you ready to identify with Jesus and put your trust in Him to save you? If you still have questions, who is a trusted Christian in your life you could talk to? (You can also find more information on page 104.) _____

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. Galatians 3:13 (CSB)

THE DEATH THAT BRINGS VICTORY

READ: MATTHEW 27:45-56; ROMANS 5:6-11; GALATIANS 1:4; REVELATION 1:18

When Jesus died, He did what no one else could do. From the prophets of old to the priests in the temple, none of their deaths could have accomplished what Jesus's death was able to. Although God worked mightily through many people throughout the generations, none of these people could do what was required for humanity to be saved.

All four Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) describe how Jesus died on the cross and the humiliation He went through. His death and resurrection are the most significant thing that could ever happen to humanity because He brought us total victory from sin and its power. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that when Jesus breathed His last, the curtain (or *veil*) of the temple “was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:37-38).

This curtain weighed hundreds of pounds and separated the Holy of Holies, where God's presence dwelled, from the rest of the temple. From the days of old, only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies—and only once a year—to offer sacrifices to God to atone for the sins of the people. Yet even the priest had to atone for himself first before atoning for others. But now, through Jesus Christ's perfect sacrifice, we can be forgiven and made right with God.

So now in Christ we have access to God. Our sins have been atoned for. The veil that separated us from having direct fellowship with God has been torn by God Himself. Now anyone who puts their trust in Jesus can have access to God on a daily basis and for unlimited time. This was God's good plan. He created us to be in relationship with Him, and even though we broke that relationship through sin, He has restored us. Now we have been completely brought back to God. 🕯 *Shadrach Goni*

🕯 Why was Jesus the only one who could save us? (See page 104.) _____

🕯 If you are struggling with any sin, remember that Jesus Christ has defeated Satan *long time* and *big time*. Jesus's sacrifice was enough to forgive all your sins—past, present, and future! Furthermore, when we read from the writing of the apostle Paul in Romans 5 and 6, we find an emphatic explanation to the church in Rome about how the death and resurrection of Christ have given us victory over sin. Who is a trusted Christian in your life who could encourage you to say no to sin and remind you of God's love even when you mess up? _____

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!
Romans 5:10 (NIV)

A BODILY RESURRECTION

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-22

For Christians, Easter is all about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But some people have fuzzy or unclear ideas about what that really means. They might see the resurrection as a symbol for new beginnings and second chances. Some churches even teach that the resurrection means “the spirit of Jesus lives on in His people.” They don’t proclaim the actual, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Does it make a difference? For the early Christians, the fact that Jesus literally rose from the dead was *the* foundational truth—the single most important teaching of Christianity. One by one, the apostles were put to death because they refused to back down from their testimony that they had seen the risen Christ. They endured gruesome deaths, such as being stoned, crucified, beheaded, speared, axed to death—or even worse. But they refused to take back what they said because they knew it was true, and God’s love compelled them to share this good news.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 15:17-19 that our own hope of eternal life after death is dependent on this very truth: “If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.”

The good news of Easter, however, is that the resurrection of Christ really happened. After being dead for three days, Jesus was raised from the dead by God the Father, and He was seen by hundreds of witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:6). He had a physical body that could be touched (John 20:27). This same resurrection power will raise all believers from the dead someday, with new resurrected bodies of our own.

Yes, the bodily resurrection of Jesus matters. For without the bodily resurrection, there is no gospel. 📖 *Laura N. Sweet*

📖 Why is Jesus’s resurrection essential to the gospel? (For more information, see page 104.) _____

📖 Have you ever thought about what it will be like to have a resurrected body when Jesus returns? To be fully human but without physical flaws, health issues, or sins? _____

And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. 1 Corinthians 15:14 (NLT)

OPEN MY EYES

READ: LUKE 24:13-35; ACTS 1:1-11; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

Easter is a divine mystery, a celebration that leaves us with questions we don't understand. How could God love us so much He would send Jesus to die? How did His body change when He rose from the dead? Why didn't He stay on earth a little longer to spend more time with His disciples?

We might not be able to answer these questions fully until Jesus returns. Like Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:25, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." God's ways are not our ways. God doesn't fit into our human understanding. But we can ask God to open our eyes to see how He is working around us.

I love the story of Jesus's walk with two of His followers on the road to Emmaus. Jesus's followers were discussing all that had happened since Jesus was put to death on a cross, and they felt confused and lost. Wasn't Jesus supposed to bring redemption? How was His death part of the plan? And how did His body disappear from the tomb?

Jesus met them where they were. They didn't recognize Him, but He walked with them, listened, and explained the Scriptures. They invited Him to stay with them, and He joined them at the table. When He broke bread, their eyes were opened to the truth, and they recognized Jesus. Then He disappeared.

We often take a bit to catch on, don't we? We don't always understand how God is working. We don't always recognize the Holy Spirit's presence. But God is here. He is with us. He is doing a great work in our hearts. And we can trust in His works of redemption. **✦** *Becca Wierwille*

✦ Why do you think Jesus's followers didn't recognize Him on the road to Emmaus? (Luke 24:16) What did they do after they recognized Jesus? (Luke 24:30-35) _____

✦ Has there been a time in your life when you didn't understand what God was doing in the moment, but looking back you can see how He was present and working? _____

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Weren't our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road and explaining the Scriptures to us?" Luke 24:31-32 (CSB)



IMPRINTED

READ: PSALM 139:23-24; 2 PETER 1:3-8

When I clean my house, I only use all-natural cleaners. Now, before you start thinking how earth-conscious I am (although that is a great reason to use natural cleaners), there's a deeper reason. When I was about four years old, my baby sister got into a cabinet and put a cap of the skull-and-crossbones kind of cleaner into her mouth. Even though I was young, I clearly remember riding in my dad's car behind the ambulance and praying, "God, please don't let my sissy die!"

Thankfully, my sister is just fine today. But this experience left an imprint on my soul: a fear of cleaning chemicals. For years, I wondered why I had anxiety when I helped someone clean their house with different products. When my kids were babies, I was super-vigilant and called the poison control number several times, none of which resulted in anything dangerous. Now, it makes sense.

We all have habits that we default to, even ones that may not seem rational. Sometimes, we can look back in our past and find the "trigger" where these behaviors started to form, while others may be buried deep in our souls and take some digging to uncover. Why does our younger sibling's whining set us on edge? Why do we have a compulsion to make sure our hair is just perfect? Why do we have extreme anxiety when we are running late? Whatever your "default" is, there may be an underlying reason lurking in your past.

This can start to feel overwhelming, but there is so much hope. If you are God's child, you are imprinted in a different way. You have His imprint on your heart and soul, reminding you that you are His forever (John 10:28-29; Ephesians 1:13; 1 John 3:1). God promises that in Christ, you are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). He will complete the work He began in you until the day He comes again (Philippians 1:6). You have the power of the Holy Spirit, who comforts you, teaches you, and reminds you of everything Jesus has said (John 14:26). You can tell your heart that you are not just a product of your past. You are imprinted by the God of the universe who made you in His image (Genesis 1:27). 📌 *Savannah Coleman*

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

🔑 How can we extend patience to others when they get stressed by things that don't make sense to us?

🔑 Have you ever had a knee-jerk reaction of anxiety, anger, fear, etc.? It feels so frustrating when you don't know the cause behind your reaction. And sometimes, it's even more frustrating when you do know the reason for your "trigger," but you can't seem to change your reaction. The scars from our past or the pain we have buried deep within us can leave us feeling helpless. But in Jesus, we have hope that He can heal our brokenness. And He can do that through His Spirit living in us, the truth found in His Word, and the love of His people. He has also equipped counselors and therapists to help people heal from past hurts. If you feel ready, you can take some time with Jesus to explore past hurts, knowing that He is even now transforming you more into His image (Romans 8:28-29). _____

🔑 If you've noticed patterns of fear or anxiety in your life, and 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.



DARKNESS WILL NOT LAST

READ: ACTS 16:16-26; ROMANS 8:31-39

When we're in a hard place, it feels like the darkness will last forever, but it won't. The Bible tells us there is a time for everything in life. A time for joy and, unfortunately, a time for pain (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). Because we live in a broken world, we all experience hurt and loss. But the pain won't last forever. One day we will begin to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Yet, it can be hard to hold on to hope when you're in a dark place. You might be in physical pain or dealing with emotional hurt. Maybe you have a lot of uncertainty or anxiety about life. However you're struggling, God invites you to come to Him.

God is good—so good that He came to be with us in the pain, in the brokenness, in the struggle. Jesus is God in flesh. He lived among us, “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain...he took up our pain and bore our suffering” (Isaiah 53:3-4). On the cross, Jesus took all the sin of the world on Himself so that He could heal our brokenness, and so that everyone who puts their trust in Him could be brought near to God. Because Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, we have the sure hope that He will return and bring heaven to earth.

As we wait for this day, we can remember that God promises He will wipe away our tears (Revelation 21:4). Remember that Jesus is with us, and He also promised that God will send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to be in Christians (John 14:16-17, 26). Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31).

It can feel like the darkness will last forever, but it won't. One day we will see how God got us through the hard times in our lives. And right now, we can cling to Jesus—like Paul and Silas did. Even when they were stripped, beaten, and chained up in prison, they “were praying and singing hymns to God, and other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). As Christians, we have the same Holy Spirit inside us, strengthening us. We can praise God in the darkness, and we can praise Him when He brings us into the light. 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

- 🕯️ When you feel discouraged, are there verses or stories in the Bible that lift you up? Does one of the verses above resonate with you? _____
- 🕯️ Can you think of a time you were going through something hard, but you knew God was with you? What did that feel like? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this. _____

But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. Isaiah 40:31a (NIV)

THE WORDS YOU SPEAK OUT

READ: COLOSSIANS 3:8-17; JAMES 3:8-12

I remember before putting my trust in Christ, my speech was just unedifying. Insults and curses always rumbled out of my mouth. But after discovering these Scripture passages and through the help of the Holy Spirit, I began to pay attention to each time harmful words wanted to go out of my mouth.

Sometimes, our words hurt people. But Jesus can bring healing. In James 3:8-12, we are admonished to desert every ill word we speak. James says fresh water and salty water can't come out from the same spring—we can't be a blessing and a curse at the same time. How sad it is that we use the same mouth to praise God and insult people.

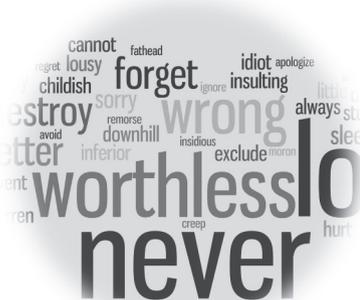
But if we put our trust in Jesus, He forgives us and cleanses us from every sin. And as we trust in Christ and lean on the Holy Spirit, He can help us tame our tongue to keep it from unleashing unpleasant words. The truth is our words can kill, but they can also heal. Isn't it amazing that our words can help and heal others?

Scripture also encourages us to always say things that will be helpful to others, words that will edify them and bring out the good in them. Beloved, through Christ our words can be seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6), which means they can add taste and value to the people who listen to us. Our speech should not be bitter like saltwater, but rather flavored with grace like a good meal.

When we speak words, we don't know how far they will go and who might be listening. So let us speak Christ with every word we say. 🕯️ *Shadrach Goni*

- 🕯️ Have you ever been hurt by someone's words? If you're still hurting, you can bring your pain to Jesus and ask for His healing. _____
- 🕯️ Has anyone ever said something to you that brought healing and joy to your heart? _____
- 🕯️ If you struggle with using hurtful words, you can take some time with Jesus, talking about it with Him and resting in His forgiveness. Through the work of the Holy Spirit in you, He can help you love others with your words.

Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone. Colossians 4:6 (NLT)



THE ABUNDANT LIFE

READ: MATTHEW 7:13-14; 19:28-29; JOHN 1:1-5; 5:24

All his life, Devon had been surrounded by walls. He had been born on the spaceship, just like countless generations before him. There were stories of a place humans had come from long ago called Earth, where there was open air and water that stretched as far as the eye could see. But that's all they were. Stories. Tales told to children before they went to sleep. On the ship, air and water were carefully monitored and recycled. One wrong move and they could be gone forever.

As the ship hurtled through space, all Devon could see outside was the ever-present blackness sprinkled with the fine glitter of distant stars. If the ship ever had a target destination, it had long since been lost. Now all that stretched before them was cold, empty darkness.

Then, one day, a message popped up on an old console. *Earth-like planet detected. Adjust coordinates immediately.* Most people on the ship scoffed at it. "Earth is a myth," they said. "There's never been anything but the spaceship."

But a few of the passengers read the words on the screen and believed. Devon was one of them. He and the others banded together and got a small spacecraft sitting in the hull ready for voyage. He sobbed as he hugged his family goodbye, then he and the others boarded the tiny ship and launched into space, away from the only home they had ever known.

They followed the coordinates. For weeks they saw nothing but darkness. Then a star in the distance began to grow brighter. Finally, a tinge of blue-green light came into view—a planet orbiting the star.

When they landed on the planet, they stumbled out of the ship into warm, permeating light. Devon's lungs burned as he sucked in the fresh, fragrant air. He and the others laughed and whooped as they ran along the edge of the great expanse of water. They gave names to the strange creatures they found crawling in the dirt and fluttering in the air. Devon realized this was how humans were meant to live—not confined to a spaceship but roaming free on a big, beautiful planet. As the giant star dipped below the unseen edge of the water, he finally sat down, exhausted. He was home. 📌 *Courtney Lasater*

*"I [Jesus] have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance."
John 10:10b (CSB)*

1 In John 10:10, Jesus says He came to earth so that we could have life in abundance. He became human, died on a cross, and rose again to give us life—the life we were meant to have before sin broke us and our world. What do you think abundant life through Jesus looks like? Have you experienced your life being changed by Him in any way? _____

1 Have you had to leave behind anything from your former life in order to follow Jesus and embrace the new life He has given you? _____



HE MAKES ME STRONG

READ: PSALM 18

There are times when I feel weak. Physically weak, because I haven't slept well.

Emotionally weak, because someone has been fighting me. Spiritually weak, because I haven't felt as close to God as I would like to feel. When I am exhausted, tired, weak...I don't feel up for the projects in front of me.

There is a beautiful picture in Psalm 18 of God saving us, giving us strength, and equipping us for all we must face. Verse 33 talks about God giving us the steady feet of a deer walking along a mountainside. Verse 34 talks about God preparing us for war and making sure that our hands are strong enough to handle a bow—even a bow of bronze, which no human could possibly bend. We do not have to rely on our own strength; we have a God who rescues us and wants to give us His strength.

God is so amazing; He even uses our weaknesses for His good purposes. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul is describing a struggle in his life, and then he shares what God told him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can have the same confidence as Paul, because the Spirit of God is living in us—the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11)! Therefore we can say, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Have you ever felt God fill you up with strength when you felt like you couldn't go on? Have you ever reached out to Him from a hospital bed, a classroom, or a bedroom floor? We don't have to be strong on our own. God is all-powerful, and He invites us to rely on Him. We don't ever have to face life without Him. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

🕯️ When do you feel weak? How might God be inviting you to rely on Him in these times? _____

I love you, LORD, my strength. Psalm 18:1 (NIV)



AS A FRIEND

READ: EXODUS 33:11; ISAIAH 41:8-10; JOHN 15:15

Do you have a best friend? A best friend is a precious gift from God. And do you know that God wants to be your very best friend? Jesus came so that we could be in close relationship with God.

While a human best friend cannot always be with you, God can. He is with you every hour and every moment. And He is happy to be with you. Before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He told His followers, “Remember, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

God feels for you. He knows whatever you are going through. A human friend cannot always help you when you have a problem, but God is there to walk you through it. Whenever you are sad, God will weep with you, as Jesus wept alongside Mary and Martha (John 11:35). And He will make you joyful again (Psalm 30:11).

You can talk to God anytime. God spoke to Moses as a friend. You can talk to God about anything, and He will listen to you. God is delighted when you talk to Him as a father delights in his child. God likes listening to your prayers and to whatever you want to tell Him. He will not reject you or push you away. He understands you and is considerate of you. He accepts you for who you really are.

God knows about your goals and dreams, and He cares about each one. As you seek Him, He will guide you and provide for all your needs. He will be with you all the way. If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you can know that God is your very best friend. He loves you dearly. He will never leave you. You can count on Him. 🕯️ *Golda Dilema*

🕯️ Do you sometimes feel like God is distant from you? Who are trusted Christians who can pray with you when you are feeling this way? _____

🕯️ Are you aware that you are special to God? You can ask God to reveal this truth to your heart anytime.

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God’s friend. James 2:23 (CSB)



AN UNEXPECTED DINNER GUEST

READ: LUKE 7:34-50

A Pharisee (a Jewish religious leader) named Simon invited Jesus to supper. When Jesus arrived, Simon didn't offer Him water to wash His feet or head. Dirty feet in sandals and itchy heads need water to wash off the dust. It was also customary for the host to offer their guest a kiss on the cheek, but Simon did not greet Jesus this way.

As they sat for supper, a woman slipped into the dinner. Though she wasn't invited, she searched for Jesus. Finding Him, she knelt down. Taking her beautiful jar of expensive fragrant oil, she poured it over His feet. As she wiped His feet with her hair, she kissed them. Simon was probably wondering who let this sinful woman in. He knew her reputation, and he definitely did not invite her. But Jesus interrupted his thoughts. "Simon, I have something to say to you."

Simon answered, "Go ahead, Teacher."

Jesus told a story about a creditor who had two debtors. One owed him a lot of money, the other less. The creditor forgave both their debts. Then Jesus asked Simon, "Who do you suppose loved him more after that?"

Simon answered: probably the one who owed him the most.

"That's right," Jesus replied. While Simon didn't offer Jesus water for His feet or greet Him with a kiss, this woman washed Jesus's feet with her tears and kissed them. Though Simon did not provide olive oil to anoint Jesus's head, she anointed His feet with rare perfume. Jesus explained that her many sins were forgiven, so she showed Him much love. 📖 *Anna Gregory*

📖 Simon called this woman a sinner, but Jesus called her forgiven. Have you experienced God's forgiveness? If you have questions about this, check out page 104. _____

📖 Out of her love for Jesus, this woman kissed His feet and dried them with her hair. Have you ever felt compelled to express your love to Jesus? What did you do? _____

"I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love." Luke 7:47a (NLT)



SPEAKING UP IN LOVE (AND NERVOUSNESS)

READ: EPHESIANS 4:29-32

As the aerobics class finished, I grabbed my bag and stormed to the locker room. *Why, God?* I pleaded. *Why do I have to deal with this?*

Near the end of the workout session, the instructor had made a rude remark about a member of a popular boy band. Over the microphone she had been using to call out exercises, the aerobics teacher had referred to this person by a homosexual slur. She laughed and, a few minutes later, wrapped up the session.

None of the other class members seemed surprised by the teacher's comment. But I sensed the Lord nudging me to speak up. I didn't want this responsibility. It was too complicated. I understood God's teaching about the kind of marriage that honors Him: gospel-centered marriage between one man and one woman. Our feelings might point us away from God's best for our lives, but His instructions about sex and marriage remain (Ephesians 5:31-33). So, how should I address this with the aerobics instructor—especially when I believed she might also be a follower of Jesus?

A couple days later, I attended a class with the same instructor. At the end of the session, I waited for the room to empty and then approached her with shaking hands and a quavering voice. I asked if she remembered her comments about the singer and then told her I was a Christian. I mentioned I had certain beliefs about marriage and sexuality, but I also believed God tells us to treat others with love—including in our speech. She listened well, seemed embarrassed about her previous nasty remark, and thanked me for bringing it to her attention.

In pursuing this difficult conversation with my instructor, I sought to love her by telling her the truth. Because of the grace Jesus has shown us, we can demonstrate His forgiveness and do good to all people, even those we might disagree with. Because, in love, Jesus died and rose again for my aerobics instructor...for the boy band singer...and for me. 📌 *Allison Wilson Lee*

📌 How do you think God teaches us to treat others who don't believe what we believe? _____

📌 Read Galatians 6:10. How should we approach Christians who are speaking in unwholesome ways? How does the forgiveness Jesus gives affect the way we have those conversations? _____

📌 What are some of the difficulties in balancing speaking the truth while doing so with love? _____

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

HELP ME, DADDY

READ: MATTHEW 7:9-11; JOHN 1:12-13

My breath started to grow short, and I felt panic rising in my chest. While my parents were taking a nap on a warm Sunday afternoon, I was playing dress-up in my bedroom. The jacket I'd shoved my arms into had fit just fine the year before, but now I had obviously outgrown it. I'd become thoroughly, completely stuck, and—to a five-year-old—this problem seemed insurmountable. *What would I do?*

Thankfully, my dad finished his nap just about that time. He opened the door to discover me struggling to free myself from the confining jacket. But he didn't leave me on my own to find a way out. Daddy stepped into the room and reassured me, then gently tugged the coat from my shoulders. Finally, I could breathe easily. I could not have extricated myself from that scary situation without Daddy's help.

When we put our trust in Jesus, we begin a relationship with God as His children. We get to experience the care and tenderness of the best Daddy. We're never required—or expected—to face problems alone, because He remains with us always, guiding us over the hurdles and through the challenges. Once we've entered that loving relationship with God the Father, we continue to grow in Christ, but sometimes, we start believing the lie that we should learn to manage our issues on our own. "Isn't that what growing up means?" we may wonder. "Learning to figure out how to solve my own problems?"

But God never intends for us to navigate messes, mishaps, or mistakes in our own strength or knowledge. As His children, we have an open invitation to come to Him and call on Him, drawing close with our tears, our fears, and everything in between. And, like any loving Daddy, He is eager to help us when we do. 📖 *Allison Wilson Lee*

📖 What problems feel overwhelming in your life at this moment? Do you feel like you can talk to God about these? Why or why not? _____

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16 (NIV)



DELIVERANCE (PART 1)

READ: ISAIAH 43:1-19

The vast landscape stretched before me, unending. Mountain peaks jutted harshly against a darkening sky and rivers churned angrily. Taking a deep breath, I paused to tighten the laces of my shoes. “I know You have created me and called me by name—I am Yours.” The wind snatched my words away, but my heart felt a bit lighter as I carefully made my way down the rocky slope.

At the roaring riverside, my stomach clenched in fear. “Must I pass through?” I pleaded to the One who loves me like no other. In the depths of my soul, His whisper echoed: “I will be with you.” The water was ice cold, and I could not catch my breath—but miraculously, the currents never went over my head.

My mouth twisted into a grim smile when I approached a forest ablaze. Smoke billowed from the tops of trees, and the heat was so intense I stopped my journey forward out of sheer instinct. “I can’t do this—I will be burned!” I cried aloud. “I am making a way.” His words swelled louder than the flames raging before me. “I will help you, I will sustain you, I will carry you, I will rescue you.” Every promise was balm to my aching heart. Emboldened, I picked up a twig charred by the fire. With the tip covered in ash, I wrote on my hand: “The LORD’s”.

He brought me through the flames unharmed—I danced with joy and sang: “In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength!” When my feet grew tired and my dancing slowed, He showed me the way I should continue on my journey. I was so thirsty, my tongue felt like sand. When I felt as though I could not bear it any longer, He had compassion and there before me was a sparkling stream of clear water. I drank until I was satisfied. **✦ Savannah Coleman**

✦ Throughout the Bible, God showed His great love to His people, rescuing them again and again. His promise, “I will be with you” (Isaiah 43:2), foreshadowed the coming of Jesus—who is Immanuel, “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23). Jesus is the Promised One, the ultimate Rescuer who saved us from sin and death by dying on the cross and raising from the dead. If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you can know that you are His forever (John 10:27-29). What hard things are you facing today? How might God be inviting you to rely on Him? _____

✦ If you want to dig deeper into Jesus’s promises: Isaiah 44:1-5; 45:24; 46:4-10; 48:17; 49:10-13.

“...when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned...For I am the LORD your God...” Isaiah 43:2b-3a (NIV)

DELIVERANCE (PART 2)

READ: ISAIAH 50:10; 51:11-16; 54:10-17; JOHN 19:30

When the dark came, because it always does, I found that I had no light. Perhaps I lost it when I crossed the river. Still, I would trust in the name of the LORD and rely on my God. As I made my way through the blackest night, I felt His comfort surround me. I relied on His presence until the night gave way to the first light of day.

Coming around the next bend, I found myself facing a crowd of people. They held every sort of weapon, and the malice on their faces made my blood run cold. One by one, they advanced upon me, shouting accusations and wielding their weapons. I wanted to curl up in a ball and cover my ears, but God gave me His strength to endure. “They will not prevail!” His words rang out, and then I heard the echo of His voice on the day that changed all days. “It is finished” rumbled over the land with such power and light that it shattered every weapon. The people I had once feared were silenced.

Hours later, upon reaching the foot of the mountains, I felt like weeping with relief. Perhaps my journey was nearing the end. Suddenly, the ground began to shake beneath my feet. The vibrations grew so intense that I was knocked to the earth as boulders smashed around me. A scream of terror rose from my throat as I watched the mountains crumble and the hills around me seem to move.

But then, unfathomably, everything was instantaneously still. I could see the destruction and hear the rumbling enveloping the landscape around me, but it was as if I were encased in a protective sphere of calm for a few blissful moments. And there was His voice, falling on my ears like a warm summer rain: “My unfailing love for you will not be shaken.” I knew then, whatever I had to walk through, my God would deliver me. *✠ Savannah Coleman*

✠ The things you have to go through in life will be hard (John 16:33); at times you will feel shaken to the core. Remember that one thing remains: God’s unfailing love for you. If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you can know that nothing can separate you from His love because Jesus has died and risen again (Romans 8:35-39). What darkness are you walking through today? How might Jesus be inviting you to rely on Him? (John 8:12; Hebrews 13:5-6) _____

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the LORD, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10 (NIV)

LET SOMEONE HELP

READ: PSALM 34:17-19; GALATIANS 6:2

We all experience ups and downs, but sometimes, what we are experiencing seems so much harder than what we see others experiencing. Sometimes, we feel like our pain is greater, that our loss is worse. Other times, we might feel like our pain is small compared to others, and we hesitate to acknowledge that we are experiencing feelings of loss. Some will lose their parents when they are young, some will grow old and still have their parents around. Some have a close relationship with their family, some do not.



Whatever you are going through, you might feel like you are alone, but there are people out there who genuinely care about you. There are people out there who will listen to you, have compassion on you, and grieve because of all that you have had to live through. There are people who will help you see God and the way He cares about you.

When life is dark and heavy, we don't have to deal with things on our own. We have a God who loves us, and He came to earth so that He could be with each one of us. Because Jesus died and rose again, we can draw near to God and receive His healing. He sees our burdens, large and small, and He wants us to give them to Him.

One of the ways God lifts our burdens is through community (Galatians 6:2). As you experience loss and heartache, reach out. Let someone help you through this time. Let someone pray for you when you feel too weak to pray for yourself. Find a trusted adult, such as a counselor, pastor, parent, teacher, or coach, and let them help you push through. Let them help you experience God's love. Let them help you find hope for your future. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

🕯️ We all go through painful experiences, and sometimes, we are tempted to compare our situation with others. Yet God invites us into a different way: receiving His compassion for us and extending this compassion to others. Have you told God about the hurt you are facing? Have you talked to someone who cares about you? If you're not sure who this might be, you can ask God to help you identify someone in your life who you can be honest with about your struggles. _____

The LORD is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18 (CSB)

LEAN ON THE PROMISES OF GOD

READ: NUMBERS 23:19; DEUTERONOMY 31:8

Parents can promise anything to a child. And that child can believe that promise. Sometimes, parents do not, or cannot, keep their promises, but there is one who always keeps His promises, and that is God our Father. Here are some of His precious and treasured promises:

God promised to send the Messiah to save His people and defeat the devil. Throughout the Old Testament, God gave prophesies about the Messiah. At just the right time, He sent His Son to live among us—fully God and fully human (Galatians 4:4). Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, just as God promised He would. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can rest knowing that our eternal future is secure. Jesus will return bodily to earth, raise us from the dead, and set creation free from all brokenness, sin, and death.

In the meantime, God promises to give strength to His people (Isaiah 41:10). In Judges 6:11-16, the angel of the LORD called Gideon a mighty warrior—even though Gideon thought that he was weak. God enabled and strengthened Gideon to lead the Israelites and defeat their oppressors. In the same way, God will strengthen you to do what He calls you to do.

The Lord promises to guide His followers. God guided Noah in building the ark (Genesis 6:13-22). God will lead and guide you also. He says in Psalm 32:8, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you."

God promises to give you rest. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

The Lord promised to love you. His love for you will never fail. Paul wrote in Romans 8:39 that nothing will separate you from the love of Christ. He will be with us no matter what (Matthew 28:20).

God has made many more promises in His Word. He has kept His promises in the past, He is keeping His promises today, and He will still keep His promises in the future. So we can trust and rely on Him, knowing that He cares for us. 🕯 *Golda Dilema*

🕯 Does one of these promises stick out to you? _____

🕯 How might God be inviting you to rely on Him today? _____

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)

REST IN LOVE

READ: EXODUS 33:12-17; MATTHEW 11:25-30

When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them the gift of a peaceful home. He planted the garden in Eden, and Genesis describes the garden as lush and pleasant, filled with trees and watered by a river. And God saw that this place He had created was good. Adam and Eve could rest in the Garden of Eden, knowing the peace of God's love surrounded them (Genesis 2:8-15).

But when Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator, their world got messy. Pain and suffering and death entered the scene. God banished Adam and Eve from the garden, but He never stopped loving them. Even after they became His enemies, God cared for their needs by making clothing for them (Genesis 3:21-24). Through the generations, God kept calling His people to return to Him.

Today, we live in a messy world. When we listen to the news or watch people tear each other apart on social media, feelings of unrest can quickly take over our hearts. Fear and anxiety can rule our days. We try to take control, but we end up hurting ourselves instead. And peace? That can feel about as far away as possible. This is no Garden of Eden.

But no matter what bad things happen, God is here. His promise to His people is that His presence goes with us. He gives us rest. We don't have to be in the Garden of Eden to experience the power of God's love. We don't have to be in the garden to know His perfect peace, because Jesus, the Prince of Peace, came into our broken world. He said, "Come to me...and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

In Psalm 46:10, God says, "Be still, and know that I am God." As Christians, we can be still because the Holy Spirit helps us slow down our thoughts, our worries, and our need to control our situations. We can trust that God is with us always. Redemption is here. Jesus invites us to rest in His love. All we have to do is accept His invitation. **✦** *Becca Wierwille*

✦ Our world is messy. What sorts of things in your life bring you feelings of fear or anxiety? How might God be inviting you to rest in His love today? _____

✦ When you are having a hard time being still, who is a trusted Christian in your life who you can be honest with? If you know someone who is struggling, how could you listen with compassion and pray for them? _____

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Exodus 33:14 (NIV)

THE POND

READ: PSALM 46; ROMANS 8:18-25; REVELATION 21:1-6

The chaos pressed around me, weighing down each step. The air was thick with it—tendrils of black vapor darting this way and that. I trudged forward, barely able to see even a foot in front of me, following the voice. Somehow, the soft voice had cut through the ever-present shrieks of pain and evil that filled this world. I didn't know what the voice was or where it came from. All I knew was how desperately I needed it. My weary heart craved peace, and something deep inside me knew the voice had it.

My stomach lurched as I heard a splash with my next step. Water quickly soaked my boot. I took one more step, and the world shifted. Silence. Sweet, sweet silence. That was the first thing I noticed. My shoulders relaxed. I hadn't even realized how tense they were. Next, as my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw the pond. Gentle sunlight shimmered on the water that started at my feet and continued just to the edge of my vision. A smile tugged at my lips as I felt the sunlight warm my face. How long had I been starving for it?

Then, I saw Him. My heart started to leap with joy, but I quickly quieted it. He was a stranger. Why should I trust Him? He strode over to me, feet sloshing in the shallow water. "You look weary," He observed, a kind smile brightening His face.

That voice... Is it Him? "What is this place?" I asked sharply.

"Peace," He replied, "Rest. Wholeness. Whatever you want to call it."

I turned, examining an invisible wall holding back the chaos. "Why can't it get in?" "Well, some of it can," He said gently, eyeing a spot on my shoulder. A whisp of chaos clung to me. Now that I noticed it, I heard its screech. "May I?" He asked, reaching out His hand.

I saw He had an odd scar near His wrist.

What is He going to do with it? Who can grasp smoke? Curious about this stranger, I nodded. He winced as He wrapped His scarred hand around the whisp. I expected His hand to move right through the smoke, but the whisp seemed to solidify. It stopped moving for a moment, then started thrashing wildly, screaming even louder. With a grunt of effort, He ripped it from my shoulder and hurled it back out into the chaos. My mouth gaped open as I crumpled into the shallow water. "What...what happened?" I asked weakly, trying to stop my head from spinning. It felt like a piece of me was missing.

He reached down and helped me to my feet, His hands rough but warm. "I'm sorry that was so painful. Evil often has a deeper grasp than one might realize. And removing anything so deeply entwined with yourself, even something that's killing you, can hurt."

As He spoke, the pain inside me began to dull. I felt lighter...mostly. Something in me still wanted that missing piece. I examined His face more closely. *If He can remove that from me...* “Did you make this place?”

His kind smile returned. “Yes, I suppose you could say that.”

Questions piled up in my brain, quickly moving from suspicious curiosity to anger. “But...If you can do that—if you can just chuck chaos away and make—make, well, this.” I gestured around me to the pond, my voice rising. “With all of its peace or rest or whatever you said it was, then why on earth wouldn’t you just get rid of ALL the chaos?” Before I quite knew what I was doing, I found myself making demands of this stranger. My arguments devolved into phrases from childhood. “Make it go away! Make it all just go away!” Sorrow, long buried under years of toughness and survival instinct, wormed its way to the surface. Choked sobs interrupted my demands, echoing over the pond. Grief upon grief washed over me. Surrounded by all this goodness—the pond, the sunlight, the quiet—I realized just how bad the chaos really was, and just how deeply it hurt me.

I felt a hand on my back. In my grief, I had apparently sunk back down to the ground, water soaking my jeans. He sat there with me. When my emotions were spent and my breathing slowed, I finally looked up at His face. Tears flowed down His cheeks. “I know your pain, dear one.” His voice broke as He spoke, and fresh tears fell from His eyes. “Someday, I will make it all go away. Someday, peace and wholeness will flood the whole earth. But not yet. There is still work to be done.” His eyes steeled, and anger briefly flashed over His face. “But,” He continued, “no matter how bad things get out there, this place will always be here. Here you can find strength for the journey. You can rest and remember who you are. Bring your hurt to me, and find healing. And when you leave, I will go with you.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t totally sure I understood. Without really knowing why, I leaned my head against His shoulder. “Can...Can I stay here a little longer?”

I could hear a smile in His voice. “Yes, dear one. Please stay as long as you need.” 🕯
Taylor Eising

The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Psalm 46:11 (NIV)

🕯 As we wait for Jesus to return and make all things well, we experience brokenness and chaos. How might knowing that Jesus is with us, in the midst of all this, give us hope? _____

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

READ: EPHESIANS 1:7-23; ROMANS 13:11-14; 1 PETER 5:8-11

The New Testament talks about power in the gospel. We might be tempted to think the gospel just has to do with getting saved—I believe the story about Jesus, and then when I die I get to go to heaven. This view almost makes the gospel seem irrelevant for life.

Why do we need the gospel's power? The gospel (the "good news") is about so much more than what happens after we die. It's about Jesus defeating the brokenness that has invaded His good creation, restoring His people to new life, and defeating death forever as He reigns as King. It means the hurt we see in the world, the sins that overtake us, and Satan's evil work will all be crushed beneath the scarred feet of Jesus Christ. The gospel is powerful!

In Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he talks about this gospel power. One reason God gives us power in the gospel is because we live in enemy-occupied territory. The Christian has three enemies: 1) our own sinful desires; 2) the sin that has invaded the world, including lies, false philosophies, and sin-driven peer pressure; and 3) Satan, the prince of the power of the air, our great accuser who prowls around seeking someone to devour (Ephesians 2:2-3; 1 Peter 5:8).

How am I, with my little arms, going to fight against my sinful desires, the world's broken system, and Satan and his forces? There's no way on my own. But in the gospel, I am not on my own. I have put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14) and the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:11). He is always working His good purposes. He brought us victory through His life, death, and resurrection, and He promises to return to fully establish His kingdom, defeating sin, death, and Satan forever. With the same power that raised Christ from the dead at work in me (Ephesians 1:19-20), I can have victory over sin, the brokenness in the world, and the devil.

Paul prays for the church in Ephesus, not that they would get power, but that they would know the power they already have (Ephesians 1:15-19)! If you know Jesus, you already have His power. The Holy Spirit dwells in you, empowering you to follow Jesus and to rest in the hope of the victory He has already won. 🕯️ *Jeff Weddle*

🕯️ Why do you think God would want to give us power? _____

🕯️ Where do you see brokenness at work in the world? In yourself? How can Jesus bring hope and healing to these places? _____

*I pray...that you may know...his incomparably great power for us who believe.
Ephesians 1:18-19 (NIV)*

LIKE THE PALM TREE

READ: PSALM 1:1-6; JEREMIAH 17:7-8; EPHESIANS 3:14-21

I happen to live in a coastal area that is very windy. Oftentimes, the strong winds cause a lot of destruction by blowing away house roofs and destroying trees and crops in the gardens. At one time, the winds ravaged my maize garden, leaving the maize plants bent. So, I had to get sticks to support them so they would not fall flat and get completely uprooted.

However, I have noticed one particular tree that is never shaken by the winds—the palm tree. When other trees are torn out by the wind, the palm tree remains in its position, unmoved because of its deep roots that give it stability.

On our own, we are all like maize, easily bent and broken by the winds of life. But Jesus makes us like the palm tree. Proverbs 10:30 says, “The righteous will never be uprooted.” While all people do wrong and none of us can be righteous, Jesus—God in flesh—came to die on the cross for us and raise from the dead so that we could “become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). When we put our trust in Jesus, He dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. His power holds us fast. In Him, we are “rooted and established in love” (Ephesians 3:17).

In life, there are many winds that blow against us and cause us to fear, or even to wonder if God is really good. From strained relationships, to illness in our families, to financial hardship and natural calamities...so many things cause us stress and threaten our stability. When we feel like we are being blown away by the strong winds of life, when we need an arm to lean on for support, God is there. He holds us up (Isaiah 41:10), and He empowers us through the Holy Spirit to stand firm (Ephesians 6:10-13). He also makes us part of His family, the church, so we can help hold each other steady when the winds come.

As Christians, we can be encouraged that we are deeply rooted in Christ, and we have our stability in Him. No matter how strong the winds may blow, nothing can move us from our position in Him (John 10:27-30). We will stand, and when the winds have stopped blowing, we will remain in our position in Christ Jesus (Matthew 7:24-29). *✚ Enid Adah Nyinomujuni*

✚ What has been causing you stress lately? Jesus invites us to bring all these things to Him in prayer. We can lay them at His feet, knowing He is big enough to take care of them all. _____

✚ What helps you when you're stressed? Who is a trusted Christian you feel comfortable talking to about what you're going through, such as a pastor, counselor, parent, teacher, or coach? _____

The righteous will never be uprooted. Proverbs 10:30a (NIV)

THE BEAUTY OF THIS WORLD

READ: PSALM 104

I live far from the ocean, but I loved each trip that I have been able to take to it. I love watching the waves come in and hearing them hit against the shore. I love the color of the water. I love walking in the sand.

I also enjoy trips to local parks and the opportunity to just be out in the sun. I love the green leaves that show up on trees in the spring, and I appreciate the beauty of the orange leaves that come out in the fall. I love the blossoming trees and the flowers that open up when the weather gets warm.

I love much of what nature offers, and I love that God created this world for us to enjoy. I am thankful to God for the fresh air coming through my window right now, and the view that I have as I sit and write.

This world is amazing, and the God who created it is worthy of our praise. The God who created this world really knew what He was doing, and there is so much for us to discover as we travel, spend time outside, and even look out the window.

I am grateful for all I have seen of this world so far. I am eager to get out and see more of this world, and I am intent on praising God for all of it. *Emily Acker*

🕯 What is one of your favorite things about nature? _____

🕯 Why do you think God invites us to enjoy the things He has created? _____

How countless are your works, LORD! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Psalm 104:24 (CSB)



IN THE NIGHT

READ: PSALM 119:103-105; PROVERBS 3:21-24; MATTHEW 11:25-30

Sleep hasn't come easily to me lately. One of the most calming things I have found to do in the night, when my mind won't shut down or I am dealing with anxiety, is to open the Bible app on my phone and read a chapter or two.

In the night, when the world is quiet and I am all alone, I can feel a different kind of worry and a different kind of darkness. Yet, in the night, when the world is quiet and I am all alone, I can also experience a different kind of concentration and I can make the most of a different kind of silence.

When I read my Bible in the night, I not only have the chance to forget the worries that are on my mind, but I also have the opportunity to really focus on what I am reading without anyone interrupting me. When I read my Bible in the night, I have the chance to understand things in a new way. Jesus came to set us free from sin and death, and all the brokenness that comes along with it. Jesus wants us to come to Him for help whenever we are feeling distressed.

I want to sleep well. I pray and ask God for good sleep each night. But there is something to be gained through waking in the night and having the chance to get closer to God in the quiet. Like a kid going to their parents' bed after a bad dream, I turn to God for comfort. **📖** *Emily Acker*

📖 Has reading the Bible ever helped you when you were feeling stressed? _____

📖 Sleep is an important part of our physical and emotional health. Sometimes, we need help in order to give our bodies the sleep we need, and that's okay. If you have difficulty sleeping, who is a trusted adult you can talk to, such as a parent, counselor, or doctor? _____

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



THE BLIND HYMN WRITER

READ: PSALM 30; EPHESIANS 5:18-20

Praise the Lord!" the man yelled. "Here comes the authoress!" The man was Pastor D. L. Moody, a well-known teacher and evangelist, and he was introducing one of the most prolific hymn writers in the United States of America, Fanny Crosby. Her hymns had touched and inspired millions who attended his church revival meetings. She only found herself on stage because there was no other seating available, but Moody was delighted to have her there.

Fanny was born in Putnam County, New York, in 1820. In infancy she developed a bad cold, causing inflammation in her eyes. A doctor applied mustard plasters, which some thought caused damage, and Fanny lost her sight. At the New York Institution for the Blind, she became a teacher and wrote song lyrics and other poetry. In addition, she had the honor of becoming the first female voice heard publicly in the United States Senate Chamber in Washington, DC. She even read one of her poems there. How awesome is that?

In 1858, she married a fellow scholar, Alex Van Alstyne (who was also blind), and they had one child. But when their child died in infancy, Fanny was badly grieved. Her hymn "Safe in the Arms of Jesus" is believed to be the result of that grief. In the lyrics of this beautiful hymn, she expresses how wonderful it is to be close to Jesus, "Safe on His gentle breast / There by His love o'reshadowed / Sweetly my soul shall rest." She also looks forward to the day Jesus will make all things new, when we will be "Free from the blight of sorrow / Free from my doubt and fears." How many other suffering parents were comforted by that hymn?

Fanny wrote an astounding eight thousand hymns. She gave all credit for her gift of hymn writing to the Lord. She also worked relentlessly to serve people who were impoverished and living in the inner city, most of whom were immigrants. She was an amazing woman for whom things could have turned out so differently. Instead of despair, she chose to draw near to her Lord and Savior. The next time you hear "Blessed Assurance" or "Pass Me Not Oh Gentle Savior," remember the woman who wrote them, Fanny Crosby. 📖 *Susan Sundwall*

📖 No matter what your circumstances are, God has given you gifts that are important in His kingdom. What are some ways you can serve Jesus in your context? _____

📖 Have you ever experienced Jesus's love and closeness through worship music and hymns? _____

Sing a new song to the LORD; let the whole earth sing to the LORD. Psalm 96:1 (CSB)

A PICTURE OF GRACE

READ: JOHN 5:1-15; EPHESIANS 2:12-13; TITUS 3:3-8

In John 5:1-9, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, to a place called the pool of Bethesda. The author, John, who was probably with Jesus at the time, tells us there were “a great number of disabled people” (verse 3) at the pool of Bethesda. Some of these people were blind, some couldn’t walk, and some were sick. All, apparently, were looking for some kind of miraculous healing by the waterside. John records that Jesus speaks to one man in particular—and heals him!

So why does Jesus choose to heal this man? He certainly isn’t well-connected. He tells Jesus that he has no one to help him into the pool—no friends, no family. He is not a special or “holy” man—in fact, Jesus warns him after he is healed: “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (verse 14). Really, we see no obvious reason why Jesus chooses this man for healing instead of others waiting at the pool of Bethesda.

And maybe that’s the point.

This man has nothing at all to recommend him as a “candidate” for grace. He is powerless, sinful, alone in the world and helpless to save himself. But Jesus comes along, finds this man in his misery, and graciously heals him. “At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked” (verse 9).

The ways God works are often mysterious to us, and we may never understand why Jesus healed this particular man on this particular day. But we can see a picture of God’s grace in this one man’s healing. He is like every lost sinner, and every last one of us. Ephesians 2:12 puts it this way: “You were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”

Like the man sitting at the pool of Bethesda, we are all hopeless and helpless; there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. But God extends grace to us. He loves us, and He came to be with us. Jesus, God in flesh, brings healing to our brokenness. He died and rose from the dead because it was the only way to save us from our sins. If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we are no longer separated from God. We are totally forgiven, and we get to look forward to the day Jesus will return and permanently heal all our brokenness. What a picture of grace! **!** *Laura N. Sweet*

! Have you ever felt like you didn’t deserve God’s help? How might John 5:1-15 speak into this? _____

*...he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.
Titus 3:5a (NIV)*

EARTHLY PAIN

READ: LUKE 22:39-44; JOHN 11:32-37

No one enjoys getting hurt, but because we live in a world that has been broken by sin, we get hurt often. Sometimes, this hurt comes from other people. The ones we trust the most, and are closest to, can really mess with our life. People can push us around and use us. They can break our heart and disappoint us. Daily life holds a lot of pain. Jesus experienced that pain while He was on earth, and He understands what we are facing.

Before it came time for Jesus to go to the cross and die a very painful death, He asked God if that was something He really had to do. He knew the pain He was going to feel, not only from what was physically going to happen but also emotionally, as people would insult Him and mock Him—and even His closest friends would betray Him, deny Him, and run away from Him. Jesus knew that going to the cross meant that He would endure all of God's wrath for the sins of the whole world. And His Father would not reach down and stop the pain from happening. Even though Jesus knew God would raise Him from the dead after three days in the tomb, He was still in agony on the night before He went to the cross (Matthew 26:38). But He was willing to endure it, because it was the only way to save us—to forgive our sin and heal our broken world.

A few days earlier, Jesus was deeply sad when His friend Lazarus died. Even though Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, He wept alongside His friends.

Pain is a part of life, but we serve a God who understands our pain. A God who is there for us in the midst of suffering. A God who became human and endured immense pain—because He loves us. A God who has promised that He will right every wrong and put an end to pain forever (Revelation 21:1-6). If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that when people hurt us, when they make life miserable for us, God stands with us. He helps us. He soothes us. He empowers us to forgive those who have wronged us. And He walks with us through the pain. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

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

- ❗ What is causing you pain today? _____

- ❗ If you've put your trust in Jesus, you are never alone in your pain. Jesus is with you, and you are part of His family, the church. How does God invite us to receive comfort from Him and from fellow Christians? (2 Corinthians 1:3-7) _____

- ❗ When someone hurts us deeply, what might healthy boundaries look like? If you're not sure, who can you ask, such as a pastor, parent, teacher, counselor, coach, or 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.
- ❗ If you or someone you know is suffering from abuse, and if your situation is potentially life-threatening, call 911 (or the emergency number for your area) or go to the local hospital emergency room right away.



MOTIVATION REALIZATION

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-18; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17; 1 JOHN 4:7-21

It was the event of the season! I eagerly awaited my invite...but it never came. Before this event was even a possibility, I had poured into this person. God laid it on my heart to encourage, pray, and uplift—and I did just that for well over a year. When a friend of mine was chattering excitedly about the event, I was happy for her, but my own ego was bruised. What was wrong with me? Why was I not invited? I risked a quick sniff of my armpits—maybe I smelled?

Later that day, I began to analyze all my interactions and conversations with this person, coming up with zero reasons why I would not merit an invitation. Since others who had known this person for half the amount of time I had were getting an invite, something had to be wrong with me. That was when I felt like God spoke to my heart: “What is your motivation for love?” The realization cut deep—somewhere along the line, my original motivations of encouragement had morphed into entitlement.

Perhaps it’s time we all took a hard look at what motivates us to show love to others. Are we pouring into others to gain special privileges? Are we showing kindness simply to receive kindness? Are we giving so we will look good in the eyes of those around us? Are we serving so we can cash in when a need arises?

The only one with ultimately pure motivations is God. We did nothing to deserve the sacrifice of His Son, yet He loved us without expecting anything in return (1 John 4:9-10). The way Jesus loves us is selfless, and this is the way of love He calls us to emulate (verse 11). Our motivation for love should be because “he first loved us” (verse 19).

In our relationships with those around us, may we have the same mindset of Christ: humbly putting others first without seeking anything in return (Philippians 2:2-5). May we daily choose to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness, with love as the binding agent (Colossians 3:12-14). 🕯
Savannah Coleman

🕯 Can you think of a time you showed kindness to someone for the wrong reasons? God knows we are sinful and selfish—yet He loves us. That’s why Jesus came to save us, humbly laying down His own life so that we could live. If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we are totally forgiven, and the Holy Spirit transforms us to be more and more like Jesus. When we rely on His strength to help us in our weaknesses, He transforms our motivations and helps us be sincere in our love. _____

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19 (NIV)

COMFORTABLE SILENCE

READ: PSALM 62

Does silence ever make you uncomfortable? It makes me uncomfortable sometimes. Especially when I am trying to get to know a new friend. I often feel nervous when there is a lull in the conversation, leaving an awkward silence. And although it is not a sin, we probably all know someone who talks like silence is a sin. For some reason, it seems we like to avoid silence. Yet, I have found that silence can be an ultimate sign of comfort.

In my closest relationships, I find that I don't feel awkward when there is silence between us. I don't feel pressured to perform or guilty that I am not entertaining them. I feel safe around someone when I know it is okay not to speak—when I can just sit and enjoy being in their presence. To me, it's a sign of a healthy relationship when silence becomes comfortable.

In the same way, I think it's easy for us to feel pressure or discomfort when God seems silent. God always loves to hear us talk to Him in prayer, and He always answers in His perfect timing. But I wonder if the times we feel like God is silent are actually opportunities for us to rest in the assurance of our relationship with Him. Jesus came to earth to make right our broken relationship with Him and give us an opportunity to be with Him again. And I think part of restoring that right relationship could be obtaining a comfortable silence—a peace in God's presence and character. **✦** *Abigail Scibiur*

✦ Do you feel uncomfortable when it seems like God is silent? Why do you think you feel uncomfortable in those times? _____

✦ If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that we are totally secure in His love (John 10:28-30). How might this truth give you hope in times of silence? _____

✦ Do you agree that "comfortable silence" is a sign of a healthy relationship? Do you feel like you have that kind of relationship with God? Who is a trusted Christian you could talk to about practices that might help you grow closer to God? _____

"The LORD your God is among you, a warrior who saves. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will be quiet in his love..." Zephaniah 3:17 (CSB)

CLIMB

READ: PSALMS 94:17-19; 119:105; 147:10-11

My fingers shook. The rough rock walls around me didn't afford many hand holds. My feet pressed against the sides to keep me from falling down this cold, dark shaft. My knees were scraped, my hands bloody. I lifted my head again to look at the scrap of light far above me. No one was coming. My arms started shaking, my feet were slipping. All I could think was, *Help*.

Let go. Did I hear the words bounce off the rock shaft, or did I just think them? An empty place moaned in my chest where I wished hope was. The light above me grew dim as my vision blurred. I could only hold myself up for so long. I'd tried climbing up every way I could think, but every time I tried, I just seemed to fall farther and farther...down this dark hole.

Let go. There it was again. I couldn't think straight. How long had it been since I'd had a drink of water? My breath rattled. I strained to push myself up, but I had no strength left. Was that crackling I heard? My right foot shifted—and I plummeted a few feet deeper. Pain seared my left arm where the rock wall tore at my skin. "Why?" I moaned.

Let yourself fall. Okay, three times. Maybe that was me, maybe it wasn't. But what other options did I have? Either wait for my muscles to give out completely or pull my limbs close to my body and hope I didn't lose any. I shuddered. "Are you sure about this?" I asked the voice.

Trust me, it replied. I let out a sigh...then let myself fall. Fall. Fall. SPLASH! I bobbed up to the surface with a gasp—I was floating. I didn't even need to kick to keep my head above the...was this water? It glowed a soft blue-green. Wait. I leaned my head back and let my feet float up to a laying-down position. The cave ceiling was covered in blue-green stars. "Bioluminescent," I breathed. Beautiful. And the ceiling was moving—or I was. That was more likely. Downstream I floated, watching the beauty above me. My muscles weren't shaking anymore. I even felt relaxed. My arm didn't hurt—what? I lifted my arm from the water and saw new skin where it had been bloody and raw. A laugh bubbled out of me and echoed off the cavern walls.

Let me carry you. The voice was comforting, and I felt myself drifting to sleep. When I woke up, I heard the trickling of the current, drips from stalactites, and the voice whispered, *It's time.* Then I felt myself being moved to the rocky bank of the underground river. I pushed myself up out of the water with surprising ease.

This way. I turned and saw a glowing path that shimmered along the cave floor. One step at a time, I followed the path carefully. The path started to grow dimmer. *No!* I dropped to my knees in dismay. *Look up.* The voice was gentle. Then I noticed

the path wasn't darker, the cave was getting lighter. I rushed forward as the light grew brighter, until I could see an opening in the rock. I ran into the warm light of day. 📌 *Hannah Howe*

When I said, "My foot is slipping!" Your loving kindness, Yahweh, held me up. Psalm 94:18 (WEB)

📌 Have you ever felt like you were stuck in that dark hole? _____

📌 We all have times when we get in trouble, either because of our sin or simply because we live in a broken world. Throughout the Bible, God makes it clear that we cannot save ourselves, but He wants to save us. There is nothing we could do to earn God's kindness, yet, through Jesus, He generously gives us mercy and makes us new. When do you find it difficult to accept God's kindness? _____

📌 Oftentimes, the way out is not taking matters into our own hands or trying harder but humbly acknowledging that we can't do it...and leaning into God's help. And He is so good—along the way He brings healing to our weary souls. How might God be inviting you to rely on Him today? _____



BROKEN AND BELOVED

READ: PSALM 139:13-18; EPHESIANS 3:14-21

Do you sometimes feel insignificant? Perhaps someone made a remark that hurt you deeply. Criticisms regarding your intelligence, background, appearance, or beliefs can be distressing. Or you might live in a household where praise is sparse, and it seems like nothing you do is good enough. We all have different circumstances, yet low self-esteem can attack any of us unexpectedly, leaving us feeling fragile.

Physical symptoms of low self-esteem include headaches, tiredness, slumped shoulders, and frowning. Emotional signs can be tears, anger, negative comments, or detachment from things we usually enjoy. When people reject us, it can shake our confidence. But it's important to remember that, when someone criticizes us, what they say may not be true. People make snap judgements based on human opinions, and these comments can hurt. So what can we do?

We can run to God, our Creator who loves us. He knows the truth about us. He says we are precious and uniquely made (Psalm 139:13-14). He has a purpose for our lives. God loves us so much that, even though we all do wrong and mess up, He made the way for us to be saved (John 3:16-17). He gave us His precious Son so that we might live. Jesus—who is fully God and fully human—willingly sacrificed His life for ours, and God raised Him from the dead.

If God, who is divine and infinitely loving, has done something so amazing for us, then that indicates how cherished and valued we are. So even when feelings of insecurity attack us, as Christians we do not have to be downcast, but instead we can remind ourselves that God forgives us. He loves us. He guides us. And He invites us to live a joyful life with Him. He heals our deep wounds and strengthens us through the Holy Spirit—who lives inside Christians. Yes, we will all be broken and imperfect until Jesus returns to make us new, but God declares we are wonderful to Him. What a celebration that is! 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

🕯️ When do you find it difficult to believe that you are valuable or worthwhile? _____

🕯️ Who is a trusted Christian in your life who can remind you of what God says about you and pray for you when you're having a hard time? How might God be giving you opportunities to be this kind of friend to others?

I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well. Psalm 139:14 (WEB)

GOD DOES MIRACLES

READ: EXODUS 14:13-16; MATTHEW 9:23-33

God is capable of miracles. He can do anything. When we start to worry about what is going on in our lives, our country, or the world, it helps to remember that nothing is impossible for God. No matter how dark and hopeless things may seem, God can turn them around. Just look at the miracles He has done before.

When Moses and the Israelites needed to cross the Red Sea, God made a path right down the middle for them.

When two men who were blind came to Jesus, He healed them. He also drove demons out of people and healed those who couldn't walk, and He even brought the dead back to life.

Anything is possible with God (Mark 10:27). He is bigger than anything in our lives, our country, or the world. Health problems, family issues, wars...God is bigger than all of it. Throughout time, God has done miracles. He has saved us and shown us His love over and over again. He has been kind to His creation.

One day, God will unite heaven and earth—the ultimate miracle. When Jesus rose from the dead, this was just the beginning of new creation. When He returns, everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will be raised from the dead to live forever with Him! Then, “There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

As we wait for God to renew creation, things won't always go our way. Sometimes, we long for a miracle that doesn't happen. But we can still trust Him—and we can always hold on to hope through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13). In everything, God is working for our good, and nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:28, 38-39). Remember that God knows what is best, and He is bigger than anything. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 Have you ever asked God to do a miracle? _____

📖 Do you have a favorite story in the Bible that reminds you of God's goodness and power? _____

Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep his promise. Hebrews 10:23 (NLT)

WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE IS LEAVING

READ: PSALMS 5:1-3; 23:1-6; 142:1-3

A friend changing schools. A sibling getting married. A family member moving to another time zone. It's hard when people we care about leave the rhythms of our everyday lives. Even if we're happy for them, even if we know the change will be good for them, it can still leave us feeling like part of our lives is missing. Yet God's love and goodness remain. So how does God meet us in these times? And how can we lean into His help?

Mourn the losses. I've found that it helps me to take some time to be alone with God and process the things that I will miss when the person is gone. From the big things to the small things, God cares about all of it. As I continue to tell Him about the losses, the Holy Spirit reminds me that God is with me, grieving my hurts alongside me. Sometimes the sadness feels like too much for me to hold, and in these moments, it's been such a comfort to know that Jesus can hold all my sorrow (Isaiah 53:4).

Notice the fears. Another thing I've started doing is letting myself consider what about this change makes me feel uneasy. *Will the other person be okay? Will I be okay? Will our relationship fall apart?* As I notice each of my fears, I can bring these to Jesus. So much is out of my control, but nothing is out of His. God helps me remember that He will continue to provide, to draw us to Himself, and to show us His goodness and love.

Acknowledge the envy. Sometimes, I feel envious when I am the one left behind while others get to do something new and exciting. But I can bring this envy to God and tell Him how I'm feeling, and even ask Him to give me a glimpse of what He's doing in my life in this season. As I come to Him, He reminds me that He is trustworthy to guide me in good paths (Psalm 23:3).

Find ways to connect. When I look to the future, it helps me feel more hopeful when I consider ways I can be intentional about staying connected with the people I love. When something makes me think of them, like a song or a joke or a pretty tree, I can tell them. I can send letters, messages, or packages. Maybe we can find a new rhythm, like having a phone or video call once a week. In the Bible, we see that Christians often wrote letters to each other, sharing good news and bad news, asking for help and advice, encouraging each other, and expressing their love for one another and their desire to see each other again. 📖 *Hannah Howe*

📖 Does one of these four sections stick out to you? What caught your attention? _____

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life... Psalm 23:6a (NIV)

LOOK AT THE BIRDS

READ: MATTHEW 6:25-34; 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-8

It's not often that I eat out, but this one time in February was especially memorable. I was in the drive-thru of a burger joint with my mom. "Want anything?" she asked. I said no, but when I smelled my mom's perfect burger, I changed my mind. Thankfully, she was patient and turned around. But the restaurant got my order wrong; they gave me extra buns. I shrugged my shoulders and was prepared to dive into the juicy burger when my mom spotted something that hadn't been on the drive-thru curb before: a bird.

Immediately, I knew why I had those extra bread buns. God had given them to me to feed the poor bird on that frigid day. It was a literal picture of when Jesus said, "Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are?" (Matthew 6:26). I got to live out that verse!

This encourages me in two ways. First, like Jesus said, if God loved that bird enough to place me at the right spot at the right time with the right resources to feed it, what does that mean He'll do for me or you? We're worth more to God than any bird, and we can depend on God to take care of us. He promised, and He meant it!

Second, while we often worry about God providing for us, sometimes we forget that God might be taking care of others through us. God may give us extra that we can use to bless others. Usually, I feel like I'm the one that others bless. But in feeding that bird, I was reminded that God will always make a way to use my resources, whatever they are, to give to others. And what a blessing it is that I get to give! *Lizzie Joy*

🔑 One of the primary ways God provides for the needs of His people is through His people. Can you think of a time God cared for you through someone else's resources? _____

🔑 What resources or skills do you have that you could use to bless others? _____

"Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are?"
Matthew 6:26 (NLT)



PUT TO SHAME (PART 1)

READ: PSALM 51:5; ROMANS 8:1-4

I crossed my arms over my stomach self-consciously, trying to hide the tattoos that condemned me. I'm not sure why I bothered. Everyone in the courtroom had seen all they needed to.

Every citizen bore the sin mark, but some were more visible than others. And my tattoos were a grim stain that covered my hands and arms, even crawling up the sides of my neck. I'd had the mark my entire life. I'd never lived a single day without it. But as I'd grown older—as I succumbed to my selfish desires, my greed, my lust—the mark had grown. It had stained my skin so that anyone could see.

The judge sat high on his perch, draped in crimson robes and wearing a twisted expression of disgust as his eyes flicked down to my stained hands. The jury was the same. Two perfect lines of scowling faces. Each juror was wearing a clean pressed robe, reminding me I was at their mercy.

I sat in my creaky chair, and I felt naked beneath their scrutiny. This couldn't be happening. The judge stood slowly from his seat, gavel in hand. "You have been found guilty of all charges and are hereby sentenced to immediate execution."

It felt as if the floor was falling out from beneath me as he lifted his gavel to seal the sentence. But before the wood of the gavel connected with the block, the double doors at the back of the courtroom were thrown open. I spun around in my chair, and through the blur of my own tears I saw a man racing toward the judge.

"Wait!" he shouted. He stopped beside my chair. There was sweat on his brow, and he was out of breath. How far had he run?

The judge's face contorted in fury. "How dare you! This is a closed courtroom!"

The man looked over at me. He must have seen the fear and desperation in my eyes, the tears that threatened to spill over, the humiliation and shame. His own eyes filled with compassion and love. But why? Who was this man? And what could he do to save me from what I rightfully deserved? *Emily Tenter*

🔑 Can you remember a time when people knew you were guilty of sin? What did that feel like? _____

🔑 We all sat guilty under the law, but Jesus raced in to save us. How might this give you hope? _____

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1 (NLT)

PUT TO SHAME (PART 2)

READ: JOHN 8:1-11

The jury was silent. The judge's face turned red with anger. "I'll ask you again. Who do you think you are, bursting into this courtroom?"

The man who had just run in from outside was still looking at me as the judge spoke, but his attention slowly shifted back to the judge. "What is this woman's offense?" he asked. The judge barked a laugh that held no humor, only cruelty. "What is her *offense*? Just look at her!" The jury rustled, and dark chuckles rose at the man's silly question. There was no arguing that I was guilty. To humor him, the judge held up a long scroll of paper, filled with all of my sins. "Would you like to take a look for yourself?"

My cheeks burned as the judge held the paper out to the man who stood beside me. But he didn't take it. I clasped my hands together, the skin on them covered with thick swirls that I knew reached up my arms and crawled up the sides of my neck. Then I looked at the man beside me. He wore plain clothes, but his arms were exposed, and there was no tattoo marring his brown skin. I saw no marks on his neck, or on his feet. Who was this man?

He never looked away from the bloodthirsty judge. "The mark of sin is on this woman, yes. Perhaps the individual on this jury who bears no mark of their own should be the one to carry out her execution."

Silence.

No one moved. The judge's mouth had fallen open, and the jury sat staring with wide eyes at the man who dared to barge in and speak in defense of such a lowly sinner. I saw the judge and jury shift beneath the thick robes they wore. Robes intended to conceal any marks on their own skin and make them appear holy before the courtroom.

The man didn't say anything else; he only waited in the uncomfortable silence. After what felt like an eternity, one of the jurors, an old woman, stood from her seat and left the room. 🕯️ *Emily Tenter*

🕯️ This story is an allegory of John 8:1-11, when Jesus was confronted by the religious leaders regarding a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. What did Jesus tell them in verse 7?

🕯️ In light of this, how does Jesus call us to view people whose sins are obvious to us? _____

For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Romans 3:23 (NLT)

PUT TO SHAME (PART 3)

READ: COLOSSIANS 2:13-15

The outrage on the judge's face multiplied, and he spit his next words. "The penalty for her sin is death. You cannot waltz in here and demand that justice not be served." The man beside me took a long breath, and in a sad voice said, "I know." My heart sank, and I covered my face in my sin-stained hands.

"That's why I will take her place."

What?

"What?" The judge echoed my own thoughts.

"Execute me instead," the man said. His face was pained, but his words were sure. The judge thought it over for a moment, then the cruel smile returned to his face. "Very well." He lifted his hand to call in the guards. *No.* I spun in my seat and grabbed the man's hand at the same moment the guards took hold of his arms. His warm hand squeezed my fingers, and then he was yanked away from me.

"No!" I jumped after him, but a guard shoved me down. I hit the ground, and the air was knocked from my lungs. I heard fabric rip as the guards struggled to push him from the room, and when I looked up, one of the guards had torn the man's shirt clean off. And then the room was silent again.

The man had no mark. None. No concealed sin. His skin was flawless, unblemished. This man was completely innocent.

He didn't fight them as they dragged him from the room. I could hear his grunts as they beat him on the other side of the doors. Immediate execution had been my sentence, and that was now this man's fate. I sat in the courtroom. I couldn't move as the guards carried out his sentence. I knew when it was finished, because the sky outside the courtroom window darkened and a chill filled the room. A groan passed through the earth, and it began to rain.

Days later, I walked home from the market and passed in front of the courthouse where I'd waited to die. I stopped in front of it and looked at the cold, marble pillars. So starkly perfect compared to the sin marks that still clung to my skin. I turned away, but voices stopped me. In the distance I could hear people shouting, their voices growing louder and more frantic. Then, from down the street, a crowd of people sprinted past me. Their faces a mixture of panic, confusion, and fear.

"What's happening?" I asked one woman who stumbled in front of me.

"They executed a man a few days ago," she said. "And now he—his grave is empty! His body is gone. Stolen, maybe. But everyone is saying he's...well, they're saying he's..."

“What? What are they saying?”

Her face paled, but I didn't miss the thrill in her eyes. “He's risen.”

A smile spread across my lips. “He's risen.” I looked down at my hands, and my tattoos were gone. **!** *Emily Tenter*

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9 (NLT)

! Have you experienced the saving power of Jesus, or are you still bearing the stain of your sin? If you're not sure, who is a trusted Christian in your life you could talk to? (You can also find more information on page 104.) _____



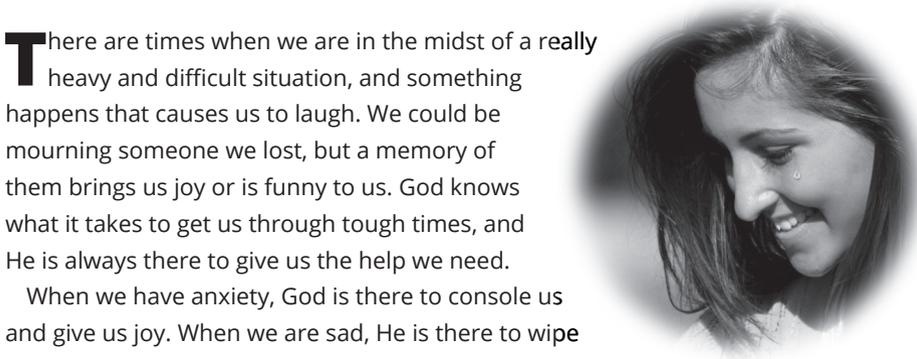
SMALL MOMENTS OF PEACE AND JOY

READ: PSALM 73:23-26; LUKE 6:21

There are times when we are in the midst of a really heavy and difficult situation, and something happens that causes us to laugh. We could be mourning someone we lost, but a memory of them brings us joy or is funny to us. God knows what it takes to get us through tough times, and He is always there to give us the help we need.

When we have anxiety, God is there to console us and give us joy. When we are sad, He is there to wipe our tears and maybe even provide us with a little humor to keep us going. When we are down, He reminds us that the world is in His hands and everything is going to work out. In the end, Jesus will return to dwell with His people, and “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).

And Jesus also promised His followers, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). We are never alone in any kind of difficult situation. God is always with us. He knows what we are going through, and He is helping us. It can feel good to know that, as we seek God, He is going to provide for us, no matter what we face, and He will always make sure that we have moments of peace and joy in the midst of all the struggles. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*



🕯️ Have you ever felt God with you in a really hard time? _____

🕯️ God invented laughter and humor! Can you think of a time you were struggling but something funny made you feel a little better? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this. _____

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy. Psalm 94:19 (NIV)

TRUE LOVE

READ: MATTHEW 22:36-40; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7; 1 JOHN 4:7-21

Our world throws around the word *love* a lot. We love chocolate; we love sports; we love our friends. But what does love even mean?

God's Word, the Bible, helps us understand what love is. True love comes from God because "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul paints a vivid picture of love: it is patient, kind, humble, generous, forgiving, and never gives up. God shows His perfect love in all He has done for us. God loves us so much that even when we rejected Him and lived in sin, He sent His Son Jesus to die for us so that everyone who puts their trust in Him can have eternal life and be with Him forever.

Because God loves us, He has freed us from the guilt and enslavement of sin, and one day we will live forever without sin. As Christians, we are totally forgiven, and now God calls us to live according to His good ways. It wouldn't be loving for God to say, "Go ahead and sin," because sin hurts us and those around us. Instead, when we live in His love, we keep God's commands (John 14:15). And God doesn't expect us to be able to do this in our own strength; rather, the Holy Spirit empowers us to obey Him.

In Matthew 22:36-40, Jesus summarized what following Him looks like in two commandments. The greatest commandment is to love God and follow Him with our lives. The second commandment is to love others as we love ourselves. Jesus calls us to show His love to everyone, even our enemies and those who are different from us (Matthew 5:44). After all, this is how God loves us. While we were God's enemies, He restored us to relationship with Him through Jesus's death and resurrection (Romans 5:10). Because of what Jesus has done, we can live in God's love for us.

Our human love fails, and our ideas of love are broken and distorted by sin. But God's unconditional love never fails. Nothing—no sin, no power, no person—can separate us from His love (Romans 8:31-39). 🕯️ *Abby Ciona*

🕯️ Can you think of a time someone showed you genuine love? _____

🕯️ How might God be inviting you to receive His love today? And how might He be giving you opportunities to share His love? _____

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Romans 5:8 (NLT)

HELP HER IN THE STRUGGLE

READ: PSALM 46

I see her struggle and it hurts
 I believe it hurts you too, Jesus
 Help her understand that you know
 Help her see that you are in control
 Let her hold on a little longer
 Let her become a little stronger
 I see her push through another day
 My heart breaks to watch her, so I pray
 I have no real control
 You are the One ultimately in control
 I want the best for her
 You want the best for her
 Help her see that we care about her
 Help her be brave and not fear
 Help her as she struggles
 It hurts for me to watch  *Emily Acker*

-  Have you ever had a family member go through something so difficult that it broke your heart just to watch them? Have you had a friend face an illness where it felt like God had abandoned them? _____

-  God cares deeply about our suffering. He doesn't stand far away from our pain, rather He came near and experienced it with us. He endured the cross, even to the point of death. And then He rose from the dead, defeating death forever. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can look forward to the day He will return and fully heal every hurt. In the meantime, He promises to be with us—grieving our hurts alongside us and caring for our needs. Can you think of a time you were struggling, and you felt God's presence? If not, you can ask Him right now to let you know He's with you. God often reveals Himself through the community of believers and through His Word. _____

-  Who is someone in your life who is struggling? Consider taking a moment to pray for them. _____

*The LORD of Heaven's Armies is here among us; the God of Israel is our fortress.
Psalm 46:7 (NLT)*

STRUGGLES NOW AND A GOOD FUTURE TO COME

READ: 1 PETER 5:6-10

I have a family member who is going through health stuff right now that has completely changed the way she lives. Before this flare up, she was able to do all the things most of us take for granted, such as going for a run or spending a whole day at the zoo. Right now, she struggles to do the little things, like putting on a pair of socks or lifting something off the floor. It hurts me to watch her struggle on a daily basis, and I get scared, thinking that she might just give up



I pray for my family member every day. I pray that God will see her through this time. I see the little ways God is helping out. I see how God is using this time to help us feel closer to Him. I see how struggles can be opportunities for us to communicate with Him and rely on Him.

I hate that this world has struggles, but I know that God is with us in each one that we face. One day every pain and difficulty will be gone. My family member will be free of her pain. You will be free of yours. I will be free of mine. I thank God that He has created a future for us that is something to look forward to. 🕯

Emily Acker

🕯 Do you have struggles that feel like too much, or do you have a family member with those kinds of struggles? How can looking toward Jesus's return—when He will raise all God's people from the dead and we will live with Him in renewed creation—give you hope? _____

🕯 God is so good that He can use even something as terrible as suffering to draw us closer to Him. Can you think of a time you felt close to God? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for this. _____

That is what the Scriptures mean when they say, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." 1 Corinthians 2:9 (NLT)

THE LOVE OF THE FATHER

READ: LUKE 15:11-32

I was hungry. Lost. Out of options. So, I decided to go, go and try. I knew I didn't deserve his help. I was not sure I even had the courage to ask. I knew I could not look him in the eyes. I practiced what I would say to him on the long, hungry walk. I would tell him I was unworthy...unworthy to be called his child. Then I would ask to be his servant. At least if I was his servant, I would have food to eat and somewhere to live.

After many days, I found myself in familiar country. Soon, I saw his place out in the distance. And then, then I thought I saw someone coming up the path. The sun was setting behind them, so I couldn't tell who it was. They were running... Maybe this wasn't a good idea. I felt my stomach tighten and wondered if I should run. But wait, there was something familiar in the silhouette. It was my father, and he was running to me. Before I could say anything, he put forth both of his hands and grabbed my arms and pulled me close. He kissed me affectionately on my cheeks and then pressed my face to his chest. I think he was kissing my hair.

Through the emotion tightening my throat I tried to say my speech, but he interrupted me, calling to the servants and giving them directions. He guided me back to the house. Servants came and put his best robe on me. As it wrapped around me, I felt wrapped in his love. I began to relax for the first time since I had left so many years ago. Then they put a ring on my hand and shoes on my feet. And then he even told them to prepare to celebrate because I had come home.

I was home. Everyone knew I did not deserve his kindness or his love, nevertheless I *was* loved. *Surrounded* in love. He had watched for me. He ran to me. He embraced me. I was loved. 🕯 *Jeri Howe*

"So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."
 Luke 15:20 (NIV)



- 🔑 This story is based on a parable Jesus told in Luke 15:11-32. Many people focus on the son in this passage, but try reading it focusing on the father and his love. What do you notice? _____

- 🔑 Now read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. How does the picture of the Father's love in Luke 15:11-31 compare with Paul's teaching on love? What aspects of love in these two passages make you curious? Which stir longing in you? _____

- 🔑 Do you want to come home? You can right now. You can come home to God the Father who made you. Jesus has made it possible through dying on the cross and raising from the dead. If you put your trust in Jesus, the good news is that you can be adopted as God's child—today. Simply pray and tell Him you want to come home and receive His love. (See page 104 for more.) _____

- 🔑 If you've put your trust in Jesus, you can ask to experience God's pursuing, embracing, never-failing love anytime. We can ask for this with confidence because Romans 5:5 says, "Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." If you're ready, take a moment to pray and ask God to reveal His love for you. _____



BOLDNESS TO WITNESS

READ: LUKE 12:11-12; ACTS 1:6-8; 4:5-14

It is not always easy to talk to others about Jesus. Yet all around us, there are people who need to hear about Jesus, and sometimes, they even invite us to share the gospel with them. How can we have the courage to do so?

Two of Jesus's followers, Peter and John, found themselves in this kind of situation. After Jesus ascended, they met a man in the temple who could not walk and was asking for money. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6), and the man was healed! All the people there were amazed, and Peter began to speak to them about Jesus.

But the Jewish religious leaders "were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2), and they put Peter and John in jail overnight to question them the next day. As Peter and John stood before the council, they did not shrink from witnessing about Jesus, but they courageously declared the gospel. This would not have been easy to do if God had not given them the courage, especially because the people on the council were the highest-ranking Jewish religious authorities.

After Peter spoke, the elders and the rulers of the people were astonished, because they knew Peter and John were common men, uneducated. How did these two fishermen, who had no formal training in the Scriptures, gain the courage to say that they witnessed the death and resurrection of the Messiah? Then the council recognized that these men had been with Jesus.

Peter and John had been close to Jesus during His ministry on earth. And after Jesus ascended, He sent the Holy Spirit to be in them. Because of this, they had the confidence and the courage to speak about Jesus (Acts 4:8). We can also have the courage to witness for Jesus, because the same Spirit is in us, as people who have put our trust in Jesus (Ephesians 4:4). Like the disciples, we can spend time being in the presence of our Lord. And this will cause us to gain confidence and boldness to be His witnesses to those who do not know Him.

How do we spend time with Jesus? There's no formula, but reading the Bible and praying are a good place to start. As we experience God's love, we will have the courage to tell others about Him, because we have been with the Lord. 🕯

Enid Adah Nyinomujuni

🕯 In Acts 4:23-31, what did these people, the first Christians, pray for? How did God respond? _____

...they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Acts 4:13b (NIV)

THE DOOM SCROLLS

READ: PHILIPPIANS 4:6-8; 2 TIMOTHY 1:7

Every morning the people of the village would gather for the reading of the scrolls. They were called the doom scrolls because they always contained bad news. Though no one much liked the morning routine, they couldn't bear to stay away. They'd watch silently as the village reader carefully unrolled a scroll and read what was written inside—news of a distant war or a deadly illness sweeping across the land. Then people would shout and groan and shake their heads. After all the scrolls had been opened, the villagers would shuffle their separate ways, their hearts heavy and full of angst.

One day, a young man passing through the town came to the morning reading. He listened with the other villagers as the first scroll was read. "A fire swept through the fields of Hessianon just a few miles from here, and all the crops have been lost." Then a voice cried out, "The fires will come here next!" Another shouted, "With no grain, we'll all starve!" The sound of cries and groans began to swell. "We're doomed!"

But the young man closed his eyes and spread his arms wide. "Lord," he prayed in a booming voice, "be with the people of Hessianon. Remind them that you are the God who saves, and let them feel your love and peace. Show us how we can be your hands and feet and offer them help."

The cries of doom came to a halt as people turned to look at him in surprise. After several moments of silence, one woman said, "We have barrels of grain stored in our cellar. More than we need." Then a man said, "And I have a pony and a cart." Heads nodded in agreement, and plans were quickly made to bring several carts of food to Hessianon. As the reader continued with each piece of news, the usual moans and groans were replaced with prayers and plans to bring help to those who needed it. When the last scroll had been read, the people dispersed in small groups, a sense of purpose drowning out their angst. Their broken world desperately needed hope, and they knew the One who offered it. They had work to do. 📌 *Courtney Lasater*

📌 Many of us continuously scroll through bad news, and it can leave us feeling depressed and hopeless. How does Jesus provide a way for us to stay informed without succumbing to *doomscrolling*? Read Philipians 4:6-8 and Revelation 21:1-5. _____

"I [Jesus] have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33 (NIV)

WHEN OTHERS TREAT YOU UNFAIRLY

READ: ROMANS 2:11; EPHESIANS 3:17-19

Our broken world is full of unfairness. You might have a sibling who your parents have always treated as their favorite child. No matter how much you try to impress your parents and get them to see what you can do, their eyes are always on that sibling. This can leave you feeling frustrated or even heartbroken.

Maybe you have someone who was always a friend to you...until someone new started at your school. Now that person has moved on from you and all their plans revolve around their new friend. This can be hurtful, and it could make you doubt yourself and your value.

But God showed how valuable you are by giving His Son for you. Jesus came to live among us, and He knows what it's like to be treated unfairly. His friends abandoned Him, and the authorities treated Him like a criminal—even though He had done nothing wrong. But Jesus was willing to go to the cross, to die a death He didn't deserve, and to raise from the dead—all so that you could become part of God's family.

People might treat you unfairly for any number of reasons, but the way other humans treat you has no impact on how God feels about you.

God loves each of us with the same kind of love.

God holds your hand, and He is there for you.

God gave His Son to die for you.

God sees the pain you are in, and He cares about you.

While life on this earth is not fair and humans often mistreat each other, you can trust that God is going to love you always, and He is never going to mistreat you. 🗝

Emily Acker

🗝 Can you think of a time you were treated as less than someone else? How might it be comforting to know that Jesus experienced this too? _____

🗝 When we are treated unfairly, God has compassion on us. He invites us to cry out to Him in our pain and remember how He feels about us. Consider taking a moment to come to Jesus in prayer. _____

The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness." Jeremiah 31:3 (NIV)

THE TRAP OF INDECISION

READ: MATTHEW 6:25-34; HEBREWS 4:14-16; JAMES 1:2-8

When God created the world, He gave Adam and Eve the task of caring for the earth. God gave them confidence, strength, and the ability to make decisions. And they had lots of decisions to make—starting with naming all the birds, livestock, and wild animals. I had enough trouble choosing names for my childhood pets. I can't imagine picking names for every animal.

But when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their ability to choose brought disobedience and shame. They lost their nearness with their Creator. What now? Would people choose to serve God or follow idols? Would they trust in God or be overcome with doubt? Would they live by faith or worry about every decision?

Lately, I've had a tough time making decisions. I waste time deciding on plans. I type out a text, then second-guess my word choice. I worry about what to wear, or what to have for dinner, or which decision will work out best in the end. Maybe you're with me. Maybe you've spent so much time trapped in your indecision that you wish someone would just tell you what to do. But we have this gift: God has not abandoned us. The world is broken, but God offers redemption. He sees our struggles and our worries. He came to be with us and to redeem what has been lost and broken. Because Jesus died and rose again, we can enjoy nearness with our Creator again. When we can't make up our mind, we can rest in His love and lean into His help.

In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks to our worries, and He says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). If we've put our trust in Jesus, His Spirit is in us, helping us to make choices that honor God, choices that love Him and others. And so we can put our decisions in God's hands. We can trust Him to guide us, even when we don't hear a clear answer about which path to take, because "we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We can believe that, in His love, God will lead us well. We don't have to sit trapped in indecision. We are redeemed, confident, and strong in Him, and He has given us the ability to make decisions. 📌

Becca Wierwille

📌 What sorts of decisions tend to be most difficult for you? _____

📌 Who are trusted Christians in your life who can help you listen for God's guidance? _____

*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.
2 Timothy 1:7 (CSB)*

UNDER GRACE

READ: ROMANS 8:31-39; EPHESIANS 2:8-10

Ever feel like you can't do anything right?" I groaned to my friend. I had just dropped by Susanne's house to chat. Earlier that day, I had gone shopping for a birthday present for my sister. I chose a full-length mirror to hang on her bedroom door—the perfect gift for my fashion-conscious little sister. A slim wooden frame surrounded the mirror, giving it a decorative quality.

But after purchasing it, I'd left the mirror in my car for the remainder of the day. On my way to visit Susanne, I noticed something different about the mirror. In the heat of August in Mississippi, the glue holding the frame to the mirror had melted, and the frame had become completely detached. I just knew I had ruined the present. Susanne sympathized with my feeling of failure. She too sometimes felt defeated and unable to do anything right. I would guess we all experience that from time to time.

But there's good news. As Christians, we can know that we are loved, accepted, and forgiven even when we don't "get it right." In fact, nothing we do (or fail to do) can separate us from God's love because Jesus—God in flesh—laid down His life for us and rose from the dead. Once we put our trust in Jesus, we get to be in relationship with our heavenly Father, not because of anything we've done, but because Jesus has made us right with God!

Yet, what we do *does* matter. Our actions, our choices...they aren't meaningless. In fact, the Bible calls us God's *handiwork* and teaches us that we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). While nothing we do in this life will be perfect, as God's children, we have the privilege of partnering with Him in sharing and showing the love of Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, He empowers us to "do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). And even when we mess up, He gives us grace. When we sin, His forgiveness is still sure. And when we make mistakes (like leaving a mirror in the car), He doesn't shame us.

It turned out I didn't ruin the present after all. That mirror held a spot on my sister's bedroom door for many years. She extended grace for a less-than-perfect present. And our Father extends grace for our less-than-perfect lives. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ Can you think of a time someone showed you grace after you messed up—either by making a mistake (which is not a sin) or by doing something wrong (which is a sin)? _____

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2:8 (NIV)

LAY YOUR BURDENS DOWN (PART 1)

READ: HEBREWS 12:1-3

If you were at the starting line, about to run a big race that you had spent months training for, would you wrap weights around your ankles? Would you tie them around your waist? Would you wear a backpack full of weights? Would you carry them in your hands? Of course not! Why? Because running a race is hard enough, and if you want to win, then you want to be as light as possible so that you can move faster and easier. Weights of any kind would just slow you down and wear you out faster.

Hebrews 12 compares the Christian life to a race. Verse 1 says, “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.” What are these weights? The Bible says that sin—anything we do or think that goes against God’s good ways, that doesn’t flow from faith in Him—will cause us to trip. And at one time, all of us were completely weighed down by sin. But praise God, He has set us free from the power of sin! Jesus “personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right” (1 Peter 2:24).

If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we are totally forgiven, and we are called to lay aside the sin that hinders us from running the good race. To lay aside our weight and sin isn’t a one-time thing, and I think we forget that. As Christians, we continue to struggle with sin. But because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we can daily turn away from sin and back to God. Every day, we can ask ourselves, “What is causing me to trust myself more than Jesus?” The author of Hebrews reminds us to run with patience and endurance because the race is difficult. Yet God is with us through it all. He is dedicated to us, and He empowers us to be dedicated to Him. **✦** *Mary Garner*

✦ What weights are getting in the way of you trusting and following Jesus? Consider spending some time talking to Him about these in prayer and asking Him to help you lay them down. _____

✦ Sometimes, hobbies, relationships, etc. can get in the way of us following Jesus, but usually the problem is sin, such as the love of money, the seeking of power or status, etc. Who is a trusted Christian who can help you discern what is and is not a weight in your life? _____

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, 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)

LAY YOUR BURDENS DOWN (PART 2)

READ: HEBREWS 12:1-3

Hebrews 12 encourages us to run the race that God has set before us, which is possible when we keep “our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith” (verse 2). Not only did Jesus start the race and finish the race, but He ran it faithfully—for us. He didn’t take His eyes off the end result, the prize. He was able to face anything that came His way, even enduring an excruciating death. Why? Because it was all worth it to Him.

The prize was greater than the race.

The prize was greater than the pain.

The prize was greater than the shame.

The prize was greater than the rejection.

The prize was greater than the cross.

He saw us—His people, His creation—and thought, *They’re worth it*. Look at the second part of verse 2: “Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.” Isn’t that beautiful? Jesus was looking forward to the joy of reuniting us to Himself, of healing His creation that has been broken by sin.

What about us? If we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we get to look forward to living with God in His new world, where we will be free from sin and death. That is our joy that is set before us. In this life, we have hurt, we have pain, we have sorrow, we have defeat, we have discouragement, we have _____. Fill in the blank. But that’s not the end of our story—and praise God for that! We have pain for a season, but thank you, Jesus, that joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5). Because we belong to Jesus, we can know that He is right alongside us in the pain. And the Holy Spirit empowers us to endure the hurt, the sadness, the brokenness...knowing that the prize will be worth it all. We can look forward to the end of our race, being with Jesus and hearing Him say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). He loves us, and He won’t leave us. 🕯️ *Mary Garner*

🕯️ Jesus ran the race for YOU. How can this give you hope? _____

And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne. Hebrews 12:1b-2 (NLT)

LOVE FROM A SAMARITAN

READ: MATTHEW 5:43-48; LUKE 10:25-37

Anna shifted her legs. Sitting in the crowded marketplace was hot, but she had come with many other people wanting to hear from this man named Jesus, who some said was the Messiah. Dust blew across her lap as a man stood up. Anna almost gasped, recognizing an expert of the law. She listened intently as he and Jesus spoke. “Who is my neighbor?” the expert asked.

Jesus described a man attacked by robbers, and Anna looked around at the people sitting near her. “By chance a priest came along.” Anna smiled. A priest! Of course a priest would help him! “But,” Jesus said, “when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by.” Anna’s eyes widened. How could a priest be one of the bad guys?

“The priest cannot touch anything unclean; he must have thought the man was dead,” a lady beside Anna whispered to her neighbor. Anna nodded. That would make sense.

Jesus continued, “A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.” Anna frowned; it didn’t make sense for a Temple assistant—a Levite—to ignore a man in need. Who would be the one to help this man? Whoever the hero was going to be, they must have been very wise.

“Then a despised Samaritan,” Jesus started. Anna heard loud gasps from the people around her. A man in front of her looked angry; he stood up and left. Anna watched a couple more people stand up and leave. *A Samaritan?* Anna thought. Samaritans were the enemy; it was hard to believe they would be the one to help the poor man! Anna turned her attention back to the story.

“Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?” Jesus asked.

“The one who showed him mercy,” the expert in the law replied reluctantly.

Jesus told him, “Yes, now go and do the same.” *Kimberly Brokish*

🔑 This parable would have been shocking to Jesus’s audience. The Israelites thought the Samaritans were totally corrupt, but the Samaritan in this story showed God’s love and care. Have you ever received God’s love and care from unexpected places? _____

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

VOICES FROM THE PAST

READ: PSALM 119:73; ROMANS 8:1, 31-34

I hope this isn't a prank, Jacob thought, waiting in the park by the daisies, just like the unusual parchment in his hand instructed. *It would be typical of me to fall for it.*

Glancing around, he expected someone to jump out and shout, "Gotcha!" But there wasn't anyone about. Wanting to turn back home, he took a deep breath before calling, "I'm here." No one replied. Without warning, the sky turned black until he was catapulted through time and space. He found himself in a cave, and echoes reverberated around him. "I'm no good. Why am I useless? I can't do this. Why can't I be like everyone else?" He pushed his fingers in his ears. The grating insults, churning inside of him, were familiar. With each word, the bitter smell of sulfur spread through the air. "How can I? I'm too dense to understand this. God, why did you make me this way?"

Burying his nose in his sweater, gagging at the stench that was worsening as each vitriolic comment pierced the air, Jacob could not escape from the sound of his own voice from the past. "Am I in hell?" he cried, shaking, tears pouring down his face. "Please stop this. Oh, Jesus, God, help me."

The words quieted down and then stopped. Bitterness evaporated, and a radiant light transformed the darkness. Out of nowhere a voice called to him, "I created you. These poisonous words about you—they're not true. Listen to my voice instead. I do not condemn you."

"Please help me," Jacob pleaded. The cave became warmer. Rainbows filled the air. "I love you. I made you on purpose. You are precious to me—so precious that my Son, Jesus, took your place on the cross to save you and give you eternal life. I have silenced every accusation against you. You are an important part of my kingdom."

Mesmerized, Jacob witnessed God's words fill the room with dazzling rainbows, showering him with blessings, until finally the cave disappeared and he was staring at the daisies in front of him. Peace soothed him. In his hand he still gripped the paper, but the message had changed: *You are loved.* ❖ *Cindy Lee*

❖ Have you ever believed lies about yourself like the ones in this story? You can take some time with God, asking Him where those lies came from and remembering what He says about you. _____

Kind words are like honey—sweet to the soul and healthy for the body.
Proverbs 16:24 (NLT)

GOD'S GLORY

READ: ISAIAH 43:7; ROMANS 11:36

Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship.” God made the vast heavens with the glorious light of the sun and the calming reflection of the moon. And to top it off, He sprinkled the sky with innumerable twinkling stars that bring us delight at night. He created countless planets and galaxies beyond our solar system, and here on Earth, He created plants that offer feasts of fruits and bounties of flowers. And the animals! He made mighty tigers and tiny mice; cruising whales and dashing minnows; horses and dogs, beautiful and faithful. And God made people. He made Adam and Eve in His own image to have fellowship with Him. God made us to glorify Him.

Why does God bring glory to Himself? Is that even okay? Isn't it like bragging? The Bible is clear that God does not sin. When Scripture talks about God doing something to glorify Himself, it means that God is showing us who He is—what His attributes are, what He can do, and how much He loves us. He wants us to know Him.

Do you realize that we do something similar? We reveal things about ourself when we play a musical instrument, create works of art, play a sport, whiz through mathematical equations to discover an answer, or use whatever knowledge or talent we have.

But people aren't sinless like God is. A person might have a sinful, boasting attitude and do things simply to show off. And we usually show off when we feel like our needs for love or affirmation aren't being met. God sees these needs, and He wants us to come to Him so that He can fill them. As we follow Jesus, He helps us use the gifts God has given us to glorify Him. He calls us to serve others like He serves us (Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Peter 4:10). Jesus humbled Himself by becoming human and dying on the cross—and He raised from the dead, defeating sin and death forever. This resulted in God being glorified!

When God glorifies Himself, He is simply being God. He is the sinless, mighty, loving, beautiful God. His works are glorious, and so is He! 📖 *Rebecca Moore*

- 📖 How does God reveal Himself through creation? What is one of your favorite things He made? _____
- 📖 How can studying history or science or music or art help us know God better? How can we invite others to know God through these things? _____

They were calling out to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven’s Armies! The whole earth is filled with his glory!” Isaiah 6:3 (NLT)

GOD SATISFIES

READ: PSALM 103:1-5; JOHN 4:1-42; 6:32-40; 7:37-39

Have you ever been at school, with nothing to eat, and felt so hungry? Have you been on a diet or had to fast for a doctor's appointment? It isn't fun when we can't satisfy our physical cravings, and it's even worse when we can't meet our basic needs. On a deeper level, we all want to feel satisfied and whole. We want to feel complete. And it can be frustrating when life does not satisfy us at all.

Have you ever tried to get happy by buying something new, or even going on a trip? Have you looked for fulfillment by taking on a new project? There are times when nothing we do makes us happy. The fact is, nothing this world offers can make us whole, and it makes sense that we feel incomplete.

Throughout the Bible, God makes it clear that He is the only one who can fully satisfy us. He created us to be in relationship with Him, but we have all rejected Him and gone our own way. That's why we're left feeling empty. But God loves us, and He chases after us. He came to live among us and restore our relationship with Him.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). When we follow after Jesus, we are made complete. As we trust in Him, God fills us with joy (Romans 15:13). And He helps us when we are in tough places. God knows everything we need, and He provides for us as we seek Him (Matthew 6:32-33).

No matter what we do, we will never be able to find joy or completeness on our own. Only God will satisfy us. 📖 *Emily Acker*

- 📖 Do you ever feel empty inside, like you're missing something? _____
- 📖 How has Jesus made it possible for us to have life to the full? (Read John 10:10-18.) _____
- 📖 One important way God satisfies our needs—both physical and emotional—is through Christian community. Who are trusted Christians you can share life with? _____

The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Isaiah 58:11 (NIV)

THE CROSSROADS (PART 1)

READ: 1 KINGS 19:3-8; PSALM 23:1-3

The sun beat down on my back. Was I going the right way? Sweat poured down my face, stinging my eyes. I had known the journey was going to be hard, but I didn't expect it to be—confusing. As I trudged down the path, I squinted to see what lay ahead. Was that? No. Not again. A moan escaped my throat as my feet came to a crossroads. Another choice. I dropped my pack to the ground. This would take all my energy.

I knelt on the dusty road and prayed, *Lord, you are Sovereign. I want to honor you in all I do. Help me choose.* The sound of water found my ear, and I looked up. There, only a few steps from the path, was a stream. I stumbled over to it and drank. The water was cold and delicious, cooling my travel-weary throat and rinsing the dust from my fingers. I felt my muscles start to relax; the water felt so good.

No. I snapped myself to a standing position. That was enough. I didn't have time for more than that. I needed to make the decision about the fork in the road. It was my fault I didn't start my journey earlier in the day. It was my fault I didn't have time to rest by the stream. I was too tired. If I lingered, it would just get harder to move on.

So I pulled my weary self back up to the road, with one last longing glance at the stream. *Which way?* I asked again, impatient this time. I squeezed my fingers to my temples, squinting down each path. *Which one?* I was exhausted. So exhausted. Couldn't He see I was exhausted? I needed an answer—now! Maybe He was letting me use my intellect. I searched for clues. The path on the left had berry bushes, but I couldn't tell if they were good for food or if they'd make me sick. The path on the right had no berry bushes. I chose the right and asked God for strength.

"Wait." I heard a voice like wind. "Go back to the stream." I hesitated. Then the voice said, "Come to me. Let me refresh you." I was confused. *But what about the journey?* I asked. "There's time," the voice replied. "Take a rest." After a moment of deliberation, I walked back over to the stream and drank deeply. 🕯️ *Hannah Howe*

🕯️ Jesus is the Good Shepherd who guides us, and He gives us living water (John 4:10-14; 7:37-39; 10:10-18). Through the cross, He has made it possible for us to enter His rest. How might Jesus be inviting you to rest in Him today? _____

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. Psalm 23:2-3a (NIV)

NIGHTFALL (PART 2)

READ: JOHN 14:1-21

After a while, I kept walking. Mercifully, the sun continued its course in the sky and no longer beat down on me. I pulled a crust of stale bread from my pack and ate as I walked. I tried to remember an old hymn to turn my thoughts to praise, but I was too tired to sing.

Then I realized night was falling. The path sloped downward, and soon I was surrounded by trees. *Great*, I thought. *I guess I chose the wrong way. What now, God? Should I go deeper into the forest? Should I turn around? What do I do!* I strained to get a better look at the path, the terrain, anything—but it was so difficult to see in the dark. My breath came faster. I rubbed at my eyes and realized I was crying. I sat on a rock, my head in my hands. I was so tired. So tired.

“Dear one,” the words came on the breeze. “I’m here.” I wanted to hear more of the voice, but I held back. I had to figure out what to do about the path, and the voice would just lull me to sleep. How was I supposed to fix this mess? I was such a fool! “Dear one.” The voice was closer. And then I felt a hand on my shoulder. I shivered at the warm touch. I hadn’t realized until now that I was cold. “Dear one, I love you.” I buried my head deeper in my lap. “How? How could you love me?” I could hear the bitterness in my voice.

“I love you,” He said again, with such tenderness that I looked up at Him. When I saw the compassion on His face, the tension I’d been holding in my shoulders released. I felt like I might collapse, but He caught me, gently, and held me in a warm hug. I didn’t want to pull away, and He didn’t want to either. He just held me. And slowly, ever so slowly, my tired limbs began to warm. I cried. Eventually I told Him about the hot sun and the confusing path. I told Him I was angry at Him. He listened, and He kept holding me. Finally, I had said all that was inside me to say, and I felt...lighter.

Then He whispered, “Dear one, I am the way.” My breath caught in my throat as I recognized the verse. He nodded, knowing my thoughts. “You’ve been asking me and asking me which way to go...” It was so clear to me now. All I wanted was to be near Him, to be loved by Him. Could I really be loved? He smiled, then said, “I want you to be with me. The way...is with me.” 🕯️ *Hannah Howe*

🕯️ When was a time you felt lost? Jesus seeks us when we’re lost (Luke 19:10). He died and rose again so that we could be close to Him. How might God be inviting you into His presence today? _____

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” John 14:6a (NIV)

THE PACK (PART 3)

READ: MATTHEW 6:25-34; 11:28-30

The next morning, we continued down the forest path. After a couple hours, we came to a clearing on the top of a hill. I set down my pack with a grunt. My shoulders were sore where the straps had been digging in. He gestured to my pack and said, “That’s a heavy load.” I stooped down to check the straps and buckles. “Has to be,” I replied. “Why?” He asked.

I looked at Him for a moment, then started pulling things out to show Him. “I need all these things.” Tools and rope and food and clothes and flint and kindling and more...I took everything out and laid it on the ground all around me. Finally, I looked up at Him again. He surveyed all my things, carefully picking up each object. Sometimes, He smiled, other times His eyes grew sad. I watched Him and held my breath. “I know—I know,” I said. “It’s too much. But I don’t know what I’ll need.” He looked at me with the tenderest compassion. “That’s a heavy load.” I could feel tears starting to roll down my cheeks. Where did I set my kerchief? He held out His own clean kerchief to me. Hesitantly, I took it and blew my nose.

“Would you like something to eat?” He asked. My eyes darted to the last of my stale bread, and my stomach made a noise. He continued, “How about some soup?” I looked all around, but He didn’t seem to have anything with Him. He smiled, then reached inside the folds of His cloak and pulled out two steaming bowls. I took one uncertainly, but then I smelled it—leeks and carrots, my favorite. I muttered a thank you and took a sip. It was perfect.

As we ate our soup, He leaned back and looked up at the sky, where clouds were skuttling across the great big blueness. I looked too. It was...peaceful. I finished my soup and let out a contented sigh. He smiled at me again. I was starting to like His smile. “You know,” He said, “you don’t have to carry that heavy pack anymore.” I felt a pang of guilt, and something deeper—fear? But I looked at Him and said, “I don’t know how not to.” He reached for my hand and held it. His hand was strong and kind. He said, “You’re traveling with me, remember? Do you trust me?” I looked at my pack, then at our empty bowls. Finally, I said, “I—I don’t know. I want to trust you.” He nodded and said, “That’s enough.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay,” I said, and realized I was smiling. 🕯 *Hannah Howe*

🕯 Sometimes, it feels like we are never enough. Never prepared enough, strong enough, smart enough...But Jesus is always enough. How might God be inviting you to rely on Him today? _____

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

TOO QUIET TO PREACH?

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-11; 1 PETER 4:10-11

I *must be the worst evangelist in the world*, I thought, as worry knitted itself inside of me.

In church, I preferred being at the back, behind the scenes. Everyone around me was confident, talkative, and quickly put themselves on the frontline. I had heard about the Holy Spirit transforming the disciples from quivering cowards to strong, bold preachers...but still my mouth was clamped shut.

I wore my Christianity inside and avoided the limelight. I didn't vocalize my beliefs because I was acutely aware that many people treated faith with derision and ridicule. Sometimes, I felt entirely alone, surrounded by worshipers in church who were not in my age group and wondering what on earth I could possibly have to offer others if I wasn't prepared to open my mouth. What could I do to reveal God's love for us, to share how He sent His Son, Jesus, to heal the broken relationship we had with Him?

It was then that I discovered—while I might not shout out in prayer, preaching, or singing—I loved reading and knew the written word had the power to change lives. My gift wasn't to try and be like everyone else. They had their skillset, and I had mine.

My inner panic was slowly unlocked, and I found a freedom to express myself through writing what was in my heart. Joy filled up inside of me when I realized I could do something after all. You can too. If, like me, you are worried about speaking out, you don't need to feel guilty or afraid. God's love for you doesn't depend on what you do, and He invites you to rest in His love and rely on His strength to use the gifts He has given you. The way we all preach is through loving the people around us, no matter what we happen to be doing at the time. There are different ways of speaking, preaching, and professing your faith. Maybe you will speak up through art, dance, acts of kindness, or having a quiet strength through adversity. Don't chase what isn't yours, but catch the skills our loving Father has given you. **I** *Cindy Lee*

- I** Do you ever feel like it isn't okay to be quiet? God made some of us to be naturally quiet, and He invites all of us to be quiet sometimes. It's good to take time to think and reflect.
- I** If you are naturally loud and extroverted, how could you support the quieter people in your life? Consider asking them, and remember to take time to listen to their ideas. _____

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. 1 Peter 4:10 (NLT)

FOLLOW THE LEADER

READ: PSALM 25:1-11; ROMANS 8:14

In first grade, my teacher picked a leader for our class each day. The leader's primary job consisted of taking the daily collection of lunch money to the school office. Additionally, the leader had the chance to select a classmate to join them on the trip to the office. We six-year-olds felt important marching the large envelope of coins and bills to the secretary who sat behind her desk, keeping the school running.



Once my friend, who I'll call Daniel, chose me as his lunch money buddy on his day to serve as class leader. We delivered the funds and began our walk back to the first-grade hall. But Daniel took a detour. I followed. Then he knocked loudly on another teacher's door before skipping away. I stood alone at the door, confused and practically paralyzed. When the teacher opened her door, she scolded me and then turned away. I stumbled down the hall, rejoining Daniel and entering our own classroom.

I don't believe my friend's intention that day was to get me in trouble. But his actions did lead to my embarrassment and a tongue-lashing from a teacher. Without knowing where Daniel was leading, I followed. It's a mistake I wish I hadn't made.

While human leaders often disappoint us, God is always a trustworthy leader. When we put our trust in Jesus, the Son of God, for the forgiveness of our sins, we begin a relationship with Him, and He places His Spirit in us. The Spirit of God desires to lead us in decisions big and small. God realizes that we don't do a good job of leading ourselves. Sometimes, we don't know what to do, where to go—and sometimes, we follow the wrong leaders. When we look to God for wisdom and understanding, He will faithfully guide us. Our good Father wants to direct us down His good paths. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

- 🕯️ Can you think of a time you followed someone and later regretted it? _____
- _____
- 🕯️ Are you facing any decisions that seem overwhelming? How might God be inviting you to follow His guidance? Who is a trusted Christian you could talk to about this? _____
- _____

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. Psalm 25:9 (NIV)

GOD SAVE ME

READ: EPHESIANS 2:1-9

God strengthen me
Sometimes I feel so weak
God guide me
Sometimes I feel so lost
God hold me
Sometimes I feel alone
God care for me
Sometimes I can't care for myself
God save me
I cannot save myself
Jesus, your sacrifice is enough for me
I know you gave everything
Let me cling to your salvation
I want to be yours
I want to be with you
God keep me going until you return
I want to honor you *Emily Acker*

🔑 Do you ever feel so weak and empty, like there's no way you can face what lies ahead without God's help? God didn't intend for us to try to get through life on our own. Rather, He came to save us, and He invites us to rely on Him for everything. Consider taking a moment to talk to God about whatever is weighing on you today. He longs to help you and to reassure you of His love. _____

🔑 Jesus died and rose again to be with us—and to save us from sin and brokenness. How can His sacrificial love bring you strength and comfort in hard times? _____

'And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' Acts 2:21 (NIV)

WHEN IT'S HARD TO SLEEP

READ: PSALM 3

Are you getting enough sleep? So many of us are sleep-deprived; studies show we are tired at school, tired at work, and tired when we are driving our cars. During our teen years, most of us need eight to ten hours of sleep every night. That's hard to get if we are worried or stressed about the day ahead. We may push stress to the back of our minds during the day, but at night, our minds circle around our problems. Sleep and worry do not mix. Yet God has compassion on us. He invites us to give our worries to Him in prayer. He not only hears us, He helps us with the problems we face.

Psalm 3 was written by King David when he was fleeing the rebellion led by his son Absalom (2 Samuel 15). David was literally running for his life! As the psalm begins, David cries out to God about the danger he is facing: "LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" But by verses 4 and 5, David is reminded that the God he trusts is faithful: "I call out to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy mountain. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me." David was able to rest at night, even when he was in danger. He gave his troubles to God, knowing that God would help him.

If you are troubled by worries and fears at night, you are not alone. If you've put your trust in Jesus, you can know that God is with you, even in the darkness. He is more powerful than anything that troubles us, and He invites us to give all our concerns to Him. And the Holy Spirit helps us remember God's goodness and rest in His love. Some Christians make it a practice to come to God in prayer before bed, or meditate on Scripture or a song of praise as they drift off. Some find they can rest easier after they have a time of reflection and confession at the end of the day. No matter what is going on in our lives, we can trust God will help us with whatever the new day brings. And we can rest in His promises. 🕯️ *Laura N. Sweet*

🕯️ What kinds of thoughts keep you up at night? Worries, guilt, regret, fear...? God invites us to come to Him with all these things, and to rest in His love, forgiveness, and protection. _____

🕯️ Sleep is an important part of our physical and emotional health. Sometimes, we need help in order to give our bodies the sleep we need, and that's okay. If you have difficulty sleeping, who is a trusted adult you can talk to, such as a parent, counselor, or doctor? _____

*In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.
Psalm 4:8 (NIV)*

HEART OF FLESH

READ: PSALMS 32:1-5; 51; EZEKIEL 11:16-21; 36:24-28

Wandering, lost, and alone. How long have I been like this? My sins are against me, sapping my strength. Bones wasting away, I groan in agony. Those I had trusted in betrayed and enslaved me—quite honestly, my own evil heart enslaved me. This heart is as hard as stone, my transgressions heavy from the time of my birth.

Have mercy, God. Wash away my sins! Your love is great, your mercies are endless! I confess my evil ways, my tendency to roam, my search for meaning and satisfaction in everything that is not You.

What will I, this stubborn sheep who has strayed so far, offer my Shepherd? I know He will not turn me away when I come to Him—He will not despise a heart full of brokenness and sorrow for my sins. Create in me a heart of purity, my God! Make my heart steadfast; cover me with Your forgiveness. Remove my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh!

My Shepherd turns to me with love in His eyes, arms open wide. I hear Him whisper to my soul, “I will gather you back...I will cleanse you from everything impure...I will give you a new heart, a new spirit...I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. Are you willing to lay down your idols?”

I contemplate the things I once thought would fill me, those pseudo-gods. My soul aches with emptiness and longing, and I know—I know. “Will it hurt?” My voice is barely a whisper. Sorrow shines in His eyes. “Yes. But I already endured the deepest pain for you.” It is then that I notice the nail scars in His hands.

I nod, and He reaches deep. His hand finds my lifeless heart—a cold mess of hardened tissue, muscle, and valve. I gasp as He removes this mass of stone from my chest. I watch as the Shepherd covers my heart of stone with His nail-scarred hands. He breathes on those hands, my heart inside. Then, I hear it, the unbelievably sweet sound of a heart beating, deep and even. He opens His hands and therein lies a new heart—a heart of flesh. 🕯️ *Savannah Coleman*

🕯️ Ezekiel prophesied that God would save His people through Jesus—He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for us, His sheep (John 10:11). What do you think it means that God will remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh? _____

“I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.” Ezekiel 11:19 (NIV)

RAW AND REAL

READ: 1 SAMUEL 1:1-20; PSALM 88

While talking to one of my friends, I was refreshed by their honesty about a current situation: "I was angry...but God can handle our feelings." There is often the temptation to put on the mask of perfection or plaster on a smile when our world feels like it's falling apart. My friend understood: God does not want us to stuff our feelings inside and suffer silently, He wants us to be real. He desires all of us: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Romans 8:1 breathes life into whatever we may be going through: in Jesus, there is no condemnation. As children of the King, we are His forever, and our spirits testify to this truth along with the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-16). We have a God who desires that we come to Him with all our burdens and worries because He cares for us so deeply (1 Peter 5:7).

There was a woman in ancient Israel who got real with God. Hannah had been longing for a child of her own for years, and her soul was consumed with grief. While worshipping at the LORD'S house, Hannah poured out her tears, bitterness, and anguish before the LORD. She was so raw and real that Eli, the high priest, accused her of being drunk. In response to the accusation, Hannah replied, "I was pouring out my soul to the LORD" (1 Samuel 1:15).

We will all walk through inevitable times of darkness, but we can follow the example of Hannah and countless others who have gone before us. We can pour out our hearts to God. The Psalms give ugly-beautiful raw pictures of many who suffered and chose to bring their struggles to God. Psalm 88 is filled with phrases such as: "I am overwhelmed...my eyes are dim with grief...darkness is my closest friend." In the midst of all this realness...is beauty. Verse 13 says, "But I cry to you for help, LORD..."

Not only does God hear our cries, He accepts us fully. May we allow this knowledge to draw us close to Him in our times of suffering and struggle. May we pour out our hearts to Him and choose to praise Him in the middle of the mess. 🙏

Savannah Coleman

🙏 Do you tend to try to hide your pain and struggles from God or from those around you? Remember that God can handle your feelings—anger, sorrow, confusion, and everything in between. He simply desires that you cry out to Him. _____

*Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge.
Psalm 62:8 (NIV)*

WHEN YOU ARE SENSITIVE

READ: PSALM 6:6-9

Do you find yourself reaching for the tissues at the end of a movie? Are you someone who chokes up when you hear a tragic news report? I am. Do you sometimes feel ashamed for shedding tears that you want to hide away? Believe me, I can empathize.

Growing up, I was (and still am) very sensitive about everything and anything. There were certain shows I would avoid—anything to do with animals was a definite no—because I couldn't cope with the emotions welling up inside of me. Music would have me swallowing back tears, and novels would have me sobbing in the night when everyone else was asleep. The news, especially concerning the elderly, would touch a nerve and stick with me for days.

For a long time, I was ashamed. When I was particularly saddened by something, I would walk away or switch something off. I was jealous of those people who didn't cry easily. In fact, I wished I was like them because I believed they were tough. Emotions were an embarrassing weakness that I wanted to hide but somehow couldn't. My tactic was avoidance.

Now, I've come to understand that being sensitive isn't something to be ashamed of, and it can actually be a strength. You have a deep understanding of sorrow because you have experienced it yourself. It can be helpful to remember Jesus experienced and understands sorrow too (Hebrews 4:14-16). And remember that God made each of us wonderfully unique, and all different personality types are needed in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Some don't cry easily and can keep people calm in a crisis, while others can create a compassionate space for people to process their emotions. We all need times we can think deeply, as well as times we can laugh. God created us to use our differences to love and serve one another. **!** *Cindy Lee*

! What kind of temperament has God given you? How might you be able to serve others? _____

! If you're feeling overwhelmed by your emotions, 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 keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. Psalm 56:8 (NLT)

KNOWN AND LOVED

READ: MATTHEW 9:20-22; MARK 5:25-34; LUKE 8:43-48

Four different authors wrote accounts of Jesus's life (called Gospels), and three of them recorded one of my favorite stories about Jesus: His interaction with a woman who bled for twelve years. This woman had spent over a decade suffering physically, but on top of that, in that culture she would've been considered "unclean." She probably felt isolated, lonely, and hopeless. But then, she saw Jesus in a crowd. She edged her way toward Him until she was close enough to touch Him. She thought, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed" (Matthew 9:21). So she touched Him.

The Gospels of Mark and Luke tell the rest of the story in a similar way. After the woman touched Jesus's cloak, she was immediately healed. Jesus knew someone had touched Him, and He asked, "Who touched me?" Then the woman fell at His feet and shared the truth with Jesus and with the crowd. Jesus told her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace" (Luke 8:48). Matthew's Gospel gives us less detail. In his account, after the woman touches Jesus's cloak, Matthew writes, "Jesus turned and saw her" (Matthew 9:22), then told her that her faith had healed her.

I like to think Jesus knew right away who had touched Him. That He wanted the woman to come forward, but He saw her through the crowd. He saw her years of suffering. He saw her need to be healed, but also her need to be seen and known and loved.

Have you ever felt like this woman? Like you've been waiting for healing for so long, but you're not sure it will ever come? You are not alone. Jesus sees you. He's waiting for you to fall at His feet and give Him your hurting heart. He is the God of healing. He fills our broken places with peace and love. All we need to do is reach out and touch His cloak. 🕯 *Becca Wierwille*

🕯 Have you ever experienced a time of loneliness, isolation, or suffering like this woman? What fears or anxieties do you think she might've had? _____

🕯 While we can always ask God for healing, sometimes it won't happen the way we want it to right away. But God always meets us with love and compassion when we come to Him. And we can know with certainty that when Jesus returns, He will fully heal all our hurts. Where do you need hope today? How might God be inviting you to reach out to Him? _____

Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed at that moment. Matthew 9:22 (NIV)

THE HURTING ROOM

READ: ISAIAH 53:4-5; JOHN 1:5; 1 PETER 2:24

Laila, don't go in!" I yell, as my friend opens the door of an abandoned hut in the hills. "You can't."

Ignoring my pleas, she whispers, her dark eyes staring back at me, "It's not what you think. I have to, and you will too." Within seconds, the door creaks shut behind her and is locked. I bang on the hut, calling her name, but there is no response. Prowling around, I realize there are no windows, only a sign: *The Hurting Room*.

"God, please let her come out of there," I pray, wishing I'd understood her instructions. How long I wait, praying, heart thumping, I do not know. The door springs open. I step inside, but Laila has gone.

"Laila," I call. "Laila. Are you in there?" No reply. I'm inside a charcoal room. My skin prickles and my head pounds. Then, surging inside, my body creaks with physical pain, every illness I've ever had manifests itself inside of me. Unable to think, nausea rising up inside, struggling to cope, the physical pain subsides. Next, mental anguish wraps itself inside of me. Conversations bounce around the empty room. Tears from a time before fall again, and rage burns within until every emotion spins itself inside and outside of me.

"Make it stop—please stop!" I cry out, my voice shaking. "God, help me." A bright light outshines the darkness. The charcoal gray transforms to yellow, then gold. I shield my eyes for a moment. My bruised skin is anointed with overflowing oil. The love swirling around me cancels out the pain and sadness.

"I will take your hurts, I will wear them like scars on my skin and transform you," echoes the light. "Hurt no more. I was crucified to bring you life. I am He who heals." For a few moments, or maybe hours, I lie in the presence of the Healer and don't want to leave.

"Arise, be free," whispers a voice in my soul. I stand up. Healed. The hut has disappeared. Laila stands next to me, a radiant smile on her face. **✦** *Cindy Lee*

✦ Because we live in a world that has been broken by sin, we all experience pain and suffering. But Jesus died and rose again to bring us healing. When we come to Him with our pain, He grieves with us and turns our suffering into hope (Romans 5:3-5). Where do you need healing? _____

O LORD, if you heal me, I will be truly healed; if you save me, I will be truly saved. My praises are for you alone! Jeremiah 17:14 (NLT)

WHEN PEOPLE PUSH US DOWN

READ: PSALM 143

People can push us down and mess with our minds. When others treat us wrongly, we can get into a dark place mentally and be scared to keep moving forward. When we have enemies coming against us, it can be hard for us to stay positive or keep our trust in God.

In Psalm 143, we can see that David felt the same way. He writes, “The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in the darkness like those long dead” (verse 3). And in this dark time, David cries out to God: “My spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed...Answer me quickly, LORD; my spirit fails” (verses 4, 7).

David knows that the people who have been pushing against him have affected his energy and the way he feels about life. He doesn’t want those people to destroy him. So David cries out to God, wanting to receive the hope and strength he needs to keep living. He tells God about his enemies, and he also remembers God’s unfailing love, saying, “I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done” (verse 5).

Even as David asks God for help, saying, “Show me the way I should go...Rescue me from my enemies...Teach me to do your will...preserve my life” (verses 8-11), David also expresses his trust in God with words like, “To you I entrust my life...I hide myself in you” (verse 8-9).

There are times when life will get to us, and certain people around us will make us feel like quitting. When we are tired and worn out, we can cry out to God like David did. We can ask God to show us how good He is and remind us that He is always with us (Matthew 28:20). As Christians, we can rest in Jesus’s compassion for us and rely on the Holy Spirit to teach us and remind us of all Jesus said (John 14:26). And we can look forward to the day Jesus will return to right every wrong. Just like David knew that he could rely on God and trust Him to be faithful, we can too. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

🕯️ What do you have going on in your life right now that is making your spirit weak? How might God be inviting you to come to Him? _____

Rescue me from my enemies, LORD, for I hide myself in you. Psalm 143:9 (NIV)

LOVED AS A CHILD

READ: GALATIANS 4:4-7

As a daughter of missionaries, I had memorized John 3:16 in both English and Portuguese. I knew that God loved me and that Christ had died for me. But it still felt like a generic kind of love. So, God loves me. But with what kind of love does He love me?

In a letter to the Christians in Galatia, Paul declares, “When the fullness of time came, God sent out his Son, born to a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as children” (Galatians 4:4-5). We see here the purpose for Christ’s death and resurrection: to adopt us as God’s children.

What does it mean to be adopted? Adoption is the process that makes a child, who was not originally part of a family, now part of that family. When a child is adopted, they can take on their new family’s name and identity.

The legal process of a child becoming part of a new family provides an incredible picture of what happened to me when I trusted Christ as my Savior: I was adopted into—made part of—God’s family. As Galatians 4 says, Christ died for my sins (every evil thing I’ve done, said, and thought—past, present, and future), and He rose from the dead so that I might be adopted as God’s child. I became part of God’s royal family. I went from being an enemy of God to being His precious child and a joint heir with Christ (Romans 5:10; 8:17).

If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, believing that He died for your sins and God raised Him from the dead, God has also adopted you. Once you were not a part of God’s family, but now you are His child, beloved and precious. With what kind of love does God love us? With the love of a father. 📌 *Angela Stanley*

📌 Have you put your trust in Jesus and been adopted into God’s family? If you have questions about this, who is a trusted Christian in your life you could talk to? (You can also find more information on page 104.)

📌 How might knowing that God loves you as His child affect how you understand His love? _____

See how great a love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God! 1 John 3:1a (WEB)



DO WHAT IS GOOD: TITUS

READ: EPHESIANS 2:8-10; TITUS 2:11-14; 3:3-8

Have you ever been reading a Bible passage and a certain word or phrase keeps popping up over and over again? That happens to me with the word *good* when I read the book of Titus, and it's why I think one of the main themes of Titus is "doing what is good."

The book of Titus is known as one of Paul's pastoral letters. Paul wrote it to instruct and give advice to Titus, who had been put in charge of organizing the churches on the island of Crete. In this letter, Paul gives Titus advice about choosing church leaders, about how those in the church should relate to one another, and about avoiding false teachings and division among believers.

Paul also focuses on the link between belief and behavior. Good works are evidence of a heart that has been changed through faith in Jesus. Doing good does not make you a Christian, but the more you get to know Jesus, the more you will desire to do what is good. Paul emphasizes this as he tells Titus that those who believe in Jesus should:

Love what is good (Titus 1:8).

Teach what is good (2:3).

Do what is good (2:7).

Be *eager* to do what is good (2:14).

Be *ready* to do what is good (3:1).

Be *devoted* to doing what is good (3:8, 14).

Yet even as Paul urges these Christians in Crete to do good, he also makes it clear that God's kindness and love toward us are not dependent on anything we do. Rather, God saved us because He is merciful. Our own goodness can never be enough to save us from sin and death, but God—in His infinite goodness—sent Jesus to die and raise from the dead so that we could live with Him forever. When we confess our sins to Him and put our trust in Jesus to save us, He changes our hearts so that we overflow with His goodness. Then He calls us to share that goodness with others. 📌 *Marie Cleveland*

📌 Have you ever tried to "do good" to earn God's approval? In Titus, we see that God loves us no matter what we do. How might this knowledge affect the way we go about "doing good"? _____

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4-5a (NIV)

RESCUED: MITSUO FUCHIDA

READ: 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17

June 4, 1942. Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, leader of the Pearl Harbor attack, was steaming across the ocean on the aircraft carrier Akagi, alongside the powerful Japanese navy. Six months after crippling the United States Pacific Fleet in Hawaii, he was poised to destroy another target—the US airfields of Midway.

Fuchida felt invincible—except for a ruptured appendix. After surgery, he was recovering on the flight deck, when he saw American Dauntless bombers diving straight for him. “Hell-divers!” a lookout screamed. A one thousand-pound bomb rocked the ship. During the attack, Fuchida broke both of his ankles. The explosions and fires eventually brought the Akagi to a watery grave, along with three other carriers and over three hundred of Japan’s best planes and pilots.

Fuchida, unable to walk, was rescued and taken to a nearby destroyer. He later found that everyone else in the sick bay, which he left before the attack, had died from a direct hit.

On August 5, 1945, Fuchida was ordered from Hiroshima to Yamato. The next day, the United States’ atomic bomb flattened Hiroshima. Fuchida had barely escaped. Later, he accompanied a search party to assess the damage. One by one, every member of his group died from radiation poisoning. Only Fuchida survived.

After the war, Fuchida became very bitter. He hated the Americans for destroying his country. One day, he read a tract that led him to the Bible. Soon he came to Jesus’s words, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Fuchida realized Jesus was praying for him! Then, Fuchida began a new life with his Savior.

Until his death, Fuchida was an international evangelist, preaching the power of Christ to replace hatred with love. **✚** *Jonathon Baker*

- ✚** Have you experienced Jesus’s radical forgiveness? If you want to learn more, see page 104.
- ✚** Do you have any hatred or bitterness in your life? How might Christ’s prayer of forgiveness make a difference to you? _____

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 1 Timothy 1:16 (NIV)

JESUS'S PRAYER FOR UNITY

READ: JOHN 17:20-26; ROMANS 15:5-7; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-14

My heart aches for unity in the church. I see so many divisions—Christians disregarding each other, judging, shaming, excluding...and I feel powerless. Unity seems impossible.

One day I shared my feelings with my church small group, and then one of my friends shared John 17:20-26. In this passage, Jesus was sharing the Passover meal with His disciples, a hodge-podge group of fishermen, tax collectors, political radicals...you get the picture. Jesus knew that in mere hours, one of them would betray Him, another would deny Him, and the rest would abandon Him. So, what did Jesus do? He prayed for them. And not just for the people who were following Him that day, but also for everyone who would believe in Him in the future. That includes us. It brings tears to my eyes when I realize Jesus prayed for *us*, for *me*, thousands of years before we were born. He knew us even then. He knew that we would all betray Him, deny Him, and run away from Him...and yet He loved us (Ephesians 1:4-6).

When Jesus prayed for us, He prayed that we would be unified, that we would be one like Jesus and God the Father are one. Wow. When I look at the hodge-podge group of people who make up the church, many who I don't agree with or even understand (and who don't agree with or understand me), who have opposing perspectives on politics, how to interpret Scripture, and how to love others well—I think, *How could we possibly be unified?* But the freeing thing is, it's not up to us to unify ourselves. God is the only one who can. And He wants to. He gives the Holy Spirit to those who've put their trust in Jesus, and the same Spirit empowers each of us to love and serve each other like Jesus loves and serves us. Unity in the church is possible because God's love is stronger than anything. Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead have covered over every wrongdoing, every offense, everything that separates us from God and each other. We will experience complete unity when Jesus returns, and it will be beautiful. But I believe we also get to experience some of that unity here and now as we live in God's love.

My friend from small group told us she'd begun reading John 17:20-26 daily and praying Jesus's prayer along with Him. So, I started doing the same thing. As I read, I am agreeing with Jesus's prayer, agreeing with what God wants to do, and asking Him to do it. 🕯️ *Hannah Howe*

🕯️ Where have you seen unity or disunity in the church? Consider taking a moment to pray. _____

"I pray also for those who will believe...that all of them may be one..." John 17:20b-21a (NIV)

SUNKEN ARMOR

READ: 1 SAMUEL 17:23-50; EPHESIANS 6:10-18

I swam to an old sea cave before the battle. Our odds of winning were beyond scary. Soon my kingdom could be enslaved to the Sinades again. There was already talk of surrender. Once inside, I removed my helmet and wept the salt into the water. My armor clanked as I fell to the sea floor. I was not equipped for this. How could I possibly save my people?

I knew what I must do. I began untwining the straps that held my armor to my scales and placed it in a pile. Once I was unburdened from my armor, I closed my eyes and whispered, salt still streaming from my eyes. "Oh Lord, Protector of the sun and sea, this armor will do me no good. Only you can affect what is needed. I surrender this armor to you." I breathed slowly, remembering our history. "You have been the one leading us. You are the one who died and rose from the dead to let us live in your freedom." I floated in silence, letting this warm truth envelop me. "Save us once more so that we may raise the seas to your glory."

You trust me? I felt the question ripple through the waters. I could only nod.

Sink your armor. With a gulp, I pushed my armor down a dark crevice in the cave. It sank into the depths from which things never returned. Then I heard, *Now go.* Fear quivered down my fins as I looked at my bare arms. I clamped my eyes shut. "Oh, please Lord, give me your armor lest I fail and die!"

Oh, dearest child. See, I have given you my armor.

"Where is it?" I looked again at my bareness.

I sunk it beneath your skin. It will protect you.

"No one will see it."

That is how they will know that it was I who rescued you. Now go. I trembled but began to leave. I stopped at the mouth of the cave. I almost smiled. "They will certainly laugh...both sides." I could hear the smile in the Protector's voice. *They always do.* ❗ *Abigail Scibiur*

❗ We live in a broken world, and the enemy is out to destroy us (1 Peter 5:8). But Jesus came to save us. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has guaranteed His victory over the evil one. Jesus fights our battles for us, and He also gives His armor to His followers. If we've put our trust in Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit in us, empowering us to take our stand against the devil. Yet, our help always comes from Jesus, not ourselves. How might this truth give you comfort? _____

Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. Ephesians 6:10 (CSB)

HOLDING ON TO TOO MUCH

READ: EXODUS 16:1-5, 14-32; MATTHEW 6:25-34

Do you get frustrated with the amount of stuff accumulating in your space? For some of us, it's easy to get things...but not as easy to get rid of those items when they are no longer being used.

Although the Israelites in the Bible did not necessarily have the issue of accumulating too many possessions, it's possible that the root cause of their problems was similar to my own when it comes to material possessions.

Soon after God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they needed food. To provide for His people, God sent bread, known as manna, from heaven. Each morning, the Israelites were to gather just enough to last for the day; the exception was on the sixth day of the week when they were to gather enough for the seventh day as well. But when some of the people gathered too much and kept it until the next day (besides the seventh day), the manna bred worms. Because they kept the manna overnight, the very thing they had needed one day became a burden the next.

God was inviting His people to depend on Him daily. The Israelites simply needed to trust God and follow His instructions, and they would have enough food to eat (without having to deal with worms).

Similarly, God invites us to trust Him daily. Though we should not be wasteful, we sometimes hold on to things too long. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the amount of stuff that you have accumulated, maybe it's time to get rid of some of it and trust God to provide for your needs in the future. **✎** *Jennifer Miller*

✎ We don't need to hoard because God cares for us, and He provides for His people. When have you seen God provide for a need in your life? _____

✎ Are you holding on to something you don't need that could be a blessing to someone else? _____

Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day." Exodus 16:4a (CSB)



ADMIT IT

READ: PSALMS 88:1-18; 116:3-6

The psalmists weren't afraid to admit when they were afraid. They even talked about feeling abandoned by God. Some of my favorite psalms are those that cry out desperately to God. You can feel the writers' authenticity. You can feel their struggle. It's easy for me to relate to what was going on with them.

These psalms remind me that God is not against our honesty. He knows what is on our hearts anyway (Psalm 139:1-4), and He invites us to tell Him when we are afraid or when we are feeling alone. When Jesus was in agony on the cross, He cried out in the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46). In the same way, we can be honest with God.

We can also talk to others about the way we feel. When we are frustrated with life, when we feel like God has abandoned us, it's important that we reach out to other Christians who will listen to us and pray with us. As the body of Christ, we are called to encourage one another and remind each other that God is trustworthy and compassionate.

Like the psalmists, we all go through struggles. At times, we find ourselves wondering why God is doing the things He is doing. In these times, the psalms can give us words to express our hearts to God, and they can help us remember His goodness and praise Him again.

We don't need to be afraid to ask for help, prayer, and encouragement when we need it. Like the psalmists, we can be honest with God, and with one another. 🕯

Bethany Acker

🕯 Can you think of a time you felt discouraged, alone, or afraid? Did you feel like you could talk to God during that time? Why or why not? _____

🕯 Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with about what you're going through? And how can you be a good friend to others when they are struggling? _____

*For you, LORD, rescued me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.
Psalm 116:8 (CSB)*



LONELY

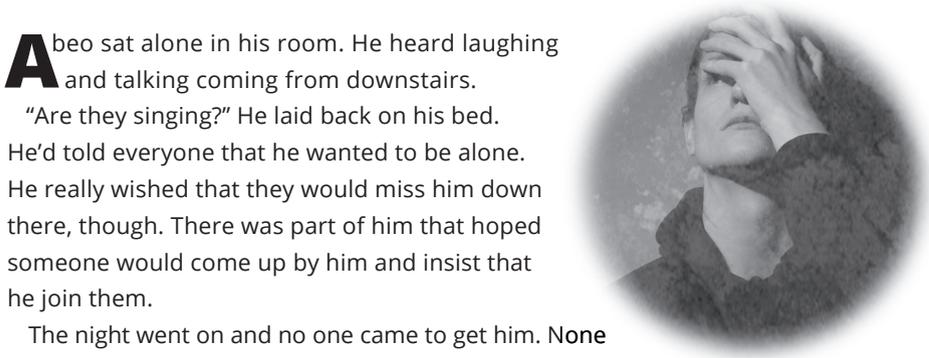
READ: PSALMS 62:5-8; 142:1-7

Abeo sat alone in his room. He heard laughing and talking coming from downstairs.

“Are they singing?” He laid back on his bed. He’d told everyone that he wanted to be alone. He really wished that they would miss him down there, though. There was part of him that hoped someone would come up by him and insist that he join them.

The night went on and no one came to get him. None of his family’s guests came up to tell him goodbye before they left. Abeo stretched out on his bed, tears welling in his eyes. He was lonely when he was with people, but even lonelier when he was alone in his room. All he wanted was to be loved and to know that he was accepted.

Reading in Psalms the next day, Abeo could understand the pain of the psalmist and how he felt alone in the world. As the psalmist cried out to God, Abeo cried out right along with him. He wanted to feel God’s presence. And then, Abeo started to feel that God *was* there with him. He started to feel God’s love and compassion. Sitting by himself in his room, suddenly Abeo knew that he wasn’t alone. **✦** *Emily Acker*



✦ Do you ever feel alone, even when others are around? In times of loneliness, God invites you to come to Him. _____

✦ God created us to be in relationship with Him and with each other. But when humans went their own way against God, our relationship with Him was broken. Because we live in a world that’s been broken by sin, we all experience loneliness and have difficulty navigating relationships. Yet God doesn’t leave us alone. He came for us. He took on flesh to dwell among us. Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has made a way for us to be restored to relationship with God. If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you can know that you are loved and accepted by the One who Created you—and you are part of His family, the church! God calls His people to love and accept each other (Romans 15:7; 1 Peter 1:22). How might God be giving you opportunities to reach out to others who are lonely? _____

*All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.
Psalm 38:9 (NIV)*

ALL THINGS MADE NEW

READ: ROMANS 8:18-30; REVELATION 21:1-7

I recently learned of two newborn babies who died, mere days and weeks after being born. Having a baby of my own, learning of such tragedies breaks my heart. I look at my sweet baby boy and hug him a little tighter, thankful for the gift of a healthy baby.

But I can't help but ask, *"Why, Lord? Why is there so much sorrow and grief and suffering in this world? Why is life filled with such heavy things as babies dying?"*

As I mulled over these things, the Lord reminded me of Romans 8, a passage that spoke comfort to my own heart a few years ago when I walked through my own season of heartache. This passage describes our world as being "subjected to futility" and being in bondage (verses 20-21). You see, the world as we know it now is not the way God originally created it to be.

When God created the world, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good indeed" (Genesis 1:31). But when humans went their own way against God, everything changed. Humanity became sinful, and the world groaned under the curse of their sin.

But take hope! It won't always be this way. Revelation 21:3-5 declares that the day will come when once again, there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more grief and pain. No more sin. We can be sure of this hope because Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead—defeating sin, death, disease, and sickness once and for all, and making a way for everyone who puts their trust in Him to be forgiven. When Jesus returns, every wrong will be made right.

However, we're not there yet. We still live in this world that is marked by the heartache of the effects of sin. Perhaps you have personally experienced the great sorrow of losing someone you love dearly. Suffering in this life is real. We cannot deny it. But as we suffer, we can cling to the hope of what is yet to come: one day, God will make all things right. 📖 *Angela Stanley*

📖 Where do you see brokenness? How can God's promise to make all things new give you hope? _____

📖 Do you feel like you can talk to God about the sorrows you experience? God sees all the brokenness of His creation, and He is filled with compassion for us. Through His death and resurrection, He made the way for us to come to Him. He invites us to process the hurt, grieve the wrongness with Him, and receive His peace (Romans 15:13). _____

Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new." He also said, "Write, because these words are faithful and true." Revelation 21:5 (CSB)

WHEN IN DOUBT

READ: MATTHEW 14:22-36; MARK 9:14-29; JOHN 20:24-29

If we are honest, at one time or another we all have doubts about our faith, what God is doing in our lives, or God's character.

In Mark 9, a man brought his son, who had been possessed by a demon since childhood, to Jesus for healing. The father said to Jesus, "If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us" (verse 22). Jesus replied, "Everything is possible for the one who believes" (verse 23). The father immediately cried out, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (verse 24). Jesus did not rebuke this father for his doubts. Jesus healed his son. What a beautiful picture of how Jesus cares for us in our suffering and doubts! In times of doubt and questions, we can echo this father's simple yet powerful words: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" God won't rebuke you for your honest cries to Him, He will pull you close and remind you of who He is.

Another day, Jesus miraculously walked on water, and He invited Peter to join Him. So Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus! But when Peter saw the waves and began to sink, he cried out to Jesus to save him, and Jesus did—immediately. Peter was in the middle of the miracle of walking on water when he had doubts. And Jesus gently reminded Peter that He was with him. Peter trusted Jesus to save him in the midst of his doubt.

After Jesus's resurrection, Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them, and Thomas said that he would not believe Jesus had risen from the dead unless he saw Jesus with his own eyes. Instead of leaving Thomas drowning in a pool of doubt, Jesus appeared to him and gave him what he needed. Even though Jesus's disciples walked with Him and saw His miracles firsthand, they still had doubts (Matthew 28:16-17).

When that inevitable doubt comes knocking, what should we do? We can cry out to Jesus. He wants to reveal Himself to us. He wants to help us know Him. And as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). When we are afraid, we can remember that God is with us—He is our strength and help (Isaiah 41:10). We can fix our minds on God's truth (Philippians 4:8) and remind our hearts that nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:39). *✠ Savannah Coleman*

✠ Even when Thomas was doubting, he stayed with the other disciples. Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with when you are doubting? _____

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" Mark 9:24b (NIV)

JESUS NEVER GIVES UP ON US

READ: ISAIAH 40:29-31; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-13; PHILIPPIANS 1:6

I used to have a little baby bird that I raised all on my own. Her parents neglected her since she was disabled and not as strong as the rest of her siblings. I fed her many times a day, including getting up twice a night (even on school nights) so that she would get enough food to become strong. She needed a lot of care, but I was willing to put in the effort to try and save her life. Even when I thought that my bird might not be able to survive, I never gave up on her. So, day by day, little by little, my bird became stronger. With the right amount of care, she was able to become a perfectly healthy bird.



In the same way, Jesus doesn't ever give up on us either. When nobody else believes in us, Jesus stays right by our side. He is always there for us, whether we're doing great or we're at our absolute worst. He will continue to help us, and we don't need to do anything to earn that help. Jesus is the God of healing and miracles. He cares about all our hurts, and He came so that we could be made whole. He will be with us, and He will continue to love us and care for us, no matter what. 🕯

Hanna Leopold

🕯 Have you ever felt like that baby bird? How might it give you hope to know that Jesus never gives up on you?

🕯 If we've put our trust in Jesus, we can look forward to the day He will return and put an end to sickness and pain forever. There is so much brokenness in our world, but Jesus has come to restore. Even now, God is bringing healing and wholeness all over creation. And He invites us to be part of this good work, extending kindness and compassion wherever we go. How could you show God's love today? _____

He gives strength to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Youths may become faint and weary, and young men stumble and fall, but those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles... Isaiah 40:29-31 (CSB)

OUR STRENGTH

READ: ISAIAH 40:28-31; 2 CORINTHIANS 12:5-10

I have days when I wonder, *How am I going to get through this?* It feels like the things I need to do and the steps I have to take are too much for me. I wonder if I will be strong enough to keep moving forward.

But in the times when I feel like I am not enough and that I am too weak, I can reach out to God. When I don't have the power to take on the things that I need to do, I turn to the One who made me and who definitely has more power than I have. The One who loves me and who came to be with me.

God knows that we need Him, and He wants us to come to Him for help. The Bible makes it clear that we don't have to be ashamed of our weaknesses. Rather, God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

On the days when you feel the weakest, God is there, ready to be strong for you. In the times when you don't know if you are going to make it, God is still working. He wants to come beside you and give you strength.

God strengthens us through the Holy Spirit. If you've put your trust in Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit in you, empowering you to do what God calls you to do. Sometimes God will call you to press on through difficulties, and other times He will call you to take a rest. Whatever the case, He will be with you through it all.

How amazing is it that we serve a God who not only sent His Son to save us but who is also willing to step into our lives and help us? How amazing is it that He will be strong for us when we cannot be strong on our own?  *Emily Acker*

 Can you think of a time you felt weak and God helped you? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for this.

 Where in your life do you need strength today? Do you feel like you can talk to God about this?

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Exodus 15:2a (CSB)

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. 📖