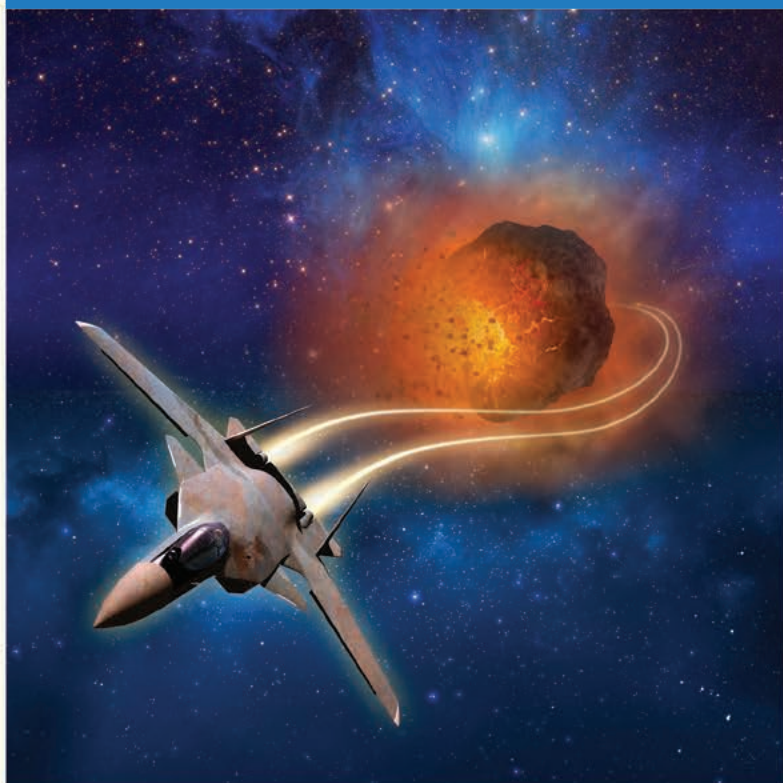


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Design and Cover Art: Warren Kramer

Editorial Assistant: Taylor Eising

Editorial Intern: Zoe Brickner

Theological Review: Chad Bresson, Mark Congrove,
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Space for Sale
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A VERY BAD DAY

READ: PSALM 86; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9

Have you had a very bad day recently? The kind of day when you're late to school or work, forgot your lunch at home, and realized you didn't turn in an important assignment? Or worse, the kind of day when you get really bad news, and all the sudden your world is turned upside down?

Sadly, very bad days are so very common in our broken world. But God sees all the struggle and pain we go through, and He doesn't sit idly by. He shares our pain and weeps with us. He invites us to draw near to Him and receive His compassion and comfort. And He provides trusted people who can help shoulder our heavy burdens (Galatians 6:2). The truth is, God made us for community. We can share our problems, and the accompanying feelings we have about them, with trusted people in our lives—people like friends, parents, therapists, pastors, and others. We can also share our problems with Jesus.

Jesus is fully God and fully human, and He knows what it's like to have a bad day. He experienced the worst day of all when He died on the cross, defeating sin in a very public and painful execution. But He was willing to endure all this pain, ridicule, and betrayal so that everyone who trusts in Him could be with Him and one day be free of bad days once and for all...because He rose again three days later to defeat death too. So, even on our worst days, we can take great comfort in the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done and promises to do.

Whatever you're going through today, Jesus wants to walk with you through it. He loves you, and He truly cares about what you're going through. He already knows all about what's bothering you, and He invites you to tell Him about it. You can talk to Him anytime, and He'll listen. He will be with you and remind you how much He loves you, no matter what. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

- 🕯️ What has your week been like? What are some of the tough things that happened? Consider taking a moment to talk with Jesus about these things and how they've made you feel. _____
- 🕯️ In addition to talking to Jesus, who are trusted people in your life you can talk to about these things—such as friends, therapists, parents, pastors, etc.? _____

I call on you in the day of my distress, for you will answer me. Psalm 86:7 (CSB)



BIRTHRIGHT

READ: ROMANS 8:12-17; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11; COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

Do you have any siblings? And if so, are you the oldest, youngest, or somewhere in the middle? In biblical times, birth order mattered a lot. If you were a firstborn son (sorry daughters) you would inherit the birthright from your father. This could be anything from sheep and property to a kingdom if your father was a king.

But even though this was the standard in the ancient world, giving a birthright to the oldest sibling was not God's standard. In fact, God often elevated a younger sibling above the oldest. Even with the first siblings, we hear that Abel's offering pleased God, while his older brother Cain's offering did not. We also see this theme when Joseph was elevated to a position of power over his ten older brothers and over all of Egypt. Not to mention Joseph's father Jacob was the younger twin, yet Jacob was chosen to be a patriarch of the nation of Israel.

In Colossians 1:15, Jesus is called "the firstborn over all creation." As God the Son, Jesus is God the Father's "one and only Son" (John 3:16), and therefore He is considered the firstborn. So, according to Israelite standards, this would put Him in place to inherit the Father's power and authority. Jesus certainly does have all power and authority—He said, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). But, similar to some of the Old Testament stories, Jesus subverted this narrative as well. Jesus is God, and He is King over all, but He also became a servant. He taught, "the last will be first" (Matthew 20:16), totally opposite of what people would expect.

Jesus even humbled Himself to a death and punishment fit for the worst kind of criminal. The King of kings, who deserves to be served and sacrificed to, loves us so much that He became the sacrifice for us. And then, Jesus flipped the narrative again by not staying dead. With His resurrection, Jesus overcame what people expected to be the end, and He became "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18). Now, He invites us to become coheirs with Him, to share in His sufferings as we lay down our lives for each other, and to share in His glory when He returns to raise us from the dead and make all things new (Romans 8:17). 🕯️ *Naomi Zylstra*

🕯️ Why do you think God often works in unexpected, counter-cultural ways? _____

🕯️ If you want to dig deeper, read Genesis 4:1-5; 25:19-26; 45:4-8; Revelation 17:14; 19:16.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (CSB)

THE GIFT OF PEACE

READ: JOHN 14:15-31; GALATIANS 5:22-26; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

Advent takes place during the four weeks before Christmas, and it's a time when some Christians prepare to celebrate Jesus's first coming and look forward to His return. During Advent, many Christians reflect on different themes each week, and one theme is God's peace.

Peace isn't something we earn. It's not something we can work to receive on our own. Peace is a gift Jesus freely gives. We see this truth in John 14, when Jesus comforts His disciples as the time of His death draws closer. He promises them the Holy Spirit, and another thing too—peace. "Peace I leave with you," Jesus tells His disciples in verse 27. "My peace I give you." Paul also references the peace Jesus gives us in Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Peace is not something God dangles way out in front of us as a reward for our future successes. He offers it to us now. In fact, when we celebrate Christmas, we are celebrating the coming of the Prince of Peace to this earth. And He came bearing these gifts we celebrate during Advent: hope, faith, peace, joy, and love.

As we go through this Advent season and prepare to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, let us accept His gift. Let us allow His peace—perfect peace that is beyond our understanding—to saturate every part of our lives. Receiving this gift doesn't mean we are going to feel at peace all the time—that won't be possible until Jesus returns. But it does mean we can know that the Prince of Peace is with us all the time, even when life feels incredibly unpeaceful. And maybe when others notice this transcendent peace in our lives, they'll want to experience it as well. 🕯️ *Becca Wierwille*

🕯️ The Hebrew word translated "peace" in the Bible is *shalom*. It's a rich word that means everything is complete and whole and all things are operating in right relationship to each other. While we will never fully experience this type of peace until Jesus returns, He gives us glimpses of it through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). How have you seen glimpses of *shalom* in your life? If nothing comes to mind, you can ask God for this anytime.

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



WITH MATTHEW

READ: MATTHEW 1:18-25; 28:16-20

Recently, I was looking up verses about Jesus being with us, and I noticed something really cool. In Matthew's Gospel—his account of Jesus's life—Matthew includes two pointed statements about how Jesus is *with* us, and he places one of these right at the beginning of his account and the other right at the end. It seems like Matthew did this on purpose to sort of bookend the story of Jesus with a key statement about who He is and what this means for us.

The book of Matthew starts with a genealogy, showing Jesus's lineage all the way from Abraham to Joseph. Matthew writes that Joseph was “the husband of Mary... the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah” (Matthew 1:16). Matthew then explains that Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married, but while Mary was still a virgin, “she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit” (verse 18). Then an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained all this, telling him to go forward with his wedding to Mary and to name the baby *Jesus*, “because he will save his people from their sins” (verse 21). Next, Matthew explains that all this fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy: “‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’)” (verse 23). Jesus is the promised Immanuel. Just take a second and try to let that sink in. Not only is Jesus human—He is *God*, and He is with *us*.

Now let's jump ahead, all the way to the end of Matthew's Gospel. After Jesus does many wonderful things, culminating in His death on the cross and resurrection from the grave, He speaks to His disciples on a mountain. Matthew records Jesus's words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (28:18-20). And those are the final words of Matthew's Gospel. Even though Jesus was about to ascend into heaven (as the other Gospel writers tell us), He made sure His followers knew that He was still Immanuel. The deep desire of God's heart is to be with His people. This is why He came and lived among us, why He died for us, why He rose again, and why He will one day return to fully restore His creation. Jesus is God, and He is with us...always. 🕯️ *Hannah Howe*

🕯️ Jesus came because God wants to be with us, now and forever. Why do you think this truth was so important to Matthew that he began and ended his Gospel account with it? _____

“And surely I [Jesus] am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:20 (NIV)

THE HERO OF ETERNITY

READ: NUMBERS 24:17, 19; ISAIAH 42:1-4; MICAH 5:2

The world-famous superhero, the Black Panther, was played by Chadwick Boseman. Every day while filming was in progress, I imagine he would get up, eat breakfast, suit up, and step in front of a camera to thrill us as an action hero. Gal Gadot did the same thing as Wonder Woman. And decades before, Christopher Reeve did likewise before he stepped up to save the world as Superman. Why did they do it?

I think there are two reasons. We love a hero, and we long to be rescued. As small children we often see ourselves as the hero—perhaps rescuing a pet, a sibling, or even a toy. As we enter our teen years we may look to various influencers for direction and validation. But as we mature, the need grows greater for real answers to life's troubles, and those answers don't come from play acting. In times of great stress, we need something real.

Threaded throughout the Old Testament we find God's promise of a great hero. And for generations, God worked through people like Moses, David, and Deborah. Many kings, prophets, military leaders, and almost all types of heroes are woven into the fabric of our salvation tapestry. But in one way or another they all failed to deliver. The relief they brought was only temporary. We were not rescued from the ultimate enemy: sin. So the longing went on.

Then, under the darkened skies and among the lonely hills near a small town called Bethlehem, the hero of the ages was born. With astonishment and awe, a chosen few gathered to worship Him. They could not have fathomed the great ministry and miracles to come, how He would rescue them, not by force, but by laying down His own life—and taking it up again (John 10:18). There is much we don't know about this hero, and yet He changed the whole world.

Imaginary heroes fill a void for many. But those who know Jesus find the true hope we all long for. The Black Panther, Wonder Woman, and Superman are all eclipsed by the real hero. Jesus **was**, **is**, and always will be the Hero of Eternity. 🕯

Susan Sundwall

🕯 What heroes have you looked up to, whether in your life, movies, history, current events, the Bible, etc.? How have they fallen short? Jesus, the greatest Hero, was willing to die for us. Let that sink in. It was because He loves us that the all-powerful One laid down His life. And then He rose from the grave, defeating sin and death once and for all. (Find out more about this epic rescue on page 104.) _____

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah...out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Micah 5:2 (NIV)

RESTING GUILTY

READ: GENESIS 2:2-3; EXODUS 10:8-10; DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15; HEBREWS 4:9-11

Have you ever felt guilty for resting? I know I have. When my body tells me I need to take a break and slow down, I always try to fight it. This world is fast-paced, and I always feel like I can't keep up—rest isn't going to help that, right? Our society values hustle and non-stop work. We've all but forgotten rest. But God hasn't.

The Bible talks about rest—and how important it is—many times. One of the first times is in Genesis 2:2-3, when God took the seventh day to rest after creating the world. What if we all took off one day a week to rest? A while ago, I would have said, “How am I supposed to get ahead if I spend an entire day resting? There are only so many hours in a day, and school takes a lot of them.”

But then I realized something important: I wasn't relying on God. I was doubting Him, going against what He said about rest, and doing my own thing. If God told me to rest, wouldn't He provide for me using the other six days of the week?

I still feel guilty when I rest, but I try to remind myself that God rested and He told us to rest. Through Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, He has already made the way to save us from sin and death, including the sin of self-reliance and overwork. And He is always with us through the Holy Spirit, reminding us of His gentle, loving care for us. He will provide for us, and as we rest in that truth, we can be good stewards of everything He has given us, including our bodies, our health, and our time. 📖 *Kimberly Brokish*

📖 In Deuteronomy 5:15, God says to His people, “Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt, but the LORD your God brought you out with his strong hand and powerful arm. That is why the LORD your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day.” In this way, God is reminding them that they are no longer slaves, and He is not like the slave-driving Pharaoh. Instead of piling harsh commands and tasks onto His people, He invites them into His rest. What are some ways you could incorporate this kind of rest into your weekly routines? _____

Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28 (NLT)



MARY: LIVING IN DIFFICULT TIMES

READ: LUKE 1:26-56

At the time of Jesus's birth, most Jews would have known the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, including a young virgin from the town of Nazareth named Mary. Then one day, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that God was going to bring the Messiah into the world...through her. He said, "You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1:31). Through the Holy Spirit, a virgin would become pregnant.

I wonder what happened after Gabriel left. Perhaps Mary sat down to think about what just happened. Maybe she needed a moment to process all this. Was she really chosen to give birth to the Messiah—the same Rescuer that had been promised generations before? Scripture doesn't tell us what came flooding into her mind at that moment. Was she overwhelmed with excitement or filled with a calm sense of peace? What we do know is that the next thing Mary did was go to visit her cousin Elizabeth. She found Elizabeth pregnant, just as the angel had said, "Your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month" (verse 36). The two women rejoiced together! But after three months, Mary returned home to some very difficult situations.

Here's the problem: Mary was engaged to Joseph, and in ancient Jewish culture they would have been considered legally married even before living together and having sex. Within a few weeks of her return to Nazareth, people would have begun to realize that Mary was pregnant. In a Jewish culture following the law of Moses, she could have been stoned to death for sexual immorality. At the very least, she would've been an outcast. This also put Joseph's reputation at risk because if he went ahead with the wedding, people would think he had violated God's law of celibacy by having sex with Mary during the engagement period.

Today, we can read the Bible and see how God provided for Mary, but in the moment, there was no way she could have known what would happen to her, and she probably experienced any number of doubts and fears. Still, Mary trusted God to see her through these difficult times. And God was faithful to take care of her and fulfill His promises. 🕯 *Doug Velting*

🕯 Imagine yourself in Mary's place. What would you be thinking coming back to Nazareth? _____

🕯 Can you think of a time you were in a difficult situation and God helped you through it? _____

Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!...For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me." Luke 1:46-49 (NLT)

NOT THE JUDGE

READ: MATTHEW 7:1-5; JAMES 4:11-12

It's such an easy temptation. How quick we as humans are to make judgments by pointing a finger at someone else instead of looking at the problems in our own lives.

It can be so easy to criticize the way other people live. When was the last time you found yourself judging others for the things they do that are different from what you think is right? It's easier to point out other people's shortcomings instead of our own, isn't it? But that's not how Jesus calls us to live. He died on the cross and rose from the grave for all sin—including yours—and He's the only One who can judge. He calls us to focus on living our own lives and leave the judgment to Him.

But what if we see somebody do something wrong? you might ask. We have to make judgments sometimes, don't we?

Yes, there are times when we need to confront others about wrongdoing or tell someone in authority so they can help—especially if a person's actions will hurt themselves or someone else. But that doesn't give us a right to put ourselves above someone else, to think of ourselves as better than other people because the sins they struggle with might be different from the sins we struggle with. The fact is, we all desperately need Jesus—He's the only perfect person who's ever lived. He's the only One who never sinned, and His death and resurrection is the only way we can be forgiven and restored to relationship with God. Let's not lose sight of this good news by pointing fingers at each other. Instead, let's remember that God desires to bring us close to Himself, to heal our lives from sin, and to make us new. We need to leave the judging up to Him...because He is the only just Judge. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

- 📖 Are there sins you find easier to judge? Why do you think that is? Consider taking a moment to talk to Jesus about this. _____
- 📖 How can knowing that Jesus is a just Judge give us comfort when we see things go so wrong in our broken world? _____
- 📖 How can knowing that Jesus will right every wrong when He returns help us love our neighbors like Jesus loves us? (1 John 4:19) _____

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor? James 4:12 (NIV)

DECORATING THE TREE

READ: JOHN 14:6; TITUS 2:10-14



Have you ever helped decorate a Christmas tree? In many families, this is a yearly tradition, especially in the United States of America. Some families even like to add new ornaments every year! In some cases, each person will make their own ornament, or the family will go to a store together and have each family member pick out one new ornament. Then, they'll put all the ornaments on the family Christmas tree. What really makes a tradition like this fun is the way the unique personality of each family member comes out in the ornaments each person makes or chooses—in how each person helps decorate the tree.

In a way, Christians are kind of like Christmas tree ornaments. In Titus 2:10, Paul says that God's people "adorn the doctrine of God, our Savior, in all things." To *adorn* basically means to decorate. Just like each Christmas tree ornament is different but decorates the same tree, each Christian has different talents, interests, and life circumstances, but we all represent the same truth—that Jesus loves us, and He died and rose again to save us from sin and death.

God's truth is already beautiful on its own, similar to how an evergreen tree is beautiful even without any ornaments. And yet, God calls us each to decorate His truth to help others see just how beautiful it is. In fact, God says we are part of the beauty of His gospel, or good news. The gospel isn't just words on a page—the gospel is demonstrated in our lives. When we share what Jesus has done for us and use our gifts, personalities, and the various things we do to express our love for Him and others, we put the beauty of His love and grace on display for all to see.

In Titus 2, Paul writes about all kinds of Christians, each with unique circumstances and abilities. If you know Jesus, you can show others His love wherever you are by using the gifts He has given you. So the next time you see a Christmas tree, think about how you can "adorn the doctrine of God, our Savior, in all things" (Titus 2:10) and point others to the beauty of Jesus. **✎** *A. W. Smith*

✎ Throughout the Bible, we see how God both calls and empowers His people to do good works (Matthew 5:14-16; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14). It's fun to notice how God made every person unique, and so the ways we do these good works will also be unique! What are some of your talents, gifts, and interests? How could those things in your life be like ornaments that decorate God's message of hope in Jesus? _____

...they may adorn the doctrine of God, our Savior, in all things. Titus 2:10b (WEB)

PRESENT TO HIS PRESENCE

READ: ISAIAH 53; LUKE 2:1-21

Listen. Can you hear it? That whisper of hope on the horizon? The echoes of an infant King born in a manger. The culmination of hundreds of years of prophecy born in a tiny babe in Bethlehem—Immanuel, God with us.

The rush of the season, the crush of life—expectations from within and without. How will we hear if we don't choose to be still and listen? Advent is about hoping, waiting, rejoicing. Being present to the One who presented His One and Only Son as the one-time atonement for our sins. Being present to the One who is after only one thing: your heart.

Colorful lights wink on an evergreen tree. Let it be a reminder of the Light of the World, who gave up His life for you on a tree fashioned into a cross. But that thrill of hope? It's not an illusion. The Light of the world is still shining—Jesus is alive!

Love was born

The veil was torn

Death was defeated!

Listen to the promise: He's coming again. It may be hard right now. Your mind and body may be weary. Wait in hope! The One who came as a baby will, in the twinkling of an eye, come back to make all things new, to raise us from the dead, to make His home among His people. Then, we will be with Him forever. 🕯

Savannah Coleman

🕯 As we wait for Christmas day during the season of Advent (which means “important arrival”), we have an opportunity to turn our hearts to the coming of a baby in a manger, the Savior of the world. Beyond the birth of our King, Advent is also a time of preparation for His second coming, when He will return to earth and make all things new. Even as we wait for that glorious day, He calls us to be attentive to His presence with us, here and now. When Jesus took His final breath on the cross, at that very moment the veil in the temple (that separated the Holy of Holies, where God's presence was, from the rest of the temple) was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:50-51). Jesus came because God wanted to be with us, so much so that He was willing to die for us! Then He rose from the grave, defeating sin and death forever. Now nothing can separate us from His love. How can you prepare your heart to focus on the presence of God today?

🕯 If you want to dig deeper, read Micah 5:2; Matthew 1:22-23; John 8:12; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me. Micah 7:7 (NIV)



SHARING IN ONE ANOTHER'S NEEDS

READ: ACTS 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:25-26

For a few years, my family and I lived near enough to our church's meeting location that we could bike to church services. The youngest ones, too little to bike any distance, could ride in a bike trailer behind a grown-up's bicycle. I was too big for the trailer, but I didn't have a bike of my own. Sometimes I would try to keep up with my family on a scooter. That was hard work, though, and I couldn't scooter fast enough to stay with the rest of the family for long.

However, a couple at our church—Ted and Kim—noticed our dilemma and decided to help. They owned a bike that would suit my size, and they weren't using it at the time. Ted and Kim didn't ask my family to pay for the bike; they simply gave it to me. And thanks to that gift, my family enjoyed many hours of outdoor time, including biking to church together.

In the book of Acts, we see people during the time of the early church who were radically changed by the forgiveness and new life they were experiencing in Jesus, and they shared what they had with one another—just like how Ted and Kim gave that bike to me. The Christ followers described in Acts gave generously to one another, sharing in one another's needs by helping to meet those needs. This kind of love for others is a gift from God, the natural overflow of His enormous love for us (1 John 4:19).

As we consider how to live out our faith in Jesus, the One who rescued us from the punishment our sins deserve and brought us into a relationship with God, we can look to the early believers as an example—and then look for people in our lives who might need the exact thing we can share—all the while looking to Jesus, the One who is so generous to us. 📖 *Allison Wilson Lee*

📖 When Jesus came and lived among us, He not only showed that God cares about our needs, but He also identified with our needs. God humbled Himself to experience pain and lack firsthand, ultimately dying on the cross for us, so that we could be with Him forever and share in the abundance of the new heavens and earth with Him. As we wait in hope for Jesus's return, we can catch glimpses of the restoration He is bringing when we see people who have been changed by His love and the power of His resurrection who are giving generously to one another. Can you think of a time someone stepped in to help when you had a need? What was that like? _____

📖 Consider taking a moment to pray, thanking God for His generous love and asking Him for ideas of how you could share with someone who could benefit from what you have to offer. _____

All the believers...shared everything they had. Acts 4:32 (NLT)

I NEED YOUR MERCY

READ: PSALM 25:16-18; 1 PETER 1:3-13

Lonely, sad, life isn't what I hoped
Desperate, scared, I feel alone

No one is for me, I stand by myself
Many are against me, I can't face them

I need mercy, need someone to help
I need strength, need to be held

I cannot go forward on my own
I turn now to cry to You, my God

When troubles are big, my heart sad
I know You notice and You care

When anxiety is great, fears large
I know that You offer me peace

Going forward, I need You with me
Give me peace, show me mercy

I need You here, my great God
Do not leave me to handle all alone *✠ Emily Acker*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1 Peter 1:3 (CSB)

🔑 Today's poem is written in the style of a lament psalm. Lament is the practice of honestly bringing our hurts to God, and it's a vital part of the Christian life. God knows our hurts, and because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we can freely bring them to Him in prayer (Hebrews 4:14-16). Lamenting reminds us that Jesus cares about our pain, and He's going to do something about it—either now or when He returns to make all things new. Consider taking some time to write your own lament, telling God about the things that have left you feeling hurt, disappointed, frustrated, afraid, or demoralized lately. For more examples of lament psalms, check out Psalms 13, 38, 42, 43, 88, or 130. _____

🔑 We all go through times when our problems feel overwhelming and God feels far away. But as Christians, we can know that nothing can ever separate us from God's love (Romans 8:35-39). We can rest in this sure hope: that because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we belong to God and He is always with us. Do you have any favorite Bible passages that remind you of God's nearness, love, and power in difficult times? _____

🔑 Have you ever felt depressed? Depression causes persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. God created the world good, but when humans went their own way against God, the result was death and decay and sickness—including depression. But God has not left us alone in our struggles. He has compassion on us, and He came to live among us and, ultimately, to heal the world of all brokenness. Because Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, we have the sure hope that Jesus will return to restore His creation—and, as His forgiven followers, we will get to live with Him forever. Then we will finally be free from sin, death, and every kind of brokenness. As we wait for that glorious day, Jesus is with us. He identifies with us in our struggles, feels our sorrows as His own, and weeps alongside us.

🔑 God does not want us to face depression—or any other kind of brokenness—alone. Christians can bring each other hope and comfort in hard times, pointing each other to Jesus. When you are struggling, who can you reach out to? If you know someone who is hurting, how could you come alongside them?

🔑 If you have been feeling depressed, who is a trusted adult you can talk to, such as a therapist, parent, pastor, or teacher? 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. _____

PROTECTIVE LAYERS

READ: EPHESIANS 6:10-20

If you live in a part of the world where the winters get cold and snowy, you're probably used to putting on layers of warm clothes before venturing outside. Hats, mittens, coats, and boots protect us from the cold and wind, and they can also help us understand today's Bible passage.

In Ephesians 6:10-20, Paul urges the Christians in Ephesus to "put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil" (verse 11). Paul goes on to describe each piece of God's armor, echoing the words of Isaiah 59:17, when the LORD "put on righteousness as his body armor and placed the helmet of salvation on his head." This Old Testament passage ends with a promise: the Redeemer—who we now know is Jesus—would come to save everyone who turns from their sins, and God's Spirit would never leave them.

So, why do we need God's armor if He has already come to redeem us and defeat sin and death for us? Well, until Jesus returns to fully restore our broken world, life can get pretty cold and harsh. But God doesn't abandon us to shiver and get frost-bitten. He gives us His armor. In fact, Jesus gifts us Himself as our armor, inviting us to depend on who He is and what He's done for us. Just like we need plenty of clothing for protection against winter weather, Christians have the armor of God to protect us from the lies of the enemy. Just like your hat protects your head and your gloves keep your hands warm, each piece of God's armor protects us in a different way against the lies we might be tempted to believe. God's armor reminds us we belong to Jesus and we don't have to give in to any temptation we might face. Instead, we can rely on God's power to live in a way that reflects our love for God and our neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40).

So today, whether it's cold where you live or not, consider taking some time to reread Ephesians 6:10-20. As you do, think about each part of the armor. Notice how God compares truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God—which are all given to us in the gospel—to various pieces of armor soldiers needed. And remember, you can rest knowing that, in Jesus, you have all the protection you need against the lies you might hear. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What questions do you have about the armor of God? What piece sticks out to you most today? _____

✦ What lies do you tend to believe about yourself? How can God's armor remind us of who we are in Jesus—how beloved and how empowered we truly are? (Ephesians 1:3-23) _____

Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. Ephesians 6:11 (NLT)

PROMISE KEEPER

READ: LUKE 2:25-35

Long ago, God promised Simeon that before he died, he would see the Messiah. And so, Simeon waited.

I imagine that, as he grew in years and felt his physical strength lessen, Simeon became weary of anticipating and expecting. The Bible tells us that Simeon looked forward to “Israel’s consolation” (Luke 2:25). No doubt Simeon saw the trials of the nation around him and wondered when God would finally fulfill His promise—when the Messiah would finally come and crush the enemy to the ground (Genesis 3:15).

But still, Simeon waited.

At some point in our lives, we all wait for something. Sometimes it’s a new job, a relationship, acceptance into college, physical healing, or new friends. Or maybe it’s simply waiting for God to reveal the next step in our lives. But because God is good, gracious, and sovereign, we can trust that He will be with us in the waiting.

As we read through the stories in the Bible we see that, time and time again, whether it’s a covenant to an entire nation or a promise to a single person, our God tells the truth and keeps His word. We know that people don’t always keep their promises, and sometimes we have a hard time trusting because others have broken that trust in the past. But because of who God is and all that He has done, we can count on His words completely and fully.

God didn’t leave Simeon in a time of expectation forever. In Luke 2:28 we see that one day Simeon finally held the newborn Messiah in his very own arms. As he looked into the face of Jesus Himself, Simeon lifted up praise to God, the Promise Keeper. 🕯 *Katherine Billingsley*

🕯 Can you think of a time you had to wait for something that was important to you? Are you in a time of waiting right now? Consider taking a moment to tell God about what you’re longing for. Even in the waiting, we can rest in His abiding love and constant presence with us. _____

🕯 It can be helpful to remember that, even if the things we long for don’t happen, we can rely on Jesus’s promise to return and make all things new. Then all our longings will be fulfilled in His wonderful presence (Revelation 21:1-5). How can we find comfort in the fact that God never breaks a promise? _____

*“...and you know with all your heart and all your soul that none of the good promises the LORD your God made to you has failed. Everything was fulfilled for you.”
Joshua 23:14b (CSB)*



COUNTING DAYS

READ: PSALMS 39:4-7; 90:1-17

When I was young, my family would visit my grandmother 750 miles away, and at night, she would sit with me on her lap and read from her Bible and tell stories of her life. She often said, “It wasn’t long ago I was your age.” I would look at her gray hair and wrinkles, in disbelief that she could think that. She was in her fifties. For me, a lifetime passed just waiting for Christmas.

Fast forward to my senior year in high school. I was driving home from a school activity, thinking about my future and what I might want to do in college. I had always wanted to take ballet, but my parents never would pay for lessons. Should I take ballet in college? Then it occurred to me: I was 17, too old to start a career in ballet. Already, the chance to seize some of life’s opportunities had passed.

In that sobering moment, I realized time gets spent whether or not we know how we want to spend it. As our time passes, opportunities come and go. But I know I get to spend eternity with God, who loves me so much He sent Jesus to die and rise again to make the way for me to dwell with Him forever. If we know Jesus, we have a confident hope that He will return to resurrect us from the dead so we can live with Him forever in restored creation. Because of that hope, we can participate in God’s kingdom here and now with joy instead of fear.

After I realized how quickly time passes, I began thinking about how to best use the skills and interests God gave me to further His work and make the most of my time. The work God is doing is wonderful, and it’s a blessing to get to be part of it. We don’t know how long this life will be or when Jesus will return, but we do know that God is at work in every moment of our lives, and He invites and equips us to participate in that good work. 🕯️ *Ronica Stromberg*

🕯️ It can be disappointing to miss out on opportunities. But God is with us in these times, and our disappointments matter to Him. Have you been disappointed by a missed opportunity lately? Consider taking a moment to bring this to God in prayer. _____

🕯️ God has given all of us skills, talents, and abilities that we can use as we participate in His kingdom. What skills, talents, and abilities has He given you? If you’re not sure, who is a trusted Christian who could help you find out—such as a pastor, parent, youth leader, or counselor? _____

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Psalm 90:12 (NIV)

GOD WITH US

READ: ISAIAH 9:1-7; MATTHEW 1:18-23

God with us. Closer than our very breath, YH-WH, “I AM,” here (Exodus 3:14). From the seeking of humanity in the Garden of Eden, when we first sinned and God called to us, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). To the seeking in the desert, when the LORD spoke to Hagar and she said: “You are the God who sees me” (Genesis 16:8-13). To the pivotal moment of Love come down in the manger. “Immanuel...‘God is with us’” (Matthew 1:23). All the way to the cross, where Immanuel gave up His life and said, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

The whole of history is this beautiful chase. God creating, bending, heart-rending. God reaching, earth crying, hearts breaking, long waiting until the promise was fulfilled: God with us here, now, always.

You can trace the line of promises kept from the Garden to the Flood, from the Manger to the Cross, from the Resurrection to the Ascension. And then, a mighty, rushing wind; tongues of holy flame settling on and always in—the Holy Spirit with us (Acts 2:2-4). Our Advocate, Helper, Teacher, Comforter—God in us (John 14:16-17, 26).

God with us wherever we go, God in our midst, God dwelling in us, God among us. All we need, always, even as we wait until He comes again.

Lord, thank you for coming to us in our need and brokenness. You came from glory and perfection to mire and destruction. You came as the Light in the darkness to set the captives free and to dwell among us—and in us. You are Immanuel. We are not forsaken. We are not alone. There is no need for striving, for working to attain—in Jesus, it’s already done. Risen from the dead, coming back again. The greatest gift is God with us: You came for love. Today, may we rest and believe that You are more than enough. 🕯
Savannah Coleman

🕯 At Christmas, we remember how Jesus came and lived among us. Jesus is Immanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). How can looking at God’s pursuit of us throughout the Bible help us more fully understand the significance of Jesus’s coming? How has Jesus revealed God’s never-ending love for us? (Find out more about why Jesus came on page 104.) _____

🕯 If you want to dig deeper, read Joshua 1:9; Zephaniah 3:17; Matthew 28:20; John 1:5, 14.

“Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” Matthew 1:23 (NLT)

WHEN HE CAME

READ: GALATIANS 4:4-5; REVELATION 21:1-5

When He came the first time
 The world was in dire need
 Arriving as a newborn baby
 Not atop a gallant steed
 This might come to some's surprise
 The way He came to us
 But, Jesus comes with power and love
 Not with pompous fuss
 When He came the first time
 He changed the world forever
 Now those who trust in Him are His
 And His love for us He will not sever
 But, do you know something?
 He's coming back again!
 Just imagine how the world will change
 Then 🕯️ *Molly McTernan*



🕯️ The word *advent* means “important arrival.” In the weeks leading up to Christmas, many Christians observe the season of Advent as a time to remember how Jesus came to earth the first time as a baby, and how He will come a second time to make all things new and dwell with His people forever. Even if the Christmas story is familiar to you, consider taking some time to think about how Jesus came the first time (Matthew 1:18–2:15; Luke 2:1–7). In what ways was His arrival surprising? Why do you think God the Father decided to send God the Son in such a humble way? _____

🕯️ What changed after Jesus came and lived among us, ultimately dying on the cross for us and rising from the grave? And how will the world change even more when Jesus returns? (Find out more on page 104.) _____

For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 (CSB)

MARY'S JOYFUL RESPONSE

READ: LUKE 1:26-56; 2:1-35; 1 TIMOTHY 4:12

In Luke 1, when the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared out of nowhere, Mary was probably no more than sixteen. As if the angel wasn't terrifying enough, he also brought distressing news: she—still a virgin and engaged to be married—would soon become pregnant with the Son of the Most High God.

Talk about rocking your world! Things *were* different then, and Mary would not have been considered too young to become a mother, as Jewish women often became engaged in their teens. Yet Mary was understandably “confused and disturbed” (Luke 1:29). Just imagine being in her shoes...what would you say? To Joseph? To your parents? To anyone? I mean, angels only spoke to prominent people, right?

Yet Mary's response to Gabriel revealed a remarkable faith and a humble heart: “I am the Lord's servant,” she replied, “May everything you have said about me come true” (Luke 1:38).

To understand how astonishing Mary's faith was, let's take a moment to contrast her response with the responses of others (adults, no less) who God also called to do frightening tasks. For example, Moses and Gideon reacted with protests and excuses when God called them to lead His people and deliver them from their oppressors (Exodus 3-4; Judges 6-7).

On the other hand, when God offered Mary the opportunity to participate in His story of deliverance, she not only responded to God willingly, she also offered Him her heartfelt praise. Listen as Mary breaks out in song while visiting her cousin Elizabeth: “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!...For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me” (Luke 1:46-49).

The next time we're faced with frightening circumstances, let's turn to God in faith as Mary did, relying on God's power instead of looking at our own limits, and join in her joyful song. 📖 *G. Kam Congleton*

📖 When God invites us to be part of His good work of deliverance and restoration, it can often be frightening. Yet, through the Holy Spirit, He empowers us to do everything He calls us to do. There is great joy in saying “yes” to His invitations! How could Mary's story, and the way God did seemingly impossible things in her life, give us courage when we face frightening situations? _____

Mary responded, “I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.” Luke 1:38a (NLT)


THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF CHRISTMAS

READ: PSALM 62:5-12; MATTHEW 2:1-11; LUKE 2:1-7


From the time we're young, Christmas can leave us feeling disappointed. As a little kid, you might have longed for a certain gift and gone without it. You might have hoped a family member would be around to celebrate the holiday season with you and found that they were too busy with work or they weren't able to travel because of weather or sickness. Maybe you hoped Christmas would be more magical than it was, and you ended up feeling disappointed and hurt.

As we get older, Christmas can still disappoint us. After all the special foods are eaten, the favorite stories are shared, and the presents get unwrapped, we might be left with a hollow feeling, like "That's it?" It seems like Christmas should continue on and be something more.

When we look closely at the Christmas story, we find that the birth of Jesus was a disappointment from many perspectives. People expected the Messiah—God's promised Rescuer—to be a great and mighty king. No one expected Him to be born into a poor, unremarkable family and laid in a manger. It's not surprising then that God works through disappointments.

So, when we feel let down during the holiday season, we can take comfort in God's presence with us—His humble and unexpected presence. After all, Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). When the people in our lives fail to show up in the ways we hope they will, and when traditions fail to be enough, we can lean in to Jesus. He will always be there for us, surprising us with all that He does for us. When gifts leave us disappointed, we can look to the perfect gift He gave us—Himself. Because Jesus came and lived among us, ultimately dying on the cross for us and rising from the grave, we can know that God will always be there for us, in the busy holiday season and all throughout the year. God loves us, and no matter what disappointments we experience, we can celebrate Him this Christmas.  *Emily Acker*

 What are some disappointments you've experienced around Christmas time, either this year or in the past? Consider taking a moment to lament, sharing these disappointments with Jesus. _____

 Maybe this Christmas isn't like you expected or hoped it would be, but it can still be good. God helps us be present and enjoy what there is to be enjoyed, and He often surprises us with good gifts. What good gifts might God be inviting you to enjoy this holiday season? (James 1:17) _____

*Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
Hebrews 10:23 (NIV)*

A BABY

READ: LUKE 2:4-7; JOHN 1:1-18

Christmas tends to get a lot of hype as far as holidays go. I love the holiday personally. It's a time when I get to celebrate with my family, share presents, and eat good food. It's also a time I get to remember the story about how God became a human. After living through 25 Christmases, I've noticed the same themes tend to pop up. I hear stories about Mary and Joseph and how difficult their journey was. I hear about shepherds, magi, or angels.

Of course, Jesus is the star of it all—well, not the literal star the magi followed, but still. Baby Jesus is the center of our attention in the manger. As the song “Away in a Manger” goes, “The cattle are lowing / the Baby awakes / but little Lord Jesus / no crying He makes.”

But that's not true. Jesus did cry. He probably cried a lot during the first few years of His life. Because He was fully human. That's the amazing part of the Christmas story! God becoming a human being and living among other humans. He cried, was hungry, felt sad, got tired...all the same experiences we have.

To me, this is what makes Christmas so miraculous. Yes, Jesus's conception was miraculous too—He was conceived through the Holy Spirit, not by a human father (Matthew 1:20, 25; Luke 1:34-35). But the fact that God came down to earth to be with humankind and live a human life amazes me. God the Father sending God the Son to earth, as a human, shows how much love and compassion our God has. And Jesus *wanted* to come, not just to live among us, but ultimately to die on the cross in our place—and then rise from the grave—so that everyone who trusts in Him can live with God forever. He loves us that much. Other gods of the day would demand human sacrifices, but we have a God who became the sacrifice Himself, on our behalf. 🕯️ *Naomi Zylstra*

🕯️ Have you ever thought about what it means that Jesus became human? Why is Jesus being fully human and fully God central to the meaning of Christmas? _____

🕯️ What is something Jesus did in Scripture that humanizes Him to you? The Bible tells us Jesus experienced crying, hunger, sadness, tiredness...He did not withhold Himself from any part of human life. (If you want to dig deeper, read Isaiah 53:2-3; Matthew 26:36-39; Mark 11:12; 14:32-36; Luke 4:1-2; 19:41; 22:39-44; John 4:6; 11:35; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7.) _____

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14 (CSB)

DARK DAYS

READ: 2 KINGS 6:8-23; PSALM 135:5-6

Wars, earthquakes, crime—all kinds of awful things are going on in the world. Sometimes it seems like there's only bad news. But when things look bleak in our broken world, we can have hope as we remember that Jesus is coming back one day, and when He does, He's going to destroy sin and death forever, and the world will no longer be a scary place. Instead, Jesus will make everything new and beautiful. Even now, He is working all things "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose," and all along the way, He is transforming us to be more and more like Him (Romans 8:28-29). Yes, the sin and death we see in our world are powerful forces. But they are not nearly as powerful as God.

That's something Elisha's servant witnessed firsthand in 2 Kings 6. A strong force of soldiers with horses and chariots were about to attack Elisha, and his servant was terrified—until God opened his eyes so he could see the large number of angels God had sent to guard them.

In a similar way, when we see all the chaos and evil things happening around us, it can seem like the world is beyond repair, like there's no hope. But the One who is in us is greater than all the powers of evil (1 John 4:4). When things look dark, the Holy Spirit reminds us that Jesus will never abandon us, and He will make everything right one day. Because He is always with us, we don't need to be afraid. We can trust Him no matter what happens.

While we shouldn't close our eyes to the problems in the world, we can also open our eyes to the power and promises of Jesus. He won't ever leave us alone in this dark world. He will comfort us and strengthen us to take part in the good work He is doing, even in the places that seem broken beyond repair. Jesus is working all things for His good purposes, and because He died on the cross and rose from the grave, we can know that His victory is certain. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What things scare you the most about our world? Who are trusted people you could talk to about those things—such as friends, parents, pastors, therapists, teachers, etc.? _____

✦ What are some tangible ways you'd like to show the love of Jesus in the midst of the brokenness of our world? _____

...the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 1 John 4:4b (NIV)

THE DETAILS

READ: MICAH 5:1-4; MATTHEW 2:1-6; LUKE 2:1-15

Are you a detail-oriented person? Some people are, some people aren't, and some people—like me—can be if it's something they care about. Did you know God cares about the details? All the way back in the writings of the prophet Micah, He left us specific details about a ruler who would be coming.

Micah 5:2 says, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

This ruler of Israel is Jesus. Even though this verse was written hundreds of years before Jesus came, Micah says the promised ruler would be born in Bethlehem... and that's exactly where Jesus was born (Matthew 2:1).

Even more specific than that, Micah outlines that He would come from Bethlehem Ephrathah. There were two different cities called Bethlehem—one in the north, near Nazareth, and one in the south, near Jerusalem. Bethlehem Ephrathah is the one near Jerusalem, and it had special significance as the town of David (Luke 2:4). Joseph, Jesus's earthly father, was a descendent of David, and that's why Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem when Caesar decreed that everyone must be registered in a census.

Isn't it amazing how God works through all the details to unfold His great story? Micah described a ruler who would come from Bethlehem Ephrathah and “shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD” (Micah 5:4). Approximately 700 years later, Jesus revealed that He is the Good Shepherd, who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Since Jesus died for us and rose from the grave, everyone who puts their trust in Him gets to look forward to the day our great Ruler-Shepherd will return, and we “will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth” (Micah 5:4). And even now, we can rest knowing that God cares about every detail—in the Bible and in our lives. 📖 *Kimberly Brokish*

📖 How can looking at Old Testament promises help us understand who Jesus is and what His life, death, and resurrection mean for us? (If you want to know more, check out page 104.) _____

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” Micah 5:2 (NIV)



LONGING TO BE LOVED

READ: LUKE 15:11-32; ROMANS 5:6-8; 15:7; 1 JOHN 4:9

As a kid, the one thing I wanted for Christmas—every Christmas—was a puppy. Sometimes a collie, sometimes a German shepherd, sometimes a cocker spaniel. But always a puppy. Every year I got what was second on my list. One year it was the doll I wanted. One year it was a wristwatch. But never my puppy.

Looking back on those days, it's obvious to me that it wasn't a puppy I wanted at all. It was love. Someone to happily greet me—no matter what mischief I had been into that morning. Someone to follow me everywhere—even when my best friend wasn't speaking to me. Love. It wasn't until years later that I learned every Christmas is a reminder of love. Real love. Love that will never die. Love that accepts me with all my faults. Love that will never let go. The love of Jesus.

God took on human flesh and lived among us. He humbled Himself to be born where the animals were kept. Imagine! Livestock bleating and pooping and chewing their cud. It was probably noisy and smelly, but He came with one purpose in mind: to die on the cross. An excruciating death. For me! For you! For people who did not deserve to even untie the straps of His sandals (Luke 3:16). He would lay down His life. But that wouldn't be the end. After three days in a tomb, He would rise from the grave, defeating sin and death so everyone who trusts in Him could live with God forever.

That love remains. The love of Jesus for this world He created and bodily inhabited—and will return to one day. His love for you. His love for me. Much greater than the love any puppy or any person could give. A love that will never die. A love we can never lose. 📖 *Carol Raj*

📖 Can you remember a time you felt truly loved and accepted? What was it like? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this. _____

📖 We all want love. We want to know we are loved. We want to be told we are loved. We need to believe we are loved. The good news is, that's who Jesus is *for us*. He assures us of God's love. God longs to accept us into His family, and He made this possible through Jesus's death and resurrection. His desire is for everyone to know His unending love through trusting in Jesus (Psalm 136:1; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). If you want to know more, check out page 104.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NIV)



THE NIGHT EVERYTHING CHANGED


READ: GENESIS 4:2-5; EXODUS 3:1-4; 1 SAMUEL 16:11-13; LUKE 2:8-20


Shepherds couldn't even testify in a court of law. That's how much people looked down on us. They assumed we were liars. I hated that. Not to mention we were too dirty and "unclean" to enter the temple because we cared for animals, dealing with their manure and blood. But even worse was how people avoided me. They seemed to forget everyone needed lambs for the temple sacrifices. And sheep need to be led and protected. They sometimes do incredibly stupid things.


Whenever I complained, my older brother reminded me of our ancestors. "Remember Abel and Moses? They kept sheep. So did Jacob. And David was a shepherd before he was king." Try telling that to the townspeople who held their noses when I passed by!

Then one night, everything changed. We were out in the fields tending our flocks when suddenly a bright light split open the night sky. I froze. Some of the other shepherds fell to the ground in fear. My brother trembled as he drew me close. "An angel," he whispered.

Then the angel spoke: "Don't be afraid!" How was that even possible? My knees couldn't stop shaking. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." All people? Even shepherds? Even me? Suddenly, a whole multitude of angels appeared. They were singing, "Glory to God in highest heaven." Then the angels disappeared as quickly as they'd come. But they'd given us instructions. Where to go. What to look for.

"Hurry!" my brother took hold of my arm. "We've got to go to Bethlehem." I protested, "But what about the sheep? Won't they be in danger?" He shook his head. "If God tells us to go, we need to go. He can protect our sheep until we get back. The Messiah is here!"  *Carol Raj*

 This story is how one author imagines what it might've been like for the shepherds in Luke 2:8-20. Jesus, the Savior of the world and bringer of peace, came for all people—including those society casts out. What can this Bible passage reveal about who God is and how He sees us? _____

 Like the shepherds might've worried about leaving the sheep, we can often fall into believing our responsibilities matter more than resting in the good news of Jesus's love and forgiveness that He's given us through His death and resurrection. God gives us opportunities to experience His vast love for us, but we're often tempted to prioritize other things. What might those things be for you? Consider taking a moment to pray about whatever comes to mind. You can rely on the Holy Spirit to help you surrender all these things to God and receive what He has for you. _____

"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased."
 Luke 2:14 (NLT)

THREE GIFTS FOR THE KING

READ: MATTHEW 2:1-12; 2 CORINTHIANS 9:15; JAMES 1:17

Galumph, galumph. The magi had been traveling for weeks. Nothing but sand under their feet and stars in the sky above. Though the heavens were scattered with twinkling stars, one stood out amongst them all. *The* star. The one leading them to the King of the Jews.

It would be unthinkable to come empty-handed. So, before setting out, they had contemplated what gifts would befit this king.

“Gold, of course,” confirmed one.

“Frankincense would honor his purity,” suggested another.

A third observed, “Great power brings great responsibility—and suffering. It is troublesome to be a ruler. Myrrh would sweeten his reign.”

So, it was settled. The magi were on their way, pursuing the mysterious star that had appeared many months before. By now the sky had darkened, and the guiding star directed them. Slowly they advanced, until they reached a humble abode on the outskirts of Bethlehem town.

Cautiously, they alighted from their saddles, and taking their costly cargo, made their way to the entrance. The carpenter Joseph invited them inside. The Child, asleep in His mother’s arms, soon awakened and with a wide-eyed expression watched the magi humbly bow before Him. They presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For a few minutes, the room was filled with an unmistakable radiance. Slowly, the magi rose from their knees and, filled with wonder, stepped quietly out the door and into the night. 🕯️ *Jarm Del Boccio*

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” Matthew 2:2 (NLT)

🗝 Today's story is how one author imagines the events described in Matthew 2:1-12. Consider taking some time to read this passage for yourself and imagine what it might have been like for the magi to search for and find Jesus (probably months or years after his birth). What do you notice? What questions do you have?

🗝 While the Bible doesn't tell us a lot about the magi, some believe they were a priestly tribe of an ancient people called the Medes, in the part of the world where Iran and Iraq are now. The magi were very well educated in astronomy and mathematics and very powerful politically. One of the main jobs of the magi was to crown kings. So, by causing a star to rise, God led these ancient magi to proclaim Jesus as King, and their gifts reflect this. Why is it important for us to know that Jesus is the true King? _____

🗝 How is Jesus different from other kings? (Hint: Read all of Matthew 2 and look at King Herod.)

🗝 Have you ever wondered why the magi chose to bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus? While the Bible doesn't tell us specifically, we can find some interesting connections throughout Scripture (Exodus 30:6-9, 34-38; 30:22-33; 1 Kings 7:48-51). For example, the only other place in the Bible where we find the combination of myrrh and frankincense is in Song of Songs 4:6, 14 in the context of the king and his bride. Jesus is the King of Kings, and the church (all Christians everywhere) is His bride. Jesus came to "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21) so that we could be forgiven and united with Him as His bride, and so that His good reign could extend over all creation. If you want to know more about this good news, check out page 104. _____



AFTER-CHRISTMAS LETDOWN

READ: MATTHEW 25:35-40; LUKE 2:15-20

Do you ever get that bored, depressed, or letdown feeling after Christmas ends? When all the fun and festivities come to a close and we wait for the new year to begin, it can be a bit, well, boring. But boredom can be a really cool opportunity to show Jesus's love.

Think about your community. Other people may be feeling bored, depressed, or let down too, especially people who can't get around easily, like those who are sick and can't leave their home, whether that be an apartment, a house, an assisted living residence, or a hospital. Sometimes, these people in our communities get lots of attention before Christmas—carolers, visitors, programs, and so on. But when Christmas is over, they may be extra lonely. If you have some extra time, one option could be doing some research and finding out the best ways to serve these people at a time when they may be especially forgotten.

In a way, getting out in our communities and showing Jesus's love has some similarities to what the shepherds did when Jesus was born. After seeing the baby Jesus—after the very first Christmas—they went and told others about Him, declaring His love for the world.

So during this year's after-Christmas lull, consider how you might show Jesus's amazing love to your neighbors! Christmas may be over, but we still have the opportunity to remember how Jesus came to save us, and we can keep sharing His love with others. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What people in your community (groups or individuals) might be feeling especially lonely during the after-Christmas lull? Are you feeling especially lonely this year? Consider taking a moment to ask God for ideas of ways to share Jesus's love with the neighbors around you. _____

✦ If you'd like to help people in your community, do you know of any organizations that are already helping? How could you find out more about them and learn from the work that's already being done? After doing some research or talking to people from an organization, if you decide this is a place you'd like to serve, follow the steps for volunteering that they've set out. In this very tangible way, you can show the love of Jesus in your community! _____

After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. Luke 2:17 (NLT)

NOT ALONE

READ: PSALMS 34:15-18; 139:7-12; HEBREWS 13:5

When it all slips away
When I am left alone
The darkness surrounds me
I feel like hiding

When it all gets too heavy
When life is hard to bear
The world is too much for me
I remember I'm not alone

My Savior is with me
He knows my pain
My God does not forsake me
No matter how hard life gets

God loves me and heals me
He helps me when I'm weak
God is always near me

I don't need to be afraid **✝** *Bethany Acker*



✝ Even when we feel alone and overwhelmed, God is always there. He will never forsake us in our pain. He is always eager to help us. Can you think of a time you were comforted by God's presence with you? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this. If nothing comes to mind, you can ask Him for this anytime. He loves to answer these prayers. _____

✝ Jesus invites us to tell Him about all the things that are weighing on us. He sits beside us in our pain and weeps with us. Consider taking a moment to bring Him any burdens that come to mind. _____

✝ In addition to talking to Jesus, who are trusted Christians in your life you can talk to, people who will listen to you and help shoulder your heavy burdens and bring them to Jesus? (Galatians 6:2) If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. _____

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

PART OF THE STORY

READ: ROMANS 6:4-11; COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

Do you have a favorite book or movie that you like to read or watch over and over? Do you ever find yourself wishing you were part of the story? It can be fun to get wrapped up in a good story and imagine ourselves in it. And let's not forget the epic story we're already part of—the story of how Jesus saved the world from sin and death and how He will one day make everything right. That story is real, and it's the greatest story of all.

To understand where we are in this massive story, it can help to think about it in four main parts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. In the beginning, God created all things good—including us. But at the fall, when humanity rejected God to go our own way, sin and brokenness came into the world and fractured God's creation in deep ways. God was heartbroken, yet His love for us and for the rest of His creation was undaunted. He was determined to bring about redemption so His people could be near Him, and all creation could be made whole once again. The way He brought this redemption is the climax of the story: Jesus, who is God the Son, came and lived among us. When Jesus willingly died on the cross, He conquered sin. And when He rose from the dead, He vanquished death, so everyone who trusts in Him could have eternal life.

Now, we live as forgiven people in this in-between space after Jesus has come the first time, before He comes again. We're looking forward to the final restoration Jesus will bring when He returns, raises us from the dead, rights every wrong, and heals every brokenness. And as we wait, we have purposeful work to do. God invites us to join with Him in sharing the good news of His great story, all the while bringing restoration to the areas of brokenness we find around us.

It's amazing that we are part of God's story, and that it's all true. It's not a story about made-up characters—Jesus is real, and His story is our story. When things are looking bleak, we can remember how the story ends: with Jesus getting rid of sin forever and making the whole world new. In a way, every story connects to this great one, echoing themes like betrayal, rescue, self-sacrifice, true love, and beautiful restoration. As we face the ups and downs of life in a broken world, we can take comfort in knowing that God's story has the best ending of all. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ Have you ever thought of your life as part of God's epic story? How could this truth give us comfort and purpose through good times and bad? (For more about God's story, see page 104.) _____

Since we have been united with him [Jesus] in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. Romans 6:5 (NLT)

THE LEAKY BATHTUB

READ: PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11; JAMES 1:19-20

I had just entered my first summer in Romania as a missionary, and one morning I discovered a stranger at my apartment door spouting words I didn't understand.

To give some background information, the city had recently turned off the hot water to our apartment buildings, and this lasted for a month over that season. Lack of hot water created a challenge when it came to taking showers. So, instead of using the shower, my roommate and I decided to run cold water from the faucet into the bathtub, and then pour in hot water we boiled on the stove to create a comfortable temperature for baths. It seemed to work—until my downstairs neighbor appeared banging angrily on our door.

I couldn't understand much of what he said except "water" and "down." Then I realized the water that was draining from our bathtub had been leaking from the pipes into his apartment below. Before, the shower must not have had the same effect since the slow stream of water dripped down the drain gradually. But a full bathtub being un-stoppered, sending gallons of water out all at once? I grasped how this might cause a problem. So, during the rest of that month, I would drain the tub throughout an entire day, pulling the plug out and then plunging it right back in over and over. It must have worked; the downstairs neighbor never returned.

To solve the problem of the leaky bathtub, I needed to take on a posture of humble listening. Jesus Himself listened to questions from His disciples, challenges from Pharisees, and cries from those longing to be healed—and He still listens to us today. When we trust in Jesus and all He's done to bring us into a relationship with God, He also empowers us to take on His humility. Even though Jesus had all the answers (He is God, after all) He still took time to listen and respond to people's needs. He humbled Himself even to the point of dying on the cross for us so He could meet our greatest need: to be rescued from sin and death. When we consider others' needs—as Jesus considers ours—we can show the loving humility of Christ. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ How is a listening posture also a Christlike posture? How could remembering that Jesus listens to us make it easier for us to listen to others? _____

🕯️ If what we're doing hurts others, God calls us to stop, listen, and carefully consider how to change what we've been doing. Who are trusted Christians in your life who could help you discern God's guidance as you navigate situations like these? _____

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.
Philippians 2:5 (NIV)*

MORE TO LIFE


READ: MATTHEW 6:25-34; PHILIPPIANS 3:7-21


Lots of things in life can feel important in the moment. You might worry about your grades. You might think you need the most fashionable clothes. Maybe you feel pressure to be the best athlete on your team. Maybe you want to learn to drive and get your license and a car as soon as you can...but what happens when things don't turn out like you'd hoped?


When your grades slip, when you don't have the money for all the things you want, when you don't perform well in your sport, when you don't have the independence you thought you'd have...you might start to worry. You might feel like you're not good enough.

When our circumstances leave us feeling disappointed and frustrated with life, what can we do? We can turn to Jesus. He sees our disappointments, and He grieves our losses with us. And He also reminds us that life is about so much more than all of that.

You don't have to have the nicest clothes to try to fit in. After all, true friends should accept you for who you are, not based on what you wear. And although it's good to do well in school, you don't have to get the best grades. Sports can be great, but winning isn't the most important thing either. Milestones like driving sometimes come with pressure, but you don't have to do everything in the timeframe anyone else thinks is right—you can go at your own pace.

God has given you life, and He invites you to live it with Him. Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, you can know the God who made the entire universe, and who made you specifically, and you can be part of the good work of His kingdom. There is so much more to this life than all the little things we find ourselves concerned with moment by moment. Things like grades and clothes are temporary, but God's kingdom is eternal. You can trust your life to Him and know it will be more meaningful and purposeful than you could have imagined.  *Bethany Acker*

 What kinds of things have made you feel disappointed or frustrated lately? Consider taking a moment to talk to God about it. He feels your hurts and grieves your losses alongside you. _____

 Especially when things don't seem to be going right, how could it be freeing to rely on God to give purpose and meaning to your life and to provide for all your needs? What might it look like for you to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness"? (Matthew 6:33; 22:36-40) _____

*"Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?"
Matthew 6:25b (CSB)*

LIGHTS IN THE SKY

READ: GENESIS 1:14-19; PSALM 33:6; ISAIAH 40:26

BOOM! POW! BANG! The thunderous echoes of a fireworks display ring out. The noise isn't always great, but fireworks sure are beautiful when they light up the night sky. Gasps of "ohh" and "ahh" can be heard as rockets whistle through the air and burst into umbrellas of brilliant, jewel-like sparks. The sky fills with many brightly colored lights, making the dark almost as light as day. And though fireworks shoot up high into the atmosphere, they don't hold a candle (pun intended) to the shining stars above. When God sees our fireworks, maybe He smiles and says, "Quite impressive, folks, but have you considered the lights I put in the sky? They can be seen all over the earth. And they don't die out in a matter of seconds."

When we look up at the heavens, we get a glimpse of just how huge and vast the universe is. What an awesome reminder of how great and powerful God is—and how much He loves us. He created the sun and moon and countless stars for His glory and pleasure, and also for us. He provided great spheres of fire and reflection so we could have lights in our sky, not just on festive days when fireworks illuminate the night, but every day.

The sun, moon, and stars—and everything else God created—remind us of the love of our Creator God. It's hard to fathom that the all-powerful Maker, who made the "starry host by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6), is the same God who became human and lived among us. His great love for us compelled Him to conquer sin and death so we could live with Him forever. And the only way to do this was by laying down His own life. Jesus, the Light of the world, was laid in the darkness of the grave—for us. But after three days, He rose again. And now Jesus sits enthroned over all creation. He directs the sun and moon and stars, and He is intimately involved in the details of our lives. He beckons us to put our trust in Him and experience "the inexpressible and glorious joy" of knowing the One who formed the stars—and formed us (1 Peter 1:8). So today, let's take a moment to behold Jesus's beautiful universe and be reminded of His immense love for us and for all of creation. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ Even though the universe is broken by sin and its effects, we can still see glimpses of God's goodness in what He has made, and we can also look forward to the day Jesus will return and make all things new. According to Romans 8:18-25, how does God's love impact creation? (If you want to dig deeper, read Psalms 119:73; 139:1-12; John 1:1-5; 8:12; Colossians 1:15-20.) _____

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Psalm 19:1 (NIV)*

INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

READ: MATTHEW 14:23; JOHN 15:5-9

I love God and value my relationship with Him, but I have periods in my life when I struggle to make time to focus on being with Him. I do really well when I have a lot of structure surrounding my own faith. This was great when I was in college and I had built-in daily chapels, church on Sunday, and a weekly Bible study with my dorm floor. After I graduated I lost some of that built-in structure, and now I find it more difficult to make time to focus on God's presence.

It can be helpful to think about my relationship with God like other relationships in my life. I love my friends, family, and husband, but spending quality time with them doesn't happen automatically. It takes intentional planning and time. It's similar with my relationship with God.

We see this truth in Scripture. Many times in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Jesus sought out quiet time to pray and speak to God the Father because He loves Him. Sometimes this involved getting up early in the morning or walking away from a crowd to climb up a mountain. Jesus also went to the temple to be with God's people and hear Scripture being read aloud. Even when Jesus was hanging on the cross, He cried out to the Father multiple times, communicating until the very end. And when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, God the Father sent us the Holy Spirit so He can be with us all the time, whether we're intentionally focusing on His presence or not. He loves us so much that He never leaves our side.

The way Jesus prioritized His relationship with the Father is a great reminder to me of the importance of spending time giving God my intentional focus. This time could be used in prayer, serving others, learning, spending time with God's people, tending to creation, or lots of other ways. But I know myself, and if I'm not purposefully setting aside time to focus on God's presence with me, that time gets gobbled up by something else in my life. Just like my other relationships, my relationship with God flourishes with intentional time, energy, and planning.

Remember, Jesus loves us, and He made the way to be with us always. He enables us to spend time focusing on His loving presence. And that's always time well spent. 🕯️ *Naomi Zylstra*

🕯️ If we know Jesus, He is always with us through the Holy Spirit. So, in every moment of our lives, we can be sensitive to His presence. Additionally, there are many ways we can set aside time to focus on His presence with us, including prayer, church, communion, music, time in nature, Bible studies, etc. What are some ways you like to focus on Jesus's presence? _____

[Jesus] went up into the hills by himself to pray. Matthew 14:23b (NLT)

WOVEN BY THE MAKER

READ: JEREMIAH 18:1-6; EZEKIEL 36:26; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

Tamora's orange eyes were wide with excitement. Today, Grandmother would teach her how to weave a sala basket, a rite of passage in her village on a planet in the Cloudina Galaxy. Tamora watched Grandmother's wrinkled purple hands lift a bucket filled with water and colorful qasab reeds out of the wash basin. "Watch carefully now," said Grandmother. She demonstrated how to bend the reeds and explained the ancient weaving pattern, more intricate than any Tamora had learned before. Soon Tamora was ready to begin her own basket.

"That's the way," Grandmother said after Tamora had completed several rows. Tamora beamed and then returned to weaving, stopping only now and then to ask Grandmother for help. After a while, Tamora said, "This reed is not bending well." She was holding the last one from the pile Grandmother had made when they began.

"Let me see." Grandmother inspected the blue reed. "This reed is too dry. You need to put it back in the water and get a different one. It's important to keep your reeds wet." After switching reeds, Tamora began weaving easily again. Grandmother smiled and leaned back. "When I weave with qasab reeds, I'm often reminded of what the Maker does for us." Tamora raised her eyebrows as Grandmother took a reed from the basin. With a twinkle in her eye, she continued, "We can all be like that dry, unbendable reed, stubbornly insisting on our own way instead of trusting our Maker to guide and shape us. But just like a basket weaver wets unbendable reeds to work with them, the Maker's Spirit softens our hearts in the waters of His love and sacrifice for us, making us humble and pliable. Then, He can form us into people who love well."

"The Maker sounds like a potter," said Tamora. "My friend Gamal was telling me that dry, hard clay can be made soft and moldable again by soaking it in water. Then the potter can shape it into something beautiful and purposeful."

"Indeed," said Grandmother. "Every time you look at your basket, you can remember the Maker's presence and love in your life. Because you and I belong to Him, let us be like damp reeds or soft clay, trusting Him to shape us." **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ If you know Jesus, how have you seen Him change and mold you? In what ways do you love God and other people more than when you began your journey with God? (Matthew 22:36-40) _____

...O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We all are formed by your hand. Isaiah 64:8 (NLT)

HOW DOES GOD SEE GENERATION Z?

READ: GENESIS 1:26-31; EPHESIANS 2:1-22

How does God see my generation?" It's a good question, and one we don't often think to ask. We hear a lot of talk about the different generations: what they're like, what their strengths and weaknesses are, how they're different from other generations, and on and on. The concept of generations is interesting. In our time, people generally separate us into different social categories based on which set of fifteen years we were born in, and therefore which significant events we've experienced in our lifetimes. Those of us who are currently teenagers or young adults are often considered "Generation Z."

In my experience, being part of Gen Z is hard. I often hear people from older generations talking about us as if we're a conundrum or a nuisance. But on the other hand, I'm also tempted to find fault with their generations. Sadly, as humans we have a tendency to put down people who are different from us, often as a way to try to make ourselves feel better. But this is not just unproductive, it's also unkind. Thankfully, there's a way out of this judging and finger-pointing.

The most helpful thing I've heard about my generation came from a woman at my church who was praying for me a few Sundays ago. She's part of Gen X, and she said, "Do you know how God sees Gen Z? As people made in His image." That declaration startled me. As her words sank into my heart, I began to feel relieved, calm, and hopeful. We are not a conundrum to God. We are not a nuisance. He made us on purpose, and He understands us completely—even when we don't understand ourselves. And He loves us, just as much as He loves every single generation that came before us, and every single generation that will come after us. His love is so great that He was willing to die for us so that we could be restored to relationship with Him. And He is working in our generation, drawing us close to Himself and empowering us to be part of the good work of His kingdom.

While thinking about people in terms of generations can sometimes be helpful as we look for ways to understand ourselves and those around us, I don't think that what generation we're part of is the most important thing about us. We need Jesus to save us just as desperately as the other generations do. And when Jesus returns and makes all things new, everyone who has put their trust in Him will be raised from their graves like He was, and we will live forever with Him in restored creation. Then, we will be in perfect community with God and with all our brothers and sisters in Christ, including those who were born thousands of years before us! We will finally understand each other and be able to enjoy one another freely—without shame or fear getting in the way.

Even as we look forward to this glorious day, we can catch glimpses of the restoration Jesus is bringing in our hearts and in our relationships here and now. As we rest in His love and kindness to us, we can see ourselves and everyone around us the way God sees us: as people made in His image, people He loves. 🗝

Hannah Howe

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (NLT)

🗝 How have you heard people talking about your generation? What things have been helpful, and what things have been unhelpful? _____

🗝 Why do you think we're often tempted to be resentful or overly critical of other generations? Consider taking a moment to talk to Jesus about this, confessing any sins that come to mind and asking for His help to see others as He sees them—and love them as He loves them. (It might be helpful to read Matthew 9:36.)

🗝 Sometimes, we can feel like our very identity is defined by what generation we were born into, but that's not how God sees us. He is the One who crafted us carefully and purposefully (Psalms 119:73; 139:13-17). And He sees us in light of what Jesus has done for us by dying on the cross and rising from the grave. In Jesus, we are totally forgiven and completely loved. So, especially when we are faced with cultural expectations and labels, both from people our age and people older and younger than us, why might it be important to take time to rest in the truths of what God says about us in His Word? _____

🗝 Consider taking some time now to reread today's Bible passages. How does God describe you? What does He say your identity is? _____



KETCHUP OR MUSTARD?

READ: MATTHEW 22:37-40; LUKE 6:43-45

What comes out when you squeeze a ketchup bottle? Ketchup, of course. And what comes out if you squeeze a mustard bottle? Mustard! Whatever is inside comes out.

And it's the same with us. How we react in a situation says a lot about what's going on in our hearts. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus says, "The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart." What we say—and how we say it—shows what's inside our hearts. When we're coming from a place of resting in God's love, what comes out of us will be good and wholesome, like patience and kindness. But when we're coming from a place of unhealed wounds and self-reliance, what comes out of us will be harsh and bitter.

The stresses of life have a way of squeezing reactions out of us. What comes out of your mouth if you're squeezed by something you don't like? What you say shows a little bit of what's in your heart. God calls us to use our words carefully to build each other up, not to tear down (Ephesians 4:29). So when we find ourselves saying things that hurt others, it's an important indicator that our hearts need some attention.

God has compassion on us, and He is eager to fill our hearts with His love (Romans 5:5). But when our hearts start overflowing, not with love but with unhealed hurt or harsh words, it's time to talk to Jesus about it. He can handle any emotion we're facing. He empathizes with us, and He always wants to help us. One of the primary ways He does this is by providing people in our lives—like therapists, friends, teachers, parents, pastors, etc.—who can help us when we're especially stuck, when bitter reactions keep coming out of us when we're under pressure.

The journey of healing and growing with Jesus is long and not always straightforward, but we can know that Jesus has promised to be with us every step of the way, gently healing our wounds and helping us grow to become more like Him. We can trust Him and rest in His love, no matter what. **✚** *A. W. Smith*

✚ Can you think of a time you were facing a tough situation but you were able to rest in Jesus's love through it? What about a time when it wasn't so easy to rest in His love? _____

✚ When you're feeling stuck in your reactions to tough situations, who are trusted people God has put in your life you could talk with—such as therapists, friends, teachers, parents, pastors, etc.? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. _____

"The mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart." Matthew 12:34b (CSB)

HALVES AND PIECES

READ: JEREMIAH 17:14; 30:16-18; PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

I'd been eating the cashews for several days before I stopped to ask why they seemed so small. Then I noticed the label on the canister: halves and pieces. I thought I'd bought the same kind of cashews I usually did—roasted and sprinkled with sea salt—but I hadn't paid attention to the entire label. Cashews are one of my favorite snacks, and I liked them no matter their size. The halves and pieces offered the same flavor as the whole ones. They were just as filling, just as savory, just as satisfying. Though they were broken, they had just as much goodness to offer.

Sometimes I've felt like those cashews—crushed to pieces. Difficult circumstances have a way of doing that. Trying our best but being turned down anyway, loving a person who doesn't love us in return, being passed over for an honor we believe we deserved...those situations can leave us feeling rejected, wondering, "What's wrong with ME?"

Perhaps you feel split in half because your parents are divorced, and you live divided between two different homes. Or perhaps you feel like a piece of you is missing because you're adopted, and even though you've become part of a loving family, maybe you wish you knew more about who your birth family is and why they couldn't care for you. These kinds of circumstances can make us question our value, our love-ability. We might feel less than whole.

Jesus knows we all have broken places, and He has declared that we are immeasurably valuable. God's love for us is so great that Jesus gave up His life for us on the cross and then rose from the grave so we could enter a relationship with Him. He came to heal us of our wounds and restore us to God our Creator. When we put our faith in Jesus, He forgives our sins and begins a good work in us. He saves us from sin and death completely. And when He returns to make all things new, He will heal us completely, too. Until that day, even though we still experience brokenness, we can rest knowing that God loves us just as we are, and He invites us to be part of the good work of restoration He is doing in and around us. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ What kinds of circumstances in life have made you feel less than whole? _____

🕯️ In what ways have you seen glimpses of God's healing work in and around you? If nothing comes to mind, you can ask God for this anytime. He loves to answer these prayers. _____

Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise. Jeremiah 17:14 (NIV)

NOT BY SIGHT

READ: JOHN 10:11, 27-30; HEBREWS 11:1-6; 1 PETER 1:8-13

Did you know kittens are born blind? They have to rely on their mother to care for them since they can't do anything on their own, but how do they know she'll be there for them if they can't see her? They use their other senses. Specifically, kittens rely on their sense of smell to let them know their mother is near.

As Christians, we live in a similar way. Like helpless newborn kittens, we rely on God to take care of us and be with us through everything we face. Even though we can't see God, we know He's there. In a way, we know this because of our other senses. Specifically, we can *hear* God because He speaks to us through His Word, the Bible (Romans 10:17). All throughout His Word, He tells us how much He loves us and He promises to be with us no matter what.

Ultimately, the Bible is the story of God's love for us, and the climax is when He reveals Himself in Jesus. He came and lived among us, fully God and fully human. He died for us and then rose again to beat sin and death. And He is returning one day to make all things new.

As we wait for that glorious day when we will finally see Jesus face-to-face, we can rest knowing that we are held by God, even though we can't see Him. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit reminds us of His promises and helps us rest in His love (John 14:26). Through the Holy Spirit, we can have faith in God, even when we can't see Him. Just like kittens know their mother is with them, even though they can't see her yet. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Consider taking a moment to read Matthew 28:20 and Romans 8:33-39. How could the promises in these passages remind us of God's love and presence when we go through difficult things? Do you have any favorite Bible passages that have helped you in tough times? _____

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)



NEVER CHANGING LORD

READ: HEBREWS 13:5-8; 1 JOHN 4:15

This world changes,
But You, my Lord, never change

The Lord who created the world
The Lord who told Noah to build an ark
You are the same Lord who lives in me today

The Lord who led the Israelites out of slavery
The Lord who gave us the commandments
You are the same Lord who lives in me today

The Lord who cares for the poor
The Lord who healed thousands
You are the same Lord who lives in me today

The Lord who died for my sins
The Lord who rose again
You are the same Lord who lives in me today

This world changes,
But You, my Lord, never change 🗝️ *Kimberly Brokish*

🗝️ Do you have a favorite story in the Bible? Just think about how the same God who breathed those words, who was present in that story, is the same God who is alive today! _____

🗝️ Once you've put your trust in Jesus—believing He died and rose again for you—God lives in you. As 1 John 4:15 says, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God." If you want to know more about putting your trust in Jesus, see page 104.

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

GOD'S TEMPLE

READ: EZEKIEL 40:1-19; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:16-17

Chapters 40-42 of the book of Ezekiel may not seem very interesting at first glance. All three chapters are a tour of a future temple. An angel led Ezekiel through this temple in a vision. There are many, many specific measurements included—enough that you may get bored. There is a measurement for everything in the temple, each room and each doorway. There are also specific details mentioned, like carvings of palm trees, cherubim, a lion's face, and a human face.

So, if they aren't very interesting chapters, why am I telling you about them? Well, because of a sentence in 2 Corinthians 6:16: "For we are the temple of the living God." There are other verses that say the same thing—that we are God's temple. Isn't that amazing? In the Old Testament, the temple was where God's presence dwelt with His people, and then His presence came fully when Jesus, God the Son, came and lived among us. In fact, Jesus even called Himself a temple when He predicted His own death and resurrection (John 2:19-22). Now, if we know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in us, so our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Not only that, but the Spirit unites us with other believers, building us together into His temple, the church (1 Peter 2:5). And someday Jesus will return to make the whole earth His temple—His dwelling place with His people (Revelation 21:1-5).

God loves us so much that Jesus came to die on the cross for us and rise from the dead so He could dwell with us and we could spend eternity with Him. And if He took the time to talk about the specific measurements of each room and doorway of the temple, how much more does He care about the details in our lives? Matthew 10:30 tells us that God knows how many hairs are on our heads! That sounds like a pretty specific detail for God to care about. He wants you to know that no detail about your life is too little for Him to care about. He wants you to know you can go to Him about every little detail of your life, and the big moments too. 📌 *Kimberly Brokish*

📌 How does it make you feel to know that God cares about all the details of your life? Consider taking a moment to talk to Him about any part of your life that comes to mind, big or small, good or bad...even though He already knows it all, He loves listening to everything you have to say. _____

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 1 Corinthians 3:16 (NIV)

WALKING TOGETHER

READ: ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12

There are times in life when our need for others becomes clear. If you try to take on a big project, you may quickly realize that you need to ask for help. When trying to learn something new, you probably know that you need to ask an expert for advice if you want to do it right.

We can think about following Jesus in a similar way. Like accomplishing a big project or learning a new skill, learning more about the gospel, the Bible, who God is, and how to walk in obedience to Him can feel overwhelming. None of us can do everything ourselves, and God knows this! He invites us to ask for help. We don't have to be ashamed to ask for help or advice. As Christians, we're meant to encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Sometimes the best thing any of us can do is seek advice from someone else. It's good to get a trusted Christian's opinion and learn from them. The Bible talks about this frequently in the book of Proverbs. For example, Proverbs 19:20 says "Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life." And Proverbs 12:15 says it even more strongly: "Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to others."

In addition to asking for advice, we can also ask for help doing the task before us. Like it says in Ecclesiastes 4:9, "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed." God has given all of us different gifts and abilities, and working together with someone who has different gifts from you can make the task easier—and the result better.

God graciously provides us with the help we need, often through other people. If you've put your trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, He has made you part of His people, the church. We can rely on one another and seek God together. We can pray and ask our loving God to guide us and help us know what to do and to give us the help we need.

So let's remember, it's great to get together with other Christians. We can learn a lot from each other as we encourage each other in our walks with Jesus. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 Who is a Christian in your life you've learned a lot from? Consider thanking this person and letting them know what they mean to you. If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future.

📖 Have you been able to encourage someone in their walk with Jesus? What was it like? _____

"For where two or three gather together as my followers, I [Jesus] am there among them."
Matthew 18:20 (NLT)

DECISION PARALYSIS

READ: 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-22; 1 PETER 5:6-11

We are faced with countless decisions every day. *What do I want for dinner? Should I read or play video games after work? Where do I go to college? Should I even go to college?* Some life decisions are bigger than others, and they require more thought too. I can usually decide what I want for dinner by the end of the night, but larger decisions take more time.

So how do I make the big decisions in life? **One** of the things I do (or try to do) early on is pray about the decision. Throughout the Bible, God invites us to bring our concerns to Him because He cares about what we're going through (1 Peter 5:7).

Jesus Himself would often take time alone to pray. Jesus is God the Son, and He lives in close relationship with God the Father. And because Jesus died and rose for us, everyone who puts their trust in Jesus can be in close relationship with God.

When I'm making decisions in my life, I can pray and ask God for His guidance on this decision. If I don't get any sort of clarity (which unfortunately happens often) I can also consult with the trusted Christian friends and family in my life, especially if they've lived through the decision I'm going to make. And whenever I make a decision, I can trust that I serve an infinite God who can draw good out of any bad situation (Romans 8:28). One of the most comforting things is that God wants the best for me, and He cares about all my problems and all the decisions I face. Even the ones as small as what to have for dinner. **📖 Naomi Zylstra**

📖 When we have a decision to make, how could it be comforting to know that we can bring all our concerns to the One who loves us so much He was willing to give up His own life for us? _____

📖 Jesus will return one day and make all things new, and in the meantime He promises to be with us no matter what. God's will for us is part of His great plan to renew heaven and earth at Jesus's return. Day by day, He guides us through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). Who are trusted Christians you can talk to when you're facing a tough decision? _____

Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. 1 Peter 5:7 (NLT)



THE DIME THAT SAVED THE DAY

READ: PSALM 145:8-16; MATTHEW 6:25-33; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-20

One year as summer approached, I needed to buy some shorts. With my budget in mind, I browsed at a second-hand shop and found two pairs in the right size. Including a discount, I could pay for the clothes using a gift card I'd received. It would cover the entire cost...except for eleven cents. But I only had one penny in my wallet.

So, what did I do? Did I leave the store empty-handed? Nope. Near the cash register, I noticed lots of loose change in a "leave a penny, take a penny" bucket. Right on top of the pile of coins, I found a dime and then finished paying for the clothes I'd picked out. Even before I needed to use that dime, it was there. Some generous stranger had dropped it in the coin container before I arrived at the shop, not realizing how helpful it would be at just the right time.

The kind person who tossed the dime into the canister for another shopper didn't know I would be the one to need those few cents, but God, the all-knowing Lord, always knows what we need. Before we ask, before we even recognize our own needs, He is working to provide for us.

And He has already provided for the greatest need any of us have: to be rescued from sin and death. Because Jesus came, we can have a relationship with God through trusting in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Then, not only do we have the sure hope of being raised from the dead to live with Him forever, but we can also approach God anytime to ask for His help and provision—just as a trusting child approaches a caring father. We can lean on God for all we need because He loves us. What an amazing invitation to come to the Father who knows all our needs and cares about each one. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ One of the primary ways God provides for His people, is through His people! Can you think of a time someone helped meet your tangible needs? What was it like? _____

🕯️ God cares about all our needs, but He doesn't promise we'll never experience hardship. Jesus said we *will* have trouble, but He also promised to be with us through it all, and to return one day and make all things new; then lack will be replaced with abundance (John 16:33; Matthew 28:20; Revelation 21:1-5). As we wait for this day, He comforts us with His presence and strengthens us to endure in times of plenty and times of lack. How could these promises give us hope? _____

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

NIGHTLY ROUTINES

READ: PSALM 4:8; MATTHEW 11:28-30; PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

The sound of white noise as we lay down to sleep can give us comfort and cover up distracting sounds that might keep us awake. A fan going while we rest can help us feel comfortable and breathe easier. Some of us have a particular pillow we need to sleep, and some of us can only sleep in our own beds. There are things we gather and routines we go through to get to sleep...and intentional time with God can also be part of those routines.

If we know Jesus, God is always present with us through the Holy Spirit, and getting ready for bed can be a great time to focus on His presence. He loves us so much that Jesus died and rose again to be with us. So, before we go to bed we can spend time telling our incredible, loving God about our day, thanking Him for the blessings He gave us, bringing Him any requests we have, and sharing any hurts we experienced with Him and receiving His compassion.

We can cry out to God when we're laying down to sleep and we're feeling anxious, and we can also talk to Him when we're feeling peaceful. We can get in the routine of talking to Him each night and sharing our problems with Him before we sleep. And if we wake up in the night terrified because of a nightmare, we can turn to Him for comfort.

God goes with us during the day, and He's also right there with us as we start to prepare for bed and as we lay down and close our eyes. Let Him be involved in your nighttime routine, and rest in His presence as you drift off to sleep. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 What routines do you follow before you go to sleep at night? There are lots of different ways we can incorporate intentional time focusing on God's presence into our routines. Some people like to put a note with a Bible verse on their bathroom mirror so they see it when they're brushing their teeth. Some people like to kneel by their bed to pray, and some like to write down things they're thankful for from that day. You can also look back through your day and ask God to show you His presence with you during it. If you're not sure what routines you'd like to try incorporating into your bedtime routine, who are trusted Christians you could talk to about it? _____

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

*I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.
Psalm 16:7 (NIV)*

DIFFERENT, BUT ALIKE

READ: GENESIS 1:27; 1 JOHN 4:7-19

You probably already know that snowflakes are remarkably unique from one another. And the reason each snowflake has a one-of-a-kind crystal structure is because every developing flake experiences slightly different atmospheric conditions as it falls from the sky to the ground. But have you ever thought about what they have in common? Even with all their differences, each snowflake is made of frozen water and has six points.

It's like that with people too. No two people are exactly the same or have the same experiences, but we often forget that we're also alike in many ways. People from different parts of the world have their own languages and customs, but deep down we all have the same feelings and desires. We all want to feel loved and accepted and valued.

Another thing all people have in common? We're all created in God's image, and He loves us all so much He sent His Son, Jesus, to live among us, die for us, and rise again from the dead so that everyone who trusts in Him could live with God forever. And one day, Jesus will return to make all things new, free from sin and death. As Christians, we are now God's children, we are forgiven and clean as fresh snow (Isaiah 1:18), and we "are being transformed into his [Jesus's] image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). God calls us to share His love with others—even those who seem different—because we all have the same need for Him. Through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to love others as God loves us, accept others as God accepts us, and value others as God values us (Matthew 10:29-31; John 13:34; Romans 15:7; 1 John 4:19).

So, as we look at snowflakes, we can remember that Jesus made each snowflake, and He made each of us. He calls us to enjoy our beautiful differences. And as we rest in His great love for us, we can show that same love to everyone we encounter. ❧ *A. W. Smith*

❧ Humans are remarkably diverse and yet have so much in common. What are some differences between you and your friends and family? What are some similarities? Consider taking some time to thank God for creating such an amazing world with so many different types of people! _____

❧ Today, how could you show Jesus's love to someone who is different from you? How could remembering what we have in common with all people help us walk in love toward one another? _____

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:11 (NIV)

OUR LABOR IN THE LORD

READ: MATTHEW 11:25-30; MARK 12:29-31; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:58; GALATIANS 6:9

I walked with determination down the hallway. *Maybe this time will be different*, I thought, knocking on the classroom door.

At the beginning of the year, I'd volunteered to mentor a second grader through a program helping youth with behavioral concerns. Once a week, I arrived at the school during my lunch break to spend time with "Justin" (not his real name) and show him some undivided, positive attention. I embraced this opportunity as a chance to connect with a child needing love.

Justin, however, did *not* embrace this opportunity. Each time I entered his class, he rolled his eyes and slumped to the little room where we sat to play games. For nine months, I met with Justin weekly, and his walls never came down. I understood he needed unconditional love; I just believed he didn't want it from me.

When we experience Jesus's unconditional love for us, we naturally want to share it with others. God's never-ending, always-pursuing, never-giving-up love was put on full display at Jesus's death and resurrection. When we wanted nothing to do with God, He made the way for us to be in relationship with Him by giving up His own life for ours (Romans 5:10). His love changes us and transforms us so that we can love God and others. Yet, as followers of Jesus seeking to obey His command to love our neighbors as ourselves, sometimes we wonder, "Does this matter? Does all my work count for anything?"

Not only does Jesus invite us to step out in faith and trust Him with the results, He also gives us encouragement when our faith feels weak. Jesus invites us to bring our weariness and burdens to Him, our great burden-bearer (Psalm 68:19). He understands we'll face discouragement in doing good work (whether it's mentoring a struggling eight-year-old or working our hardest at school), and He assures us that He is with us and He is at work even when we don't see it. We may not see the outcomes we expected to, but we can trust God with our obedience. After all, He promises us that our labor in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). *✠ Allison Wilson Lee*

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)

- 🔑 Have you ever felt worn out while trying to love your neighbor? Jesus understands, and He is with you. Remember, the results of your work aren't up to you. They are not on your shoulders. Jesus is the One who brings about change in people's hearts. He is at work in you, and He is at work through you. Consider taking a moment now to pray for a neighbor you're trying to love. _____
- 🔑 Some days, we're like the author of this story—giving love and help. Other days, we're like Justin—the one receiving the love and help. We're all in need of love, and we're all in need of help, even when we don't want it. So, God gave us community in His family, the church. Through the church, we can give and receive God's love, uplifting each other and being uplifted. What are some ways you've seen this play out in your life? If nothing comes to mind, you can ask God to help you notice ways He is inviting you to give and receive love and help as you live life alongside fellow Christians. _____



DOES GOD CARE ABOUT EVIL?

READ: ISAIAH 61:8; JEREMIAH 22:3; MATTHEW 23:23

It's discouraging to see so much evil in the world. Evil and sin have been a part of the world for a long time, but as I get older, I notice it more than when I was a kid. I hear news about corruption, poverty, or health crises...and it can really get me down.

It can be easy to see all this evil and either choose not to believe there's a God, or to think that God doesn't care—just look at how bad the world is. But Scripture tells me that God does care. He hates evil. It breaks His heart to see His creation suffering, and one day He's going to get rid of all evil permanently.

I've spent a little time in some of the minor prophet books of the Bible recently, and those books frequently show how vehemently opposed God is to evil. God despises evil and promises to bring down these ancient empires that were built on greed and oppression (Nahum 2). Through the prophets, God foretells the justice He will bring and the restoration that will come after.

Part of this restoration has already happened through Jesus Christ. After Jesus defeated sin and death and evil through His own death and resurrection, our relationship with God was righted. Our sin was paid for, and we were able to be accepted into God's family. And one day, God's justice will come in full, and He will right all wrongs and rid the world of all evil, and our struggle with sin will finally be over.

So, it's not a question of "Does God care?" anymore. With the knowledge of Scripture, now it's a question of "When will God's justice come in full?" And even as we wait for the day Jesus will come again, we can participate in God's kingdom here and now, acting in love and justice with confident hope for the future. **✎** *Naomi Zylstra*

✎ Can you think of a time you felt discouraged when you saw evil in the world—either on the news, in your community, or in your own life? Jesus weeps with you. You can bring these feelings to Him in prayer anytime. _____

✎ What opportunities and skills has God given you to pursue justice right where you are, at this time of your life? Who are trusted Christians you can talk to about this? _____

*The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.
Psalm 33:5 (NIV)*

IN GOD'S EMBRACE

READ: ISAIAH 41:10-14; 49:14-16; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11

I saw a young child get off a school bus today—
and go right into the waiting embrace of his mom.

As she straightened up, he wrapped his arms around her neck, resting his head against her shoulder. I wondered if something had happened at school today, or if maybe he was just tired from being gone from home for several hours. It made me think of how God invites us to go to Him whenever we feel like that little boy, whenever we need someone's arms to rest in.



This broken world we live in can be a scary place. When the darkness around us makes us long for an escape, we can always go to the arms of God and receive comfort. He is “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). God sees everything we’re going through, and He longs for us to be with Him. That’s why Jesus came—He died for us and rose from the grave so that He could be with us forever.

Once you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you can know that, no matter what, God will hold you. You don’t have to face anything alone. God is waiting, ready to be there for you.

When life in this broken world just makes you tired, when you can’t go on in your own strength any longer, you can go to God. He is your compassionate Father who will carry you. Like the little boy going from the bus to the arms of his mom, you can go from a busy and tiring day to the arms of God—and rest secure in His embrace. 🕯️ *Emily Acker*

- 🕯️ Jesus is Immanuel, which literally means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). If you’ve put your trust in Jesus, you have full access to God, and nothing can separate you from His love (John 10:11, 27-30; Romans 8:35-39; Hebrews 4:14-16). If you want to know more about what it means to put your trust in Jesus, check out page 104.
- 🕯️ What kinds of things in our broken world make you feel worn out or long for an escape? How could it be helpful to remember that God is with us in the midst of the brokenness, and that Jesus will one day return to raise us from the dead and make all things new—free from sin and death and evil and pain? (Revelation 21:1-5) _____

“For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.” Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)


CALLING OUT

READ: PSALMS 27:7-14; 33:20-22

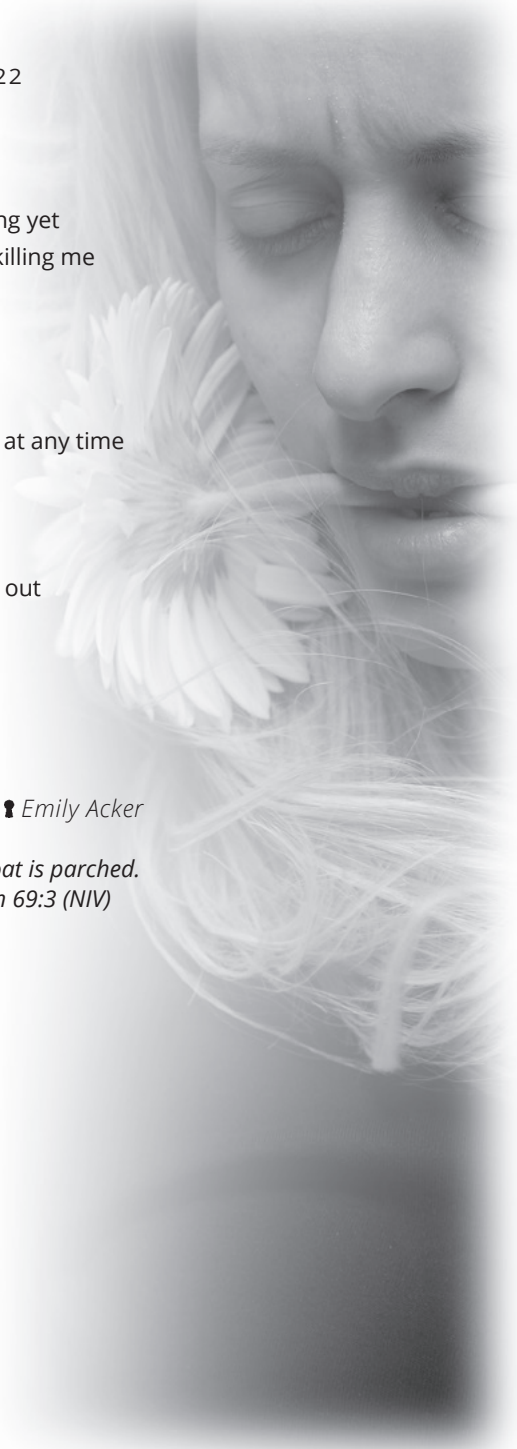
I keep calling out, God
Even though I am tired
Even though I don't see You working yet
Even though this life seems to be killing me

I keep calling out, God
Because You are my only hope
Because You can bring me peace
Because You can move into action at any time

I keep calling out, God
And my body is tired
And my throat doesn't want to call out
And I feel ready to just give up

I keep calling out, God
Please answer me
Please give me peace
Please reach down and rescue me  *Emily Acker*

*I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched.
My eyes fail, looking for my God. Psalm 69:3 (NIV)*



- 🔑 Today's poem is written in the style of a lament psalm. Have you ever felt like you just kept crying out to God without experiencing any comfort? We all go through times like these, but God does not abandon us. His presence with us gives us hope we can cling to no matter what. Can you remember what (or who) God provided to help you through that difficult time in your life? Consider taking a moment to thank Him for this.
-
- 🔑 Does today's poem express how you're feeling right now? God is right there with you. He knows your hurts, and He doesn't condemn you (Romans 8:1). He feels your pain and He weeps with you. Consider taking some time to bring your pain to God, like the author does. If you feel like you can't even pray right now, who is a trusted Christian in your life who can help you bring your pain to God? By leaning on God's grace and the people He has placed around you, you can begin to heal. These feelings won't last forever, but Jesus's love will. And one day, He will return to make all things new. Because Jesus died and rose from the grave, everyone who trusts in Him can look forward to the day He will put an end to death and sin and brokenness permanently. Jesus is the ultimate source of our hope, a hope that endures even in the most difficult times.
-
- 🔑 This poem mentions feeling ready to give up. If you or someone you know is experiencing feelings of hopelessness or suicidal thoughts, tell a trusted adult right away.* One important way God brings healing is through medical and mental health professionals and biblical counseling. The path to healing can be long and sometimes painful, but Jesus will walk every step with you. If you feel like you can't reach out to others because you are a burden, know that this is a lie from the pit of hell. The enemy wants to isolate us from community, but God's truth is so much more powerful than the enemy's lies. The truth is this: you are made in God's glorious image, and for that reason you are beloved and incomparably valuable, and there is nothing you can do to change that. You are worth people's time, attention, and care—even when the people around you don't act like it. You can know that you are so precious to God because He sent Jesus to give you new life so that you could live in loving relationship with Him. Jesus did this by dying and rising again. You are an important part of His kingdom, and nothing, nothing, NOTHING can ever separate you from God's love (Romans 8:39).
- 🔑 *You can call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988. You can also talk with someone via web chat (988lifeline.org/chat). If your situation is potentially life-threatening, call 911 (or the emergency number for your area) or go to the local hospital emergency room right away.
- 🔑 *If you need someone to talk to but are not in need of immediate help, you can 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.

KNOWN AND LOVED

READ: PSALM 139

Have you ever had a moment when you realized that someone really knows you? I had a moment like this with my housemate recently, and it made me feel so loved.

I had been feeling overwhelmed and depressed for a few days. My husband took our kids to run some errands so I could get some time to finish up my work for the week and do something restful. I sat on my bed, trying to figure out how best to plan my day. *Should I make breakfast and eat it here, or go to a coffee shop to get breakfast while I work?* I tried to get my sluggish, exhausted brain to think through the options. I don't make decisions quickly in the best of times, and I operate even more slowly when I'm not feeling great.

My housemate, Jenn, knocked on the bedroom door and told me she was going to pick up some breakfast at a nearby fast-food restaurant and asked if I wanted any. This very kind offer meant that I now had a third option to consider. I mumbled something about not being sure, and she quickly said, "I'll give you a minute to think about it," and walked away. I smiled internally and thought, *She knows me.* Jenn has been my friend for over a decade, and she knew that I needed a moment by myself to think things through. A minute or two later I walked out and accepted her offer.

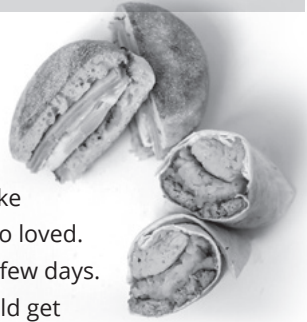
Little moments like these remind me of how God knows us. He knows the very hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:29-30). He knows how we operate. He knows our good days and our bad days. He knows exactly what we need. And He loves us.

Being known can be a scary thing. But not with God. Because He won't ever use that knowledge to hurt us. Instead, He draws us ever closer to Himself. Jesus died and rose again to make the way for us to be with Him. And to be known by a God like that is the best thing I can imagine. **✎** *Taylor Eising*

✎ Can you think of a time when you've felt known? What was it like? _____

✎ How could it be comforting to know that God knows you and loves you? _____

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. Psalm 139:1 (NLT)




HOW HAVE YOU SEEN GOD WORK?


READ: JOHN 4:1-42

When God amazes us, sharing our story with others can make a real difference. In John 4, we see how Jesus spent time with a Samaritan woman at the well near Samaria. He talked to her about God and also about her life, her husbands, the choices she had made...and about who He was. This woman was surprised at all Jesus knew about her, and when He said He was the Messiah they'd all been waiting for, she went out and told others about Him, saying "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?" (verse 29).


Because of what she shared, many people met Jesus and believed in Him; they said, "Now we believe, not just because of what you told us, but because we have heard him ourselves. Now we know that he is indeed the Savior of the world" (verses 41-42).

This woman was someone who probably didn't have the best standing in her community. Because of the rejection she would've faced, she probably hadn't spoken out or shared stories from her life before. When she told others about Jesus, though, people who heard her story wanted to meet Jesus for themselves.

When we share about the ways we've seen God work, we can encourage both fellow believers and those who don't know Jesus yet. Our stories can help lead people to Jesus and invite those who already know Him to go deeper in their relationship with Him. If there's something God has done in your life that has left you in awe, why not tell others about it? Who knows if your story might encourage those around you to go and meet Jesus for themselves.  *Emily Acker*

 Can you think of any ways God has worked in your life—any ways He has revealed how good He is or how much He cares about you? If nothing comes to mind, you can ask God to help you notice what He's been doing in and around you. He delights in answering these prayers. _____

 What could others gain through hearing about the ways you've seen God working in your life? And what could you gain by listening to others? _____

 The biggest way God has worked in any of our lives is by saving us through Jesus's death and resurrection—and this amazing story is always worth telling! If you want to know more about this good news, check out page 104.

*Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he did for me.
Psalm 66:16 (NLT)*

EVERLASTING CANDLES

READ: MATTHEW 5:14-16; ROMANS 8:35-39

Picture this. The room is dark, and you blink as your eyes adjust to the light created by the glowing candles on top of a birthday cake. “Okay, make a wish and blow the candles out,” your friend says. You nod, close your eyes, and blow out the candles. But when you reach for the cake knife, you notice something strange. Every candle on your cake has started burning again. So, you take a deep breath and try a second time. Once again, all the flames disappear, but one by one the candles spark, and soon they’re burning again.

What’s going on? You look at your friend, who’s grinning from ear to ear. You roll your eyes as you realize your friends put trick candles on your cake! These special candles are made to relight themselves, no matter how many times you blow them out.

In a way, Christians are kind of like these everlasting candles. When we know Jesus as our Savior, His light glows within us. No matter how hard our broken world tries to blow out our lights, Jesus never lets the powers of darkness succeed. Because Jesus has defeated death and sin and evil by dying on the cross and rising from the grave, everyone who believes in Him has the Holy Spirit living inside us, and God’s presence can never be removed from us (Acts 2:1-24). Even death cannot separate us from God’s love! As we encounter challenges in our broken world, Jesus is right there with us, helping us trust in Him and show others His love. No matter how dark things may get, He empowers us to shine brightly for Him.

So today, may we let the light of Jesus shine in our lives. We’re free to show His love in our words and actions, knowing that Jesus won’t let anything separate us from His love. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

- 🕯️ Can you think of a time you saw Jesus’s light shining through others? What was that like? _____

- 🕯️ What are some ways you could show Jesus’s love to the people around you today? _____

- 🕯️ How can we know that we’re secure in Jesus’s love? (Hint: look at Romans 8.) _____

Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. Philippians 2:15b (NLT)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

READ: GENESIS 1:27; PSALM 139:13-18

I'm one of those people who likes to make a big deal out of birthdays. Whenever it's someone else's birthday, I try to at least send a happy birthday text, or get a gift, or even throw a party. When it comes to my own birthday, I always try to have a fun day planned. I never understood why people would hide or brush off their birthdays. Your birthday is the day that God knew you would take your first breaths!



God watched over you as you grew in your mom's womb. God knew what color eyes you would have, how tall you would be, and what your first word would be. Psalm 139 says that God knit us together. I love thinking about that image. I think of God hunched over, focused on pulling together the threads of your life to form all the different aspects of who you are.

God loved you before you were born, and He still loves the person you are today. His love for you is so great that He sent Jesus to sacrifice His life for you and become your Redeemer so you could be adopted into God's family. And even though Jesus's sacrifice and miraculous resurrection happened long before you were born, it was still a sacrifice meant for you.

And that's why I like to make a big deal out of birthdays. Because each person is so unique and there's no one just like them. Each person is loved so deeply by God, and each life is worth being celebrated. 📌 *Naomi Zylstra*

📌 Do you like your birthday? Why or why not? _____

📌 What's one thing you like about yourself? Consider taking a moment to imagine God creating this aspect of you carefully and purposefully, and thank Him for making you this way! _____

📌 What are some ways we can show honor and value to the people we come in contact with, whether it's their birthday or not? _____

*For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb.
Psalm 139:13 (WEB)*

SPACE FOR SALE

READ: ISAIAH 33:5-6; MATTHEW 6:19-34; 1 TIMOTHY 6:17-19

Kellen knew that asteroid mining was a risky business. There were hazardous pockets of gas and metals too tough for the drill. For Kellen, though, the money to be made was worth the work. The material in this asteroid alone would fuel his entire home planet for a year. His share would be enough to buy his own mining gear, then he could really start making some cash. Lost in thought, Kellen was startled by the blinking warning light on his monitor, indicating someone had hit a gas pocket. With enough pressure, the entire asteroid could potentially explode—with them on it.

Kellen heard his boss shout through the commlink, “We need to evacuate now! This is an emergency. All personnel proceed to your designated areas and secure yourself for an emergency departure!” Kellen pressed a button and his entire drill, with him inside, detached from the asteroid, rocket thrusters launching him back to the main shuttle where he could see dozens of other drill ships also loading up for a speedy getaway.

A moment later Kellen felt bits of asteroid rattle his small compartment rather undramatically. As the main carrier raced away, Kellen took a glance on his monitor to see the asteroid, worth trillions, explode in a flash of light and space dust. All of his dreams, gone in an instant.

Kellen tried to relax as the boss started roll call. But when they got to Freya’s ID number, the commlink was silent. Kellen felt his stomach drop. Freya was a good pilot, she had to have made it off the asteroid in time. But there was a chance...Kellen held his breath as he heard the boss call out her number a second, then a third time. No response. Then, there was a crackling sound, and a patchy voice said, “Docked... com damaged...I’m alright.”

Kellen exhaled with a shudder. As he looked back at the field of debris, he realized Freya’s life was worth more than that—worth more than all the asteroids in the galaxy combined. He remembered something his mother had said, back on his home planet on the Illyrian system. How God treasured and desired and loved him...far more than anyone could desire an asteroid. How God’s love compelled Him to take on human flesh and die—for him. And then, to rise again with a promise to put an end to death and evil, all that’s wrong with the world.

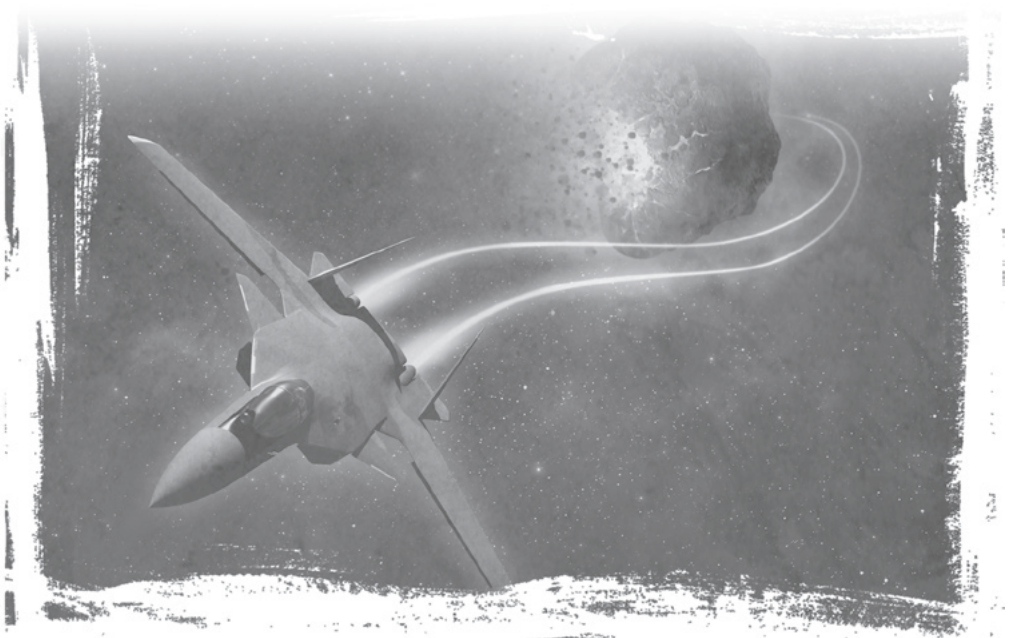
Thank you God, he whispered. Help me see as You see. Loving You, and the people you’ve made, is worth more than anything that could be bought. Help me lean on You and remember what’s truly worthwhile. 🕯 Peter J. McDonough

*“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”
Matthew 6:26 (NIV)*

- 🔑 In today's allegorical story, Kellen realizes that true wealth comes from God, not the world's sin-broken system. In what ways have you seen how pursuing things—like money, success, possessions, or experiences—can get in the way of pursuing the true riches of loving God and the people He has made? (Matthew 22:36-40) _____

- 🔑 Human life is sacred because we are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). God showed how much we are worth to Him—how much He treasures and desires and loves us—when Jesus, God the Son, willingly gave up His life for ours on the cross. Then He rose from the grave, defeating sin and death so we could be forgiven and live with Him forever. How can looking at Jesus, and remembering what He has done for us, help us discern what is truly valuable in life? (Hebrews 12:1-3) _____

- 🔑 Proverbs 10:2 says, "Ill-gotten treasures have no lasting value, but righteousness delivers from death." Jesus is our righteousness, and He is the only One who can deliver us from death (1 Corinthians 1:30). But, even as Christians, sometimes we forget that the only thing that will truly satisfy us is knowing God through Jesus. Until Jesus returns and makes all things new, we will all struggle with greed and the fear of scarcity, but God invites us to rely on Him for everything we need, even when following Him means giving up material things. God doesn't expect us to be able to do this on our own; rather, His love frees us from fear and every kind of selfishness (1 John 4:18). Is there something you're holding onto in your life that takes the place of God's true wealth, the riches that can only be found in Him? What would happen if you let go? Consider taking a moment to talk to God about this...you can be totally honest with Him about your desires, fears, frustrations, and hopes. He is eager to help you and guide you into "the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19). In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians in your life you could talk to about this? _____



RICH INDEED

READ: PSALM 63; JOHN 14:1-6; PHILIPPIANS 3:7-9

A lot of people think money is what makes you rich, but let's take a closer look at the concept of riches. No matter how much money a person has, it never feels like enough. Just ask any wealthy person! Money won't bring true satisfaction—and it doesn't last. We can't take wealth or status with us when we die.

The reality is, what makes us rich—is love. The true and unending love of God. Humans were created to be in relationship with God, but humanity rejected Him to go our own way, and so we're left searching for something to fill the deep longing that only God can fill. Yet, the good news is that God extends His love to us, even though we could never earn it, even though we're all greedy and self-centered and, well, sinful. He loves us so much that Jesus—God in flesh—died and rose again to beat sin and death so that we could be with Him. Now, everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is forgiven and welcomed into rich and satisfying relationship with God.

And as Christians we also get to look forward to the day Jesus will return and we will live forever with Him and His people on the new heavens and new earth. Then we will enjoy the lavish abundance of everything we could ever desire, and nothing will be tainted by the suffering and confusion caused by sin. And even as we wait for this day, Jesus fills our hearts with His love through the Holy Spirit. He also places us in His family and blesses us with the love of our brothers and sisters who also know Jesus. And He transforms even our suffering into hope because He is just that good (Romans 5:1-8). Yes, in Christ, we are very rich indeed.

So, when we find ourselves craving earthly riches like money or success, let's run to Jesus instead. He's eager to remind us that these riches aren't the things that really count. A relationship with Jesus is more valuable than any treasure this world has to offer. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Earthly wealth doesn't offer true satisfaction, and it can often cloud our vision so that we love money or status more than God or our neighbors. As Christians, how does Jesus help us view the things we have on earth in light of the greater riches we have as members of Jesus's family? _____

✦ To learn more about what it means to know Jesus, check out page 104.

"And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?" Matthew 16:26 (NLT)

SPIRITUAL SCAMMERS

READ: 1 JOHN 2:1-29

Recently, I was buying some pizzas, and when I handed the cashier my money she did something that made me freeze: she held up the dollar bills to the light, examining them closely. She was trying to see if they were authentic. At that moment, I thought to myself, *Oh great. Did I get stuck with a counterfeit bill?* Fortunately they were not counterfeits, and I got my pizza and went on my way. But counterfeit money is a real problem for businesses, and so cashiers are often trained to recognize fake money.

Do you know how they do it? They don't study fake money. Instead, they learn all about real money. When the Federal Reserve prints dollar bills, they add all kinds of markings that authenticate the true value. That way, no matter how a counterfeit bill is made, a cashier can tell what's real and what's not. When you know what to look for, you can spot a fake a mile away.

In 1 John 2:18-25, John is warning us about spiritual scammers who pass on counterfeit gospel messages. They use spiritual language and sound very religious, but if you listen closely, what they're preaching is a false gospel—such as a gospel of getting lots of money, or treating our neighbors in a fearful and hate-filled way, or trying to follow God's commands legalistically rather than relying on grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). But the real gospel, which John often calls "the truth," is purely the good news of who Jesus is and what He has done for us.

So how do we avoid getting tricked by counterfeit gospels and falling for their lies? John says the best defense is to "remain in fellowship with Christ" (1 John 2:27). We could never study every single lie—there are too many of them! Instead, Jesus calls us to abide in Him (John 15:1-17). By faith, we can rest in the good news of Jesus's death and resurrection, even as we seek to understand the truth of God's Word. Throughout our lives, He will guide us through His Spirit, His Word, and His people, helping us discern what is true and what is false. When we understand the true gospel, we can better defend ourselves against false gospels. As we abide in Jesus, we will be prepared to face whatever messages are thrown at us. 📖 *Jacob Bier*

📌 How can looking at the true gospel help us recognize fakes? (More on the gospel on page 104.) _____

But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true—it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ. 1 John 2:27 (NLT)

QUESTIONING AUTHORITY

READ: MATTHEW 11:25–12:14; 18:1-17; JAMES 3:1-2

I'm a big rule-follower, but I was more so when I was younger. I really didn't want to make waves or question anyone who was in charge. It's something I'm still not really comfortable with to this day. But sometimes the rules we're asked to follow do not align with our beliefs. And this is where life can get complicated.

The same thing happened to Jesus. A group of religious leaders called the Pharisees tried to enforce rules about what people could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. God commanded His people to rest on the Sabbath, which is the seventh day of the week (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:15), but the Pharisees extended God's command to include more rules.

When Jesus broke these additional rules by healing on the Sabbath and by letting His disciples pick grain, and then declared that He is Lord of the Sabbath, the Pharisees were upset and eventually plotted to kill Jesus. But Jesus corrected the Pharisees' ideas about the Sabbath and explained not only the meaning behind God's law, but also how He came to give us rest in Himself. The rules the Pharisees were following, and telling everyone else to follow, did not necessarily align with what God's Word was actually teaching, so Jesus called these people out.

Calling out figures of authority isn't an easy role to play. For many people in the Bible, speaking out against authority led to harm or even death. Remember, the Pharisees were primarily the ones who were plotting to have Jesus crucified. But when people misrepresent the good news of Jesus, preaching injustice or evil, we are not supposed to stay silent in the face of oppression. We can speak out with courage and humility, knowing that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead lives in us (Romans 8:11). Standing up to injustice will look different for everyone. It may not be as dramatic as yelling or flipping tables (Matthew 21:12-17), but it could mean sending an email about a concern you've noticed. And as we do this, we can rest in the good news of Jesus—the One who died and rose again to free us from trying to keep the law in our own strength—and we can invite others into this rest, too. 📖 *Naomi Zylstra*

📖 Sometimes, those in authority teach things that do not align with God's Word or help their hearers rest in Jesus. If they're seeking to follow Jesus, they will want to be corrected so they can repent and grow. If you had a concern about someone's leadership, how would you bring it up? Who is a trusted adult you could talk to if you experienced something unsettling? _____

"Come to me...and I [Jesus] will give you rest." Matthew 11:28 (NIV)

ROCK TUMBLER FRIENDSHIPS

READ: ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12; JOHN 15:9-17

I used to own a rock tumbler, a machine that takes ordinary rocks and transforms them into polished, gemlike stones. The process would last for days, and the tumbler was so loud I had to keep it in the garage! After I put rocks and grit into the barrel with some water, the machine would spin everything around so the rocks scraped against each other, slowly grinding away the edges. After all the grinding and polishing, I was left with smooth, shiny, colorful stones.

Tumbling rocks takes grit and perseverance, and it isn't a process that can be rushed, but it's worth it—a lot like friendship. Building friendships is hard work for me. I'm an introvert, and talking to new people doesn't come naturally to me.

For all of us, it takes time and effort to get to know someone well, and it can be hard to trust new people. But friendship also offers opportunities to love and support others, find fun and encouragement, and, especially, learn from each other. Like how the rocks in the rock tumbler scrape against each other and become polished in the process, friends can strengthen each other by pointing out each other's struggles and helping them grow. Proverbs 27:17 says it this way: "As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."

Even if you struggle to make friends, know that you have a friend in Jesus. He is the King and Creator of the universe, but He knows and cares for us on a deeply personal level. He is a faithful friend who is closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). When Jesus came and lived among us, He showed us what it truly means to be a loving friend (1 John 4:11). He loves us so much that even when we were living in sin and rebellion against Him, He gave up His life for us (Romans 5:8). Then He rose from the grave, defeating sin and death so we could be forgiven and become friends of God. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, His Spirit lives in us, helping us grow in our relationship with God—and in our relationships with each other. Friendship can be difficult, but it is a beautiful treasure. 📖 *Abby Ciona*

📖 Good friendships involve conflict all the way through, not just at the beginning. We are different people, and we'll disagree about things until Jesus returns and makes all things new. Do you know anyone who loves others well, even in times of disagreement and conflict? _____

📖 As we seek to love others well, how could it be helpful to remember the way Jesus loves us, even when we get frustrated with Him and don't listen to Him? _____

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend. Proverbs 27:17 (NLT)

UNSHAKEN

READ: PSALM 62; MATTHEW 7:24-29; JOHN 16:31-33

Perhaps you know how it feels to seek shelter from the storms of life. I know I do. We often look for safety and security in anything we can, like sailors trying to cast an anchor. But it soon becomes clear that “everything is futile,” or empty—like vapor that’s here one moment and gone the next (Ecclesiastes 1:2). No matter how hard we try to find the shelter we so desperately desire, when we put our confidence in the world’s unkept promises, we come up empty-handed.

Because of sin, the world is often a dark place. Sometimes it’s hard to find light. But God doesn’t leave us alone in the storms. Look at how David begins the 62nd psalm by penning a testimony of God’s faithfulness. He writes, “I am at rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will never be shaken.”

In a world of uncertainty, God offers us shelter and rest. He made this world good, and though our sin brought brokenness, Jesus stepped into this brokenness to save us. He is the Light of the world who rescues us from darkness through His own death and resurrection. He is the solid rock that will not be shaken. And when He returns, He will make all things new and whole.

But as we wait for this glorious day, life in the midst of brokenness can sometimes seem like an insurmountable challenge. We are often surrounded by difficulties, and we may even feel as if we’re completely alone. If God promises us that we will not be shaken, shouldn’t He protect us from the trials that roll our way?

In John 16:33, Jesus tells His disciples, “You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.” Jesus does not promise a life free from trials. In fact, He guarantees that we will suffer. But He promises to be our stronghold who brings us hope above all else, a Savior to cling to despite the trials, and a God who loves His precious children. And so, while we can be certain that we will have trials, we can trust God completely when He tells us that those who have faith in Jesus will “never be shaken.” *✦ Katherine Billingsley*

✦ What things, ideas, or people are you tempted to find security and identity in? How have these let you down? Jesus sees our pain and grieves our hurts with us. He comforts us in our troubles and invites us to take part in bringing wholeness to broken places. (2 Corinthians 1:3-11) _____

✦ What are some of God’s attributes and promises we can count on as a firm foundation, no matter what? (Matthew 11:28-30; 28:20; John 8:12; 1 Peter 2:4-6; Revelation 21:1-5) _____

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold; I will never be shaken. Psalm 62:2 (CSB)

SUFFICIENT GRACE

READ: EPHESIANS 1:7-9; 2:1-10; 3:14-21

When I was young, I didn't realize the extent of God's grace. As a child, I prayed over and over asking God to forgive me for my sins. I thought maybe it took a special kind of prayer to be saved from sin and death, and I wanted to make sure I said it. I knew that God loved me, but I just didn't realize how big His love was.

Now I can see God's love much better, even though it's still hard to fathom. God knew that I needed to be saved from my sins, so He sent His Son Jesus to live among us and ultimately die on the cross. And then, He rose from the dead, defeating sin and death forever. God knew I couldn't be perfect and wouldn't make it on my own, so He made the way through Jesus Christ, His perfect Son.

Jesus is the way and the only way. I can't get there on my own. No prayer I say is good enough to earn a place in God's eternal kingdom. Nothing I could do could get me there. It's only through His grace that I am saved.

Once I have confessed my sin and, by faith in Jesus, accepted the gift He offered in His death on the cross, I am free from my sins. I am a new creation. The old me is gone, and the new me is washed in His blood and covered with His grace.

When I was young, I worried that my prayer would somehow wear off or that God would no longer forgive me if I did this or that. Now I know that His love is so much greater than I imagined then, and His grace is big enough to cover me. 📖

Bethany Acker

📖 Have you ever worried that your prayers are not enough? Have you ever begged God over and over to save you? You may have heard that works can't save us, but have you ever thought of prayer (or saying "the right prayer") as a work? Anytime we find ourselves relying on something we do instead of something God does, He invites us to turn back to Him and rely on His grace. We can rest in His steadfast love, knowing that Jesus has already done the work of saving us. _____

📖 *Grace* is sometimes defined as "unmerited favor" or "getting what we don't deserve." God's grace is amazing—He freely gives us eternal life even though we could do nothing to earn it. If you want to know more about this grace and what it means to be saved through Jesus, who is a trusted Christian in your life you could talk to? (You can also find out more on page 104.) _____

📖 If you want to dig deeper, read John 3:16; 14:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 7:14.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you..." 2 Corinthians 12:9a (CSB)

THE BOOK OF MICAH: REBELLION AND MELTING MOUNTAINS

READ: MICAH 4:1-7; JOHN 10:11-18; REVELATION 21:1-5

In the book of the Bible called Micah, the prophet Micah speaks of God's coming judgment against the nation of Israel: the impending invasion from the nation of Assyria. The book begins with an image of God coming down and bringing judgement. The vivid imagery describes mountains melting like wax (Micah 1:4). All of this because Israel had continued to rebel against God. The prophet Micah even goes through the names of different towns that have turned away from God, and he describes how he is in distress over this rebellion (1:9-16).

So, what sort of rebellion deserved all this wrath and judgement? Micah calls out the leaders of Israel for their greed, saying they have wrongly become wealthy through theft (2:1-2). The leaders have also participated in bribery and bent the rules to favor the rich (3:9-11). Micah also blames the false prophets of Israel who gave sweet words of reassurance for the right price (3:5).

But this book isn't only about judgement. God shows His merciful character by bringing a message of hope. Micah describes how God will act like a shepherd and gather the remnant of His people back to Himself (2:12-13). The book also contains a message of hope about how God will restore all things after His judgement (4:1-7). Micah says that, after the Jerusalem the Israelites know is destroyed, God will bring about a new and restored Jerusalem. And the people of this new Jerusalem will be a blessing to the rest of the world. Micah also prophesies about the new king from the line of David who will rule over this new city (5:1-6).

Today, we know that King is Jesus! Through His death and resurrection, Jesus forgives and saves His people from judgement, and one day He will return to make all things new. Jesus will reign over all creation as the long-awaited Shepherd-King. Even as the book of Micah shares the message of God's judgment against injustice and greed, it's also full of the hope of future restoration. It gives us a picture of the loving, merciful character of God. 📖 *Naomi Zylstra*

📖 Where do you see greed and injustice in the world around you? How could it be comforting to know that Jesus weeps over these things and will one day destroy all greed and injustice forever? _____

📖 We all fall short of God's justice, and we all fall into greed sometimes. Consider asking Jesus to help you identify greed in your life so you can confess it and rest in His forgiveness and restoration. _____

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. Micah 7:19 (NIV)

GOOD SHEPHERD, GOOD PROTECTOR

READ: 1 SAMUEL 17:34-36; PSALM 23:1-6; EZEKIEL 34:11-12, 22

One of Jesus's names is the Good Shepherd. Throughout the Bible, we find glimpses of what this means, and in John 10:11, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." I've heard teachers illustrate what Jesus does for us by explaining how shepherds care for their sheep by feeding them and making sure they don't get carried away by a raging river. That's all true, yet there's another aspect of being a shepherd that we sometimes forget. We don't often think of a shepherd as a courageous hero.

Think about sheep for a second. They do dumb stuff. And predators, like lions and bears, think sheep are a great snack. Whenever they get the chance, they snatch an unsuspecting sheep and trot off to enjoy their food. What does the shepherd do? Watch the bleating animal being carried away and think, "How sad. But at least I won't have to deal with that pest anymore"? No. He grabs whatever weapons are available and takes off to take care of business. He kills that predator and takes the sheep home. He tends to their wounds and places them back with the flock, away from danger.

In the same way our Good Shepherd looks after us. He first rescued us from sin by coming to sacrifice His life on the cross and then rise from the dead. In doing so, He defeated Satan and the grave once and for all. And now, He continually protects His people, because even when we're Christians we still mess up—we sin, we make mistakes, and we get into trouble. When our circumstances and our own failures seem to carry us away and eat us, Jesus breaks in. He shows us the foes are beatable, because He is with us and He is Lord over all.

The Good Shepherd is there whenever we call for Him. And when the world, its obligations, and all kinds of trials batter us around, He's always there to care for us. *✦ Morgan Mitchell*

✦ Jesus rescues us from sin and death, but He doesn't stop there. He continues to rescue and care for us as we go through the struggles of this life. And when He returns to restore creation and right every wrong, we will live with Him forever, free from dangers and difficulties. How might picturing Jesus as the courageous Hero-Shepherd, and ourselves as helpless sheep, make it easier for us to call on Jesus when we're in trouble? Why is crying out to Jesus better than trying to figure things out on our own? _____

"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them." Ezekiel 34:11 (NIV)

STRONGER TOGETHER

READ: ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12; ROMANS 12:15; HEBREWS 10:23-25

When my closest cousin, Jeanna, was barely a young woman, she lost her fight with cancer. I mourned her death with daily tears longer than I expected to. Then I learned of a way to honor Jeanna and others who were battling a cancer diagnosis.

I signed up for a walk-a-thon to raise funds for cancer research. Most people taking part in this event had joined teams—from churches, families, or workplaces—and they took turns walking laps along the designated path. I had no team, though. I never thought of asking anybody to share in this effort with me. I just knew I wanted to recognize Jeanna's life and find an outlet for my grief. Doing this alone did not deter me.

But as the walk-a-thon wore on, I traveled lap after lap on my own. I had nobody to cheer for me or hand me water. I had no team member sharing in the goal of walking in memory of Jeanna, and I had nobody to relieve me when I needed to rest. By the end, I felt weary in more ways than one.

That night at the cancer fundraiser, having the support of others with the same purpose would have made such a difference for me. God knows we need each other. He created us for a relationship with Him and for relationships with others. When we trust in Jesus—His work on the cross and His resurrection—we begin a relationship with God. He never intended for us to journey through life alone; He is present with us, and He also gives us each other. He calls us to encourage and seek fellowship with other Christians as we experience all the joys and sorrows of life. And as we grow in loving Christ, we not only learn to build each other up. We also grow to understand how we need support and strength from other Christians, too. **✦** *Allison Wilson Lee*

✦ Have you experienced a loss recently? Jesus has so much compassion on you and grieves your hurts alongside you. Who are trusted Christians in your life you could share your grief with, too? _____

✦ One way God is present with us is through each other. As His love for us spills over into our love for each other, we find hope, love, comfort, and strength that we never could have found on our own. Do you find it easier to boost others up or to recognize your own need for support? Consider taking some time in prayer, asking God to help you grow in these areas. Additionally, who are trusted Christians you could talk to, such as parents, pastors, youth leaders, or friends? _____

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. Hebrews 3:13 (NIV)

THE TRINITY WORKS IN UNITY

READ: JOHN 10:11-18, 27-30; GALATIANS 1:1-4; 1 PETER 3:13-18

I've heard many an argument about who raised Jesus from the dead. The truth of the matter is that God raised Him from the dead.

Something important to know about God is that He is one God, and He is also three persons—that's why we sometimes refer to God as the *Trinity* (from the Latin word for triple or three at a time). Scripture tells us that all three persons of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit—raised Jesus from the dead!

In Galatians 1:1, Paul says that “God the Father...raised him [Jesus] from the dead.” In John 10:18, Jesus, who is God the Son, takes responsibility for raising Himself from the dead when He declares, “No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” And in 1 Peter 3:18, Peter writes that Jesus was made alive by the Holy Spirit: “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.”

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit work in perfect unity with each other. That's why Jesus said, “I can do nothing on my own” (John 5:30). He totally relied on His Father in what to say and how to say it (John 12:49-50), and also in what to do. On the night before Jesus went to the cross, He said, “So that the world may know that I love the Father, I do as the Father commanded me” (John 14:31). In the same passage, Jesus shows the triune God working together in unity when He promises the Spirit: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you” (John 14:26). And remember that Jesus only said what God the Father told Him to say.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God. They all love us deeply, and they all work together in our lives, for they work together in perfect harmony. 🙏

Sharon Morris

🙏 As humans, we can't totally wrap our minds around who God is, and that's okay! He invites us to learn about Him, enjoy relationship with Him (which He made possible through Jesus's death and resurrection), and continue to ask questions and wrestle with Him throughout our lives. Who are trusted Christians in your life you can talk to as you ponder the wonderful mysteries of God? _____

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9 (CSB)

SNOW DAY

READ: PSALM 145:1-3; ACTS 16:22-25; ROMANS 12:10-18

When you think about snow days, what comes to mind? Maybe sleeping in, then going sledding in all that fresh snow, then drinking hot chocolate to warm up? Snow days can bring unexpected fun and rest, but they can also bring disappointment sometimes. Have your plans ever been derailed by a snow day? While it's fun to get the day off from school, snow days also mean you probably don't get to see your friends or do other things you may have been looking forward to because all that snow can make traveling questionable or even impossible.

Throughout our lives, we'll have many days when things don't go like we expect. But Jesus wants to walk with us through all these disappointments, and He gives us unexpected gifts along the way. No matter what happens, we have an opportunity to rest in Jesus and enjoy being in relationship with Him—every day of our lives.

Each day is a gift from Jesus, and He wants to help us rejoice in the days He gives us. We can use them to bask in His love for us, and to show that love to others—whether it's a school day or not, whether it's a sunny day or a snow day. We can find something to enjoy every day, even when things don't go according to plan.

So, how can you be attentive to God's presence on this day He has given you? What unexpected gifts could He be setting in front of you? May today be a day where you find joy and hope in God's abiding presence and His unchanging love. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

- 🕯️ What things have not gone according to plan today? Consider using the space below to talk to God about your feelings about what's happened. _____
- 🕯️ What are you thankful for today? Where have you seen glimpses of Jesus's presence and love? _____
- 🕯️ How would you like to use the remainder of your day? _____
- 🕯️ On days when the disappointments just keep piling up, it can be helpful to remember that Jesus knows firsthand what it's like to experience the pains of human life, and He longs to comfort us in all our troubles and give us hope. His love for us holds steady even on the hardest days, and He is always worthy of our praise. (Romans 5:5; 8:38-39; 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Hebrews 4:14-16)

This is the day the LORD has made; let's rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:24 (CSB)

CONSTANT CHANGES

READ: MALACHI 3:6; HEBREWS 13:1-8; JAMES 1:17

We live in a world where things are constantly changing. Music, friendships, clothing styles, circumstances—they all change. Some changes are good; some are not so good. But even in the midst of all this change, we can rest knowing that Jesus will always stay the same. He will always love us and always keep His promises. And once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can be sure that He will never leave us and that we'll live with Him forever.

Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." And Romans 8:35-39 tells us that nothing can separate us from His love. In fact, part of God's greatness is that He's always the same. He's the one unchanging factor in an ever-changing world.

So, no matter what changes we face in our lives, we can rely on Jesus. He is who He says He is, and He keeps all His promises. Jesus went to the cross, giving up His very life for us, and rose from the grave to beat sin and death. And He will return one day and make all things new—free from sin and death forever. In the meantime, God is working all things together "for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). This hope we have is real and unchanging: we belong to Jesus, and no matter what kinds of changes we experience in this broken world, we can know that His love never changes. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What kinds of changes are going on in your life right now? What about the world in general? How do you feel about these changes? Consider taking some time to talk with Jesus about these changes and how you feel about them. _____

✦ Why is it important to remember that Jesus is unchanging? How could this truth help us rest in His love, and better love our neighbors? _____

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



YOUR CREATION INTO ART

READ: GENESIS 1

Lord, how I long to turn your creation into art.

How I long to paint the light,
Where there once was dark
How I long to sing of the waters,
Where there once was nothing

How I long to write of the flowers,
Where once no land was found
How I long to sketch the stars,
Where once the sky was empty

How I long to play a melody the birds would sing,
Where the fish will splash along
How I long to photograph the animals,
Where once nothing trotted

How I long to act as the people before me,
Where once no people were alive
How I long to be an artist,
Where you were the original Artist

Lord, how I long to turn your creation into art. 📌 *Kimberly Brokish*

📌 What is your favorite art form? Painting, singing, writing, drawing, sculpting, playing an instrument, photography, theater, etc.? God created everything out of nothing—and He specifically made humans in His image. He invites us to use whatever talents, abilities, and resources He has given us to create things that are beautiful, thought-provoking, or useful out of what He has already made. And, if we know Jesus, the Holy Spirit helps guide our creative process. How might God be inviting you to use your creativity today?

In the beginning God created... Genesis 1:1a (CSB)

THE ETERNAL ONE

READ: PSALMS 90:1-4; 136:1; 2 PETER 3:8-9

We humans were made to be curious creatures. God made us to learn and to always be full of questions about Him and the world He made. One deep question we very quickly reach is: “Who or what made God? If every effect has a cause, what caused God to exist?”



The answer is, nobody made God; nothing caused God to exist. He didn't come from anywhere—He just always was. Our minds are finite and limited, and there are some things we can't fully understand as humans. It's hard to wrap our minds around the fact that God is eternal, which means having no beginning and no end. God always existed and always will exist.

Perhaps the closest image we have is a circle. Where does it begin or end? Technically, nowhere. And that's kind of like God. He is the Eternal One. He never had a beginning, and He has no ending. We think of our lives in minutes and days and weeks and years, but with God, it isn't like that. Second Peter 3:8 says, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”

And because God has no beginning and no end, His love is like that too. We see God's never-ending, unconditional love on display when Jesus, God the Son, willingly became human and died on the cross for us. But the Eternal One couldn't be held by death. After three days in a tomb, Jesus rose from the grave, defeating sin and death once and for all so that we could live with Him—forever. No matter what, His love for us will never end. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 God's eternal nature is a mystery to our brains. What are some other mysteries about God that you wonder about? Who are trusted people in your life you could talk with about these wonderful mysteries? _____

📖 How can God's eternal, unchanging, unconditional love for us give us comfort in tough times? _____

Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Psalm 90:2 (NIV)

FOLLOWING GOD

READ: PSALM 25:3; ROMANS 8:31-39; HEBREWS 10:19-23

Have you ever followed a celebrity who ended up in trouble? It can make us feel embarrassed that we were ever supporters of this person as their wrongdoings are exposed. We may regret ever spending time following them. It can be so disappointing.

People disappoint us in other ways, too. Maybe you've looked up to a parent or other adult in your life, and then they left. Maybe you spent so much time trying to impress them, trying to win their love, but they simply left without a glance back.

But even when people let us down, we have this hope: following God is not like following a person. When we know Jesus Christ, He stays a part of our lives. We can read His Word, we can pray to Him, we can gather with His people, and we can grow in our relationship with Him each day. We don't have to be afraid that He will abandon us or turn out to be untrustworthy—His love never fails (Psalm 13:5). Out of love, Jesus died and rose again because God wants to be with us so badly. And one day, He will return to dwell with us forever in renewed creation. In the meantime, He is always with us, and He never leaves us. Nothing can ever come between us and God. Our relationship with Him is unlike any other.

Throughout our lives, people will disappoint us. They will let us down and hurt us, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally. But God never forsakes us, and He never changes. God doesn't mess up or get in trouble. He is always good, always kind, and always the same. "No one who hopes in...[God] will ever be put to shame" (Psalm 25:3). *Emily Acker*

❗ Can you think of a time you felt disappointed by someone you looked up to, such as a parent, teacher, pastor, or celebrity? We all sin, and we're all broken, so it's not surprising that the people we look up to will fall short. Jesus is with us in these times of disappointment, weeping with us and inviting us to rely on His faithfulness, grace, and mercy. _____

❗ While we may feel disappointed with God sometimes, He will never fail to keep His promises. He'll never leave us, no matter what. How could this bring us comfort when we feel abandoned? _____

❗ Community is a good thing. God designed it! He wants us to listen to wise people who love Him, so don't be afraid to draw near to others and learn from them. Yet, our ultimate hope is found in Jesus and no one else. Who has helped and encouraged you in your walk with Jesus? _____

Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. Psalm 9:10 (NIV)

FORGIVEN TO FORGIVE

READ: MATTHEW 18:21-35

Many of us love a good revenge story. In movies, books, and TV shows, we love the story of someone who takes matters into their own hands and gets back at the bad guy—we want to see the bad guys get what they deserve. Many of us have been on the receiving end of bullying or mistreatment, and we know what it's like to want revenge.

But what happens when we're the ones doing the bullying or mistreating? Well then we may be tempted to think it wasn't a big deal. We may come up with all sorts of excuses and reasons to explain away what we did: *I was just joking. I was tired. You're overreacting.* Or maybe we try to justify what we did: *Well, I wouldn't have hurt them if they hadn't hurt me first!* We may want revenge when we're the ones who have been hurt, but when we hurt somebody else, we might try to explain it away.

Do you see the problem here? We're all hypocrites! In our sinfulness and brokenness, we have one standard that we apply to others, but we fail to live by our own standard. How often do we insist on punishment for others' sin but excuse our own sin?

In Christ, we've been forgiven a tremendous debt. Jesus has wiped away our debt of sin through His death and resurrection, and He calls us to show that forgiveness to others. We see this in Matthew 18:21-35, when Jesus tells a parable where one servant had been forgiven of a HUGE debt—millions of dollars. But he still refused to forgive a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller debt. When we refuse to forgive others, we are acting like that first servant.

If you know Jesus, you've been forgiven, and His Holy Spirit lives in you, empowering you to forgive. Jesus knows that forgiving others isn't easy. It's normal to want revenge. But He showed us a better way. Even when He was being nailed to the cross, He cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). That is amazing love. 🕯️ *Jacob Bier*

🕯️ Forgiving someone doesn't mean saying that what they did is okay or even being in close relationship with them. When people sin, they need healing, and forgiving someone means you desire healing and wholeness for that person. How does Jesus, the ultimate Healer, enable us to desire healing for those who hurt us?

Peter...asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

ENOUGH

READ: ISAIAH 64:6; ROMANS 3:10, 23-24; PHILIPPIANS 3:3-11

Arlyn stood in a long line of travelers, each waiting for their turn at the weighing station. She watched the distance between her and the balance scale grow smaller. Her basket of jewels rattled as she tried to control her trembling. When she had gathered them in the dark depths of the mine, the jewels had appeared flawless. Now, against the backdrop of the splendid palace towering over her, she saw cracks marring the stones. She desperately hoped they would be enough.

When it was Arlyn's turn to step forward, she looked over at the curtained doorway beyond the giant scale. People whispered that the king presided over each weighing, though no one ever saw him. She placed her basket on the scale and glanced fearfully at the enormous rock on the other side of the balance. It was hopeless. There was no way her jewels, which seemed more like pebbles now, would ever outweigh the impossible weight of the boulder. But that was the only way to purchase entry into the kingdom.

"Not enough," a soldier declared, confirming Arlyn's worst fear. Exhausted, she sank to her knees. *It wasn't enough.* How could it not be enough? She had given everything she had.

"Wait." A voice called from the shadows. A figure stepped out from the curtain. It was the king's son himself. He gestured to Arlyn. "Will you take your jewels off the scale?"

"But...I can't!" Arlyn whispered hoarsely. She had worked for years to gather the jewels—were they really worthless?

"Do you trust me?" the prince asked, surprising Arlyn with his gentleness. This time, Arlyn nodded. The jewels turned to dust in her hands as soon as she picked them up. She turned her eyes to the prince. With scarred hands, he lifted the great boulder from the scale and hefted it onto his own shoulder. Then, he placed himself on the balance. The scale crumbled beneath his weight. Arlyn watched in wonder as the curtain separating her from the king ripped straight down the middle, from top to bottom.

"Follow me." The prince held out his hand kindly. "My father wants you to come and be part of his kingdom, part of our family." As Arlyn took his hand and stepped into the kingdom, a peace settled over her. A weight she hadn't known she was carrying disappeared from her shoulders. Her jewels *hadn't* been enough. But the prince himself had saved her. 🕯 *Katherine Billingsley*

He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (CSB)

🔑 In today's allegorical story, Arlyn struggles to let go of the jewels she worked so hard to collect. As humans we could never do enough good to outweigh our sin (anything we do, think, or say that goes against God); we could never make ourselves righteous. Yet, we often struggle to let go of our own good works. Arlyn finds peace when she realizes the prince alone can help her. We can feel a similar weight lifted from us when we recognize that we can't save ourselves and instead put our trust in Jesus. He offers us rest because He has already done the work of saving us by living a sinless life, dying in our place, and rising from the grave. He declared, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Have you experienced the freedom of trusting in Jesus? If you want to know more about this good news, check out page 104. _____

🔑 Even after we've put our trust in Jesus, we all fall into striving to be good enough, instead of resting in what Jesus has already done for us. In what ways do you find yourself trying to be "enough" for God, for other people, for yourself...? Consider taking a moment to talk to God about these things. He has so much compassion for you, and He wants to help. _____

🔑 In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians you could talk to about what you're struggling with, and discern together how God might be inviting you to step forward in love for Him and for others as you rest in Him? _____

🔑 The moment Jesus gave up His life on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. This curtain separated the Holy of Holies (where God's presence dwelt) from the rest of the temple (where people could come and worship God). Our sin separated us from God, but God made the way for us to be near Him. If you want to dig deeper, read Matthew 27:50-54; Colossians 1:12-14; 1 Peter 2:24.



WHAT I WOULD SAY

READ: JOHN 3:16-18; COLOSSIANS 4:3-6; 1 PETER 3:15-16

My niece got me thinking recently. She wrote me a letter asking what I would tell her about Jesus if she didn't know about Him. She said she wanted to know so that she would know what to share with others. I was surprised when I didn't have an immediate answer for her.

As I spent time thinking, I considered the fact that you really need to know what someone has heard about God and Jesus before you can start sharing with them in a helpful way. You need to know what their beliefs are and how they feel about things. You need to listen to them.

I told my niece some of that, and then I told her I would want her to know that God loves her. I would want her to know that she can be forgiven and that there is grace out there big enough to forgive us over and over again.

As I thought about what I would share with someone if they didn't know Jesus, I thought about how I would explain that they were carefully crafted by God. Rather than just jumping into Jesus's death and resurrection, I would want to start with a bit of a backstory.

I'm thankful that my ten-year-old niece got me thinking about all of this, and I'm in awe of how she wants to go out and share about Jesus with others. It can be so helpful for us to think about what we would say to someone who doesn't know Jesus—and to consider how different people will need to hear His message of hope in different ways. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 Have you had opportunities to tell others about God's perfect love and justice, and how He made the way for us to be saved through Jesus? What was it like? _____

📖 Has someone ever shared the gospel (good news) with you? Did their explanation make sense to you, or did it confuse you? If you want to know more about the gospel, check out page 104. _____

📖 God invites us to be part of His good work of sharing the hope of Jesus with others, and He knows that everyone is different. Through His Holy Spirit, He'll help us tell people about Jesus in ways that will resonate with them. The first step in telling others about Jesus is listening to them. You can ask questions like, "Who do you think Jesus was?" or "What do you think God is like?" or "What have your experiences with Christians been like?" _____

I have not kept the good news of your justice hidden in my heart; I have talked about your faithfulness and saving power. I have told everyone in the great assembly of your unfailing love and faithfulness. Psalm 40:10 (NLT)

OLD TO NEW

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-17; EPHESIANS 4:20-32; COLOSSIANS 3:5-17

Closet clean-outs can be so satisfying. Getting rid of clothes that no longer fit can help make space for the things we really need—and like—in our closets. Instead of a cluttered and chaotic closet bursting at the seams with clothes that don't really suit us, we see a space well-ordered with things that are functional and beautiful to us.

Getting rid of old things to make room for new things is a lot like how our walk with Jesus goes. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new.”

Once we put our trust in Jesus, we become new creations! And some of our old ways of life don't fit us anymore once we become Christians. So, it's kind of like Jesus takes us shopping. He gives us new attitudes, new habits, and new desires to clothe ourselves in—and these new ways of life suit us much better.

Are you putting on the things Jesus has given you for your new Christian life—things like kindness and self-control? Or are there some old habits and attitudes that you're still hanging on to? Jesus wants to replace old habits and attitudes with something far better. Those old, selfish desires don't fit you anymore. Instead, since you are already “God's chosen ones, holy and beloved” (Colossians 3:12), look to Jesus to fill your life with His love, peace, and joy. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

- ✦** Why is it important to remember that Jesus is the One who makes us new—not anything we do or don't do? (Ephesians 2:8-10) _____
- ✦** According to Galatians 5:22-23, what are some of the fruits that the Holy Spirit produces in our lives once we know Jesus? _____
- ✦** How have you seen Jesus bring about change in yourself and in other Christians? Consider taking a moment to celebrate this work by thanking God in the space below! _____

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new. 2 Corinthians 5:17 (WEB)

WORTHY IS THE LAMB

READ: REVELATION 5:9-14; 12:10-11; 17:14; 22:1-5

Worthy, worthy is the Lamb,
Worthy is the great I AM.


Clothed in robes of purest light,
The Lamb returns, dispels the night.

He was slain in my stead,
Bruised and buried, He rose from the dead.


King of kings upon His throne,
High and holy is the Saving One.


Ruling now in majesty,
Day and night He pleads for me.

Worthy, worthy is the Lamb,
Worthy is the great I AM.

This poem was inspired by passages in the book of Revelation that show Jesus as the triumphant Lamb of God. In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah said the Messiah would be “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). And this is how Jesus let Himself be led to the cross. Yet, the Lamb we see in Revelation is no longer meek and submissive, but is now a ruling, warrior Lamb. This is because, when Jesus returns, the time will finally come for justice to reign! The Lamb arises as the only One worthy—worthy to enact justice. Why? With His own blood, the great I AM (Exodus 3:14), paid the debt for every wrong. Because Jesus Christ the Lamb died on the cross for us and rose from the grave, only He can intervene with power to cleanse all who repent—and power to destroy evil forever. Christ the Lamb is “the faithful and true witness,” the final “Amen,” who always judges “with justice” (Revelation 3:14; 19:11). May we join in the joyous chorus of heavenly praise, singing, “Worthy is the Lamb!” 

G. Kam Congleton

 Consider taking some time to reread today’s Bible passages, asking God to reveal Jesus the Lamb of God to you in a new way. What words are used to describe this Lamb of God? How can what Jesus has done—and what He will do—make a difference in our lives? (Find out more on page 104.) _____

 Do you have any favorite Bible passages that fill you with awe at who God is? Consider taking a moment to praise Him using some of these words from Scripture. You could even create your own poem or song of praise. _____

*In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”
Revelation 5:12 (NIV)*

THE BOOK OF NAHUM: EVIL EMPIRES AND INNOCENT BLOOD

NAHUM 1:1-7; 2:1-10; 3:1-4, 18-19; ACTS 17:24-31

Sometimes I see all the bad in the world and I start to feel hopeless. With things like war and cancer in the world, does God even care? Well, the short book of Nahum in the Bible is a collection of poems that shows how God does address evil and does care about the bad things happening in the world. In it, the prophet Nahum tells about the coming downfall of one of Israel's enemy nations: Assyria.

The Assyrians captured and ransacked Israel in 721 B.C. Eventually, the nation of Babylon would topple the Assyrians, including their capital city of Nineveh. The imagery of the fall of Nineveh in the book of Nahum is vivid and gruesome. The book talks about the city being cut down with the sword and people stumbling over the corpses. God's righteous judgement is coming down because the city and empire itself was built on the blood of the innocent.

The book then contrasts the evil empire, and the judgment they will face, with the mercy God will show to His faithful remnant in Israel. Nahum 1:6 talks about how God's wrath is pouring out like fire against the evil nation, and in Nahum 1:7, the very next verse, it talks about how God is a refuge to His faithful people who have humbled themselves before God.

For the prophet Nahum, the fall of the Assyrians alludes to how God will someday bring justice to all evil empires of the world. We are familiar with evil and oppression in today's world—we see it all the time. The book of Nahum shows that God does not ignore this evil; He grieves it. And He promises to bring judgement and restoration to the whole world one day. We have already seen this restoration in part through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but we also look forward to the day Jesus will return to earth, and our loving God will destroy all injustice and restore creation under His perfectly just reign. 📖 *Naomi Zylstra*

📖 Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the evil and suffering in the world? You can bring these feelings to Jesus in prayer anytime, and you can ask Him to show you how you can participate in the good work of His perfectly just kingdom here and now. (Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8; Mark 12:29-31) _____

📖 Have you seen a piece of restoration and justice that previews the restoration to come? What was it like? If not, you can ask Jesus to help you catch glimpses of the good work He is doing anytime. _____

*The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.
Nahum 1:7 (NIV)*

GROWING IN THE LIGHT

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17; HEBREWS 12:1-3; 1 PETER 1:3

Growing up, I would eagerly await Easter. After long stretches of cold winter, I couldn't wait for warmer months. The Easter season promised planting new flower seeds, hiding Easter eggs, and more time basking in the spring sun.

During the six and a half weeks leading up to Easter, some Christians practice Lent, preparing for Easter by giving up certain things, reflecting on Jesus Christ's suffering, and examining their lives and hearts for sin that needs to be surrendered to Jesus.

Where I live, Lent begins while we are still under the snowy veils of winter. I begin Lent in the shadows, reflecting on Christ's suffering and on my own sacrifices as I think about how to let go of whatever isn't helping me grow in my relationship with Jesus.

As the weeks go on, the days lengthen, with the light lingering ever more. Sunshine lifts my spirits. As I get to know the loving spirit of Christ more deeply, what I've given up leaves space for the light to enter. By the time Easter arrives, the sun has cleared away the slush to reveal where flowers have bloomed. I feel the light brightening my heart too. I can have hope for the future, keeping room for even more of God's love to pour into my soul like the water from Christ's pierced side, bringing forth blossoms from the hardened ground.

In this season of Lent, I search, and prepare. I ready myself to open the tomb, discovering that Christ has risen. Seeds of faith planted grow as Easter Day arrives. In this time, let's keep ourselves open to new possibilities, to finding Christ in the light that reaches us every day, even as we wait for winter to recede into the past. Every day we have hope in Jesus, and we can open ourselves to new surprises, new sources of joy—like a hidden egg found. 🕯️ *Kathryn Sadakierski*

🕯️ Waiting for Easter, and for all good things to come in our lives, can be difficult, but as we wait, what graces are there to be found? How has God helped you grow in seasons of waiting? _____

🕯️ Have you ever found yourself surprised by joy? What was that like? _____

*By his power God raised the Lord [Jesus Christ] from the dead, and he will raise us also.
1 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV)*

ALWAYS LOVED

READ: PSALM 27:10; ISAIAH 49:15; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-13; 1 JOHN 4:7-21

People don't always love each other the way they should. Our world has been broken by sin, and we experience this brokenness in so many ways. You might see divorces happen and witness the heart-wrenching sorrow of two people separating after promising to be joined to one another for life. You might see parents abandon their children. Maybe you suffered a big hurt when someone in your life walked away from you. We don't always love each other as we should. We mess up and hurt each other, whether intentionally or unintentionally. But God's love for you is always there. He will never take it from you.

When you don't feel loved by your family in the way you should, you can remember that you have a God and Father who always loves you. Psalm 27:10 says, "Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close."

When you don't feel loved by your friends, you can remember that Jesus calls His followers His friends (John 15:15). He so much wants to be with you that He went to the cross to die for you—and then He rose again, defeating sin and death so you could be with Him forever.

When you worry that you are not loved, you can remember that the One who created the whole world created you. He made you in your mother's womb, and He knows you (Psalm 139:1-17). He knows exactly who you are and loves you.

God always cares about you and wants you as His child. Through Jesus, He made the way for you to be forgiven and brought into His family, where He helps us grow in love. Even when others don't love you as they should, you are still worthy of love, and God will always give His love to you. **✦** *Bethany Acker*

✦ When we fail to love each other, God sees all the ways we hurt each other and all the pain we go through, and He weeps. But He doesn't stop there. He came to deliver us. Jesus, God in flesh, died and rose again so we could be forgiven and brought near to God. He also gives believers His Holy Spirit, who empowers us to love others the way He loves us. When Jesus returns, He will restore all things, and everyone who's put their trust in Him will live together in perfect love and harmony, with every hurt healed and every wrong made right. Until that glorious day, why is it so important for us to take time to meditate on the truth of God's love for us in His Word? _____

✦ What kinds of hurts have you experienced? In addition to talking to Jesus about this, who are trusted Christians in your life you can talk to, such as parents, friends, pastors, or counselors? _____

*We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love.
1 John 4:16a (NLT)*

HUNGRY

READ: ROMANS 8:18-39; REVELATION 21:1-7

Some days, I end up not eating breakfast. I'm not saying this is something everyone should do, but sometimes it's what happens to me. I may not eat anything till noon. All morning, my stomach groans and grumbles, communicating its annoyance. And when I finally do eat, I find a lot of joy and satisfaction in my food. My stomach is finally content.

Lately, this experience has reminded me of a truth found in Scripture. In Romans 8, Paul (the author of Romans) says that all of creation *groans* in anticipation of Jesus returning to earth and making all things new. It (and we) long to be free of sin, death, and suffering. There is a holy groaning and grumbling that communicates all is not right. We see how broken the world is, and how broken we are. Alongside creation, we lament and cry out to God, telling Him how desperately His healing is needed.

And someday, Jesus will return. He will right every wrong, destroying sin, brokenness, and death permanently. Everything will be made whole again. There will be immense joy and satisfaction, and all of creation will finally be content. We will get to dwell with Jesus forever, living in His perfect love and peace.

So, during those days when my stomach remains empty till lunchtime, I let the grumbles and groans turn my attention to the brokenness of creation and my desperate need for Jesus. I let myself feel the hurt. Then, when lunchtime comes around, I let myself feel the joy. I smile, remembering the sure hope of Jesus's return and the peace and contentment He will bring. I remember that, while there will be temporary suffering now, eternal joy is coming. Our holy hunger will be satisfied. We will feast with Jesus and each other. And I can't think of anything better than that. *✦ Taylor Eising*

✦ Where do you see brokenness in the world around you? This breaks God's heart, and someday Jesus will return to bring healing to the brokenness. How could this truth provide comfort? _____

✦ As we wait for Jesus to return, He invites us into the healing work He is doing. Consider taking some time to pray, asking Jesus to show you ways you can participate in His good work. _____

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." Revelation 21:3-4 (NLT)

LETTING GO OF APPEARANCES

READ: 1 SAMUEL 16:1-13; MATTHEW 23:23-39; COLOSSIANS 3:1-17

Appearances aren't everything. We probably know this in our heads, yet how often do we find ourselves getting worried about what others will think of us based on how we look or what we do? Maybe you really care about your clothes, the image you portray to your friends, how you perform in school or sports, or having the latest technology. While caring about these things is not bad, it becomes a problem when we elevate anything to a place in our hearts above God.

There's a story in 1 Samuel 16 that shows us God's heart on the matter of appearances. The prophet Samuel went to see Jesse's family because God told him to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be the next king and replace Saul. When Samuel saw Jesse's sons, he thought the oldest must be the chosen one based on what he saw on the surface, but God told him, "Do not consider his appearance or his height... The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (verse 7).

Our culture is, in general, obsessed with appearances. From our bodies to our homes to our reputations, the world system wants us to be concerned with the outer and superficial. And this is nothing new! In Matthew 23, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for being so concerned about their appearance on the surface. They dressed impressively, they loved being honored and respected by others, and they followed strict, human-made rules, but they neglected the most important things: "justice, mercy and faithfulness" (verse 23). They looked good on the outside, but inside they were "full of greed and self-indulgence...hypocrisy and wickedness" (verses 25-28). Jesus told them what was of first importance was attending to the inside, their hearts.

We live in a broken world where appearances too often take priority. But the good news is, there is freedom in Jesus. God loves us so much that He was willing to die for us, taking the penalty for all our sins so we could be forgiven. We don't need to try to impress Him or anyone else. Once we put our trust in Jesus, believing He died and rose again, we are children of God, and He empowers us to set our minds and hearts on the things that really matter (Colossians 3:1-2). As God's chosen and dearly loved people, we are called to clothe ourselves with things like compassion, gentleness, and forgiveness (verses 12-17). We can grow to become less concerned with appearances as we rest in the love of God, the One who transforms our hearts. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

📖 How can resting in God's love for us free us to care less about appearances? _____

*"People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."
1 Samuel 16:7b (NIV)*

EXPIRED

READ: JOSHUA 23:14; 1 PETER 1:3-9; 2 PETER 1:2-4; 3:9

Imagine this. You've just arrived at the best theme park in the state. You're ecstatic to finally have enough money to be here—and you wouldn't even be going if you hadn't found a coupon for half-price tickets. But when the woman at the ticket booth looks at your coupon, she shakes her head. "I'm sorry," she says, "but this coupon has expired. I have to charge you the full amount." But you can't pay the full amount...so you can't get into the park.

Can you feel the pain of this disappointment, even though it's imaginary? This story can help us understand something really important about the gospel, or good news.

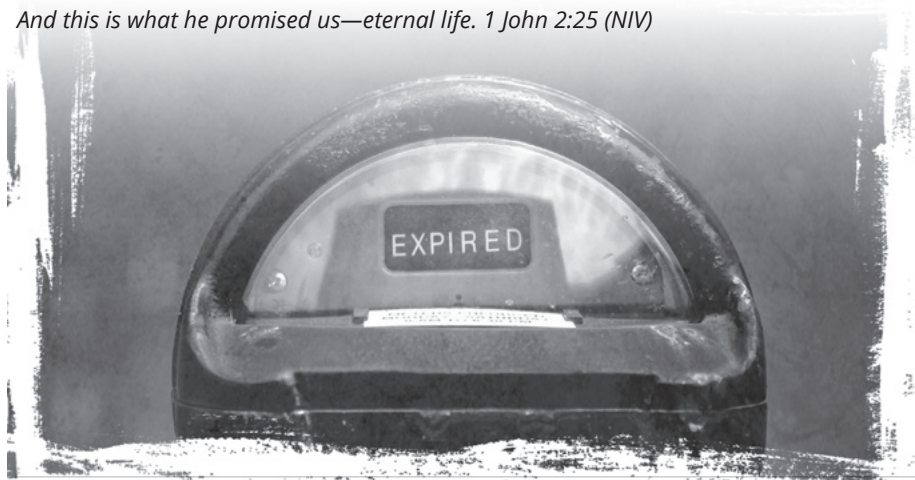
God has made many promises to us, and they will never expire. He promises to forgive everyone who puts their trust in Jesus and to rescue us from sin and death. He promises to hear us whenever we pray, to give us joy, and to supply all our needs. Jesus promises to return one day to right every wrong and make all things new, and to resurrect our bodies so we can live with Him forever in restored creation. We can find these and more of His promises in His Word—the Bible. And all His promises will last forever!

In short, God's promises are way better than any coupon offer. His promises will never expire—He keeps every single one. So, once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can rest knowing that God will never leave us, and we get to look forward to eternal life with Him. Now that's good news! **!** *A. W. Smith*

! Do you have a favorite promise from God? What is it? _____

! If you want to learn more about Jesus's promises, check out page 104.

And this is what he promised us—eternal life. 1 John 2:25 (NIV)



NOT SO DIFFERENT

READ: 3 JOHN 1:5-8; ROMANS 15:7; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6; EPHESIANS 4:1-6

In God's family, we will encounter people who have different backgrounds, experiences, personalities, likes, and dislikes than ours. And this is a beautiful thing! But it can be challenging as we seek to learn from and be kind to each other through the differences.

As fellow Christians, there's good news. Even if we don't have much in common with some of our siblings in Christ, we're still siblings because we both know Jesus as our Savior. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus unites us with all Christians and makes us part of His family, called the church. He is with us through the Holy Spirit, and that same Holy Spirit is in every believer. And He loves all of us. That's why we need to be kind and welcoming to each other, no matter where someone is from or how different from us they may be. Jesus's love for us is what binds us together—and it's what enables us to love each other.

When you are kind and welcoming to people who are different from you, you may be surprised to find they're not so different from you after all! But no matter how similar or different they may be, Jesus calls us to show kindness to others—especially if they know Him as their Savior too. Instead of drawing back from each other because of our differences, we can lean in and learn from each other as siblings in Christ. And who knows—maybe we'll get to know God a little bit better in the process! **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Is there someone you've found difficult to love? Consider taking some time in prayer, asking God to help you see as He sees and love as He loves in this situation. _____

✦ Who are trusted people in your life who can help you love difficult people well, including setting boundaries where necessary—such as therapists, parents, teachers, pastors, etc.? _____

✦ Can you think of a time you were pleasantly surprised when you encountered someone different from you? What was it like? _____

Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith. Galatians 6:10 (NLT)

FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

READ: ROMANS 6:1-23; 8:12-21

At times, the Christian life can feel a bit restrictive. Following God's good ways means certain things are off limits because sin hurts us and those around us. Yet sometimes, saying no to sin doesn't make us feel very free. It might feel like we're missing out.

But Romans 6 in the Bible has something else to chip in. It calls our life in Christ one of freedom, and it tells us to submit no longer to the slavery of sin. Slavery? Sin is bad, you might say, but is it really like slavery? Paul, the person who wrote much of the New Testament, says that yes, it is. When we were under the control of sin, we had no options. Sin was our default impulse, and we defaulted to it often. We could not have willingly obeyed Christ if we'd tried.

But God made the way to save us from our slavery to sin. Jesus Christ, who is God the Son, came and lived among us. He depended completely on God the Father as He walked perfectly in God's good ways—something we never could have done. Then He died on the cross and rose from the dead, defeating sin and death on our behalf. Now, if we know Jesus, He freely gives us His perfect righteousness (or sinlessness) because He loves us so much.

In Christ, we're free from slavery to sin. While we will still struggle with sin until He returns, the Holy Spirit helps us obey Christ out of love, not out of force. We can obey Him as we would someone who has our best interests at heart, because that's exactly who He is. It's by doing God's will that we are truly free, and liberty is always better than slavery, if you ask me. 🗝️ *Ethan Terry*

🗝️ Read Romans 8:12-17. How would you describe our relationship with God because of what Jesus has done for us? _____

🗝️ Read Romans 8:18-21. What else will God set free someday? _____

For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Romans 6:4 (NLT)



HIS WORK AND OURS

READ: JOSHUA 1:1-9; EPHESIANS 2:8-10

Joshua was given a monumental task. He was told to lead his people, the Israelites, across the Jordan River to their new home, the Promised Land. This happened directly after the death of Moses, the one who had led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert for forty years to the brink of the Promised Land. God told Joshua to be “strong and courageous” in Joshua 1:6, again in verse 7, and once more in verse 9.

The Promised Land was agriculturally rich and highly desirable, which is why there were already tribes of people there. Joshua’s task was formidable: lead a massive group of people with no military training into a hostile land. But God’s command to Joshua to be “strong and courageous” is not a mere platitude. It’s based in something solid and unmovable.

You see, before God told Joshua to be strong and courageous, He told Joshua what He Himself had already done: “I have given you every place where the sole of your foot treads” (Joshua 1:3). Because God had done His part, Joshua could be strong and courageous as he followed God’s command to lead the people into the Promised Land. Joshua understood the difference between what he was commanded to do and what the Lord had already done.

This truth is also the basis of the gospel. We, too, can learn to understand the difference between what God commands us to do and what God has already done. While God does command us to follow in His good ways, our very best works, full of good intentions for others, will do nothing to save us. Kind words, strong morals, helping little old ladies across a street—these are all good things, but none of them will save us from sin and death. It is only the finished work of Christ that can accomplish that. Jesus’s perfect sacrifice, made out of His unending love for us, paves the way. It is His death and resurrection that makes the way for us to be saved. Let’s never confuse what God wants us to do with what He has already done. 🕯 *Mike Hurley*

🕯 God does not command us to save ourselves. Rather, He made the way to save us through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. (You can find out more about this good news on page 104.) Those who know Jesus are forgiven and made right with God, and we are also empowered by the Holy Spirit, who helps us follow God in every area of our lives. How could resting in what God has done for us help us be “strong and courageous” as we follow in His good ways? _____

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

I REST SECURELY

READ: PSALMS 16:7-11; 139:1-12; ISAIAH 41:10; 1 JOHN 1:5

I lay to rest, where do my thoughts go?
To dangers, to darkness, to fears

Though there's no light around me
I can see the light of my great God


My heart pushes me to find my God
To seek Him with prayers as I try to sleep

I set my eyes on the One who saved me
Fears can do nothing to shake me

Securely, I rest in the hands of God
Knowing my Father holds me with love

When thoughts turn back to darkness
I put a stop to them, staying in light

The joy of my God fills my whole being
Joy that pushes out the fear and doubt

I know who holds me and loves me
I rest because I'm securely held by Him  *Emily Acker*

*Return to your rest, my soul, for Yahweh has dealt bountifully with you.
Psalm 116:7 (WEB)*

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

- 🔑** Do your thoughts ever keep you awake at night? We all experience this from time to time, and God has so much compassion on us. As Christians, we can know that God is always with us, holding us securely. Jesus our Savior is the Light of the world, and darkness can never overcome Him (John 1:5; 8:12). Because Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave for us, nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:35-39). And His Holy Spirit lives in us, reminding us of His promises and empowering us to give our worries to Jesus and turn our thoughts toward the hope He gives us (Philippians 4:4-9; 1 Peter 5:6-11). Do you have any favorite Bible verses that give you comfort and help you turn your thoughts to Jesus when you're feeling unsettled?

- 🔑** Sometimes, we experience thoughts and feelings that are too much for us to handle on our own, even by praying and reading the Bible. But God wants to help us in lots of ways, including through other people such as medical and mental health professionals who can help us figure out if what we are experiencing is worry, anxiety, or something else. It's important to remember that we all need help from others, and it's okay to be honest about our struggles. If you find yourself feeling afraid, stressed, or worried a lot of the time, or if your thoughts keep going to dark places or "what if" scenarios and you can't seem to stop, who is a trusted adult you could talk to, such as a parent, pastor, teacher, or counselor? _____

- 🔑** 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.



LIVING STONES

READ: MATTHEW 7:24-27; 1 PETER 2:4-10

Not long ago, we were scattered like pebbles across the ground. Unwanted, forgotten, far from found. That was, until the day He came. Bare feet scudding across the sand, bending down to gently pick us up and place us in His hands. Rejected by others, chosen by Him. He told us that He had been rejected too. Despised, beaten, spit upon, and ultimately killed.

After that time of darkness and mourning, His Father raised Him to life, rolling the stone away. Chosen by His Father, precious to Him. For years, we waited for someone we could trust, someone who would speak what is true, about everything, about us.

The world said He was a liar, a heretic, an imposter. The Father said He was the Cornerstone, chosen before the creation of the world, imperishable (1 Peter 1:18-20), one with the Father Himself (John 10:30). The world says we are worthless, He says we are chosen (1 Peter 2:9). Once we were covered in rags, but Cornerstone clothed us with His royal robes. We were created by Him, made to sing His praise.

Cornerstone takes us, one by one, and builds, not on the sand, but on Himself. Each stone is unique and alive, every one precious. Some He sands down, others He chisels. These stones are being formed into a beautiful house with the only foundation that will remain. Though storms will come and waters rise, this truth endures: "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (1 Peter 2:6). 📖

Savannah Coleman

📖 The prophet Isaiah wrote that the Lord would lay a precious and tested cornerstone for us, one that would give us a sure foundation, and those who rely on Him will not be "stricken with panic" (Isaiah 28:16). Later, the Bible tells us that Jesus is that Cornerstone. Trusting in Jesus, believing He died on the cross for us, receiving His mercy, and building our lives on Him...is so much better than building our lives on piles of sand. Consider taking a moment to read Matthew 7:24-27. How might Jesus be inviting you to build your life on Him today? _____

📖 How could it be comforting to know that Jesus was rejected by humans, just as we are from time to time, yet He was still chosen by the Father and precious to Him? God says we are chosen and precious to Him too. What else does He say about us? (Ephesians 1:4; 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5, 9) _____

The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad. Psalm 118:22-24 (NIV)

FROM FLAT TO FILLED

READ: ISAIAH 41:8-14; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-20

I gulped. *A flat tire? What now?*

I'd recently joined a ministry to share the good news of Jesus with others. To take on this role, I needed to raise money for expenses. I talked with lots of people in my hometown about supporting me financially, hoping they would partner with me through their donations and prayers. That evening, I'd set up an appointment to speak to Mr. and Mrs. Peters about my ministry plans. I didn't know them well, but the conversation at their kitchen table went smoothly. But as they walked me out, I spotted a problem. Although I did have my driver's license, I didn't own a car. I'd borrowed my grandfather's old vehicle to travel to the meeting. Then, right there in the Peters' driveway, one of the tires had gone flat.

Help, Lord! I thought, swimming in embarrassment. I'd just asked them to contribute money, and now would I be asking for even more help?

Mrs. Peters quickly offered a can of foam tire inflator that would re-inflate the tire enough for me to drive home. Mr. Peters fetched the canister and even took care of applying it to the leaky tire. After thanking them profusely, I drove safely home.

When I noticed the problematic tire that evening, I could think of no solution. But when I couldn't imagine a way through, God made a way. God cares for His creation, and He assures us we don't have to give in to fear, because He helps us (Psalm 145:8-21). He invites us to rely on Him for everything, instead of trying to do things in our own strength and wisdom. Since He provided the way for our sins to be forgiven—when we could never accomplish that ourselves—we can trust Him to help us whenever we feel stuck. The same God who died for us and rose from the grave is with us now. He strengthens us. He upholds us—through flat tires, fundraising, and much more. **I** *Allison Wilson Lee*

I Are you facing a problem that feels like it has no answer? Consider taking a moment to come to God in prayer and ask for His help. _____

I One of the primary ways God helps His people, is through His people! Yet sometimes, we feel embarrassed for needing help. Other times, we can easily fall into pride if we think we don't need to rely on anyone else. How could we remind each other that it's okay to need help, and in fact it's good to rely on each other? _____

For I am the LORD your God...Do not fear; I will help you. Isaiah 41:13 (NIV)

THE HUMMINGBIRD IN THE COURTYARD

READ: PSALM 124:6-8; LUKE 12:22-31

As Valeria and Galena sat in the courtyard, working away at some handicrafts to sell at the market in the next town over, Galena watched the setting sun and pondered their situation. The famine continued with no signs of letting up. Their parents had died several months ago, and the two sisters had to care for each other in their small, impoverished village.

“Galena!” Valeria called suddenly. “Can you help me with something?” Galena set down her work, shook away her thoughts, and came over to where Valeria was leaning over a tiny green hummingbird as it flopped around, struggling with a string tangled around its spindly legs. The bird’s needle-like bill tore at the strand, but the string wound around tighter and tighter.

“Valeria, run and get me a soft rag,” said Galena. When Valeria returned with the clean cloth, Galena draped it over her hand and gently picked up the colorful little bird. The humming sound grew louder as he flapped his long, narrow wings. “Be still, little one.” Galena’s voice was so quiet Valeria could hardly hear her. One twist, two twists. The humming sound quieted, and the stubby body relaxed. Valeria let out a big breath of air when Galena handed her the string and carefully placed the bird on the ground. After resting for a few moments, he took flight.

“Do you remember that story Mama told us,” Valeria asked, “something about how the Creator cared for birds and would do the same and more for humans?” Galena leaned back against the cool stone wall. “Ah yes. The birds, they store no food and gather no crops. Yet the Creator feeds them. And today, we helped that tiny hummingbird because we cared for it. That’s a good reminder. We don’t need to worry because the Creator loves us and takes care of us.”

Valeria twirled the string around her finger. “Did you realize? We freed the bird’s legs from the string, and the Creator came to free us from sin and death!” A smile spread across Galena’s face. “You’re right! We’re not trapped in sin any longer, and we can look forward to eternity with Him, where there will be no more famines, no more sadness. Until then, even when the troubles of life come, we can trust Him to be with us and help us through them.” **✠** *A. W. Smith*

✠ When you go through difficult times, do you have any favorite Bible passages that remind you how much God loves you—so much that He became human to die and rise again to beat sin and death so you could be with Him forever? Even when you go through difficult times, He will be with you. You can always talk to Jesus about your worries and rely on Him to take care of you. _____

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

REMINDERS

READ: PSALM 77:10-15

Have you ever made a scrapbook? Whether in digital form or with paper pages, scrapbooks can be a creative way to remind us of the people we love and the things we learn as we go through life.

Thinking about scrapbooks can help us understand an important part of our relationship with God. It's good to take time to remember all the ways God has blessed us, whether by helping us with problems, giving us family, friends, and experiences, or any number of ways we've seen His presence in our lives. In the psalms, we find songs and poems that people created to praise and thank God for all He has done. And people in the Old Testament sometimes set up stones as physical reminders of the times God had shown His presence and faithfulness to them (Genesis 28:18-19; Joshua 4:1-9; 1 Samuel 7:12).

If you wanted to have a tangible way to remember God's presence and faithfulness in your life, you could write a song or set up a stone or some other kind of reminder, or you could even make a scrapbook with pictures and words detailing the ways God has blessed you and revealed His goodness. But in a way, a book like this already exists. The Bible—sometimes called the Good Book—is full of God's goodness throughout history. It tells us how He answers prayer and cares for people—and most importantly, how Jesus came to defeat sin and death and make us His children. Reflecting on all the things God has done for us in the past helps us remember that we can trust Him with our present and our future.

Because He loves us so deeply, God calls us to take time to look back and see how He has blessed us and helped us through all kinds of difficulties. He is eager to remind us just how trustworthy He is, and He invites us to rely on Him more and more. As we read about how He helped people in the Bible and how Jesus died and rose again to beat sin and death, we can know that the same God who helped His people generations ago still helps us today. He has not changed. We can always trust Him to help us and take care of us. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Are there any Bible passages that have been particularly meaningful to you? What moments in your life would you like to hold on to as reminders of God's trustworthiness? Is there some tangible way you could remind yourself of some of these good things God has done for you? _____

*I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
Psalm 77:11 (NIV)*

THE BOOK OF OBADIAH: RAIDING AND RIVALRIES

READ: OBADIAH 1:1-21

I hadn't read the book of Obadiah until about two years ago. It's the shortest book in the Old Testament (it's only one chapter), and it can be confusing. The book mostly centers on poems that cast judgement on the people of Edom, who were related to the Israelites through Abraham's family and who lived on the opposite side of the Dead Sea from the Israelites.

These two people groups had a rocky history that went all the way back to the twin sons of Isaac: Jacob (who would be renamed Israel) and Esau (who would also be called Edom). These twins fought and had a falling out (Genesis 25-28), and even though they had a moment of reconciliation (Genesis 33), their descendants would continue to have conflict throughout the years (Numbers 20:14-21). This conflict culminates in Edom raiding Israelite cities after Babylon takes Israel into captivity (Obadiah 1:10-14).

The first half of the book of Obadiah is about God holding this Israelite neighbor accountable for their raiding and their pridefulness as a nation. But then the author shifts their focus in verse 15 to talk about how the day of the Lord is coming for all nations. The author shows how all nations that are prideful like Edom will fall. The nation of Edom is a symbol for all the nations that will be repaid for their evil deeds when God's judgement comes.

But there is hope. God is full of love and mercy, so the book ends in a promise of restoration. God will bring justice, and He will do this through Jesus. Jesus is God the Son, and He is also a descendent of Jacob. First, by Jesus's death and resurrection He will defeat sin and death and forgive all who trust in Him, making us part of His new, holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). And when Jesus returns and ushers in the new creation, He promises to bring full restoration and peace. The fall of Edom points to the day Jesus will rid the world of all evils so there can be a new and glorious creation where all God's people live together in harmony. 📖 *Naomi Zylstra*

📖 What is a pain or hurt that you're looking forward to God's justice correcting? _____

📖 How can knowing that God's perfect justice and restoration will come someday give us hope and strength to pursue justice and restoration as we follow Jesus here and now? _____

But on Mount Zion will be deliverance; it will be holy, and Jacob will possess his inheritance. Obadiah 1:17 (NIV)

WAITING ON A PROMISE

READ: GENESIS 12:1-4; 21:1-5

One thing I've always had to keep practicing is patience. I'm more patient now than when I was younger, but having to wait for things still irritates me more than I would like. And as I've gotten older, I've had to wait longer for the things that are important to me.

When I was in school, I was surrounded by change, even if it didn't feel like it at the time. Every year I was in a new grade, with new teachers and new materials to learn. But now, a few years after I've graduated from college, things have slowed down. I've been at the same job for some time and moved into a house with my husband. Life has slowed down, and now I'm in a waiting and resting period.

Waiting is a huge part of God's story. I don't always see the full effect of waiting in the Bible because for me, I can turn the page and time has already passed in the story. For instance, in Genesis 12:1-4, God promised Abraham he would have many descendants. But then it was *twenty-five years* before Abraham and Sarah had their son Isaac (Genesis 21:1-5). This delay between God's promises and their fulfillment happens throughout the Bible. For example, David was a teenager when he was anointed to be king, but he didn't start his reign till he was thirty (1 Samuel 16:10-13; 2 Samuel 5:4).

The Israelites also had to wait hundreds of years for the Messiah, the Rescuer God promised them. And when Jesus the Messiah was born, He was not what the Israelites expected Him to be, but He was exactly what was promised. Even now, we are waiting for Jesus to return to make all things new. God has always included waiting in His story, but God has also always delivered on His promises. So, the next time we're waiting on God for an answer or a sign, let's look around and see what unexpected things we already have, and remember that our loving God's timing is often different from our own. 🕯️ *Naomi Zylstra*

🕯️ Is there something you've prayed for that you're still waiting for an answer on? Even in the midst of our waiting, Jesus is with us. He is always at work behind the scenes. How could it be comforting to know that God's people have always experienced periods of waiting, and God has always fulfilled His promises?

*Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart be courageous. Wait for the LORD.
Psalm 27:14 (CSB)*

NOT DEFEATED

READ: PSALM 32:1-5; ROMANS 6:12-14; 8:1-4; 1 JOHN 1:9

Do you ever feel down and defeated by things you've done that were wrong? Do you find yourself asking God for forgiveness several times before you really feel forgiven? If so, you're not alone; we all feel this way sometimes. But there is good news.

Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that God has already forgiven all our sins—past, present, and future—because of Jesus's death and resurrection. As we walk through life with Jesus, we will continue to struggle with sin until He makes all things new. But even when we stumble and fall, Jesus doesn't leave us. He is right there with us, inviting us to confess what we've done wrong and rest in His sure forgiveness. Then we are free to leave our sin in the past, get back on our feet, and keep walking with Him.

No matter how many times we fail, God forgives us and continues working in our lives to make us more like Jesus. We don't need to let ourselves feel defeated by sin, because Jesus has already defeated sin for us! When He died on the cross for us, His last words were, "It is finished" (John 19:30). God Himself paid the full penalty for our sin with His own life. There is no debt left to repay. And after three days in a tomb, Jesus rose from the grave—declaring His joyous victory over sin and death!

Our God is so much more powerful than any sin we could ever commit. And His love for us is far greater than any guilty feelings that might creep into our lives. So, whenever we've done something wrong, we can confess it to Jesus, knowing with absolute certainty that He promises to forgive us. We don't have to keep dwelling on what we've done in the past. Instead, leaving the sins we've confessed behind, we can go forward in our walk with Him. He loves us, and He will never leave us. 🕯

A. W. Smith

🕯 How can resting in Jesus's victory over sin and death empower us to "walk in love" (Ephesians 5:1-2), to freely love God and people as we go through life, instead of being weighed down by guilt and shame?

🕯 Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with about your struggles? How can you comfort and encourage each other when you're facing a particularly tempting sin pattern? _____

Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13-14 (CSB)

UNKNOWNNS

READ: PSALM 119:105-112; PROVERBS 3:3-6; ROMANS 8:35-39; HEBREWS 12:1-3

We face unknowns day by day. We don't know what life will be like next year or even next week. There are constant twists and turns. Some things happen so suddenly and so out of the blue that, left to our own resources, we could be left paralyzed.

Sometimes the unknowns, and the fears that come with them, can be overwhelming. But through all the change and uncertainty, one thing remains steady. God never changes. He loves us with a never-ending love. He never gives up on us, even when we give up on Him. And He always wants to help us. God's never-changing goodness was put on full display when He became human and lived among us. Jesus, God in flesh, gave up His life for us on the cross so we could live with Him forever. And then He rose from the dead, totally victorious over sin and death.

Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He is always with us. And when we keep our eyes on Jesus, we can keep walking forward. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." We are never stuck in darkness with Him at our side. Through the Holy Spirit, God helps us to trust Him. To believe He is who He says He is. To rest in Him and His promises. And to follow His gentle leadership.

We are never going to be sure or certain about the things that will happen in our lives. Oftentimes, even the things we plan for don't turn out exactly how we expect. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We can't plan ahead and know that it will be exactly how we want it to be. But we can trust God no matter what. He will be with us through it all. And as we follow His trustworthy guidance, the unknowns become a lot less scary. 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

🕯️ The unknowns of life can be overwhelming at times. But God generously provides comfort and guidance through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). Do you have any favorite Bible passages that have helped you through difficult times? Which one(s)? _____

🕯️ Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with about your struggles? How could you be intentional about encouraging and comforting each other this week? _____

🕯️ None of us knows what tomorrow will bring. How might it be freeing to rely on Jesus and commit ourselves to following Him in everything, instead of trying to figure out what to do in our own strength and wisdom? (John 10:27-30; James 4:13-17) _____

"I the LORD do not change. So you...are not destroyed." Malachi 3:6 (NIV)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW JESUS? AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Christianity rests on four truths about Jesus, the One the Bible is all about:

- 1. Jesus is fully God.** He is the Creator of the universe, the definition of good, the giver of life, and King over all.
- 2. Jesus is fully human.** He came to earth to save us from our sins. Sin is doing anything against God's good commands. Sin twists and breaks everything it touches, and it's the root cause of brokenness and death. It broke our relationship with our holy (or perfect) God, who must punish sin or He wouldn't be good or just.
- 3. Jesus offers us the only possible rescue** from sin and death. We can be rescued by putting our faith in Jesus. He is perfect, yet He took the punishment for our sins: dying on a cross. Then, He beat death by coming back to life. Knowing Jesus through faith restores our broken relationship with God because Jesus forgives our sins and clothes us in His sinlessness, as if we never sinned. He also gives us the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to begin to reject sin and live as new people in Christ.
- 4. Jesus is coming back** to make everything new. God's people will be raised from the dead, living forever with God and each other, free from sin. But those who have refused His offer of rescue and relationship will face eternal judgment (or punishment) for their sin.

Romans 10:9-10 sums up these truths: *"If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved"* (NLT).

So, if you believe and that belief compels you to openly say that

- you are a sinner,
- Jesus is Lord, the true God and King of the universe,
- you trust Him as the only way to save you from sin and death...

then you are a Christian.

Some people say a prayer when they become a Christian. There are no magic words, but you are welcome to use the following prayer as a guide: *"Dear God, I'm a sinner. I need to be saved from sin and death. You are the only way to save me because You are the living God and King over all. I trust You to save me, and I acknowledge that You are good and in control. In Jesus's name, Amen."*

Still not sure? That's okay! If you need more details about what it means to know Jesus, dig into the Bible—God's Word to us—and talk to a trusted Christian in your life, such as a camp counselor or pastor. Some great books of the Bible to start with are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Romans. If you want to look up the Bible verses we used to create this page, go to unlocked.org/knowjesus 📖