

UNLOCKED

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS

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Unlocked—Daily Readings for Teens

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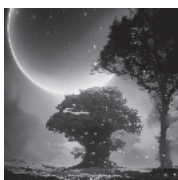
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Cover Story:

Merciful God

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GOD'S LOVE IS LIKE A STREET VENT

READ: PSALMS 136:1-26; 139:7-12; 1 JOHN 4:7-21

I was driving my usual route in town when I noticed something out of the ordinary—a mystic cloud of steam puffed from the streets' vents alongside my car. It looked majestic, floating there in the broad daylight of the winter day. I kept driving and noticed the street was lined with other billowing vents, large cotton-ball puffs floating next to me while I drove.

I'd been living in that town for months but never noticed the vents before. Yet they were always there, releasing their steam into the world. Only when the temperature got cooler could I notice the white floating clouds.

In a way, God's love is like a street vent. God is always there, releasing His love into the world, surrounding us with it. As we move forward, His love lines the road alongside us. On a warm spring day when life is sunny and bright, we might not notice it. Our hearts are full, and we might not feel like we need to search for His love.

Then winter comes. Cold, hard times settle in. We're still moving, driving down our paths, but now we might search out God's billowing love. It was always there, though, on the warm days and the cold ones. God's love was perfectly displayed in Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. No matter where we are, that same love is always, always with us.

I want to remember the street vents are there on those warm spring days. When things are going well, I want to remember God's love. I want to remember it's surrounding me and others too.

My spring season might be someone else's winter. They could be moving through the cold, unaware of God's love surrounding them on all sides. I want to help them feel the love, show them that even though it's cold, God's goodness is still billowing, still surrounding them during the journey. **Jenna Brooke Carlson**

! Happier seasons in life can point us to God's goodness, while more difficult times can remind us of our dependance on Him. What season of life do you find yourself in right now? Where do you see God's love present?

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever. Psalm 136:1 (NIV)



GETTING BUMPED

READ: MATTHEW 12:34-37; ROMANS 5:1-11; 1 JOHN 4:16-19

We all know the feeling. We're going about our day and something happens—a difficult conversation, a snag at school or work, a major food spill on our clothes, forgetting our lunch, etc. When something happens to mess up our plans or efforts, it's like a bump that pushes us off course. When things don't go our way, often a bit of what's in our hearts spills out. If our hearts are filled with patience and kindness, gentle words spill out. But if we're still working through hatred or fear, harsh words sometimes spill out instead.

What comes out when you get bumped—when things don't go right for you? When we realize we've acted in a harsh way toward someone, we can confess it to Jesus and to those we were harsh toward. We can rest assured that when we come to Jesus there is always forgiveness—no matter what we've said or done. He has already paid for all our sins through His death and resurrection, and He'll help us remember that He has filled our hearts with His love through the Holy Spirit. So, no matter what happens to bump our plans off course, His love can spill over onto others through our words and actions.

But what about when cruel words keep spilling out of us and we can't seem to stop? Jesus wants to help us with this too. Even when we mess up, out of Jesus's mouth flows grace, forgiveness, love, and promises for us—because that's what's in His heart for us. Through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church), He'll help us untangle any lies or false assumptions that get in the way of resting in the truth of His love for us and others. Remember that the kind of love He has for each of us is full of patience, kindness, and understanding...and that's the same love He's filled our hearts with. So, when we get bumped, we can trust Him to help us rest in His love and let others see that love overflowing from within us. **I**A. *W. Smith*

- I** Can you think of a time someone spilled unkind words on you? How did it feel? What might have been going on in their world when that happened? Even though unkindness is not excusable, understanding where people are coming from can help us have compassion on them. _____

- I** Can you think of a time you've been harsh when you've gotten bumped? How can resting in the truth of Jesus's love help us communicate with love and clarity, even when we get bumped? _____

- I** When you experience big emotions that you're not sure how to process, who are safe people in your life you can talk with—such as counselors, parents, pastors, etc.? _____

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

WILL I PREQUALIFY FOR BEING A CHRISTIAN?

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30; ROMANS 3:23-24; 5:6-11; COLOSSIANS 1:12-14

I've decided to begin looking for a house. Prices are coming down a little, and I have a good chunk of money in savings. It just feels like the right time. My parents explained the best next step would be to get pre-approved for a mortgage loan. This will let me know how much I can spend. So, I called the bank down the road to start the process. They directed me to fill out an online application, and I immediately began working on it. It was *extensive*. There were so many tabs and little boxes to complete. The final section was likely the scariest—my employment history. It reminded me of filing my taxes.

And, just like filing my taxes, I was terrified of making mistakes. Would the bank disqualify me? Would I be good enough? Did I make enough? Suddenly every coffee, every bag of chocolate-covered peanuts, every pack of fake nails I've ever bought played in my head. Had I even saved enough? That fear made me reluctant to even finish the application.

As I considered this, I thought of how people often don't come to Christ because they feel like they have to get themselves together first. They think they have to get back on the right track and get everything right before God will even accept them. But this isn't true. Unlike my loan that I have to "qualify" for, there is no qualifying for God. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

While we are still sinners, guys! Jesus Christ meets us where we are. He paid our debt. We don't have to tally it all up for Him. We don't have to hurry and walk old ladies across the street or serve in fifteen countries before God will be willing to "consider our application." The only thing we need to do is come to Him. 🕯️ *Natty Maelle*

🕯️ Do you ever feel like you have to "get yourself together" before you can go to God? Why do you think that is? (For more about how to have a relationship with God, see page 104.) _____

🕯️ When was the last time you talked through your heart with Jesus? Consider taking some time today to tell Him everything. Your hurts. Your sins. Your anger. And allow the Holy Spirit to speak into that moment. _____

🕯️ Have you heard this message before but still just don't believe it? That's okay. You can do a few things from here. First, you can reach out to trusted believers in your life and talk to them. But also, just take some time and talk to God about it. He wants us to question and grow.

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


WHY SHOULD I SERVE?

READ: JOHN 15:1-17; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-11; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13

If you've been part of a church, you've probably been told that, as Christians, we are called to serve others, help the hurting, and bring about justice (Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:35-40). That's part of how we participate in the kingdom of God. And we also know that Jesus will return to right every wrong, make all things new, and get rid of sin and death forever. So, if we know that Jesus is going to come fix everything, why do we bother to do anything?

This is a question I've bumped into in my walk with Jesus. It's true that if I did nothing but sit twiddling my thumbs all day, Jesus's plan to return and restore all of creation would not be thwarted in the slightest. But I think this mindset misses the point of the gospel.

When we put our trust in Jesus, His Spirit dwells within us and transforms our hearts in ways that compel us to serve (Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 5:5; Philippians 2:13). When God shows us how deeply He loves us, we can't help but love others. When He shows us how utterly good He is, we want others to experience that goodness. When He shows us the things that break His heart, our hearts break, too. When we realize how He has served us, we are drawn to serve others. When we've experienced the power of the gospel—that Jesus, out of His great love for us, died on the cross and rose again from the dead, and that He desires for His people and His creation to be made whole—that power takes root in us. It shapes our desires into God's desires. And that desire moves us to action.

So, through the power of the gospel, we can serve others out of love, hope, and peace. Not out of anxiety that things won't get done, or fear that we'd better serve or we'll get in trouble, or shame for not living up to certain expectations, but out of an overflowing of God's love and a deep desire to see His goodness on display. Until the day we die or Jesus returns, we can serve because, from the very core of our being, we *want* to. Because Jesus and the wholeness He brings is just too good to keep to ourselves.  *Taylor Eising*

 When have you felt a desire to serve others? What was that like? _____

 How can knowing Jesus's love for us compel us to share that love with others? _____

We love each other because he loved us first. 1 John 4:19 (NLT)

ARE YOU RUNNING ON EMPTY?

READ: GENESIS 2:1-3; MATTHEW 11:28-12:13; LUKE 5:16

Are you running on empty? Are you overburdened with clubs, hobbies, schoolwork, sports, church activities, part-time jobs, or other commitments? In our fast-paced world, it can be easy to say “yes” to too many things and fill our lives so full, there’s no room left for rest. The following might be signs you need to take a step back and take some time to be refreshed.

Irritability: When we’re overloaded, we often feel tired, frustrated, and impatient. The smallest things become hugely annoying, like an offhanded remark, a person’s mannerisms or quirks, a chatty friend or sibling when you want to concentrate, etc. So, if you find yourself losing your temper over things that normally wouldn’t bother you, this might be an indicator you’re running on empty.

Feeling overwhelmed and exhausted: Are the hobbies, social events, work, and other things you normally enjoy starting to lose their excitement, instead sparking a sense of dread as you wonder how you can possibly manage your time? Do you find your mood changes rapidly and you are more sensitive than usual? Do you need to rely on adrenaline to motivate you? The problem with living this way is, when we do stop and take a break, we find ourselves needing lots of rest because we have burned ourselves out.

Physical aches and pains: When we are swamped with a hectic schedule, it can take a toll on our bodies. Headaches, fatigue, and being more susceptible to colds and other bugs can be indicators that we are rundown.

What can you do? Remember, even Jesus needed time to rest (John 4:6). He preached to crowds and healed countless people, but at times He needed a solitary place to recuperate. God the Son would make time to be alone with His Father. In the same way, we need moments when we can relax and hand over our burdens to Jesus, whether that looks like taking a walk outdoors, sitting quietly and meditating on Scripture, or even just taking some deep breaths.

Remember, you are important to God. When we take time to rest, it can be an opportunity to remember that Jesus has already done the work of saving us, and there’s nothing we need to do to earn His love. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 How could you prioritize rest? Is there anything in your schedule that needs to change? Who is a trusted Christian who could help you discern God’s guidance in how to use your time wisely? _____

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)

THE SUPERCCELL

READ: PSALM 46; MARK 4:35-41

Have you ever heard the meteorological term *supercell*? It's an unusually large storm cell, and its clouds form the shape of a huge anvil. This kind of weather system has separate updrafts and downdrafts, and it produces severe wind and thunderstorms, large hail, and even tornadoes. A supercell can be a good analogy for what it feels like to have a panic attack.

It begins as a gentle breeze in the corner of your mind. "What if...?" Soon, though, it picks up velocity and force and begins to spin out of control, growing larger with each worse-case scenario imagined. The panic takes your breath away and causes your heart to pound as it rips through your mind, leaving you torn and broken, your peace and hope in shambles.

A panic attack is just as real and scary to the person having it as a tornado is to those in its path. Although the damage isn't always visible, it can be as devastating as a violent storm.

If you've experienced debilitating anxiety or a panic attack, you know that it feels like the world is spinning out of control. Fear can be coupled with physical symptoms like heart palpitations, dizziness, or even chest pain. But aren't Christians supposed to be protected from such things? Doesn't the Bible say over and over, "Don't be afraid"? True, God does give us His protection, His comfort, and His presence, but that doesn't mean Christians are immune to the brokenness in the world, including anxiety and panic attacks.

So how can we find shelter from the winds of worry and fear? The God who made the world and saw that it was good is the same God who came to live among us after that world was broken by sin (Genesis 1:31; John 1:14). He is the same God who was with His disciples in the storm-tossed boat. He stilled the winds, and He says, "I will never leave you or abandon you" (Hebrews 13:5). He died and rose again for us, and He promises to return one day and make all things new—free from sin and its effects, including anxiety and panic attacks. In the meantime, He offers healing in Himself but also by the gifts He has given through medicine and counseling.

If anxiety and panic are blowing your calm to bits, know that you are not alone. This doesn't make you a "bad Christian," and it doesn't mean you don't have true faith. God is with you, even in the middle of your storm. 🕯️ *Mary Rozendal*

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me and rescued me from all my fears.
Psalm 34:4 (CSB)*

🔑 Have you experienced anxiety or panic attacks? Sadly, in our world that is broken by sin, many people experience these things at some point in their lives, and this is nothing to be ashamed of. Instead of hiding our pain, God invites us to be honest with Him and with people we trust so we can experience healing.*

🔑 The American Psychological Association describes panic attacks this way: “a sudden onset of intense apprehension and fearfulness in the absence of actual danger, accompanied by the presence of such physical symptoms as heart palpitations, difficulty breathing, chest pain or discomfort, choking or smothering sensations, sweating, and dizziness. The attack occurs in a discrete period of time and often involves fears of going crazy, losing control, or dying” (dictionary.apa.org/panic-attack). A panic attack might follow troubling thoughts or begin during a stressful situation, or it might happen unexpectedly. And panic attacks are not necessarily caused by anxiety; sometimes they are a result of treatable medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism. While having or witnessing a panic attack can be frightening, God is right there with us, grieving our hurts alongside us and holding us securely in His love (Romans 8:38-39). And He provides help, not only through His Word and through prayer, but also through professional counselors, therapists, and doctors who can help find the root cause of a person’s panic attacks and recommend things that can help, such as counseling, medication, or lifestyle changes.

🔑 Do you know someone who suffers from panic attacks or anxiety? How could you offer peace and be a calming presence to them? It’s always a good idea to ask this particular person what would be helpful to them, preferably at a time when they’re feeling calm and safe. Then listen carefully to what they say, and feel free to ask clarifying questions. This is one way we can “carry one another’s burdens” and love each other the way Jesus loves us (Galatians 6:2).

* If you’re struggling with anxiety or if you’ve experienced a panic attack, who is a trusted adult you could talk to about it? 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.



WONDERFULLY MADE

READ: GENESIS 1:26-31; PSALM 139:12-16; ISAIAH 64:8

When you look at yourself in a mirror, what do you think? Maybe you like who you are, or maybe you're critical of yourself. Either way, God shows us the right way of seeing ourselves in His Word.

In Psalm 139:13-14, King David pondered how the Lord created us. He said: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

The Lord created YOU! When He made you, He thought of you and created you as a marvelous work. Isn't it amazing to think that you are "wonderfully made"? You're not just an *okay* work, but a *marvelous* work. And, because God is everywhere, He was present even when you were still in your mother's womb, and He will continue to be present throughout the rest of your life.

Not only did God create you, He longs to be with you. That's why Jesus—God in human flesh—died and rose again to make the way for you to be in close relationship with Him. Once you've put your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). You can take comfort in the fact that this all-loving God is the same One who created you as a wonderful and beautiful being.

The next time you look in the mirror and are tempted to criticize yourself, you can remember that the Lord lovingly formed every bit of you and created you as a marvelous work. You are fearfully and wonderfully made by the Creator of all things, and you are the work of His hands. **✦** *Lydia Lancia*

✦ Isn't it amazing to think that God made each of us as a marvelous work? Yet, it's easy to forget this truth as we go about our daily lives. One way you could remind yourself is by writing down a verse about how God created you and sticking it on your mirror, your locker, or somewhere else you'll see it often. Does one of today's verses resonate with you in particular? _____

✦ When you create something you're proud of, how do you feel? How do you think God feels about making you? _____

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:14 (NIV)



JULIA OTA: A FRAGRANT BLOOM FOR CHRIST

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 2:12-17

A child and a spoil of war. Forced to live with the enemy, far from home. Then, as a young woman, a war prize again, forced to serve the nation's most powerful leader. Finally, exiled to an island for her Christian faith.

This was the life of Julia Ota, who lived over four hundred years ago. Japanese warriors invaded her Korean home and swept her back to Japan, an unjust and tragic event, especially for a child. But Julia also grew up experiencing God's blessing, goodness, and transforming love. In Japan, an influential Christian general and his wife raised her as their own. She was baptized and named Julia.

Life changed again for Julia, however, when Tokugawa Ieyasu won a decisive battle, became Shogun, and executed the Christian general. Julia became the Shogun's lady-in-waiting.

When she was faced with an ultimatum, Julia refused to deny Christ, who loved her and had sacrificed Himself and been raised for her. So, the Shogun exiled her to the Izu Islands. On the islands, she cared for those who were weak, sick, or in need of encouragement.

Like a beautiful flower, Julia's love for Christ spread a healing fragrance of joy and hope everywhere she went. Her charity and evangelism are still remembered in Japan and Korea today with various memorials and even an annual festival!

How amazing is it that Jesus is at work even in the worst of circumstances? 🕯

Sonja Anderson

🕯 As Christians, when we go through terrible circumstances in our lives, we can know that Jesus Christ holds us through it all and He is working for our good (Romans 8:28-29, 35-39). How might this truth embolden us to share His goodness with others, even in the midst of hardship? _____

🕯 Has anyone in your life shared Jesus's joy, hope, and healing with you? What was it like? _____

🕯 Is there anyone in your life who might need the fragrance of Jesus's joy, hope, and healing in their life? Consider spending some time in prayer, asking God how you might spread the love and knowledge of Christ to that person. _____

For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 2 Corinthians 2:15 (NIV)

GOD OF SPIDERS

READ: GENESIS 1:20-31; ISAIAH 11:6-9; ROMANS 8:18-25

How do you feel about spiders? Many people have strong opinions about these web-making creatures. They often inspire fear or disgust. But the reality is, although some spiders' venom can cause pain or illness to humans, most spiders are harmless to large beings like us. In fact, there are a lot of things we can appreciate about spiders. They construct beautiful webs of silvery strands connected to make a lacy pattern, which sparkle with dew drops in the morning sun. They also do some important pest control because their diet includes insects. We can be thankful that the presence of spiders means there will be fewer bugs that can sting or bite us, or eat the plants we rely on for food, or carry diseases that could be spread to humans or animals.

Spiders have a purpose, just like all the other animals, plants, etc. we find in our world. God made everything good. But when sin came into the world, it changed things. All that God made good was bound to death and decay (Romans 8:21). That's why now there are bugs that can bite or sting us and diseases that make us sick.

But it will not always be this way, because Jesus came into our broken world, and He faced death head on—for us. He died for our sins, and then He rose from the grave, declaring victory over sin and all its effects, including death and decay. One day, Jesus will return and make all things new, and everything that has been warped by sin will be made right again. Then spiders won't be scary to us anymore, and “there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). On that glorious day, “the baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy” (Isaiah 11:8-9).

So, think about the creatures you're unsure of. How might they play an important part in God's world? When we take the time to notice how everything is good for something, it can help us marvel at the greatness of God and all He has made. We can rest in God's role as Creator and in His promise to one day restore all His creation to the way He intended it to be. **✪** *A. W. Smith*

✪ What is your favorite creature? What about your least favorite? What good might these creatures bring to the world? Consider taking a moment to thank God for that good work and for His promise to one day make all things new, free from sin and death. _____

*Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!
Genesis 1:31a (NLT)*

ALL THINGS NEW

READ: PSALM 51; REVELATION 21:1-5



God can make all things new. That's what the Bible tells us. It's easy to believe, too, when it's spring and everything is changing in the world around us. But it can be harder to see in fall and winter, when trees start to lose their leaves. The whole world becomes a bit barren. Everything looks gloomy and gray. But then the weather starts to warm a bit; little signs of spring and life appear. Buds pop up on the trees. Flowers push up from the ground. The grass starts to brighten. Spring comes, and suddenly the world is beautiful again. Everything is new.

That's what God can do in our lives. He can make us fresh and bright and new. He can take us from any dark and wintry place and help us see spring again.

God can renew our lives, even though we have all sinned and made mistakes. One example is in Psalm 51. David wrote this psalm after he repented of his sin—using his position as king of Israel to have sex with Bathsheba and then have her husband killed. David had been in a season of darkness and despair, lost in his sin, but after the prophet Nathan confronted him, David trusted God to cleanse him of his sin and make him new again (2 Samuel 11-12).

We can also see God's renewal in the life of Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament. Before Paul knew Jesus, he killed and persecuted Christians. Then one day, God met him on the road with a bright light and transformed him and made him new by the power of Jesus's death and resurrection (Acts 9:1-31).

God loves us, and He can take anything and make it new. When you feel in need of spring in your life, you can ask Him to help you find it. 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

🕯️ Where do you need renewal in your life? A painful situation, a persistent sin, a broken relationship? You can bring all of these to Jesus in prayer, asking for new life. He loves you, and He is listening. _____

🕯️ Because of Jesus, any sin can be forgiven, and any life can be made new. And when Jesus returns, He will establish the new heavens and the new earth—then sin and death and suffering will be no more, and everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will live with Him forever! How can observing the spring season help us remember Jesus's bountiful forgiveness and look forward to His glorious return? _____

*He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"
Revelation 21:5a (NIV)*

LEARNING TO LAMENT

READ: LAMENTATIONS 3:19-22; ROMANS 12:15

Have you ever heard of lament? In Christianity, lament is the practice of telling God about your hurts, anger, and disappointments—and asking Him to do something about it. Sometimes we find it hard to lament something we have lost. We tend to prefer laughter to crying, joy to anxiety, celebration to nostalgia, and happiness to mourning. Anxiety, sadness, anger, and nostalgia are part of the spectrum of human experiences and therefore normal to every human. They must be embraced, not avoided.

I don't know why we have the idea that following the God who gives joy means that we cannot experience sadness, anger, or anxiety. Sometimes, we feel pressured to be happy all the time even when the Bible teaches that weeping, lamenting, and mourning are regular experiences for those who follow Jesus. In fact, Paul encourages us to “weep with those who weep,” not to command them to feel well (Romans 12:15).

Instead of shunning uncomfortable emotions, we can normalize saying things like “I'm angry,” “I'm hurt,” “I need time to process,” or “I'd like to talk to someone.” God enables us to embrace uncomfortable emotions. Jesus Himself experienced uncomfortable emotions like anxiety, grief, and sadness (Luke 22:44; John 11:33-35). He invites us to process all our feelings with Him, trusting in His unfailing love. And even when we don't have words, He laments for us, on our behalf. In the midst of grief, sadness, and anxiety, the first step to regaining hope is to allow ourselves to recognize these emotions. Some other things we can do to help process difficult emotions are:

- Talk to someone. Friends, family, and health professionals can be of great help.
- Recognize and accept that you are going to have bad days. The faster you recognize it, the more comfortable you'll feel with it. It's okay to not be okay.
- Don't try to move on to the next thing. Listen to your emotions; they're trying to talk to you and give you important information about how you're doing.

As you do these things, bring your feelings to Jesus in lament. It may feel uncomfortable at first, but tell Him how angry, sad, disappointed, or hurt you are. God is not afraid or ashamed of your feelings, and you don't have to be either. Let's embrace lament, it's normal. 🕯️ *Samir Eljagh*

🕯️ What do you need to lament right now? If you're ready, you can write your own lament. For some ideas about where to start, you can read Psalm 13, Psalm 88, and Psalm 102. _____

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

SCENTED CANDLES

READ: EPHESIANS 6:18-20; PHILIPPIANS 2:12-16; 1 PETER 3:15-16

As Christians, we're called to share the good news of Jesus with others. And this is a wonderful thing—it's an honor to be entrusted with such a task. But have you ever been around somebody telling others about Jesus in a way that just doesn't seem all that great? It might feel like this person is bragging because they know Jesus and others don't. While it's commendable to have the courage to speak up about Jesus, we should be careful to consider the way we witness to others. If people don't even like to be around us, maybe our approach needs to change.

In Matthew 5, Jesus tells His disciples, "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (verse 14-16). A person's witness—the way they share Jesus with others—can be like a floodlight shining in someone's eyes, blinding them. On the other hand, a witness with a kind, gentle spirit is like a scented candle (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). As Christians, sometimes we're tempted to be a floodlight in situations when a candle is needed.

Think about it this way—imagine you walk into your friend's home, and you're greeted by the warm, calming scent of coconut. Even though the smell is coming from a candle, it makes you hungry for your favorite dessert: coconut cake. Just as a scented candle can make us hungry for the real thing, a gentle witness can make people hungry to know Jesus. When we consistently treat others the way Jesus would and gently tell them what He means to us, they can see the difference He's made in our lives. Then they may decide they want to know Him too.

So, how will you witness? Will you be like a floodlight, trying to shine God's truth on people all at once? Or will you be like a scented candle, gently yet consistently pointing to Him in your words and actions? While there are times when a direct conversation with someone about Jesus is necessary, we should never do it with a know-it-all attitude. Instead, we can remember that we need Jesus just as much as anybody, and we can let our lives be filled with the aroma of His love and kindness so others will be hungry to know Him too. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Think about how you came to know Jesus. Were there any people who were like scented candles in your life? What did they do or say that was helpful? _____

✦ Consider taking some time to reread today's Bible passages and write down what sticks out to you about how we're called to share the good news. (More about this good news on page 104.)

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16 (NIV)


CHRISTIANS ARE ALLOWED TO BE HAPPY

READ: NEHEMIAH 8:8-12; PSALMS 16:9-11; 68:3-6


Some of us have grown up thinking that Christians are meant to be serious all of the time. It's like we see a group of people having fun and laughing loudly and we think, "No, that's not for us." Some people are even hesitant to become Christians because they're worried about all they would have to give up. They might wonder whether or not they would ever be allowed to be happy again. But the Bible doesn't say Christians aren't supposed to be happy. Instead, the Bible talks about joy and even happiness coming to those who follow God!

For example, Psalm 68:3 says, "May the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful." Who are the righteous? Well, apart from God, none of us are righteous, or sinless. But Jesus died on the cross for us and rose from the grave so we could be counted righteous before God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

So, why shouldn't we be happy? We have a God who loves us, who delights in us, and who is watching over us. As Christians, we have been saved from sin and death, and nothing will ever separate us from God's love. And we have hope that one day Jesus will return to renew heaven and earth. We are going to live with Him forever in the most beautiful and perfect place.

Hard times will come, and we will have days when we feel down about all that we are facing, but we don't have to stay that way. When we start to feel happy again, we can lean into that. We can rejoice. We can have a good time! We don't have to live our days acting completely serious and somber. Our faith is not a burden that is weighing us down. It's a wonderful gift! When we know Jesus, we "are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 Peter 1:8).  *Emily Acker*

 Do you ever feel like God doesn't want you to be happy? Why do you think that is? _____

 God delights in His creation, and He invites us to delight with Him in all He has made! What are some of the things that make you happy—like your favorite foods, favorite music, favorite places, etc.? Consider taking a moment to thank God for these things! _____

 If you feel like God may be calling you to give up something because it's getting in the way of the abundant life He has for you (John 10:10), who is a trusted Christian mentor you could talk to about it? _____

*But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful.
Psalm 68:3 (NIV)*

FILLED

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-16; GALATIANS 5:16-26; EPHESIANS 5:1-20

I've always had a sweet tooth. On one special occasion, this served as a great qualification for a unique job. My family and I had joined with others in our community for a fun-filled summer day, complete with a barbecue, picnic, games, and a dessert contest. I had been asked to arrive early and help judge the desserts. My mouth watered at the idea!

Over one hundred people were there, and multiple people in each family submitted a dessert to be judged. I ate just a small amount of each sweet treat entered in the competition. But after dozens and dozens of cakes, cookies, and pies, I was too full for the barbecue. I skipped the meal because I'd eaten so many bites of dessert that I couldn't hold anything else.

That day, fulfilling my role as judge, I filled up on sweets and had no room for more nutritious food. In our spiritual lives, we're invited to be filled as well—but with something more than sweets. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul writes, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit."

When we put our trust in Jesus—believing in His life, death, and resurrection—our sins are forgiven, we become God's children, and He sends His Spirit, who is God, to live in us. Isn't that amazing? The Holy Spirit indwells all believers, comforting us and helping us understand God's Word, know His love, follow His leading, and pray according to God's will.

Not only does God the Holy Spirit dwell inside followers of Jesus, He wants to *fill* us. Whatever fills us sets the direction for our choices and actions and leaves room for nothing else. When we have a relationship with God in His Son, we can choose to live filled with His Spirit. 📖 *Allison Wilson Lee*

- 📖 If we know Jesus, the Holy Spirit lives in us, or indwells us. Consider taking a moment to thank God for this amazing gift! (If you want to dig deeper, read more about the Holy Spirit in John 14:15-27; 15:26; Romans 5:5; 8:1-39; Ephesians 1:13-14; Philippians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:7.)
- 📖 We are called to pursue God first and foremost. When we do, all our other desires and pursuits find their right place in our hearts and in our lives. What are you tempted to pursue over God? _____
- 📖 When we are yielding to the Spirit, we are empowered to follow God's good ways, we can confess and turn away from sin, and we see the fruit the Spirit produces in our lives: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). What does a Spirit-filled life look like? (Hint: reread today's Bible passages.) _____

...be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 (NLT)

CLOAK OF OFFENSES

READ: PROVERBS 19:11; 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-5; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-13

Frigid air made my eyes water as I pulled my cloak tighter around me. I watched my breath come out in little puffs of white, an ode to the snow that most certainly lingered on the horizon. Night would soon be upon me, and I needed to make camp and a fire, but my cloak called to me.

Opening the folds of my leather cloak, I pulled out one of the gems from one of the many pockets: an egg-sized ruby. Shimmering in its crimson depths was a tale from my past, this one not fifty days old. *"We are sorry, but you're just not who we need."* My fingers gripped the ruby harder as the memory washed over me. *"This other warrior is more qualified to complete the task..."* My cheeks burned with shame and anger as I placed the gem back in its pocket.



As the sun broke over the mountains, I stretched my stiff back. I had lost more time than I thought caught up in reminiscing over that ruby, so when I finally fell asleep, my bedding of hard ground had to suffice. Tonight I would take the time to craft an appropriate bed. My stomach protested in hunger, reminding me that I needed sustenance for the journey ahead.

But, the cloak called to me. Deep in a pocket near my heart, I reached for an emerald as large as my fist. The glistening green of the gem blurred as tears clouded my vision. I watched a scene I knew well despite the years that had passed. *"The way you handled that was wrong...I can't believe how much time I've wasted being with you."* This memory hurt more than others, for the person speaking was dear to my heart. Hours passed of reliving the hurt before I remembered I must continue my journey.

At midday, I could feel my steps growing heavier, my energy waning. How would I ever make it to my destination? Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash of light—and a man materialized beside me. Stunned into silence, I gaped at Him while He smiled at me. This smile was the most genuine, kind smile I had ever seen. He spoke no words but simply placed a warm hand on my shoulder.

"I can't make the journey; it's too much for me." I don't know why I shared this, but something in me told me I could place my trust in Him. He gestured to my cloak, and I noticed deep scars on His hands. "This cloak? Oh, I need it." He looked straight into my eyes, and I saw the depth of His love for me.

He held out His scarred hands and waited. Somehow I knew, without Him saying a word, that He would wait all day, all my life even. I knew that He would be here whenever I was ready. I pulled my cloak tighter around me and attempted another step, staggering under the weight.

Tears shone in His eyes, brighter than any gem. In His eyes, I saw my past, present, and future. I saw every mistake I had ever made and how I broke His heart time and again. In spite of all the times I had offended Him, I saw the end result: He died for me. Those nail scars on His hands were because of me.

Weeping, I fell to my knees and handed Him the heavy cloak. If He loves me enough to give His life for me and forgive all my offenses, the least I could do was give Him my life. "I don't have much," I whispered, "but I choose to give You my cloak of offenses. Help me fix my eyes on Your love instead."

He pulled me to my feet and kept my hand in His. Together, we took a step. The air was still cold without my cloak, but His presence kept me warm. I was finally free. 🕯️ *Savannah Coleman*

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

- 🕯️ Many things can burden us. Our own sin can weigh us down and make moving forward seem impossible. We may feel like we don't deserve the freedom and forgiveness Jesus offers. However, our perfect and humble Jesus loves us so much that He took our sin upon Himself when He died on the cross and rose from the grave (1 Peter 2:24). He freely gives mercy to all who believe in Him. Because of Jesus's sacrifice, we don't have to be overwhelmed in our sin; we can find hope in a restored relationship with Him. (More about this good news on page 104.)
- 🕯️ Because we live in a broken world, we are affected by sin and brokenness—our own and other people's. Their offenses to us, whether intentional or unintentional, can cause us pain. We might be hesitant to let go of these hurtful things, but if we know Jesus, His Spirit lives in us, so we can make the choice not to dwell on offenses. Because of Jesus's love and forgiveness for us, we are called and equipped to love and forgive others (Ephesians 4:32). Consider taking some time to bring your burdens to Jesus, telling Him about the hurts you've experienced, confessing any sins that come to mind, and asking Him to bless the people who've offended you (Matthew 5:44).



UNDERSTANDING BIBLE VISIONS

READ: EZEKIEL 1; REVELATION 1

When you start reading the Bible, it doesn't take long to realize there is some strange stuff in prophetic books like Revelation and Ezekiel, especially the visions about crazy creatures and symbols that seem bizarre in our contemporary context. Why are those things in the Bible if they're hard to understand and interpret?

Well, since everything in the Bible is there for a reason and inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), I've begun to realize the value of having confusing things in the Bible. These passages aren't always written literally; they use a lot of figurative language. Often, visions use the word "like," meaning this is the writer's way of describing something unfamiliar to us by comparing it to something familiar. For example, in Revelation 1:16, John writes that his vision of Christ was "like the sun shining in all its brilliance." These visions are so beyond our imaginations that we as humans can only begin to describe them by comparing them to something simpler.

I'm still often confused after reading passages in the Bible that are full of wild imagery and symbolism, but they remind me of something important: God is beyond our understanding. His thoughts and plans are way beyond what we can fully grasp (Isaiah 55:8-9). Reading passages in the Bible that confuse me fills me with a sense of awe and wonder at God's hugeness and power. And it's amazing to think that this huge, powerful God became human and lived among us. In fact, the whole Bible points toward Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of His ministry and His coming kingdom (Luke 24:27; John 5:39; 20:31; Acts 8:26-40). He lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and was resurrected from the dead on our behalf. The Bible reveals that God loves us so much, and He made the way for us to know Him and be with Him forever in Christ.

It's humbling to remember how little I know and understand, but comforting to know that in the vastness of the universe, the King and Creator of it all knows me, loves me, and cares about the little details of my life. 📖 *Abby Ciona*

📖 What are some of the Bible passages that confuse you? Who could you talk to about these passages, such as pastors, teachers, parents, or church elders? One helpful way to move forward is to use a study Bible (either a physical Bible, an app, or a website with notes from reputable Bible scholars). What resources can you find to help you understand the Bible in a deeper way? _____

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8-9 (NIV)

PASTORS ARE PEOPLE TOO

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27; 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-9

Have you ever wondered what pastors do when they're not preaching, visiting people in hospitals, or doing other pastoral things? Some people seem to think pastors study and read the Bible all the time. While pastors do study more than most people because they teach God's Word at church, they're really just like anybody else. Jesus continues to work in the lives of pastors and help them get to know Him better, just like He does with other Christians.

It's easy to be awed by someone who holds a church leadership position, and we might even start to assume they're some kind of superhuman Christian. But this isn't the case. Pastors need Jesus just as much as we all do! Even though church leaders have what the Bible calls "an honorable position" teaching God's Word, they are regular people (1 Timothy 3:1). They have likes, dislikes, hobbies, trials, joys, families, and friends. They have temptations, they sin, and they need forgiveness—just like the rest of us. Simply put, pastors are people too.

So, get to know your pastors if you can, and pray for them. Remember that pastors have physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational needs just like we all do. They have their own questions and doubts and temptations and times when they don't feel connected to God. They need time to rest, and they need support and guidance and accountability from people they trust.

Even though pastors are leaders in the church, they are still part of the church. And we all need each other. So, as you pray for the pastors in your life, you can ask God to provide for their needs and help them share His love with others—including you. And you can also ask God to show you ways your whole church community, including pastors, can serve and bless each other. In this way, we get to reflect the same love Christ has shown all of us. **✱** *A. W. Smith*

✱ What pastors do you know? What assumptions have you made about their lives? _____

✱ What are some ways you can pray for and show Jesus's love to your pastor(s) and your whole church community? Consider taking some time to pray and write down whatever comes to mind. _____

✱ Pastors are part of the church, which the Bible sometimes calls "the body of Christ." Each of us is a vital part of the body, and as we abide in Jesus we learn to love each other well. If you want to dig deeper, read John 15:1-17; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:25-13:13; 1 Peter 4:8-11.

*"If someone aspires to be a church leader, he desires an honorable position."
1 Timothy 3:1 (NLT)*

DISTRACTED DRIVING

READ: MATTHEW 7:1-5; GALATIANS 6:1-10

What are they doing?" I grumbled to myself, watching a bright orange pickup truck in my rearview mirror weave in and out of traffic behind me. The driver apparently wanted to go faster than the cars in front of them, and kept tailgating the other cars and zooming over to the next lane to try to get ahead. This orange truck was far enough behind me that I didn't feel unsafe, but I kept watching scornfully in my rearview mirror.

Suddenly, I realized it had been several seconds since I actually looked at the road ahead of me. I had been so preoccupied with the orange truck that I wasn't paying attention to my own driving. Thankfully, the road was calm and nobody had slammed on their brakes ahead of me, otherwise I could have gotten into an accident. I felt a prick of guilt thinking about my kids sitting in the back seat and how they could have been hurt because I wasn't paying attention.

Sometimes, we do the same thing in our spiritual lives. We see somebody do something outrageous and obviously evil, and we get so wrapped up watching them and judging them that we fail to notice our own sin. And sin always causes hurt.

The truth is, I have no control over how other people act. When somebody does something terrible—especially somebody I don't know personally—I can mourn their sin and pray for God's restoration, and that's about it. Everything else is just gawking. But when I see sin creeping its way into my own heart, I can actually do something about it. I can look to Jesus, who died and rose again for me—and for the driver of the orange truck—and ask Him to take this sin away from me. I can lean on His strength, forgiveness, and healing, and seek His wisdom in how to move on. And I can look forward to the day when He will return to resurrect us from the dead and rid the world of all sin—including mine—permanently.

And that does a lot more good than gawking. *✦ Taylor Eising*

✦ Why do you think it's easier to focus on other people's sin than our own sin? In what areas of your life are you tempted to do this? _____

✦ God already knows all our sin, and He has secured our forgiveness through Jesus's death and resurrection. Consider taking a moment to confess any of your own sins that come to mind. You can ask for His restoration and guidance in your own life, and also in other people's lives. _____

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" Matthew 7:3 (NIV)

BREATHING NEW LIFE

READ: ROMANS 6:1-11

Sometimes I watch the seasons progress with awe. Everything looks dead in winter, and then suddenly one day in the spring, daffodils start popping up, and soon after the trees blossom and turn green. God has a pattern of bringing new life.

In the beginning, God created everything, including people. Adam was nothing more than dust before God gathered up that dust, formed it, and breathed life into Adam. He gave Adam and Eve the calling to rule over the creatures of the Earth, giving dignity and purpose to what was once nothing but dust (Genesis 1:26-30). Similarly, God blessed Sarah's 90-plus-year-old womb and gave her and Abraham a baby: Isaac. In this way God fulfilled His promise, and through Isaac He brought forth the whole nation of Israel (Genesis 17:15-19; 21:1-7).

Generations later, Jesus called His followers to a new life. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew, two ordinary fishermen, He said, "Come, follow me...and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him" (Matthew 4:19-20). When Jesus called Levi, a tax collector who would've been considered a traitor to His own people, Jesus simply said, "Follow me" (Mark 2:14), and Levi got up from his tax collector's booth and followed. These disciples left everything behind because Jesus called them to a new life. They went on to be leaders of the early church and served a great purpose as Christianity was just starting out. They became willing to endure terrible suffering and hardship because of Jesus.

And Jesus Himself rose from the dead to new life. Jesus's miraculous resurrection aligns so well with the character of God. Of course Jesus was resurrected into new life, and of course God invites us into that new life. That's what He does! We see it all throughout God's story, we see it in the beautiful world He has created, and we see it in our own lives. **✦ Naomi Zylstra**

- ✦ Where have you seen God breathing new life in and around you? If nothing comes to mind, you can ask God to help you see how He has been working. _____
- _____
- ✦ Do you have a favorite story from the Bible where God gave new life and purpose to something or someone that was dead (either literally deceased or otherwise hopeless)? _____
- _____
- ✦ When Jesus returns, He will raise us to new life, and everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will live with Him forever! If you want to know more, check out page 104.

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7 (NIV)

GOD IS REFLECTED IN OUR CREATIVE NATURE

READ: GENESIS 1:26-31; 2:7, 15; JOHN 1:1-5

God created everything in the world, including us. We were created in His own image. How incredible is that? Nothing else in this world has that same stamp from the Creator.

Think about all the incredible things God has designed and made. The beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the flowers growing from season to season, the high peaks of mountains, the waves crashing on the beach. The list goes on and on. The world around us shows His creativity in many ways.

Because we were made in His image, we also have that creativity within us. We have the ability to make new and beautiful things. We have the ability to add beauty to the lives of the people around us through what we make, and we can also admire and appreciate the beauty other people have created.

Each of us has been gifted differently, but we all have the ability to create. We might enjoy writing stories or music. Maybe we're talented at coding a video game or baking a delectable cake. Perhaps we can decorate a room or craft something out of wood. Or maybe we have a passion for gardening, sewing, organizing a space, making a new tool, or a thousand other things.

When we lean into the creative side of ourselves, we can grow in our relationship with God and reveal to others how God works in us. If we know Jesus—having put our trust in Him and believed in His life, death, and resurrection—He is always with us. Because His Holy Spirit lives inside believers, we can rely on Him to lovingly guide our creative process. As we work with Him, we can embrace the way we were designed to create. **📖** *Tynea Lewis*

📖 Can you think of a time when seeing somebody's creativity reminded you of God's creativity? What was that like? _____

📖 What is your favorite way to create? There are endless ways to be creative, and you will probably encounter more and more areas of creativity throughout your life. How do you think God feels when you engage in something creative? _____

📖 If you want to dig deeper, read Exodus 28:3-4; 31:1-6; 35:30-6:1.

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)

BREAD OF GOD

READ: EXODUS 16:4; MATTHEW 6:9-11, 31-34; JOHN 6:25-51

Father, we come, we kneel, we pray.
As You have commanded
we ask bread for today.

Bread for today and today alone—
Your grace we need
for tomorrow's unknown.

Tomorrow's unknown looms ahead—
We fear it, Lord!
We confess our dread.

Ah, dark dread—may you forever be
forbidden and crushed
by His wounds on the Tree.

His wounds run deep
with healing strength,
His sinless blood
makes darkness shrink—

'Till darkness fades and fear gives way
to glorious hope—
Resurrection Day!

Father, we come, we stand,
we sing!
You are the Bread,
Everlasting King,
To You alone
All praise we bring.

I love the metaphors Jesus uses in Scripture—like calling Himself the “bread of God,” “bread of life,” and the “living bread” (John 6:33, 35, 51). By using a metaphor about something we can touch, taste, and smell—something as life-giving as bread—Jesus communicates crucial things about Himself that ordinary descriptions simply fail to do. 🗝️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🗝️ Consider taking some time to reread today's Scripture passages. Why do you think Jesus tells us to ask for “daily bread” (Matthew 6:11)? _____

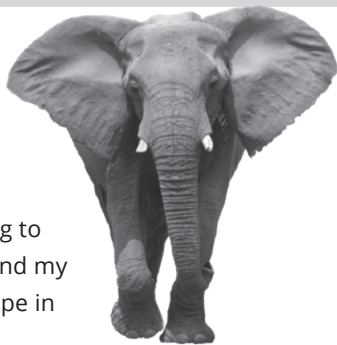
🗝️ And in John 6, why would Jesus compare Himself to bread? What point is Jesus making to His listeners that is hard for some of them to swallow? (Okay, pun intended!) _____

“For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” John 6:33 (NIV)



I WILL REMEMBER

READ: PSALM 42; JOHN 14:25-27



I am prone to forgetting. I'm not talking about the usual things like my cell phone, car keys, or sunglasses—wait, they're on my head. I'm referring to the more profound things. When I am downcast and my soul is disturbed, sometimes I forget to put my hope in God. Sometimes I forget to praise Him.

But, as it says in Psalm 42, God is worthy of my praise. He is my Savior, and my God. I forget that I need Him more than water to quench my thirst—I need Him for surviving and thriving. And I'm learning that remembrance is a choice, a practice.

When my soul is aching and tears keep falling, I can choose to grasp the one little word that is so powerful: *yet*. "I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God" (verses 5, 11). I will remember Him. I will remember His character, His goodness, and His faithfulness from the past.

There are days when it feels like He's forgotten me, but here's the reality: "By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me" (verse 8). As the deer knows it needs water to survive, my soul knows I need the living God (verses 1-2).

Yes, we are prone to forget, but Jesus promises to remind us of who He is. When we put our trust in Jesus, He gives us His Spirit to dwell inside of us, help us, and remind us of our Savior's words (John 14:26). And so, by His grace I will remember my Rock (Psalm 42:9). I will remember to meet with my God, the source of my strength. In times of sorrow, I will remember the "yet." I will remember to praise. I will remember His love for me, constant and unfailing. I will remember His songs in the night. I will remember He is my hope. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

📖 God knows we're forgetful people. The Bible is full of people forgetting God's care for them. From the Israelites crossing the Red Sea in victory to whining for food in the desert, from the courage Peter had to get out of the boat and walk on water with Jesus to the moment he noticed the waves (Exodus 14; 16; Matthew 14:22-33). Thankfully, God gives us His Word so we can look back on the ways He's been faithful. What are some ways you could practice remembrance in your everyday life? Maybe you could write prayers in a journal and then highlight the ones God has answered, or display works of art in your space that remind you of God's character, or choose or compose a song that helps you remember what God has done for you personally...

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. Psalm 42:11 (NIV)

WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 4:18; 1 PETER 1:3-8

AH-CHOO!” That sound is not usually good news. It could mean someone is coming down with a cold. Sneezes and other symptoms show us the effects of germs on our bodies. Even though we can’t see germs without the help of a microscope, they have a significant impact on our lives. When you think about it, there are lots of things that affect us that we can’t see—we only see evidence that they exist—things like wind, electricity, radio waves, Wi-Fi signals, etc.

This is kind of similar to how we don’t see God, but we see evidence of His existence all around us. Theologians use the term “general revelation” to describe how God reveals Himself to us through His creation. As we explore and study science, there are so many things we can know about God by observing how He designed the universe in ways that are beautiful and logical.

Theologians also use the term “special revelation” to describe how God reveals Himself to us through His Word, and specifically through His Son: Jesus. Like a microscope allows us to know things about germs we’d never be able to see with our eyes alone, the Bible reveals things about who God is and what He’s done that we’d never be able to know just by looking at the natural world. And the whole Bible points to Jesus—He is God in human flesh, the “image of the invisible God,” and He shows us the Father (John 1:1-18; 14:8-9; Colossians 1:15-20). Throughout Scripture, God reveals His love for us, shows us how we can have a relationship with Him through Jesus, and describes how one day Jesus will return and everyone will finally see Him.

We see evidence for the existence of invisible things like wind, electricity, radio waves, Wi-Fi signals, and more—and we rely on these things to be there when we need them. Similarly, we can see evidence of God’s existence all around us in the world He created, and we can search out the deep mysteries of God in the Bible. Through faith, we can know that God exists and He loves us. Because of what Jesus has done and promises to do, we can have confidence that God’s love is real—and it’s far more reliable than electricity and Wi-Fi and all these other things we can’t see. As 1 Peter 1:8 says, “You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.” **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What questions do you have about God? Who are trusted Christians you could talk with about these questions? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to reveal someone in the future. You can also learn more about the whole story of the Bible, and what it tells us about God, on page 104. _____

...we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. 2 Corinthians 4:18 (NLT)

TWIN PARADES

READ: MATTHEW 21:1-11; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

The governor was coming into town. Moriah had been waiting weeks to catch even a glimpse of the man. He was supposed to stay for the festival week and bring his entourage of soldiers and even a jester. Moriah had even heard the governor's war horse would be the biggest she'd ever seen.

The wide gates were heaved open by two men. At the front entry, an announcer shouted, "You are honored with the presence of the esteemed Governor Pontius Pilate."

"All hail Caesar!" the crowd echoed back. The first group of soldiers marched in, stoic faces in perfect rows. *Soon—I'll get to see the governor soon*, she thought.

Then, from the other side of the city, she heard a commotion. A few people looked over and some even fell away from the parade to wander to the eastern gate. *Why would people go over there?* she wondered. But as more and more people broke off from the crowd, curiosity got the better of her and she abandoned the parade as well. *I'm sure I can get back in time to catch a glimpse of the governor; I just want to see what everyone's gawking at.*

As she approached the street and peeked over the crowd, Moriah got her answer. *That's just some guy on a donkey.* A disappointed frown crept over her face. She plucked up the courage to ask a woman next to her. "Excuse me." She pulled on the woman's sleeve. "Who is that?"

"That's Jesus—He's a prophet and the Son of David. He's going to save us all and overthrow Rome. He's bringing a new kingdom. I've heard Him talk of it and seen Him do things only a prophet could do!"

Wow, I'd hoped to see a governor, and now I get to see a prophet! Moriah took off her shawl and laid it on the ground. When the prophet passed by, He met her gaze, and something in His eyes made her wonder if He was more than just a prophet. 📖

Naomi Zylstra

📖 This fictional story imagines Jesus's humble triumphal entry into Jerusalem, contrasted with the pomp and circumstance of a governor's traditional entry into a city. Since the days of Solomon, Israel's kings rode donkeys to their coronations. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey because He is the promised King, and He is riding to His death as a ransom for many. How does the humility of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem reveal who He is and how He saves us? _____

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"
 Mark 11:10 (NIV)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORGIVENESS

READ: GENESIS 37:18-28; 50:19-21; ROMANS 8:28

When Joseph was seventeen years old, his brothers wanted to kill him. So they threw him into a pit, then sat down and ate lunch. After lunch, they pulled him out of the pit and sold him into slavery instead. Then, later, the wife of Joseph's new Egyptian slave owner tried to have sex with Joseph, and he refused. Her vengeance landed him in prison where he remained for years.

But eventually, Joseph became an important leader of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Because God was blessing Joseph, he was able to save nations from starvation during a huge famine. Joseph's slavery and imprisonment led to countless lives being saved, including his own family. He was even reunited with his brothers, and he forgave their wrongdoing against him.

In a similar way, Jesus Christ came to earth as a human to love and forgive us. Though He is God the Son, He willingly took the position of a servant (Philippians 2:5-11). He healed people who were blind and deaf, made those who were lame walk, and fed the crowds. Yet He was beaten, mocked, and crucified. Jesus suffered horrible circumstances, ultimately enduring the cross to die for our sins. Jesus willingly paid that price so that we could be freed from our sin and receive His forgiveness. By His death and resurrection, countless people are being saved.

God's love overcomes evil. Joseph endured great pain through the wrongdoing of his brothers, yet God used bad circumstances for good. Perhaps God used the trouble in Joseph's life to mature him into a man who could forgive his brothers. Forgiveness is possible because God has extended His forgiveness to each of us through Jesus. Even on the cross, Jesus asked God the Father to pardon those who crucified Him, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). We too can receive this amazing and complete freedom in Christ. Perhaps you are in a painful position because others have wronged you. The middle of a difficult place can sometimes be where God helps us learn, mature, and grow. Hardships can open opportunities for God to do great things. His forgiveness heals us all. 🕯️ *Mary Schilling*

🕯️ God can use any situation to help us grow—both good situations and bad ones. What are some ways you have seen God use situations in your life to help you grow? _____

🕯️ If you know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in you, empowering you to forgive people who have sinned against you. Consider spending some time in prayer, asking God to help you notice any unforgiveness lingering in your heart and to lay it down at His feet.

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

THE COLOR OF EASTER

READ: 1 PETER 1:1-5, 18-23; ROMANS 3:25-26; REVELATION 1:4-6

Even though I'm in my twenties now, my family still dyes eggs every Easter. It's a tradition we've kept since I was little. In fact, I can't remember *not* dyeing eggs on Easter. And this is just one of the many fun, color-filled traditions I associate with the holiday. We often have egg hunts using bright plastic eggs with colorfully wrapped candy inside. We display pastel-colored décor in our homes and on our lawns, and we even wear colorful clothes on Easter Sunday.

As I think about the colors I typically associate with Easter—light blues, greens, yellows, pinks, and purples—one color I *don't* normally associate with Easter is red. It stands in contrast to the pastel colors that we see on eggs, candy wrappers, décor, and clothing.

But the color red is vital to the Easter story. Because without the red blood Jesus shed on the cross for our sins, there would be no reason to celebrate Easter. We can't truly grasp the significance of what He has given us without remembering what it cost. And so, it's important to reflect on His sacrifice, to think about the pain He experienced and the blood He lost on the cross. He was willing to go through all of this—for us. Because of His sacrifice, we can be free from the entrapment of sin; and because of His resurrection, we can be free from the fear of death.

The red blood of Christ is the source of our freedom. Because of Jesus's costly sacrifice, we have the joyful hope of living with Him forever. **✚** *Grace McCready*

✚ If Jesus hadn't given up His life for us on Good Friday, there would be no Resurrection Sunday. How can remembering the price Jesus paid for our sin help us more fully celebrate our forgiveness and new life in Christ? (Find out more about the good news of Jesus on page 104.) _____

✚ Jesus's blood is hugely important, and it's talked about time and again in Scripture. If you want to dig deeper, read Acts 20:28; Romans 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 2:14; 9:7–10:29; 12:24; 13:11–12, 20–21; 1 John 1:7; 5:6–8; Revelation 5:9; 7:14; 12:11; 19:13.

For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus. Romans 3:25-26 (NLT)



GOD KNOWS YOU BY NAME

READ: ISAIAH 43:1; 49:13-16; 53:5-6; JOHN 20:24-27

Have you ever had something with your name on it—like a keychain, a necklace, a bag, or a jersey? Do you have a hard time finding things with your name on it? Do people sometimes forget your name or pronounce or spell it wrong?

Our names are important to us. We're alert to the sound of our own names. Have you ever heard a stranger say your name in a crowd, or even just something that sounds like your name? It catches our attention immediately! And names don't just serve the practical purpose of helping us communicate with others; they can also tell us something about our history. Whether that be what our name means, where it came from, or how we got it.

Names are important to God, too. In Isaiah 43:1, God says, "I have called you by your name. You are mine." And in John 10, Jesus says He is the Good Shepherd who calls His own sheep by name (verse 3, 11). The fact that God knows each of us by name shows how much He loves and cares for us. In Isaiah 49:16, He even says our names are engraved on the palms of His hands.

That's a striking image! Have you ever written something on your hand so you would remember it? When God said our names were engraved on His hands, He meant it literally. When Jesus went to the cross, He let them drive nails through His hands. And when Jesus rose from the dead, He still bore the scars on His hands. Those scars will be there for all eternity as a reminder of His great love for us. He was willing to go to the cross, to take all our sins upon Himself, so that we could be with God forever. We are that precious to Him. First Peter 2:24 says it this way, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds."

God knows you by name, and He loves you so much. In Christ, we can always remember that our names are written on the palms of His hands, now and forever. 📌

A. W. Smith

📌 Do you know the meaning or story behind your name? What do you like or dislike about it? _____

📌 Even if people forget your name or pronounce it wrong, God will always remember your name, and He always says it perfectly. How could this truth bring us comfort when we feel unseen or forgotten? _____

"Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." Isaiah 49:16a (WEB)

BETRAYED BUT NOT ALONE

READ: PSALM 23:4; MATTHEW 26:69-75; JOHN 21:15-19

Do you know what it feels like to be betrayed? Maybe you've had a family member or a friend violate your trust or turn their back on you when you really needed them. Jesus knows exactly how you feel. He knows the pain of being rejected by someone you love.

In God's Word, we can see that Jesus felt hurt and betrayed by those He was closest to. On the night before Jesus went to the cross, one of His chosen disciples, Judas, betrayed Him into the hands of the religious leaders who had been plotting to kill Him. Then, all His other disciples ran away, leaving Jesus alone to be brutally beaten and face an unjust trial. Then, right before Jesus's crucifixion, Peter denied that he ever knew Jesus or had anything to do with Him—not just once, but three times. Talk about being hurt and betrayed!

Whenever we are hurt by someone, our initial reaction may be a desire to get revenge or punish them, but this is not the reaction we see from Jesus. In John 21, after Jesus rose from the dead, we see that Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. Three times, Peter says he does, and each time the Lord tells him, "Feed my lambs...Take care of my sheep...Feed my sheep" (verse 15-17). In this way, Jesus restores Peter, and Peter goes on to continue to glorify the Lord and tend to other believers. This encounter reveals that Jesus had mercy on Peter and still loved him.

In the same way, Jesus has mercy on us and continues to love us when we sin against Him—after all, every sin we commit is ultimately against God (Psalm 51:4). Through Jesus's death and resurrection, He forgives all our sins. So, whenever we are tempted to hate someone for their betrayal or wrongdoing, let us remember Christ's continuing love and grace for us and also for this person, and may this love and grace overflow from us to them. And when we experience the unfairness and pain of betrayal, we can rest knowing that Jesus can relate to us better than anyone else. He hears our cries, and He comforts us in the pain. **✎ Lydia Lancia**

- ✎ What is usually your first reaction when someone wrongs you? How might God be inviting you to, instead, come to Him with your pain, rest in His love, and extend that love to others? _____

- ✎ Jesus is close to us in our distress. When someone has wronged us, forgiving them does not necessarily mean being in close relationship with them. If you have experienced a deep hurt, who is a trusted adult you could talk to about how to pursue healing and set up loving boundaries? _____

The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:17-18 (NIV)

FULL CIRCLE CROWN

READ: GENESIS 3:14-21; JOHN 19:1-22



As an author, I love being able to write full circle endings—when all the loose ends are tied up and the reader is satisfied by the end. There are a lot of full circle moments in the Bible that are so easily skipped over because we don't always understand their significance.

One of those moments is when a crown of thorns is placed on Jesus's head. You may have read this before. It's part of the Easter story, just before Jesus is put onto the cross. It was a crown meant to make fun of Jesus, to mock Him for being the "King of the Jews."

To understand this full circle moment, we have to go back to Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve rejected God and disobeyed His good ways, the world was subjected to the curse of sin, death, and suffering. Part of that curse, mentioned in verse 18, is that the ground produced thorns and thistles. Here's the full circle part—thorns remind us of the curse of sin and death. They remind us of the pain and brokenness sin causes.

When the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and pressed it onto Jesus's head, it was like the curse of sin was being placed on Him. He took that curse away from us, along with all our sins, when He died on that cross. And then, He rose from the dead in victory, promising to one day return and put an end to sin and death, destroying the curse forever. How amazing is it that we have a God who loves us so much that He willingly wore the curse of sin as He died to save us? 🕯

Kimberly Brokish

- 🕯 Consider taking a moment to picture Jesus as the crown of thorns is pressed into His head...the blood flowing down His temples, the soldiers beating and spitting on His torn flesh, the crowds shouting for His crucifixion. "While we were still sinners," Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He freed us from the ugliness of our sin—because He loves us. Yes, we will struggle with sin until Jesus returns, but His forgiveness is sure. (If you want to dig deeper, read Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 15:16-20.)
- 🕯 Throughout the entire Bible, God points us again and again to the promise of Jesus's return, when He will put an end to sin and make all things new. Then everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will live with Him in renewed creation, forever free of the curse (Revelation 21:1-5). As we live in a world that is still full of sin and its effects, how could we encourage each other with the hope of Jesus, that His sacrifice gives us freedom? (Romans 8:18-25) _____

The soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they put a purple robe on him. "Hail! King of the Jews!" they mocked, as they slapped him across the face. John 19:2-3 (NLT)

DEATH

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15

One day, unless Jesus returns first, I will die. And honestly, that's a scary thought for me. I've known Jesus as my Savior for as long as I can remember, and I trust that He will hold me even in death. But sometimes I think I use the promise of the resurrection—that Jesus will raise us from the dead at His return—as an excuse to avoid my fear of death instead of actually facing it.

In these moments, when the reality of death grips me in fear, I can take comfort in the fact that Jesus Himself experienced death. It's an easy fact to gloss over—we often jump straight from the cross to Easter Sunday, missing the tomb entirely. But Jesus didn't skip the tomb. Jesus didn't just die—He spent time being dead.

Jesus lived a sinless life, then died on the cross. Jesus was laid in a tomb—a cold, barren place of darkness and death and despair. His limbs were still. His lungs didn't move. His heart didn't beat. And then, it did. His heart began to pump blood through His veins, and His lungs pulled air into His body. His cold hands became warm with life. He walked out of the tomb healthy, whole, and alive. And, when we put our trust in Him, that is what He promises to do for us when He returns. In fact, He promises to make all of creation new—healthy, whole, and alive.

And this truth gives me great hope. Because one day, my body will lie in a grave—a cold, barren place of darkness and death and despair. My limbs will be still. My lungs won't move. My heart won't beat. And then, one day, it will. **🔑**
Taylor Eising

🔑 Have you ever been afraid of death? How could the promise of the resurrection be comforting in these times?

🔑 Death is the ultimate result of sin. No wonder death is strange to us—God didn't intend for us to die. And thankfully, He has made the way for us to have eternal life. Jesus said, "Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying" (John 11:25). As Christians, if we die before Jesus returns, our spirits will be with Him, away from our bodies (2 Corinthians 5:1-15). In perfect joy, we will await the day Jesus will return to earth and raise our bodies from the dead; then we will live with Him forever in renewed creation! So, we don't need to be afraid of dying, because our Savior died for us, and now nothing—not even death itself—can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). If you want to know more about this good news, see page 104.

Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 1 Corinthians 15:54 (NLT)



WATCHING JESUS DIE AND COME BACK TO LIFE

READ: MARK 16:5-7; LUKE 24:1-53

You might have grown up hearing the “Easter story” and the gospel message over and over again. Maybe you understand that Jesus died, that He rose... that He was dead and then alive again. What was it like, though, for those who experienced all of this firsthand?

For the people who knew Jesus and interacted with Him while He was on earth, it had to be incredibly difficult when He was killed. I cannot imagine having a friend and knowing that they had gone through the most painful and gruesome death. While Jesus’s friends were in the midst of their mourning, they found out that He was no longer dead. His body was gone from the tomb where He had been laid. They were told that He had risen—that He was alive.

Many of us have heard about the resurrection enough times to believe it and to have the ability to imagine it happening. But for those who first heard the news, it had to be hard to believe. In fact, the Bible tells us that many of them doubted, and that’s easy to understand. Even though Jesus had hinted at what was to come, they still didn’t comprehend it when they saw it all playing out. They were utterly amazed when they saw Jesus alive and walking around after seeing His beaten and bruised body hanging lifeless on the cross.

But Jesus, in His great love and mercy, spent time with His doubting followers. He showed them where the nails were driven into His hands and where the spear was plunged into His side. He explained how His death and resurrection were foretold throughout the Scriptures. And He ate with them, showing them that He wasn’t a ghost or a figment of their imagination.

What an amazing God we serve. He came and lived among us, and He died and rose again so we could be with Him forever. What an amazing thing it must have been to witness His death and then His resurrection. And how amazing it will be when He returns to earth and raises us from the dead; then we, too, will see Him face to face. **✎** *Emily Acker*

✎ Why is it important for us to dwell on the astonishing miracle that is Jesus’s resurrection? (If you want to know more about what His resurrection means for us today, see page 104.) _____

✎ It can be hard to wrap our minds around who Jesus is and what He’s done. Thankfully, He is eager to help us understand. When Jesus appeared to His followers, “he opened their minds, that they might understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). If you want to dig deeper, you can read all four accounts of Jesus’s resurrection in Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20.

For to this end Christ died, rose, and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Romans 14:9 (WEB)

MISTAKEN FOR A GARDENER

READ: MATTHEW 13:1-9; JOHN 15:1-17; 19:41-20:18

John 20 contains one of my favorite scenes in all of Scripture. On Easter Sunday, Jesus's disciples discovered His tomb was empty, but they had not yet seen the risen Lord. They were probably confused and concerned, suspicious that something terrible had happened.

In the midst of all this confusion, Mary Magdalene began to weep, unable to leave the empty tomb. After all the agony and heartbreak of Jesus's crucifixion, the disappearance of His body must have felt like adding insult to injury. When Mary finally turned to leave, she nearly bumped right into Jesus. Overwhelmed by grief, she didn't even recognize Him but mistook Him for the gardener! In His characteristically gentle way, Jesus revealed Himself to her and sent her to tell the other disciples what she had seen.

As it turns out, Mary's mistake is rich in biblical imagery that tells us more about who Jesus really is. Scripture is full of references to gardening, going way back to Eden. When God created the heavens and the earth, He planted the garden of Eden and placed people in it "to tend and watch over it" (Genesis 2:8-23). Many of Jesus's parables depict God's kingdom as a garden or field. Jesus Himself is the farmer who plants good seed that yields a great harvest, He is the true vine, and He is the first fruits of the harvest of the resurrection. Even now, He is like a gardener tending over His crop, producing in us the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-25).

Given all this biblical imagery, maybe Mary's mistake wasn't so silly after all. The image of Jesus as gardener is a powerful symbol that reveals more about who Jesus is and what He wants to do in our lives. Because of His death and resurrection, we can grow and flourish in the way God intended. **✦** *Jacob Bier*

✦ How do you think Mary felt when she realized that the "gardener" was really Jesus? _____

✦ How does the Bible use garden imagery to speak about spiritual things? How does Jesus act like a gardener today? Consider taking some time to reread today's Bible passages and write down what sticks out to you. (If you want to dig deeper, you can also read Matthew 13; Romans 7:4-6; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23.) _____

"Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. John 20:15a (NLT)

GOD SHOWS UP IN UNEXPECTED WAYS

READ: LUKE 24:1-49

After Jesus was raised from the dead, the women who went to the tomb were surprised to find it empty. Then angels appeared and told them Jesus had risen! So the women rushed back to tell the apostles and all the others what they had seen, but they didn't believe the women because what they said seemed to be nonsense.

Later that same day, as two of Jesus's followers were walking on the road to Emmaus, Jesus appeared to them! But God kept them from realizing it was Him. They walked with Him and talked with Him during their journey, and they *still* didn't know it was Jesus. But when He sat down to eat with them and broke the bread, "suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31).

Sometimes we live our lives like we're on the Emmaus Road. We can be quick to forget that God moves in mighty ways, and many times they aren't the ways we expect. When we're facing something difficult, we want God to show up, but often we have our own idea of what that would look like. We think about how our prayers should be answered, but sometimes God has different plans.

Sometimes we miss seeing God because we're not expecting Him to show up in a certain way. These two travelers didn't expect to see Jesus walking with them, and yet there He was. Even when it doesn't feel like God is with us, right by our side is where He'll always be (Matthew 1:23; 28:20). We just need to open our eyes and our hearts to His presence. **✎** *Tynea Lewis*

- ✎** Can you think of a time when you had a specific idea of how you wanted God to show up in your life or answer your prayers? Did God surprise you by working in a different way? _____
- ✎** Have you ever experienced God's presence in unexpected ways? How did that experience deepen your faith or change your perspective? Consider taking a moment to ask God to help you see how He is working in and around you today. Remember, He is eager to reveal Himself, and even when we don't "get it" at first, He is patient with us—He never stops pursuing us. _____

As they talked and discussed these things, Jesus himself suddenly came and began walking with them. But God kept them from recognizing him. Luke 24:15-16 (NLT)



IV DRIP

READ: ISAIAH 61:1-3; JOHN 16:16-33; REVELATION 21:1-5

Every seven weeks, I watch an IV drip two hours' worth of liquid medication into my arm. That's the reality of a chronic illness— it's never-ending. It's most likely not going away. Not before Jesus returns anyway.

Living with Crohn's disease feels like a part-time job. I have to watch what I eat (goodbye, hot dogs), go to doctor's appointments, get pricked by needles that sometimes find a vein easily and sometimes don't. The medical upkeep is exhausting and painful.

Jesus said we would have trouble in this world. But we know it's only temporary. An example of this occurs in John 16, when Jesus warns His disciples that He is about to leave. They will grieve and weep after His departure, but their mourning will turn to joy.

Jesus was about to die on the cross for the sins of all humanity. Three days after His crucifixion, He was raised from the dead, and forty days later He ascended into heaven. And He promised that all who believe in Him would have eternal life. When the time comes for Jesus to return, the book of Revelation tells us He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more sorrow or pain.

Getting IV infusions for the rest of my earthly life seems like a long time, but it's a drop in the ocean compared to the time I'll spend in eternity with Jesus. Until then, I'll live with my IV drips and sensitive stomach, knowing my story doesn't end here. My pain will disintegrate, and my grief will turn to joy. And maybe, there will even be a hot dog waiting for me in heaven. *✠ Jenna Brooke Carlson*

✠ Are you or someone you know struggling with chronic illness? How can the hope of our future with Jesus encourage us in our present? (Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:14-21; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18) _____

✠ When Christians die, we enter into Jesus's presence and escape the world's burdens, physical and otherwise. And when Jesus returns to establish the new heavens and new earth, He will put an end to pain and death and sorrow, and He will raise us from the dead to live forever in renewed creation! Yet, Jesus not only promises to end our pain and sorrow in the future, He also promises to be with us now, grieving our hurts alongside us, holding us close, and giving us hope. What is troubling you today? Whether it's something physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual, you can bring it to Jesus in prayer, knowing that He feels your pain as His own. _____

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

UNFAILING LOVE

READ: EXODUS 15:13; PSALM 36:7; ISAIAH 54:10

Unfailing love of Jesus,
unending mercy renewed,

Unfailing strength in my weakness—
for your name is Faithful and True.

Unceasing comfort in sorrow,
untold delight in my heart,

Unceasing hope for tomorrow—
for your mercy I see from afar.

Jesus, my Savior, I praise You,
Jesus, the One I adore,

Jesus, the face of the Father—
my God, my King evermore.

This poem grew out of a season when I found myself turning to the psalms to find comfort in God's presence. In the book of Psalms—and some of the prophets—I noticed the phrase “unfailing love” turned up repeatedly. The more I saw it, the more I thought that this is the perfect phrase for God's loving pursuit of us. His unfailing love gets put on display in a variety of circumstances: when He helps His people through troubles (Psalms 44:26; 94:18), when He comforts people with His presence or His promise (Psalms 21:7; 90:14; 119:76), and when He extends forgiveness after failure (Psalms 51:1; 130:7; Lamentations 3:32).

As I studied these Scriptures in different Bible versions, I learned that *unfailing love* may also be translated as: loving-kindness, faithful love, mercy, steadfast love, constant love, loyal love, and gracious love. Wow! I like thinking about God's love in all those ways—His love is so much deeper and richer than any other! Thus, I find it fitting that we simply can't describe His love with a single phrase. But we *can* join with the apostle Paul in praying that God Himself will help us “to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:18-19). **✠** *G. Kam Congleton*

✠ Which of the phrases for “unfailing love” speaks most to your heart today? Why? _____

✠ Many of the psalms look forward to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the One who came in flesh as “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15) to reveal His unfailing love. Check out page 104 to learn more about God's great love, which has come to us in Christ Jesus.

Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love... Psalm 143:8a (NIV)

FOSSIL FANTASIES

READ: 1 CHRONICLES 29:10-14; PSALM 62:5-8; EPHESIANS 2:4-10

Emil hadn't dreamt about dinosaurs since he was eight. Yet here he was with a full-sized *Tyrannosaurus rex*, in a top hat no less, right in front of him.

"If you're going to eat me, do it quickly, I have other things I'd rather be dreaming about," Emil said, surprised by his lucidity. Usually, he couldn't control what he said or did in his dreams, but this one seemed different. Emil scrunched his eyes shut and concentrated. He opened them to see his determination had paid off—he was floating above the ground! With sheer joy, he flew up several more feet, twirling in the air with a happy yell before floating right in front of the perturbed looking *T. rex*. Then it spoke, "If you're done lollygagging, we haven't much time, so listen closely." Emil was taken aback by the dinosaur's voice. "Gra-Grandma?"

"Don't be absurd. I'm a talking dream dinosaur. I'm just using your grandma's voice to tell you a valuable lesson," the *T. rex* stated matter-of-factly.

"Okay...what'd you want to talk about?" Emil floated around the dino's head, his impatience and curiosity growing. He was startled when the *T. rex* began speaking telepathically. "Power and success have become familiar to you. You're a whiz in your classes, a social butterfly, and, let's face it, your volleyball team wouldn't have made it to state without you."

Emil smiled. Whatever this dino had to say, he could handle it. In here he felt like he could handle anything. Still floating, he did a double-front flip. The *Tyrannosaur* voiced like his grandma continued. "I said *listen*. There are things bigger than you and me. What you've done and what you have are not really yours. You need to recognize a higher force at play."

Emil was about to try a backflip, but he hesitated at her remark. "I wanted to prove I could do it. That I could be someone others were proud of...someone they would love." Emil was shaken by his honesty. He'd never said these anxieties out loud before. He could feel a lump forming in his throat as he thought of how overwhelming it really was to live "the life" that seemed perfect, fooling even himself. He knew that the high school achievements he'd craved so desperately meant he had missed out on other stuff he loved to do. Hanging out with his family, doing a Bible study with his two best friends...and he couldn't remember the last time he'd taken out the dinosaur books and figurines he kept in his room where no one could find them.

The Tyrannosaur softened her eyes. "Your family and friends are proud of you and love you no matter what you do, Emil. More importantly, someone greater than us all treasures you. He loves you with an intense and deep passion, and there is nothing you can do to earn His overwhelming grace in your life. He sees all your shortcomings, all your failures, all your hidden sins...yet His love for you is

not changed. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, He made the way to forgive you. There is no score, or medal, or certificate required. Jesus has already fulfilled the requirement. He died for *you*. He wants you just as you are. And He invites you into the freedom of enjoying relationship with Him, following where He leads, and glorifying Him in everything you do."

The T. rex began to grow foggier, and Emil realized he was waking up. Once back in his bedroom, Emil felt strangely empowered, just like in his dream. Not by any power from his own efforts, but by the work of the One who loved him. 📖

Peter J. McDonough

Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. 1 Chronicles 29:11a (NIV)

📖 Society and culture tell us that, in order to have value or be honored, we need to *do* things. The pressure to perform can be overwhelming, especially if, like Emil, you just want to make your loved ones proud. But take heart, God loves us because of who He is, not because of who we are or what we've done. He is the One who came to die on the cross to save us. None of us deserve His love and sacrifice, but He gives it to us freely. Through Jesus, we are invited into a personal relationship with our Creator—and into His family, the church (Romans 15:7). This is good news! How could it be freeing to rest in the work Jesus has done for us, rather than constantly trying to earn favor with God and people? _____

📖 It's easy to want to take credit for things we've accomplished in our lives, especially if we've worked hard for success. But everything we're capable of doing is a gift from God. He created our minds and bodies, and we are called to use our lives to glorify Him rather than ourselves, and the way we glorify God is often by serving our neighbors (1 Timothy 6:13-21). Consider taking some time to write down some of the gifts, abilities, opportunities, and special interests God has given you. Then thank Him for all of these, and ask Him to help you see how you could use them to glorify Him and serve the people around you. (In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians in your life you could talk to about these things?) _____



RESCUED KITTEN

READ: LUKE 15:1-7; ROMANS 7:15-8:4, 38-39; 2 PETER 1:3-4

When kittens are rescued and placed in a new family, they have a lot to learn—which usually includes learning not to scratch the furniture! Still, their rescuers are patient and help them learn how to live in their new family.

This is kind of like our story as Christians. We were lost before God rescued us, like an orphaned kitten caught in a thunderstorm, cold and wet and trembling. When we trusted Jesus as our Savior, God forgave our sins and gave us a brand-new life. He took us home and lovingly placed us in His family. But, we still do wrong things sometimes. As humans, we have a tendency to sin, a bent toward hating God and our neighbors. Just like rescued kittens give in to their instincts to sharpen their claws on the couch, we often give in to our old sinful nature.

But when kittens become part of a family, the family teaches them not to be destructive. And God teaches us as Christians how to act like members of His family, too. He gives us His Holy Spirit, who empowers us to live a godly life. Jesus takes sin seriously and calls us to commit our whole selves to living in His good ways. He also knows we'll still do wrong things sometimes, but even when we do, He will always forgive us. And when Jesus returns, He will make everything new, and we won't struggle with our old sinful nature anymore.

Are you learning how to be a member of God's family? We all still sin sometimes, but if we know Jesus, the Holy Spirit is teaching us to change our ways. Whenever we get discouraged at our own tendency to sin, we can come to Jesus and find rest in His unshakeable love and forgiveness. The reality is, as Christians we are part of God's family forever, and nothing can separate us from His love. We can thank Him for the Holy Spirit's power over sin and trust Him to guide us in turning away from sin and instead doing what's right. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Learning to love God and our neighbors can be hard! When have you seen God work in your life to help you learn how to love well? What is an area where that struggle is still ongoing? Progress isn't always linear, so it may be two steps forward, one step back. But you can know that Jesus is always with you and will complete the work He started in you (Philippians 1:6). _____

✦ Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with about your struggles? How could you set aside time to pray for each other and help point each other to God's Word this week? _____

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 2 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

SHARPENABLE

READ: PROVERBS 17:17; 27:17; ECCLESIASTES 4:9-10; JOHN 15:12-15

Do you ever meet someone and think something like, “I hope your weirdness matches my weirdness, so we can be friends”? I do! The Bible says, “As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend” (Proverbs 27:17). The longer I walk with God, the more I realize what a gift those friends who sharpen me really are.

I have a friend who sharpens her favorite knife each time she uses it. This seems like a hassle to me, but it really is an awesome knife! And I don’t think it would be the same if she hadn’t been so diligent in its care. In the same way, making deep friendships can feel like more of a hassle than it’s worth. It can be intimidating enough to let GOD into the vulnerable parts of our hearts, and He already knows us completely and loves us fully—Jesus even died and rose again so we could be friends with Him! Opening up to another person can be risky, but it also means your friend can have a rare opportunity to know the real and totally quirky you. It gives them a chance to step back and appreciate who YOU actually are!

Another benefit (or risk) of making true friends: it results in a smoothing of our rough edges. The filing away of the parts of us that were bent by hurtful circumstances, experiences, or even other people, and the strengthening of our character...which all helps us love God and our neighbors better. This makes going through the process of making deep friendships well worth it. Iron is the best tool for sharpening iron, and making true friends who will be honest with you is one of the best ways to grow into more of the person God created you to be (Proverbs 27:6, 9).

If we set out to try to change each other, it will never work, but through love, acceptance, encouragement, and even appreciation of each other’s “weirdness”... that’s when the good stuff happens. That’s when we feel safe to be ourselves. That’s when we don’t have to put up our guard to protect our hearts from being hurt. That’s when we shine our brightest, and yet it’s also when some of the not-so-shiny parts of our hearts can show up as well. It’s through these safe interactions that we are sharpened...if we trust Jesus to help us be sharpenable. 📌 *Sarah Andruszko*

📌 It can be scary to be honest about your thoughts and feelings with someone because they might criticize or even reject you. This fear can also keep us from going deeper in our relationship with God, but He never criticizes or rejects us when we open up to Him. He welcomes us with grace, healing, and gentle guidance. And He calls us to do the same (Romans 15:7). Have you ever opened up to someone and been welcomed by grace, healing, and gentle guidance? What was it like? _____

*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.
Ecclesiastes 4:9 (NLT)*

UNDERSTANDING WHO WE ARE: EPHESIANS

READ: EPHESIANS 2:1-10; 3:14-21; 6:10-18

Ephesians is a short book—only six chapters. Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus, but everything in it is for us as well!

This small letter contains some large truths. In fact, if you want a brief overview of the good news of salvation, along with your standing in Christ as a believer, and instructions for godly living, you've come to the right book.

The book is divided in two. In the first three chapters, Paul teaches us about God's plan of salvation for the world. The last three chapters tell us how to live as children of God. And maybe this book is organized that way because it's important for us to know who we are in Christ before we try to live out His good ways.

I didn't use to know that. I would try really hard to obey all of the things in the Bible. But then I finally figured out that, until I understood who I was in Christ, trying to be good in my own strength just wouldn't work. We need to rely on God to transform our hearts and help us walk in His good ways (Ezekiel 36:26; Philippians 2:13).

Ephesians is famous for spelling out how it was God's plan to rescue sinners from their sins—something that nobody can do for themselves. None of us can cleanse ourselves from our sinfulness. But, because of God's grace—His un-earned, un-deserved love—we can become children of God, and co-heirs with Christ. 📖

Kristen Merrill

📖 According to Ephesians 1:3-14; 2:4-10, who are we in Christ? (If you want to know more about becoming a child of God and co-heir with Christ, check out page 104.) _____

📖 Why do you think it's necessary to know *who* God has made us to be...before we try to figure out *what* He wants us to do? _____

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



DON'T BE A CHICKEN

READ: MATTHEW 20:16; MARK 9:33-37; GALATIANS 5:13-16; PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

Have you ever been picked on? Or have you made fun of others for being different? In our broken world, this is an all-too-prevalent reality. But here's the thing. When we pick on others, we're acting like chickens. Think about it—chickens have a pecking order. The bigger, stronger chickens have the most power and access to food. Any chicken who's different or appears weaker is at the bottom...and is mercilessly pecked and denied food to show them their assigned place in the system. If a chicken is injured, even if it's just a small red spot on its neck, when a big chicken sees that hurt, they jab the sore, making it even larger. This should not be.

Here's the good news: Jesus turned the pecking order upside down. Jesus is God the Son, and He was willing to give up His place at the top because He loves all of us at the bottom. Philippians 2:6-7 says, "Though he was God...he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being." Jesus lived among us because God wanted to save us from sin and heal all the brokenness sin causes. He was picked on mercilessly, but He was willing to endure all this pain and sorrow and rejection and injustice—for us. Ultimately, He let Himself be killed on a cross, and then He rose again, triumphant over sin and death, all because He loves all of us—people He created to be different from one another.

Because of Jesus, we don't have to follow the pecking order anymore. Chickens fight because they think they need to prove their strength and survive. Similarly, humans act out of selfishness and fear, taking others down to try to push ourselves up. But since Jesus humbled Himself to flip the pecking order, we can trust Him with all our needs and fears, and we are free to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can work together and take care of each other. With our differences, we can glorify our good Creator. We can listen to one another and work to set up systems in our communities that reflect the beauty of the differences we have as people who bear God's image (Genesis 1:27). And we can look forward to the day Jesus, our just God, will return and restore His creation, abolishing the pecking order for good. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 How have others picked on you? How have you picked on others? Jesus invites us to come to Him with all our hurts and sins. He forgives our wrongdoing, touches our hurting places with His love, reminds us of what is true about us, and guides us in how to move forward in love. (If you or someone you know is being bullied, who are trusted adults you could reach out to for help?) _____

For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Galatians 5:14 (NLT)

GOD HOLDS YOU WHEN YOU ARE LONELY

READ: PSALM 27:7-10; JOHN 14:18-20; ROMANS 8:31-39

It can feel terrible to feel all alone in the world. Whether you're going through a time when you don't have a lot of friends in your life or you feel like you can't connect with others when you're around them, loneliness can hit you hard and upset your life. When you feel like no one cares about you, know that God is always there. He always loves you—in a way that goes beyond anything you can imagine (Ephesians 3:17-21).

When I'm feeling lonely or when I feel like I'm all alone in a stressful situation, I like to imagine God holding me. I like to imagine myself securely in His hands. I know that He is there. I know that He will not abandon me. I know that He is holding me.

He is there with you, too. No matter what you're facing or how lonely you feel, God sees you, He is with you, He holds you.

How can we know this is true? Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we not only receive salvation, we receive connection with God. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we are never really alone. No matter what you go through in life and how many—or few—people you have supporting you, may you always feel God right there with you. **✎** *Emily Acker*

✎ Can you think of a time you felt lonely and like you didn't really have anyone you could rely on? Do you feel that way today? How could it be comforting to know that God—the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth who died for you and then defeated death itself—is with you? _____

✎ Have you had times in your life when it felt like God was the only one who was supporting you and holding you and keeping you going? Consider taking a moment to thank God for the ways He has helped you through these tough times. _____

✎ God reminds us of His presence with us through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). Who is someone in your life who might be feeling alone right now? Consider taking a moment to pray for this person, and ask God for ideas of ways you could show His love to them; then write down anything that comes to mind. _____

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. Psalm 73:23 (NIV)



PRAY FOR ME!

READ: EPHESIANS 6:18-20; 1 TIMOTHY 2:1; JAMES 5:15-17

Are you familiar with the most famous of all missionaries? His name was Paul. He preached the gospel to numerous people soon after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and he wrote much of the New Testament. During Paul's missionary journeys, he and his companions would start a church, then journey on. He'd spend time getting to know each unique culture, and then explain the gospel to them—the good news of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Paul went back and forth, founding new churches and visiting the established ones, until he was finally arrested, imprisoned, and made to stand before the emperor of Rome: Nero.

Paul was thrown in jail many times. He was whipped, ship-wrecked, and stoned, but even then, he would not stop spreading the good news. He couldn't stop sharing the gospel. And yet there came a time when this man, who had spent years of his life giving speeches, asked for prayers for *how to speak!* This is the great missionary, Paul! He knows how to speak! And here we see his example of humility. Weary after so many years of diligent service, Paul asks his friends for help, as he has done many times before.

*Pray for me, he says, that I might speak as I ought. Why? Was it because he was about to stand before the notoriously evil Nero? We can't be certain. And yet, it's good to remember that no matter what great accomplishments we achieve, there will always be those times when *this particular problem* or *that future event* just feels *too hard*. And when we're in the habit of asking for prayer for the little things, it's easier to ask for prayer in the big things, too.*

When the task before us seems too big, it's easy to be hard on ourselves. We're tempted to beat ourselves up for not being “stronger” or “braver” or “trusting in God more.” Instead, let's follow Paul's example. When we are afraid, let's ask for prayer like he did. Let's lift one another up in prayer, trusting our loving God to give us what we need. 📌 *Kristen Merrill*

📌 When do you find it difficult to ask people to pray for you? How could it be encouraging to know that people are praying for you in the midst of a difficult situation? (If you want to dig deeper, read about other times Paul asked for prayer: Romans 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 1:10-11; Philippians 1:19; Colossians 4:2-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2; Philemon 1:22.) _____

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. Ephesians 6:19-20 (NIV)

BECAUSE HE CARES FOR YOU

READ: PSALM 55:22; MATTHEW 11:28-30; 1 PETER 5:6-9

It's natural to worry. We humans just do it, pure and simple. And the Lord, knowing how distracting chronic worry can be, lovingly offers His children a remedy because He wants to set us free from the cares that clutter up our minds and petrify our hearts.

In 1 Peter 5:6-9, we see how Jesus provides that remedy. We read in verse 7 that we can cast our "cares on him."

Maybe you've tried this already! But sometimes, after casting our cares upon His loving Self, we take them back again, and get back to our job of fretting. We can get into a repetitive cycle that doesn't help at all: *give it to God, take it back, give it to God, take it back*. Has this ever happened to you? It can be exhausting.

But we find an answer to this dilemma by taking a deeper dive into the original language of 1 Peter 5:6-9. The ancient Greek word for "casting" is in the aorist tense (meaning a "one-time event, back in the past" verb tense). So, it might be helpful to think of Peter saying: "since you have already cast your cares upon Him, live that way."

Past tense—one and done! We recall that we are not the ones in charge, because we gave our lives and everything concerning us to our great and loving Shepherd, Jesus.

This is why, before Peter talks about worry, he says, "Humble yourselves" (verse 6). We humble ourselves under God's authority and governance. We recall that, because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we are His, not our own. We were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:20). And, when we became His, we gave up worrying over what is happening to us now, or what will happen to us next. We don't need to.

Why? Because He has it. He has you. Peter goes on to tell us that "he cares about you" (verse 7). Indeed, He does! He is with you always, no matter what worries and cares you have. And He promises to return someday to put an end to everything that is worrisome.

If you've given your life to Jesus, you have accepted His Lordship over your life. So, you can rejoice that He has you—worries and all—today, and tomorrow, and forever. 🕯️ *Kristen Merrill*

🕯️ Can you remember a time when you shared your worries with Jesus? What was it like? _____

🕯️ When you feel overwhelmed with worry, who is somebody that can help you and remind you of Jesus's peace and loving care, such as a parent, pastor, counselor, youth leader, or friend? _____

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

NEVER TOO YOUNG

READ: 1 SAMUEL 3:1-10; 2 KINGS 5:1-5; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27; GALATIANS 5:13-14

Do you ever feel too young to do anything important for Jesus? Sometimes, when we hear stories of people traveling overseas as missionaries, or becoming foster parents, or starting a career they sensed God guiding them into... we can be left wondering, *What about me?* Though we may love Jesus and want to follow Him with our lives, it can feel like all we're able to do during our teen years is wait and prepare to be an adult.

But that's not how God sees us. Just look at the Bible—there are teenagers and even kids who served God. For example, in 2 Kings 5 we find an Israelite girl who was taken captive by raiders from Aram, and she became a servant to Naaman's wife. But when Naaman had leprosy, this girl said the prophet Elisha could cure him. Because of her compassion and her courage to speak up, Naaman journeyed to Israel, found Elisha, and was cleansed from the deadly skin disease. Then Naaman became a worshipper of the one true God (verse 15).

And in 1 Samuel 3, we see that Samuel was only a boy when he “served the LORD by assisting Eli [the priest]” (verse 1). One night while he was sleeping in the Tabernacle, young Samuel heard God call to him! Samuel listened and shared the message God gave him. As he grew up, he continued to be attentive to how God was calling him to serve in his community.

No matter how old we are, as Christians, we're a part of God's kingdom and family. Since we've put our trust in Jesus, we all have the same Holy Spirit. As 1 Peter 4:10 says, “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.” The Holy Spirit equips us to share Jesus's love in our words and actions wherever we are. Maybe you could pray for a friend, encourage a church leader, rake a neighbor's leaves, help a sibling with something they're struggling with, or look for ways to help members of your community who are experiencing homelessness. All of these loving acts of service can reflect how Jesus first loved us (1 John 4:19)—and none of them have to wait until you're older. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What are some practical ways you could show Jesus's love to others by serving them? Consider taking a moment to pray and ask God to help you notice opportunities to serve the people in your community, church, or home...and write down anything that comes to mind. _____

And the LORD came and called as before, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel replied, “Speak, your servant is listening.” 1 Samuel 3:10 (NLT)

THE TRAIN TO NOWHERE

READ: PSALM 36:5-9; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:8-13

Made it. I'm free!" Sultan yelled, jumping on the train as the doors beeped shut behind him. *Where is everyone?* He thought, sitting in the empty carriage, a knot of dread weaving itself inside him. *Is this the right train?*

"Tickets," the guard's rasping voice called. With trembling hands, Sultan handed over the ticket, watching in horror as the destination letters changed to *Nowhere*. Staring out of his dark, empty eyes the ticket collector grinned. "You're on the right track, to Nowhere" he laughed, handing the ticket back before striding away.

Wiping the prickling sweat from his forehead, sadness physically dragged Sultan down. Past mistakes flashed before his eyes. *"You're wasting your life. They aren't your true friends."* Mom's words haunted him. *"I wish your grandpa was still here. He'd know what to say."*

Pushing himself up with his last remaining dregs of strength, Sultan stumbled along the carriages as the train hurtled along. Nothing. The ticket collector had vanished. *If only you were alive Grandpa*, Sultan thought. *I miss you, your faith, your Bible stories and adventures. When you died, it felt like I lost my trust in God. I don't know if I even believe anymore.*

Sliding to the floor, Sultan shuddered, recalling how he'd flung Grandpa's well-worn Bible in his closet. He felt an ache in his stomach. *Is it too late?*

"Help!" His plea was a strangled whisper. "Father, Jesus. My grandpa loved you. Please help me trust You again. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me." Tears poured down his face. His eyes stung and every bone ached.

A glimmer of light appeared, glowing brighter and brighter until it dazzled. A loving voice cried out, "Sultan, weep no more. You are my precious, beloved child,



and my Son Jesus died for you so you could be cleansed of sin and brought into relationship with us. We have not forgotten you. We have not abandoned you. We see your sorrow, your pain. We will help you trust in us, and we will heal you.”

Sultan nodded, choking on the words. “I believe,” he cried out. The heaviness lifted. He could feel peace beginning to heal his brokenness. Sultan stood up. The train was buzzing with the chatter of people. Glancing at his ticket, his destination had changed to *Hope*. ❧ *Cindy Lee*

*When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your unfailing love, LORD, supported me.
Psalm 94:18 (NIV)*

❧ Have you ever felt like Sultan in this story? Sometimes, when we experience a tragedy or life-changing event, it can make us question our beliefs or make us angry with God. But the truth is, once you become a Christian, nothing can ever separate you from Jesus’s love (Romans 8:38-39). We live in an imperfect world, but Jesus has restored our broken relationship with God through His death and resurrection. And one day, Jesus will return and restore the heavens and the earth—then death and sorrow and pain will be gone forever (Revelation 21:1-5). As we wait for this glorious day, Christians don’t need to be afraid of losing our faith. Faith is a gift from God, one He gives generously (Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Peter 1:1; Philippians 1:29; Acts 3:16). No matter what, you can share all your worries, your anger, your hurt, and your fears with Jesus, the One who died for you and loves you dearly. Consider taking a moment to talk to Him about whatever is on your mind.

- ❧ If you’ve never put your trust in Jesus and you want to know more, check out page 104.
- ❧ Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be open and honest with about your struggles? How could you encourage each other, pray for each other, and point each other to Scripture, especially in hard times?

REAL RICHES

READ: PHILIPPIANS 3:7-21; 4:10-13

Do you ever feel like there's something you need to have in order to be happy? In our world of uncertainty, it can be tempting to think that something—some piece of technology or clothing or jewelry, some rental property or car or brand name—can bring us the satisfaction we crave or solve all our problems. Sometimes, we can get so focused on getting that thing, that we lose sight of our neighbors and our Creator. We end up choosing greed and violence instead of following the way of Jesus. We get lost in chasing after created things rather than walking in the love and service of our Savior.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Because the reality is, in Christ, we already have true riches. We have the promise that God loves us, that He is with us every moment of every day, and that He is making all things new through Jesus's death and resurrection—He is freeing all of creation from sin and its effects. Yet, as we wait in eager anticipation for Jesus's return, we live in the already-not-yet tension of God's kingdom. We see glimpses of His restoration, but we also long for the day all things will be made fully right and whole (Revelation 21:1-5).

So, as we live in this tension, we can count our blessings. And that's not as cliché as it sounds. Because as we spend time pondering all the good things God has done for us, we find ourselves becoming more joyful, more peaceful, and more able to say "no" to the greed and violence and other temptations of our broken world.

And counting our blessings can be as simple as making a list. We can list the promises we find in the Bible. We can list things in nature that remind us of our Creator's love and goodness. We can list all the ways He has been providing for our physical needs through things like food, clothes, and shelter. We can list things that delight us, like our favorite flavors and colors. And we can list the relationships in our lives that remind us of Jesus's love—whether we see that in friends, family, teachers, pastors, church family, or other loved ones. All these good gifts come from God! And as we rest in God's abundant love for us, we start to crave possessions less and less. Things we own don't last that long, but knowing Jesus lasts forever. In Him, we find true riches—love that satisfies our deepest longings and purpose beyond ourselves. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ Consider making a list of blessings—where do you see God's love in your life? Then, put your list in a safe spot so that, when you need encouragement, it's readily available to you. _____

*Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.
1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NLT)*

LIVING WATER

READ: PSALM 63:1-5; JOHN 4:1-14; 7:37-39; PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13

Imagine how good it feels to take that first sip of cold water after a long, hot run. Imagine how good it tastes to take that first bite of your favorite meal after you've been smelling it cooking all day long. Water and food sustain us. We need them to survive, and it can feel so good to consume them, especially in more desperate times.

Now, think about how God is our living water. Jesus said to a woman He met at a well that if she believed in Him, she would never thirst again. That doesn't mean physically. We will always need food and drink to survive on earth. But think about how much food and water mean to us. If God says we will never thirst again with Him, that's a big deal.

God is everything we need. He gives us life. He gives us purpose and meaning. God helps us through the hard times and gives us joy. He is our living water. He is enough for us.

Jesus is God the Son, sent by the Father to die for us and rise again. Before He went to the cross, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). And during the last supper, Jesus broke bread and gave it to His disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it" (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). In communion, the bread is broken, and we remember how Jesus's body was sacrificed for us.

Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, He promises that everyone who trusts in Him will have His presence with us always—and the sure hope of eternal life to come. When we know Jesus, He not only sustains us, He satisfies us (Psalm 63:5) and fills us with "a glorious, inexpressible joy" (1 Peter 1:8). 🕯 *Bethany Acker*

🕯 Jesus is the bread of life, and He gives us living water, which is the Holy Spirit (John 4:14; 6:35; 7:39). Why do you think God describes Himself as bread and water? How might this help us understand Him better? (If you want to dig deeper, you can read more about communion in Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.) _____

"But those who drink the water I [Jesus] give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life." John 4:14 (NLT)

GOD KNOWS ALL

READ: PSALM 139:1-3; ISAIAH 53; HEBREWS 4:14-16

I know someone who lost part of his leg due to health issues. Now he has a prosthetic and is able to get around just fine. Seeing him in long pants, you would never guess he has anything going on with his leg. You would have no idea of the struggles he's faced or the fact that he still has to deal with things now that a person with two good legs would never think about.

You might have an illness that most people don't know about. This may cause you to act differently at times, and you may feel judged because of it. You might have a mental illness that affects the way you feel but is hidden to those around you. Maybe no one knows the pain you are in or how much you're struggling to look "normal."

The world around us thinks they know us based on what they see when spending limited time with us, but they don't know our background or what is going on inside. The average person would never guess that the man I mentioned has something going on with his leg, and there may be things you're dealing with that the average person would never know either.

God knows it all, though, and He understands. Your pain is not hidden from Him. God created you and loves you, and He feels your pain with you. Others might not see or understand, but you can know that He does. He will hold you even when others have no idea what is going on. **I** *Emily Acker*

I Do you have a painful situation in your life or in your past that nobody knows about? God does not want us to suffer alone. He is with us, holding us in our hurts and offering comfort, strength, and healing. And He also gives us His people, the church. Who are trusted people you could talk to about the difficult situations in your life, such as parents, pastors, youth leaders, or counselors? _____

I Because of God's great love and compassion for us, Jesus came to save us. He lived among us as "a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief" (Isaiah 53:3), and He befriended and healed those who were isolated in their suffering. Even when most of the world doesn't know about your pain, how could it be comforting to know that Jesus sees you and He cares? _____

I Jesus suffered and died for us, and He rose again so we could be with Him. One day, Jesus will return to restore creation and resurrect His people from the dead, free of injury, illness, and suffering. In the meantime, He is with us through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). How could these truths remind us that we are never alone in our suffering? _____

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

PAIN AND JOY

READ: PSALMS 42:1–43:5; 46:1–5; MATTHEW 26:37–38

Sometimes, you cry tears
They fall as hard as the rain
It feels just like a storm
This life, full of pain

But just as quickly, the sun appears
A smile comes to your face
Joy in your life again
It's a beautiful time and place

God is with you through these moments
The ups and downs of days
He gives light to the darkness
Has a listening ear when you pray

Pain and joy are a part of life
Both times will come, you know
Tears and smiles until the end
Our God will hold you and not let go 🕯
Bethany Acker

🕯 How could it be comforting to know that Jesus personally experienced all the joys and sorrows of being human, and He promises to be with us through all the ups and downs of life? _____

🕯 Even when we experience deep sadness, it can be helpful to remember that these feelings won't last forever. We will feel happy again, maybe in a few minutes, maybe in a few days. However, if it's been more than a couple weeks since you've felt happy, you may be experiencing a form of depression. This is nothing to be ashamed of—depression can be the result of several factors, and many people will experience depression at least once in their life. God does not stand far off when we are depressed. Jesus grieves our hurts alongside us and wants to help us heal, not only through His Word and through prayer, but also through community with fellow Christians and the expertise of professionals like counselors, therapists, and doctors. If you think you might be experiencing depression, who is a trusted adult you could talk to about it? _____

🕯 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.

*“And be sure of this: I [Jesus] am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
Matthew 28:20b (NLT)*



IS IT ENOUGH?

READ: MATTHEW 18:20; ROMANS 12:9-18; EPHESIANS 3:14-21

“Is it enough?” The question rolled around in my brain as I drove home. A family in our church was experiencing a number of medical problems, so a few of us went to their house to pray with them, bring a meal for us to eat together, and share communion.

“Is what we did enough?” I asked myself on my drive home. Suddenly, the answer sprang to life in my mind, bringing a smile to my lips and easing the tension in my shoulders.

Of course it wasn't enough. I laughed at myself. Because of course, it was never meant to be enough. Nothing we do as the church is ever meant to be enough.

Instead, we point to the One who is enough.

I can't solve all the problems in the world. I can't remove all the suffering. And that's not my job. It's not your job either. But it *is* my job, through my presence, my words, and my actions, to point people to Jesus and His love for them. And it's also my job to let myself be pointed to Jesus by the presence, words, and actions of my siblings in Christ—the church.

And this is only possible because Jesus has already done enough. Jesus—God in human flesh—lived a sinless life, died on the cross, and rose again from the dead to save us from sin and death. If we've put our trust in Him, He lives in us through the Holy Spirit. And one day, He will return to resurrect us from the dead and destroy all sin, suffering, hurt, and death forever.

There's nothing I can do to add to what He has already done. And resting in that truth frees me to let go of my arrogant, “I-can-fix-all-your-problems” attitude and instead enter into the lives of others with humility, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. Together, we can throw ourselves into Jesus's loving arms, trusting Him to care for us.

And that's enough. 🕯️ *Taylor Eising*

🕯️ Can you remember a time when others pointed you to Jesus through their presence, words, or actions when you were going through a hard time? What was it like? _____

🕯️ Is anyone in your life struggling right now? If you're ready, you can spend some time in prayer, asking Jesus to show you how to show them His love. _____

*Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.
Romans 12:10 (NLT)*

DUSTY SPOTS

READ: ROMANS 6:11-14; EPHESIANS 5:1-20; 1 JOHN 1:7-9

Have you ever finished cleaning a room...only to notice the sun shining on a dusty spot you missed? In our Christian lives, the same thing happens in our hearts. Often, we don't even notice our own sin. But, through God's Word, through our prayer times, through our times at church, or through something else, Jesus continues to show us forgotten places in our hearts where we are struggling to love God and our neighbors well. Think about it this way—Jesus is the Light, and in His mercy He shines on us, showing us sin in our lives that He wants to clean away. It can be unsettling to realize we have sin in our lives that we weren't even aware of, but we can trust that whenever God brings an area of sin to light, it's because He wants to help us and bring renewal to that messy place.

As 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." Like a dust rag cleans dust off a forgotten table, Jesus cleans away our sin.

And this good news is multi-faceted. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, He frees us from both the result of sin—which is death—and also from the power of sin. That means, once we put our trust in Jesus, we can know that all our sins are forgiven—past, present, and future. And, because the Holy Spirit is living inside us, we don't have to give in to the temptation to sin anymore. The Holy Spirit empowers us to say "no" to sin and live in God's good ways instead. And even though we'll never do this perfectly until Jesus returns, His forgiveness remains sure.

Has something you've done that's wrong been made visible to you by Jesus recently? We all sin every day, and that's why He invites us to confess our sins to Him often, resting in His sure forgiveness. Then, we can live by the light of His Spirit, trusting Him to help us do what's right. We can live in love toward God and our neighbors because of Jesus. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Where in your life do you struggle to truly love God and your neighbors (Matthew 22:36-40)? Jesus invites us to talk to Him about this—we can be totally honest with Him because He knows what temptation is like and He empathizes with us, but He Himself never sinned, so He can help us (Hebrews 4:14-16). He reminds us how much He loves us, and He often reveals underlying lies we're believing that might be causing a struggle to continue—lies about God, ourselves, or others. Consider taking a moment to talk to Jesus about whatever comes to mind. _____

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. 1 John 1:9 (NLT)

THE GREATEST ARTIST

READ: PSALM 107:21-24, 31; COLOSSIANS 1:16; REVELATION 4:11

Have you been to an art gallery or installation recently? It's amazing to see the way artists create memorable and beautiful works of art using paint, pencils, clay, stone, fabric, metal, wood, glass...the possibilities are nearly infinite! And just think about how our ability to create art reflects the Creator who made us—He is the greatest artist.

Have you ever thought of God as an artist? Have you noticed how creative He is? Both the cold winter snow and the warm summer sunshine were His idea. He made oceans, and He also made deserts. He made plants and animals, some that live in oceans, others that live in deserts, each perfectly suited to their environment. He made stars and galaxies, atoms and photons...And He wasn't content to make everything in grayscale—He painted the universe in more colors than we can count! God created everything there is as an expression of love. And that includes us.

God didn't create the universe because He was lonely or bored or because He needed anything. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always existed in perfect love and joy. No, He created because it delighted Him to do so!

God has boundless creativity. He has made so many wondrous things, each one just the right color, just the right shape, and just the right size. And even though sin brought brokenness into God's good creation, He has promised to redeem it. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, He is making all things new. And if we put our trust in Jesus, we get to take part in His wonderful work. Because Christians have the Holy Spirit living in us, we can use the creativity He has given us to glorify Him and bless others, both today and in the age to come.

And, as we behold God's beautiful creation, we can remember how awesome He is and how much He loves us. He's the greatest artist, and He invites us to enjoy His creation with Him! **!** *A. W. Smith*

! What is one of your favorite things in all of nature? Why? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this and tell Him what you like about it! _____

! In what ways do you like to be creative? How do you like to take what God has made and arrange it in a purposeful way—such as through painting, sculpting, building, designing, cooking, etc.? Is there something new you'd like to try but haven't yet? _____

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

WATCHING THE ANIMALS

READ: PSALM 104:10-28; MATTHEW 6:19-34; 10:29-31

There is a lot of nature outside my window. I hear birds singing their morning songs and talking to each other all day long. Occasionally I see rabbits and even a few deer. I hear coyotes howl at night, and I've seen turkeys strut across the yard. All of these animals have a home out there. They know how to survive in the forest and get what they need to make it through each day. And God is the One who made all of them. He gave them the ability to make a home in the wild and survive.

When I think about all the animals and what God has given them, I know that He will take care of me. After all, Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 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 6:25-26).

Humans are God's most precious creation. We are the ones He came to seek and to save (Luke 19:10). It was for our sins that Jesus died on the cross. And just as He rose from the grave, He promises to raise us when He returns. We are the ones He loves.

God cares so much for us, even more than He does for all the animals in the wild (Matthew 10:29-31). When I am afraid or wonder about what to do with my life, I can remember that. I can know that God will help me and show me what to do. He takes care of all the animals, and He will do even more for me. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 What kinds of animals can you see where you live? Consider taking some time this week to pause and watch them and be reminded of how God is taking care of them and you. _____

📖 Because our world has been broken by sin, sometimes animals hurt each other and compete for what they need to survive, and humans do too. But one day, Jesus promises to return and make all things new. Then "the wolf will live with the lamb...and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy" (Isaiah 11:6-9). How can the hope of the new creation Jesus is bringing free us to trust Him, and to love others the way He calls us to, instead of hurting other people for fear that we won't have enough? (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 5:13-14) _____

"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)

UNDYING FAITHFULNESS: THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

READ: NUMBERS 13–14

Numbers—funny name for a book, don't you think? Five of its thirty-six chapters contain lists of people. But most of this book records the story of a people on the move. The best part of Numbers? We find God's loving intervention in the lives of His people, over and over again.

Numbers not only includes records of people and lists of ceremonial regulations, it also contains stories. Have you ever heard the story of a flashing sword, a shining angel, and a talking donkey? It's in chapters 22-25, and it involves blessings and curses, bribes and greed. In this passage, and throughout the whole book of Numbers, we discover the underlying theme of God's unceasing goodness, His personal interaction, and His abiding care for His people. He plans good things for them, even when they are ungrateful, stubborn, and faithless.

God's plan for His people, the Israelites, was to give them a home—the Promised Land. And this was crucial. For from this nation would arise His Son—the Savior, Jesus. And Jesus would be the perfect Israel that the Israelites could never be—faithful, loving, and sinless. God's strategy all along was ultimately to provide the way of salvation for His people through Jesus's death and resurrection. And the book of Numbers is part of His rescue plan.

It's in Numbers that we get the inside story of how God's people responded to Him in defiance, faithlessness, and fear right on the borders of their Promised Land. We learn how that broke God's heart, and then we see how He directed His people back into the desert to wander for forty years, until that faithless generation had died out.

Then, we learn about how Joshua and Caleb finally led the people into the Promised Land, and we see God's undying faithfulness through it all. We learn how trustworthy God is, and how important it is for us to trust Him. His ways are good, and trusting and following Him is the best thing we can do. Today, if we know Jesus, He lives inside us through the Holy Spirit, helping us to faithfully follow our loving God. This treasure of a book has much to offer the student of the Word. May He reveal Himself to you as you read it! 📖 *Kristen Merrill*

🔑 Which of the stories mentioned above sounds the most interesting to you? What questions do you have about them? _____

🔑 How could remembering the ways God has been faithful in the past (either in our own lives or in the lives of people in the Bible) help us trust Him to be faithful in the future? _____

"Do not rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid...the LORD is with us!" Numbers 14:9 (NLT)

NOT A MISTAKE

READ: GENESIS 1:26-31; PSALMS 119:73; 139:14; EPHESIANS 2:1-10

W*ho am I?* This question is one we wrestle with throughout our lives. And it's an important question to ask, because much of what we do flows from who we believe we are. Here's the thing though—we can't answer this question without God. And thankfully, He provides the answer in His Word. Take a look.

God created human beings, and He did so out of love. Genesis 1:26-31 says that God made us in His image, and He entrusted us with the important job of caring for His creation. Furthermore, if we are in Christ, Ephesians 2:10 says we are God's masterpiece—we are created anew in Christ Jesus, and God has given us good and purposeful work to do.

Have you ever thought of yourself as God's masterpiece? How amazing to think that God created each of us, purposefully crafting us to be unique and wonderful (Psalms 119:73; 139:14). Yet, oftentimes we don't realize how valuable we truly are. As we go through life in a world broken by sin, we are bombarded with lies about ourselves, lies that say we're not worthwhile, not capable, not lovable. As we're confronted with our own sins and shortcomings, we may even start to believe our very existence is a mistake.

But God knows the truth about us. He made us, and so He's the only one qualified to tell us who we are and what we're worth. The fact is, we are so precious to God that He came to be with us. The second person of the Trinity, the Father's only begotten Son, became human and lived among us. It was worth it to Him to pay the ultimate price to save us from sin—Jesus was willing to lay down His life so that we could be forgiven, brought near to God, and made new. And God the Father is glorified in all of this (John 17:1-3; Galatians 1:3-5; Philippians 2:11).

So now, as people who've put our faith in Jesus, we can rest in God's love for us. And, because the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with His love (Romans 5:5), we can rejoice in the ways He has made us, using both the natural abilities and the spiritual gifts He has given us to express our love for God and for the people around us. And whenever we find ourselves struggling with lies about who we are and what we're worth, we can turn to Jesus. He will remind us that we are His priceless work of art. God doesn't make mistakes, He makes masterpieces! 📖 *Hannah Howe*

📖 When you struggle to see yourself as God sees you, who are trusted Christians who can remind you of what God says about you in His Word? How could you be this kind of friend to others? _____

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

MERCIFUL GOD

READ: JEREMIAH 42:1–43:7; EPHESIANS 2:1-10

Rhode, tell us what to do. We will die here on the planet Yavorah! The Kuvil

Regime took the rest of our people to their planet, and they won't let us live here peacefully. It's been years since Juro's old dynasty held us in slavery—maybe if we go back, their new rulers will help us."

The desperate shouts and worried exclamations filled their meeting space, a hollowed-out tree trunk aglow with jars of lightening bugs. Rhode closed his eyes for just a moment, resting in Yahweh's presence despite the contentious atmosphere. After generations of sin and idolatry, Yahweh's judgment had come to pass. Kuvil had conquered Rhode's people, the Yavorians. Now, only a remnant was left on their home planet under the Kuvil Regime. Their ships swarmed the sky, as numerous as the bugs, blocking the two Yavorian suns, slowly killing the planet's lush greenery. Soon, their livelihoods would be upended, and they'd starve.

Bora, the Yavorian army captain, stepped closer and shook Rhode's shoulders. "Go, ask Yahweh for mercy. Ask Him to show us the way, and we swear we will follow it—whether that means we stay here as captives of Kuvil or we return to Juro for refuge."

Rhode was appalled at the idea of returning to the very planet Yahweh had delivered them from. He wanted to be compassionate and hopeful, but he could only be suspicious of Bora's plea. Of course *now* they wanted to hear from Yahweh, after generations of ignoring Yahweh's commands. Were they merely desperate to avoid destruction, or were they sincere in their desire for repentance? "I will pray," Rhode decided. "Whatever Yahweh says, I will tell you."

The moment Rhode was alone, he collapsed with exhaustion. A few glimmers of light shown in the sky through the dense canopy. As Rhode stared up at them, he wondered if they were stars or impending spaceships. Sighing, he prayed, "Help me be faithful. Please, reveal Your will to me." For ten days, Rhode remained silent before Yahweh, until He spoke.

Rhode called the commanders together, but the cold and determined look on Captain Bora's face made him hesitate. Gathering himself, Rhode said, "If we remain on this planet, the one Yahweh promised to us, and trust in His protection, He will be gracious and we will prosper. We can trust that He will be merciful to us."



Everyone was silent, but Bora's eyes were ablaze with anger. "You lie! Your words are treasonous! If we stay, Kuvil will destroy us all."

"But Yahweh promises He will preserve a remnant of our people," Rhode said. The leaders began filing out of the tree, casting dirty glares and muttering "traitor" in his direction. Rhode hollered after them, "Fleeing to Juro would just be another idolatrous response. Yahweh is giving us another opportunity to put our trust in Him!" No one listened.

Before the suns had even set, Rhode was corralled onto a shuttle with a hoard of other Yavorians. They slipped through Kuvil's blockade with a cloaking device. Rhode pressed his face against the window and watched as the green planet's surface grew dim. Yavorah was a gift from Yahweh, a place for prosperity after slavery. And now, instead of leaning into His mercies, Rhode was taken with the rest of his people back to Juro. But Yavorah was his home, *their home*.

"I am with you, and I still give my mercy to my people," Yahweh said to Rhode as Yavorah faded from sight. "One day, I will bring you home. I am making all things new, and I will dwell with you forever." ❧ *Zoe Brickner*

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! Ephesians 2:4-5 (CSB)

❧ Today's story is an allegory of Jeremiah 42–43. Israel sought Egypt's help when Babylon attacked them, despite the fact that Egypt had enslaved them for over 400 years. Their choice to return to Egypt for refuge was an act of idolatry because they put their trust and hope in something other than God. To us, it may seem absurd and idiotic that Israel would even consider turning to Egypt, but we often fall into idolatry as well. What are some things in your life that you are tempted to trust before you trust God? Maybe it's your own good deeds, a relationship, academic or athletic achievement, financial success, social status, material security, or even a government or church leader. Consider taking a moment to bring your idols to God and take comfort knowing that He will never let you down, even though our idols will. _____

❧ Like Israel, we have all failed to fully trust God at times. However, Jesus lived a life of perfect trust in God the Father and perfect obedience to Him. When Jesus died and rose again, He bore the punishment our sins deserve, including idolatry, so that we don't have to. God washes away the very memory of our sins purely out of love for us (Isaiah 43:25). Jesus is always with us, and His death and resurrection have ushered in the new creation. When Jesus returns, He will complete His restoration of the heavens and the earth, and we will live in a new Jerusalem with Jesus and with all His people forever (Revelation 7:9; 21:1-5). And we can experience a taste of that new Jerusalem now when we gather with His people, the church. Praise God for this gift of mercy! How could you celebrate God's goodness with fellow Christians in your life? _____

TOO FAR GONE?

READ: MARK 2:13-17; JOHN 6:37


It's common sense that showers are for the dirty, hospitals are for the sick, and life preservers are for the drowning. So why is it so hard for some of us to accept that we don't have to fix up our lives before coming to the very One who promises to clean us, heal us, and save us?



We may resist coming to God for help because we think we're too far gone. We are correct in seeing that our sin separates us from a Holy God; we were *all* once totally lost in spiritual darkness (Ephesians 2:1-10).

But God didn't leave us there! Jesus Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead paid for all of our sins and made the way for us to be with Him forever (Colossians 1:12-14). If we think we've sinned too much to be forgiven, we are severely underestimating the power of God's grace and perhaps even missing the point of the gospel.

Sometimes those of us who know we're forgiven still struggle to come to God because we feel like we've wandered too far. We think that since we've been straying into different sins, or haven't been keeping up with our devotions, or haven't been praying enough...that God doesn't want anything to do with us. But God always wants us to draw near to Him!

I think it makes God sad when His children try to live apart from Him. He has called us to live in pursuit of Him, and once we have been redeemed by Christ, we can do so with the Holy Spirit's help. But God's love doesn't require our obedience in order to reach us (Romans 5:8). God's love has no strings attached.

Whether you've never asked God for forgiveness before, or you've recently wandered, don't wait to come to Him. There is true forgiveness for all of us in Christ's work on the cross, and Christ promises to *never* cast you out (John 6:37). 
Katherine Billingsley

-  Have you ever felt too far gone? If you know Jesus, all your sins are forgiven—past, present, and future. When God looks at you, He sees His Son's perfect righteousness. And He loves you more than you could ever imagine. You can come to Him in prayer anytime, asking Him to help you draw near to Him once again. If you've never come to Jesus, find out more on page 104.
-  In John 6:37, Jesus promises that He will never cast out those who come to Him. How can this truth comfort us when we have doubts about our salvation? _____

When Jesus heard this, he told them, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." Mark 2:17 (CSB)

WHEN GOD SEEMS DISTANT, HE'S STILL LISTENING

READ: PSALM 23; 2 CORINTHIANS 7:5-7

Once again, intense pain had brought me to the emergency room where I waited to be admitted to an upstairs room. Beyond discouraged, I asked the Lord, “Do You still love me?” My depression deepened as one nurse after another poked me with needles and questioned me.

The paramedics had been concerned and caring. At the hospital, the staff seemed determined to add to my suffering. How I longed for someone gentle to care for me. Someone like Annie.

Annie was the friend who had introduced me to my boyfriend. A few days earlier, she had begun her first nursing job in this same hospital.

“Lord Jesus, please fix it that Annie is my nurse.”

It was a crazy prayer. The hospital was large, and I had no idea what department or shift my friend was working. Still, I repeated my prayer until the shots did their work and I fell asleep.

Before I knew it, I was at an upstairs nursing station. A familiar voice nudged me awake. Opening my eyes, I looked into the face of my admitting nurse.

It was Annie. 📌 *Kathy Irey*

📌 Have you ever felt like God had stopped listening to your prayers? Was there a way He showed you He still cared? If not, you can ask God for this anytime. The Lord may not always take away our pain, but He'll let us know, He has not abandoned us. (If you want to dig deeper, read 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 12:7-10.)

📌 When we feel like no one understands our suffering, Jesus does. He suffered for us so that we could be free from the bondage of sin (Isaiah 53). When Jesus returns, He will make all things new; then sin and all its effects will be gone for good, so terrible things like pain and depression will be no more (Revelation 21:1-5). Until that day, He stays with us through everything. Even when it feels like He's distant, He is always so very present with us—through His Spirit, His Word, and His people. Are there any Bible passages that have resonated with you in times of sorrow and pain? Are there any people in your life who have embodied the kindness of Jesus to you, like Titus did to Paul, and the Corinthian Christians did to Titus, in 2 Corinthians 7:5-7? How might you be able to share the comfort He has given you with others? _____

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



REJOICING IN HIS GOODNESS

READ: PSALMS 23:5-6; 34:8; HABAKKUK 3:17-19; JAMES 1:17

In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!	On the third day Hell did weep— Death's final, dark defeat!
He has given Life to me— His sinless sacrifice set me free.	In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!
In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!	May His grace be ever praised, Oh, the glory of His ways!
In the grave His body lay— Sin's ransom fully paid.	In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!
In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!	In the goodness of the Lord I will rejoice!

What comes to mind when you hear the words: “God’s goodness”? If I’m honest, I think of the times that God helps me out when I’m in trouble. Especially if the problem was brought on by...uh, dubious choices of my own! Don’t get me wrong—thanking God for His help in times of trouble is good. But in the Scriptures that inspired this poem, I noticed that God’s Word portrays His goodness as far more than His kindness or help in trouble—though it is that!

God’s goodness is a part of His very nature (Exodus 33:19; Psalm 34:8). It is evidence of His *unceasing, divine work on our behalf*—recrafting and redeeming all things for our ultimate deliverance from sin and all its effects. His goodness is His presence experienced in the midst of pain—or His restraint when we desire vengeance. It is His relentless, pure, and undying love—which is displayed on the cross: God in flesh, dying to conquer sin and rising again to restore all that was broken, shamed, or lost. God’s goodness is the glory of this redemption. And glimpses of His goodness lie in every beautiful thing we experience—made not only to draw us to Him, but to delight in through all eternity. Therefore, let us say with the psalmist: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 118:1). 🕯️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯️ As you read today’s Scriptures, what are some ways you notice God’s goodness portrayed? Consider taking a moment to praise God for His goodness to you personally, and ask Him to help you recognize the ways His goodness is made real to you. You could even write a letter, poem, or song to God, thanking Him for some of the ways you see His goodness in your life. _____

“...may your faithful people rejoice in your goodness.” 2 Chronicles 6:41b (NIV)

SLOW WALKERS

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30; 14:13-23; MARK 5:21-43

One of my biggest pet peeves is slow walkers. I remember in high school I would inwardly scream when I was caught behind someone dillydallying. And now, when I go to the grocery store, I weave my cart in and out of families on busy afternoon shopping trips. I drive over the speed limit. It never seems to matter that I get up hours before I need to leave for work or class—I'm always rushing out the door with my shoes untied and coffee spilling out of my mug.

But then I think, and I wonder: *Was Jesus a slow walker?* If I were lucky enough to be one of the disciples who lived with Jesus for three years, what would I learn about the pace of His life?

Everywhere Jesus went, He taught and healed and saved. Although His days were packed with action, Jesus allotted time for interruptions to His rhythms and routines. In Mark 5, a father named Jairus pleaded with Jesus to heal his dying daughter, and Jesus agreed to go with him. Now just consider Jairus's panic and desperation, but also hope, as they made their way through town. This man was in a rush to get home. But then, Jesus just stopped, and said, "Who touched my clothes?" I imagine Jairus thinking, *What does He mean 'who touched me'? The crowd is all around Him!* In the middle of Jairus's darkest hour, Jesus stopped for a woman who had been bleeding for *twelve years*. Then, Jairus found out that his daughter had died during Jesus's short delay. The messengers said, "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?" (verse 35). But Jesus knew it wasn't too late. He knew there was enough time for both the woman who was bleeding and for Jairus's daughter. On that day, He healed them both.

Jesus was present. He was keenly aware of His surroundings, and He had compassion on those around Him. Jesus paused to listen to others' needs and love them well. In the same way, Jesus is attentive to us, and He invites us to live and love like He does. When we slow down, we can begin to notice the Holy Spirit moving within and around us. Rather than always focusing on "the next thing," we are invited to come and see what He is doing in the present moment.

So yes, I think Jesus was a slow walker...and I want to be one, too. 📖 *Zoe Brickner*

📖 Do you know anyone who lives their life at a slower pace, making an effort to be attentive to the Holy Spirit and to the people around them? What is it like to be with them? _____

📖 Consider taking a moment to ask God to help you be more aware of His constant presence with you, and more responsive to His invitations to rest in Him and to love and serve those around you.

"For my [Jesus's] yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:30 (NIV)

RELEASING THE BURDEN OF SEEKING APPROVAL

READ: MATTHEW 11:28-30; GALATIANS 1:10; COLOSSIANS 3:23-24

Have you ever felt pressure to get straight As or be the best athlete on the field? There are so many things in this world telling us to be the best at this or that. When we feel this pressure on our shoulders, it can start to crush us.

The truth is, it can be good to use the skills and abilities God has given us as we work hard for things and do our best—this can be an act of worship, honoring to God. But once we allow ourselves to be controlled by achieving the highest standing because we want to be well-liked, accepted, or feel valuable, then we know we've crossed a line. This can be a sign that we're starting to forget that we are perfectly loved, accepted, and valued in Christ.

And when we forget this truth, we start allowing ourselves to do things for the approval of other people, turning away from what God wants for us. Instead of walking in God's good ways because His unshakeable love has transformed our hearts, we begin to do things to get people to like us or accept us.

But, when we return to the truth of the gospel and we start to turn our focus on God, His Spirit works in us to align our thoughts, words, actions, and attitudes with His good ways. In the gospel, we see how Jesus died and rose again to make the way for us to be with Him, free from sin and death. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He is always with us. He loves us, He will never leave us, and we never have to earn His approval. This truth changes everything. When we rest in God's love, we begin to do things out of our love for Him instead of to earn the approval of people. 📖 *Tynea Lewis*

📌 When are you most tempted to idolize the approval of the people around you? Consider spending some time in prayer, asking Jesus to show you where you're chasing after human approval, and to help you rest in His perfect love instead. _____

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



THE POWER OF SEEKING WISE COUNSEL

READ: PROVERBS 11:14; 12:15; 15:22; 20:18

Do you have people in your life who want to give you advice, like parents, teachers, pastors, counselors, or coaches? They want us to listen to what they have to say, and often we can be tempted to shrug them off, but there may be a lot we can learn from them.

Someone who has been through different seasons of life can offer a lot of wisdom, and not in the “I-told-you-so” kind of way. There are people who genuinely care and want to help. And the Bible tells us how wonderful this kind of advice can be: “The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense” (Proverbs 27:9).

When we seek the advice of others, we can be given more direction. Fellow Christians can point us to Christ and help us discern what He wants for our lives. Because the truth is, God doesn't expect us to be able to figure everything out on our own. He provides loving wisdom and guidance through His Word, His Spirit, *and* His people. Once we've put our trust in Jesus—believing in His life, death, and resurrection—He gives us the Holy Spirit, who gives all wisdom. And He gives us the church—people who follow Jesus and also have the Holy Spirit inside of them. Through the church, we can surround ourselves with people who can offer biblical advice so we can do what Proverbs 19:20 says: “Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.” When we talk to mature Christians, they can help us align our plans with God's good ways. So often, it's easy to see the way we want things to go, but when we turn to different advisors, we can see if we are on the right track or completely off base.

It's a blessing to have these people in our lives. Sometimes, it feels like other people want to criticize what we're doing, but when we humbly seek the advice of others and truly listen to their wisdom, it can have a profound impact on our lives. 📖 *Tynea Lewis*

- 📖 Have you ever been hesitant to ask for advice because you were afraid of being criticized, demeaned, or teased? This is not how God treats us, and it's not how He calls us to treat each other. Consider taking some time to talk to Him about your hurts and the ways people have looked down on you, receiving His compassion and healing. _____

- 📖 What is one thing you're facing that you could use advice on? Who are mature Christians in your life you can go to for advice, people who display the kind of wisdom described in James 3:13-18? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. _____

Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many advisers bring success. Proverbs 15:22 (NLT)

OLD PRAYERS

READ: DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9; LUKE 11:1-13

In the churches I've grown up in, prayers were almost always made up on the spot. And these prayers are great! But lately, I've also been appreciating pre-written prayers. And I'm not the only one! In the early church, it wasn't uncommon for Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4) three times a day. And before that, the Israelites would regularly recite a prayer called the Shema (based on Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and the Ten Commandments (found in Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21) as part of their prayers.

While spontaneous prayer is certainly important, I think these pre-written prayers offer a lot of value as well. They can remind us of the unchanging truth of the gospel, center us (the church) around our mission, and keep us focused on God's goodness. Plus, sometimes when I'm praying, I don't have the words to say. These pre-written prayers can give me a place to start, and they can be a jumping-off point—something in these prayers will often remind me of something else I want to talk to God about, thank Him for, or ask Him for.

And, by reciting these prayers, we are joining in with a tradition thousands of years old. We can pray prayers that have been prayed by hundreds of generations of people following God. And they'll be prayed for years and generations to come. Not only that; we're also uniting with believers around the world. These prayers have been spoken in thousands of languages by people from hundreds of different cultures. How amazing is that?

By trusting in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, we are united with our loving God and with each other. Reciting these prayers alongside our spontaneous prayers, especially with other believers, can be a powerful way to remember these truths. *✦ Taylor Eising*

✦ Consider taking a moment to reread Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Luke 11:1-13. What can these passages tell us about who God is? What can they tell us about who we are? _____

✦ As we read prayers from the Bible, we may end up memorizing them, and we can also use them as models for our own spontaneous prayers. Remember, pre-written prayers are great, but we shouldn't stop making up our own prayers, too! Consider writing down some ideas of ways you could incorporate a prayer from the Bible (there are lots to choose from) into your life. Perhaps you could pray it before a meal, when you wake up, when you go to bed, with friends or family, etc. _____

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Luke 11:1 (NIV)

FINDING REST IN THE HANDS OF GOD

READ: EXODUS 14:14; PSALMS 23:1-3; 127:2; MATTHEW 11:25-30

Are you, like me, constantly asking God to move and work and make your life different? There are things I've prayed about over and over again, asking God to step in and bring about change. I've begged Him to make things better. As I pray to Him, I feel anxious. I want to see something happen.

I try to fix things. I ask God to fix things. I work hard to heal. I ask God to heal me. I feel like something has to be constantly happening, constantly changing. I want to be made better. I want my life to improve.

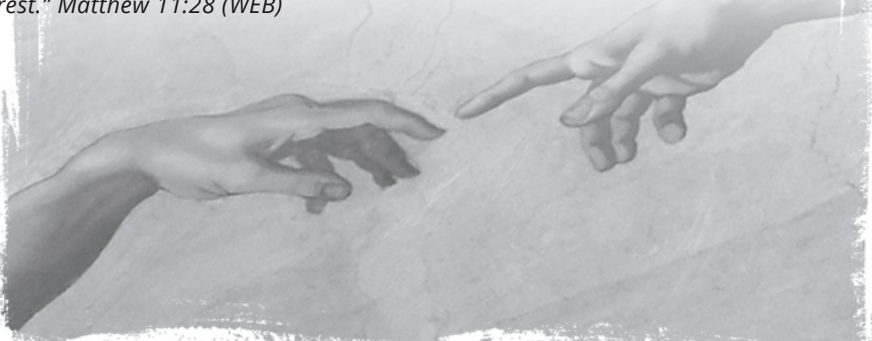
I was praying for change the other day, and suddenly it hit me. What if instead of asking for change, I just rest in the hands of the One who holds this world? What if instead of asking for healing, I just rest in the hands of the One who has the power to heal? What if I let things be as they are and I simply take time to rest, trusting the hands of the powerful One to protect me?

Yes, there are times when action is required. But there are also times when we need a break, and we can simply be still in the hands of God and let Him look out for us. **✦** *Emily Acker*

✦ Once you've put your trust in Jesus, you can know that you are forever held in His love and your eternal future is secure. So, even if the things you've been asking God for don't come to fruition, you can still have confident hope that He is with you and He is working in your life (Philippians 1:6; 4:6-7, 12-13). If you want to know more about trusting Jesus, see page 104.

✦ While God certainly does invite us to ask Him for the things we need and want, He also beckons us to simply come to Him and find rest in His presence. How might it be freeing to take a break from asking God for things? Have you ever felt the peace that comes from simply resting in Him and knowing that He will take care of everything and that you will be okay? Consider taking a moment now to come to Him in prayer, not asking for anything, but just resting in Him. _____

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



WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES

READ: ROMANS 5:1-5; 12:15



BOOM! A clap of thunder shook the rounded windows of Habitation Enclosure 150 in the Tuuli province of the planet Terra.

“That sounded awfully close,” said Lillah with a shiver. “I hate storms.”

“I know,” said Phlox, Lillah’s roommate and the area botanist. “It feels safer when we don’t have to see the lightning.”

“I wish it could just rain without all that thunder and lightning,” Lillah sighed.

“Well,” said Phlox, “did you know that when lightning hits the ground, it breaks down nutrients in the soil so plants can use them?”

Lillah smiled. “I think I’ve heard something about that, but it’s been years...And I know I’m not going to stop your inevitable botany lecture.”

Phlox laughed. “Well, I’ll spare you most of it. But, basically, lightning is important because it plays a part in helping plants grow.”

Lillah nodded. “Only the Creator could bring so much order out of so much chaos.”

“I agree,” said Phlox. “I’m glad the Creator is with us and we’re never alone. In actual storms or when things get chaotic in our own lives.” Phlox’s eyes sparkled with the beginnings of tears.

Lillah hugged her friend. “I know this year hasn’t been easy for you. Moving to Tuuli to watch over an underfunded community garden...after your dream job at the National Art Garden lost funding. That’s a big loss to grieve.”

A flash of lightning caused them both to wince.

“Thank you for grieving it with me.” Phlox wiped at the tears on her cheeks. “May the Creator use my life storm to give me the nutrients I need to grow in love.”

Lillah nodded. “And may He remind us that, even in chaos, His love holds us steady.” **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ What are some life storms you or your friends are going through? Maybe you or someone you love is struggling with illness, or you feel like you’ve lost all your friends. Remember, because Jesus died and rose again for us, we’re never alone, no matter what storm comes our way. He’s right there with us, inviting us to talk to Him about all our problems and helping us grow. We can rest in His embrace as we look forward to the day He’ll return and make everything new. _____

...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. Romans 5:3-4 (NIV)

BEAUTIFULLY GATHERED

READ: GENESIS 1:26-27; JOHN 3:16-17; REVELATION 5:9; 7:9-10

Have you ever watched a florist arrange different flowers into a bouquet? It's fascinating to see all those blooms come together into a unified composition. And a florist's creativity points to our Creator God, who designed the stunning variety of flowers we find all around the world.

God is glorified by the vast array of floral colors—for starters, just think about white and yellow daisies, red and pink dahlias, blue and purple hydrangeas, and snapdragons and petunias and lilies that come in all sorts of colors! And it's not just the colors that are different. The petals are too. Lilies are shaped like trumpets, daisy petals look like teardrops, baby's breath is like little stars, and gladioli petals are all ruffly.

It's amazing to think God made people like that too. Just as we see beautiful variations in flowers, we also see beautiful variations in humans. God made people with different colors of skin and hair and eyes. And their hair might be straight, wavy, or curly. Even body shapes are different—people come in all different heights and proportions. Our differences make our world more interesting than if we were all alike, and this diversity brings glory to God.

When we see a variety of flowers gathered in a bouquet, we can remember how the Bible says God will gather believers from every nation, tribe, people group, and language to worship Jesus. How wonderful it will be to praise the Lord with believers from all over the world—joined together like a beautiful bouquet, unified by Jesus's blood and forgiveness. When Jesus returns and establishes the new heavens and new earth, we will rejoice in our God together for eternity.

But we don't have to wait until then to appreciate people who are different from us. All people are created in God's image and are deeply loved by Him. We can enjoy His beauty in the huge variety of people He has made, remembering that God created each of us in His own image, and Jesus died for us all. Together we reflect the beauty of His love and grace. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 God created humans in His image—and no two humans are exactly alike! Can you think of a time when the differences of others helped you better understand God? How so? _____

📖 How can looking ahead to the new heavens and new earth, when all Christians will worship Jesus together in harmony, give us hope to pursue that kind of fellowship here and now? _____

...I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb [Jesus]. Revelation 7:9b (NLT)

WALK THE WALK OF LOVE

READ: JOHN 13:31-38; 15:1-17; 1 JOHN 3:16-18; 4:19

Have you ever heard the expression, “They talk the talk, but don’t walk the walk”? It’s a way of saying that people’s actions don’t match their words. For example, if somebody talks all about how important recycling is but constantly throws their plastic water bottles into the trash, they are acting like a hypocrite: they talk the talk but don’t walk the walk. They might say recycling is important, but when it comes to actually taking action, they don’t follow through.

Sadly, we are all guilty of hypocrisy in one way or another. We might not even realize our actions aren’t matching our words until someone points it out, and this can be disheartening. After all, the Bible shows us that Christians are supposed to “walk the walk” AND “talk the talk.” For example, the apostle John says, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). As Christians, we are called to be people who love in word AND deed. Because Jesus loves us so much, we are called to love others.

Many of us know it’s important to love others, but how well do we show it? If we say we love our friends or family but act selfishly and treat them unkindly, our claim to love them isn’t really good for much. It’s a good thing to tell people we love them, but we need to act like it too.

Jesus did not merely *say* that He loved us—He went and actually did something about it, saving us from sin by dying for us on the cross. He took our sin, our shame, and died the death we deserved. *That* is true love. And then, Jesus rose from the grave, declaring that everyone who trusts in Him can be forgiven and become God’s child.

God’s love is so great that nothing can separate His children from Him—even sins like hypocrisy. The fact is, He knows that we are unable to truly love Him or other people on our own. Thankfully, He has poured out HIS love “into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). So, as Christians, we can love others in word and deed by relying on God’s love. We can treat our friends, our family, and even our enemies the way Jesus would: by caring for them, helping them, and providing for their needs. As Jesus’s followers, we are empowered to talk the talk and walk the walk. 📖 *Jacob Bier*

🔑 Consider taking some time to ask God to help you see ways that you might “talk the talk but not walk the walk.” We can confess our sin and ask God to help us follow Him wholeheartedly. _____

🔑 What are some practical ways you could show love to people in your life today? What resources has God given you that you could use to show love to others? _____

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

THE GOD WHO SEES

READ: GENESIS 16:1-13; PSALM 139; HEBREWS 13:5

If there was a list of all the people in the Bible who had a reason to feel invisible, Hagar would no doubt be near the top. As Sarai's Egyptian slave, Hagar likely had no choice but to cooperate when she was suddenly thrown into the middle of a messy plot for Abram to produce offspring through her. You see, God had promised that Abram and Sarai would have many descendants, but after years of waiting, the childless couple got impatient. So, Sarai told Abram to sleep with Hagar, her slave, so they could have a child through her. Even though this was a common practice at the time, God was certainly not okay with it. And, like most plans we make apart from God, things began to go badly. Hagar was mistreated to the point she ran away, leaving Abram, Sarai, and their twisted plan behind. Except, she was already pregnant.

But as she came to a spring in the middle of the wilderness, Hagar was met by the angel of the Lord. The angel instructed her to return, promising that God would greatly multiply her descendants and saying, "the LORD has heard your cry of affliction" (Genesis 16:10-11).

Hagar called the God who spoke to her *El Roi*, which means: the God who sees me. Hagar's mistreatment and grief wasn't over yet. But in the middle of it all, when she no doubt felt invisible in her suffering, God saw her.

Not all of us have been used and mistreated like Hagar was, but at some point we will all reach a wilderness of our own. Living in a sinful world and carrying heavy burdens, it's easy to feel unseen and forgotten in this life. But we are not unseen. Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And in Psalm 139, David writes about how God sees each of us and searches the innermost places of our hearts. How wonderful to know that the One who knows us from the inside out, the One who knitted each of us together in the womb, is the same One who walks with us every step of our lives.

In the middle of whatever you're going through, you are not invisible or alone. The same God who saw Hagar sees you, and He will never forsake you. 🕯

Katherine Billingsley

🕯 Have there been times in your life when you've felt invisible? How could it be comforting to know that the same God who saw Hagar is the One who sees each of us? _____

🕯 Throughout Scripture, God sees and cares for those who would normally be looked down upon or outcast. How could you show those around you that they are seen and heard by God? _____

LORD, you have searched me and known me. Psalm 139:1 (CSB)

LET YOUR HEART TAKE COURAGE

READ: MATTHEW 10:29-31; ROMANS 8:28-29; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:9; HEBREWS 13:5

Are you going through a stressful time? Is life really hard?

In every hard time, we are seen. We are known, and we are loved. And the One doing all of this caring is God Himself. Jesus understands suffering. He suffered and died for you.

In Matthew 10, Jesus says that God has His eye on every sparrow that falls from its branch. The bird's whole life is noticed by its Maker: from hatchling, to bird-in-flight, to nest-builder and worm-eater and tender-of-its-young, on to old age.

Throughout our lives, we will encounter suffering. Yet, our heavenly Father sees all we go through. He has compassion on us and comforts us, and He has planned for all believers a glorious life ahead that we cannot even imagine (1 Corinthians 2:9; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

So, in every struggle He says, "Be encouraged," or as some Bible translations put it, "Let your heart take courage" (Psalm 31:24). How do we do this? We can take hold of the courage God offers by trusting in Him. Instead of focusing on all the hard stuff, as believers we can choose to focus on Jesus because we have the Holy Spirit living inside us. The Holy Spirit gives us faith and reminds us of who God is and how much He cares for us. One practical way we can choose to trust Him is to live in the "even though's," believing God's truths, even though the circumstances are tough. Here are some examples:

Even though... I miss the person who died, yet I will take courage, knowing that God sees me in my suffering, and He is right here with me. He said He would never leave me, nor forsake me. Ever.

Even though... I am suffering through this illness, yet I will take courage, knowing that God sees me in my suffering, and He promises to use this difficulty for good. I can trust Him. Always.

Rest assured today, His eye is upon you, right now, even in the stressful experience you may be facing. He loves you, and you can trust Him for what lies ahead. 📌 *Kristen Merrill*

📌 The One who made you understands and cares about everything that is going on in your life, right now. His loving eye is always on you (Psalm 32:8). What are some of the stressful things you've experienced lately? Consider taking some time to talk to Jesus about these things—you can be totally honest about your hurts, sorrows, frustrations, and fears. As you talk to Him, consider trying out the phrase "even though," using the truths from today's Bible passages. _____

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who hope in Yahweh. Psalm 31:24 (WEB)

GOING LOW TO BE LIFTED UP

READ: ROMANS 12:1-13; JAMES 4:6-10

I genuinely wanted to figure this out on my own. But I couldn't. It was time to ask for help.

I'd been in Romania just a few weeks. Wanting to acclimate to my new city, I took a tram to shop for groceries one afternoon. I needed to return for a meeting with my ministry team later that night. As I left the store, I walked to the tram stop that looked familiar. Only I boarded the tram going in the wrong direction. When I realized my mistake, I quickly exited. Now I stood waiting in an area that felt completely foreign. I didn't want to be late to meet my team, but I could think of no solutions. At least, not on my own.

I approached a group of school children and asked if they spoke English. After my request for directions, one boy held up his hand and indicated I should go five stops and then switch trams. I followed those instructions and returned in the nick of time. Even though I—a young woman—wanted to feel independent and capable, I had to humble myself so I could receive the help God wanted to give.

In my pride, I might have chosen to continue sorting out my problem alone—probably growing more lost and desperate. As humans, we all have a sin problem. And the result of sin is death. God's plan to solve that problem was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. Out of His great love for us, Jesus humbled Himself by becoming human and submitting to death on a cross. Then, He was lifted up to life on the third day. When we trust in Jesus for forgiveness and new life, we begin a relationship with God by His grace. But we don't stop needing His grace. As we grow, we learn to acknowledge that we can't meet all our needs on our own. And as we humble ourselves, we get to experience His grace in our lives. That evening in Romania, God's grace showed up in a group of generous school kids. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ While the desire to be independent can be good and healthy at times, how could this desire get in the way of asking for and receiving help when we need it? (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 21) _____

🕯️ When do you hesitate to ask God for help? And, when do you hesitate to ask other people for help? Why do you think that might be? Consider spending some time in prayer, asking Jesus to help you let go of any pride in your heart and instead rest and rely on Him. _____

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4:10 (NIV)

FREED TO FLEE

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13; 2 TIMOTHY 2:22; JAMES 1:12-15; 4:7

What sins do you struggle with the most? In other words, in what situations do you find it's harder to love God and your neighbors through your words, thoughts, and actions?

In Matthew 22:37-40, we see that the life Jesus invites us into is one of love. But sin distorts love, so we end up loving the wrong things—or loving the right things in the wrong way. And the result of sin is always death, decay, and brokenness.

Yet, so often sin seems so appealing. Do certain sins seem to tempt you more than they tempt other people? That can be such a discouraging experience. But the good news is, it's also normal. Every person has different weaknesses and different strengths. And Jesus “understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Isn't that a comforting truth? And it gets even better. Because Jesus was sinless, He was able to pay for all our sins when He died on the cross—He took the whole of our sin upon His own body (1 Peter 2:24). This was the ultimate act of love. He went through all that undeserved pain and sorrow and ridicule...because He loves us. He wants more than anything for us to be with Him. He invites us to come to Him with all our failures, weaknesses, and shortcomings...to come and receive His free gift of salvation. Instead of being trapped in guilt and fear, we can rest knowing that we are held in His love, because He has secured our forgiveness by dying and rising again for us. And since He loves us, we can love Him and others.

So, when we feel tempted to do something unloving against God or our neighbors, we can remember that we don't have to give in to any sin because Jesus has already freed us from sin's power. We can trust Him to help us resist every temptation we face—no exceptions. And when we find ourselves believing lies that make it easy for us to act in ways that are unloving toward God and our neighbors, we can turn to Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, He will help us reject those lies and instead rest in His great love for us—a love that is far more powerful than sin.

The next time you're tempted, remember that God knows your weaknesses, and He can help you be strong when you feel yourself wanting to give in. Once you know Jesus, sin holds no power over you. You don't have to give in, even when something is especially tempting, because God gives His people the ability to resist every temptation. But when you're tempted, don't try to resist on your own—instead, depend on God. Since you belong to Jesus, you have been freed to flee temptation and run to Him. In His arms, you will find the strength to love God and your neighbors—no matter what. **✠** *A. W. Smith*

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

- ❗ Jesus came to save us from sin. Why is sin something we need to be saved from? (If you want to know more, check out page 104.) _____

- ❗ When is it hardest for you to love God and your neighbors well? Consider taking some time to talk with God about this in the space below. Remember, even Jesus was tempted, but He never sinned. Yet, He understands all our weaknesses and He empathizes with us. So, once you've put your trust in Jesus, you can approach Him with anything, knowing that you are held securely in His love. (Hebrews 4:14-16) _____

- ❗ We live in a broken world where we are constantly bombarded by lies that make it easy to act in ways that are unloving toward God and our neighbors. Here are just a few examples of lies we might believe: *God doesn't really love me. God doesn't really care about me. God won't meet my needs. I'm worthless. I'm bad. I'm unlovable. Other people are worthless. Other people are bad. Other people are unlovable. What I do doesn't matter. My life has no purpose. My needs don't matter. Other people's needs don't matter. I'm trapped, and sinning is the only way out. If I don't sin, I'll be alone and vulnerable. This thing God calls "sin" is actually good for me and other people. God can't be trusted. I've already sinned, so it doesn't matter if I sin more.* (Etc.) Does one of these lies stick out to you in particular? Why? How can resting in Jesus's love for us help us combat these and other lies? _____

- ❗ In addition to talking with Jesus, it's also important for us to spend time with fellow Christians who we can be honest with about the temptations we struggle with. Jesus calls us to confess our sins to each other, remind each other of God's great love and forgiveness, and encourage each other in our walks with Him. Who are trusted Christians in your life you can be open and honest with? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. _____



FLOWERS

READ: MATTHEW 6:25-33; EPHESIANS 3:14-21; 1 PETER 5:7

Have you ever been walking or driving along and noticed a cluster of colorful flowers just off the road? No one planted them there, but they're just as beautiful as any of the flowers planted on purpose. Wildflowers come up in the most random places, even between the cracks in the pavement. They come in all shapes and sizes and colors, and they're a bright spot in some otherwise drab areas.

Do you ever stop to think about how God created all the flowers in the world, including the wildflowers? In Matthew 6, Jesus says, if God cares for the flowers that are here for such a short time and then fade away and die, shouldn't we know that He cares much more about us?

It's so easy to forget that God treasures us, that He watches over us, and that He is mindful of our every need. But when we look at the wildflowers, or any flowers for that matter, they can be reminders of God's love for us. He cares about us much more than the flowers—and just think about how beautifully and intricately He made them.

God's love for you is deep and wide, and He will never stop caring for you. All the flowers you see can be reminders of His love and kindness, because the same God who shaped each petal also made you, and He loves you more than you can imagine. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 According to Matthew 6, how can flowers remind us of God's love? What other reminders do you see day to day? Why do you think God calls us to take time to ponder His love? _____

📖 In Ephesians 3, Paul prays that we would realize just how deep and wide and high Jesus's love for us is. Because Jesus died and rose again for us, we can rest in the hope of His constant presence with us and His promise to one day return and welcome us into the new heavens and the new earth, where we will enjoy an abundance of all good things. Until then, He promises to be with us and give us strength to endure as we struggle with pain and lack, looking forward to the day He will clothe us even more splendidly than a field covered in flowers. Consider taking a moment to bring your needs and concerns to God in prayer (Philippians 4:4-13). And if you'd like, you can also pray Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 for yourself or someone you know. _____

"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?" Matthew 6:28-30 (NIV)

THE GOD WHO GETS IT

READ: ISAIAH 53; ROMANS 12:15; HEBREWS 4:14-16

Have you ever met someone who just gets what you're going through? It can be so comforting. I experience this often with my friends who are parents.

I have two young kids, and I really appreciate my friends who do have kids, as well as my friends who don't. They both bring richness to my life. It takes some extra work for my non-parent friends to understand what my life is like, and I love that they are willing to do that work to empathize with me.

But, my friends who have kids of their own don't have to do nearly as much work to empathize with me. All I have to do is say the word "teething," and they instantly know that means sleepless nights, hours of tears, and a deep sense of helplessness. They know, not just intellectually, but from their own shared experiences, what it's like to attempt to soothe a crying child an endless number of times throughout the day and night. Not only can they imagine what it's like—they've actually lived it. They've felt the exhaustion, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness that seep into your bones. They get it. And knowing that brings me so much comfort and alleviates some of my loneliness.

The Bible tells us that, whatever we're going through, Jesus gets it. He is the all-knowing, all-powerful God who created the whole universe, became human, and walked the earth. He experienced heartache, loneliness, disappointment. He was tempted. He was betrayed. He even experienced death. But, He rose again, declaring that He will one day restore all things.

As we wait for that day, if we know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in us, feeling our hurts with us. Not only can He imagine what it's like—He's actually lived it. He gets it. God has entered into our suffering. And while that doesn't always take away our pain and heartache, His empathy can make us feel a bit less lonely in the midst of it. And sometimes, that's enough. *✦ Taylor Eising*

✦ As Christians, we can know that, whatever we go through, we are never alone. Jesus is with us, feeling our hurts as His own. And, He is able and eager to help us. Consider taking a moment to tell God about the hard things you've experienced lately, resting in His comfort and empathy. _____

✦ Because we have received Jesus's empathy, we can also extend empathy to others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Who have you been able to empathize with lately? What was it like? _____

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses...
Hebrews 4:15a (NIV)*

SO DOWN

READ: PSALM 46:1-11; LUKE 19:10; JOHN 8:12; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11

Feeling so down
Laying on the ground
Tears fall from my eyes
Then I get a surprise

A hand on my back
Comforting, not an attack
Someone to dry my tears
Be with me in my fears

Help me get up again
Walk where I've never been
Jesus, there for me
In ways I never knew He could be

When I was ready to give up
He showed me His love was enough
Brought me back to the light
Told me I would be alright 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

🕯️ Have you ever been surprised by Jesus's comfort? Has His nearness ever brought you peace in a hard time? If so, consider taking a moment to thank God for this. If not, you can ask God for this anytime; He loves to answer these prayers. _____

🕯️ Sometimes, life in our broken world can be overwhelming. But Jesus does not stand far off—He is so very near, ready to help and comfort us. Have you ever imagined Jesus being physically present with you? After all, Jesus is God in flesh (John 1:14). He is fully human, even as He is also fully God. When He came and lived among us, people could talk with Him, eat with Him, lean against Him, even beat Him and bruise Him. He fully entered into all the joys and sorrows of human life. Ultimately, He gave up His life for us. He walked where we never could—He lived a sinless life and took our sins upon Himself, dying a terrible death on a cross, so that we could be forgiven and brought near to God. But the evils of death could not hold our wondrous Lord—He rose from the grave, defeating sin and death once and for all and declaring that, when He returns, pain and sorrow will be no more. On that day, He will be physically present with us again, and all who trust in Him will live with Him forever. In the meantime, He is still very much with us—through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). He is intimately involved in our lives. Every moment of every day, He is there for us. Consider taking a moment to picture Jesus right beside you, and talk to Him about whatever comes to mind. _____

🕯️ If you're feeling overwhelmed, who is a trusted Christian in your life you could talk to about what you're going through, such as a friend, parent, counselor, teacher, coach, or pastor? _____

God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. Psalm 46:1 (NLT)



TORNADO THUMBS

READ: EPHESIANS 4:11-32; JAMES 3:2-10

Picture this. You're on your favorite social media app, and you come across someone saying blatantly untrue things. You're understandably frustrated. *How could someone have this much disregard for the truth?* You feel anger and fear. And just like that, it feels like a tornado has taken over your thumbs. You deposit a slew of harsh words and not-so-kind names into the comment box. You press send, and you hope you've shown them what's what.

But let's take a step back. Let's think about tornadoes for a second. When a tornado hits a town, it can destroy all sorts of things as it sweeps through. Once the storm passes, the people who live there are left wandering around their ruined yards and houses and overturned cars. Their belongings are flung everywhere. The people are stunned, at a loss for what to do. All that damage was done in just a few minutes. But the rebuilding may take years. Thinking about tornadoes can help us reflect on how the words we say can cause a lot of hurt and damage and keep us from showing others the love of Jesus. Much like tornadoes, harsh and hasty words on social media can not only hurt us but also the people we might actually be trying to help.

As Christians, we are called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). After all, Jesus came to live among us, full of both love and truth (John 1:14). Though we were all trapped in sin, showing disregard for the truth and for one another, He had compassion on us. He died and rose again to forgive us and save us from sin. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, His forgiveness frees us to love others and to realize that we are all sinners—both us and the people we're tempted to tear down on social media. So, as forgiven people, we can build others up instead of tearing them down (Ephesians 4:29). Even when we do decide to comment online, it's important to make sure the way we say something doesn't cause more damage than if we hadn't spoken at all. Next time you feel the tornado thumbs coming on, take a deep breath, pause, and talk to Jesus. You can trust Him to help you deal with the situation in an honest yet loving way. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Can you think of a time you saw harsh words on social media cause harm? What were the effects? What might have been a more loving way to communicate the intended message? _____

✦ Before posting or messaging, what questions could you ask yourself that might slow you down? Who are trusted adults in your life who could help you set up good boundaries for communicating lovingly and safely online—such as parents, teachers, counselors, pastors, etc.? _____

Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips. Psalm 141:3 (NLT)

THE COMFORT OF JESUS

READ: PSALM 34:18; ISAIAH 41:10; MATTHEW 5:4; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4


Editor's note: Today's devotional reading discusses sexual abuse.

As an eleven-year-old, I was shy and awkward. My father moved out that year. Everything felt embarrassing. One day, my father came to school unannounced. He took me on a weekend trip and molested me. Then he told me it was my fault. I felt damaged, dirty, and destroyed. I was brokenhearted and crushed.


Has something horribly unfair or evil happened to you? It seems like life should be fair. When it isn't, we can feel devastated. The sorrow can be crushing when another person harms part of our life.


Jesus came to earth for our good. Yet He was crucified by the very people He came to save. Jesus understands unfairness. He was bullied and tortured. He wept and bled for us so we could have friendship with God. When He rose from the dead, He promised that He would bring an end to sin, death, and suffering permanently on the day He returns. And until that day, He is able to comfort us through our troubles.

The Lord is the only way I survived my pain. He was near to me and consoled me. When I remembered that He is close to us in all our troubles, I could feel Him next to me, leading me, guiding me, and holding me beside Him when I was afraid.

At the right time, God provided a Christian counselor to help me grow past the pain. I learned that it was not my fault and that I was valued by God. I learned that although someone sinned against me, I could find comfort in Jesus. Holding onto hurt ultimately hurts us more. Leaning into the love and hope of Christ brings peace.  *Mary Schilling*

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

 Has something shattered your life? Jesus can relate to your suffering. He cares about your every hurt, and He weeps with you (John 11:33-36; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 Peter 5:7). You can talk to Him about your hurts anytime.

 As you process your hurts with Jesus, who are trusted people in your life you can reach out to? Remember, we need community. We are made to walk alongside other people, especially as Christians (Genesis 2:18; Galatians 6:1-10). _____

🔑 We live in a world that has been broken by sin. But Jesus came into our broken world to save and restore. He was willing to endure the cross so that our sins could be forgiven and we could be brought near to God (Isaiah 53; Hebrews 12:2). Then He rose from the dead, defeating sin and all the brokenness sin causes, including terrible things like abuse. He promises to return one day, righting every wrong and making all things new. On that glorious day, He will raise His people to new life. “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). And even now, He is present with us, helping us escape harmful situations and bringing healing through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). As Christians, we have this unshakeable hope through all the suffering and sorrow we experience. We can rest in the truth that “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). In light of these wonderful truths, what are some ways we can pray for people who have been abused and also for people who have abused others? _____

🔑 If you or someone you know is suffering from abuse, and especially 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 help doing this, who is a trusted person you can reach out to?

🔑 If you are not in immediate danger but need someone to talk to about hurts you have experienced or are currently experiencing, 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.



HEALING TEARS

READ: PSALMS 6; 42; JOHN 11:1-44

When was the last time you had a good cry? I'm not talking about letting a few tears go and moving on with your day, but an all-out, feels like your heart is breaking, flooding your couch with tears kind of cry. I recently allowed myself to weep like this, and afterward, it occurred to me that it had been months since I had such a cleansing cry. Before the deluge, I felt an aching emptiness. After crying, I felt a great sense of comfort and peace.

David knew all about the healing power of tears. He wasn't afraid to use the emotions God gave him to maximum capacity. When we read the psalms of David or other Bible passages about his life, we find many times when he wept, whether it be over his friendship with Johnathan, the sickness of his baby, his enemies having the upper hand, or his sorrow over the death of his adult son Absalom (1 Samuel 20:41; 2 Samuel 12:16-23; 18:33; Psalm 6).

In Psalm 56, David wrote that God kept track of all his sorrows, collecting his tears in a bottle and recording each one in His book (verse 8). The knowledge that God cares enough about our sorrows to keep track of them is such a comforting thought. Our emotions and tears are extraordinarily important to the One who created us.

Jesus Himself wept over the death of His friend Lazarus, deeply moved by the grief of others who also loved him (John 11:32-44). Jesus is God, and He knew that He would raise Lazarus from the dead, yet in His humanity He took the time to weep and share in the sorrows of those around Him. And, when His own death was drawing near, Jesus said, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death" even though He knew that He would rise again three days later (Matthew 26:37-38; Mark 14:32-34).

If you know Jesus, you have a promise that one day He will raise you from the dead too, and wipe away all your tears (Revelation 21:4). While weeping may remain for much of life here on earth, God promises that joy will come (Psalm 30:5). When circumstances feel hopeless, you can cling to His promises and rest in the One who cares so much for you that He records your every tear. 🕯 *Savannah Coleman*

🕯 When was the last time you allowed yourself space to process your feelings with tears, whether tears of anger, sorrow, or joy? Consider setting aside some time for this, and ask God to give you the courage to follow His example and utilize the good gift He has given you in tears. _____

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



SUGAR AND SALT

READ: ROMANS 8:1; HEBREWS 4:14-16; 1 JOHN 1:8-2:2

I'd just arrived in a new-to-me country on the other side of the world. I had left a sweltering summer in Florida, where I lived...and landed in a blustery New Zealand winter to begin a year of ministry. A missionary couple offered their home for my first few days there. When I trudged into their house, I wanted nothing more than a cup of hot tea. After getting my tea just right, I spotted what I assumed to be a tiny sugar bowl near the stove. I spooned some sugar into my cup and took the first delightful sip. Only my tea wasn't delightful; it was dismal. I'd mistakenly added salt, not sugar. It was a mistake I never made again at this family's house.

Some errors are harder to leave behind, though. There are days when I've found myself doing the same wrong things over and over, such as doubting God's goodness or acting out of fear instead of faith. It can lead me to wonder in disappointment—*when will I learn?*

Sometimes our sins surprise us, like a mouthful of salty tea, but God isn't ever surprised by our sin. He knows everything we do, think, or say, and He knows that we'll all struggle with sin until Jesus returns. So, until that day, God's instructions to His people are not to hide our sins, but rather to acknowledge those wrongdoings to Him. We don't need to be afraid to come to God with our sins, because being God's people means we have received forgiveness from sin and entered a relationship with Him through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, when we confess our sins to God, we experience reminders of His lovingkindness: that Christ took the penalty for our sin on Himself, and we don't face that any longer (1 Peter 2:24).

That evening in New Zealand, I could have chosen to try to hide my mistake and drink salty tea. Instead, I poured it out and started fresh. God gives us fresh starts, too. In Jesus, we're free from condemnation. Through faith in what Jesus has done for us, we are freely accepted by Him, and free to take new steps of obedience even after we fail. **✦** *Allison Wilson Lee*

✦ When do you find it difficult to confess your sin to God? How could it be encouraging to remember that God is never surprised by our sin? He calls us to confess our sins to Him often. Even though we're not even aware of all our sins (Psalm 19:12-14), it's so good to come to Jesus in our weakness and rest in His forgiveness and in the Spirit's power to help us move forward in love (Galatians 5:13-16). Consider taking a moment to confess any sins that come to mind. _____

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...
Romans 8:1 (NIV)*

GOD SEES YOU

READ: ISAIAH 43:1-7; MATTHEW 10:29-31; JOHN 10:1-18; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27

Have you ever felt invisible? Like no one knew who you were? Sometimes it seems like other people have really great relationships and a bunch of people to hang out with. There are some people who fit into groups with ease, and there are others who find themselves watching from a distance more than they'd like.

It's lonely. It's isolating. It's discouraging. Trying to find your place in this world can be hard. It can take more time than we'd like. It can feel defeating.

But God knows your name. He knows who you are. And He loves you. He doesn't care whether or not you're in the in-crowd. He doesn't care if you have the best ability when it comes to sports or music. None of that makes Him love you any more or any less.

He created you for a purpose, and you matter more to Him than you could ever know. He sees you, He knows you, and He values who you are. 📖 *Tynea Lewis*

📖 When have you felt left out? In times like these, Jesus invites us to come to Him. Remember, He befriended all kinds of people, but He especially sought out those who weren't part of the in-crowd, people like ordinary fishermen, hated tax collectors, and zealots with questionable reputations, not to mention He was friends with women, who were generally looked down upon in society, and He touched people who were considered "unclean" outcasts and healed them. (If you want to dig deeper, just start reading one of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.) _____

📖 Jesus sees each one of us, even when no one else does. Because God cares about us so much, Jesus died and rose again so everyone who trusts in Him can become part of God's family. How could it be comforting to know that, even when we don't feel like we have a place we fit in the world, Jesus says we belong to Him and we have an important place in His kingdom and family? _____

📖 How can resting in the assurance of being known and loved by God help us reach out to others who may be feeling lonely or unseen? (Romans 15:7) _____

📖 What is the purpose God created us for? One way Christians have answered this question is in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." (If you want to dig deeper, read Psalm 86; Isaiah 60:21; Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 6:20, 31; Revelation 4:11 and Psalms 16:5-11; 144:15; Isaiah 12:2; Luke 2:10; Philipians 4:4; Revelation 21:3-4.)

"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine."
Isaiah 43:1b (NLT)

JOY

READ: PSALMS 16:9-11; 94:17-19; JOHN 15:1-12

Rejoice, delight, jubilation, glee, ebullience, exhilaration...all of these words mean to have joy. Not only are there lists of words about joy, but there are also hundreds of Bible verses about joy. Yet, so often we overlook or even avoid the joy of the Lord. Instead, we should be asking, how can we receive this joy? How can we live in the blessing of joy?

In Romans 5, Paul tells us the reason for our joy. He says, "For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can *rejoice* in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God" (verse 10-11, emphasis added).

As Christians, we have received freedom in Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross and rising from the grave, He set us free from sin! If the Lord of Heaven's Armies has set us free, why shouldn't we praise Him? Why should we isolate ourselves from freedom and joy?

Psalm 47:1 says, "Shout to God with joyful praise!" It literally says to *shout* with joy! The Lord has given us this gift: to live in never-ending joy. Psalm 16:11 says, "You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever."

If you don't know how to receive joy, I have one word to help you receive the fullness of God's beautiful gift of joy: *prayer*. In Romans 12:12, Paul says, "Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying." Pray for joy; pray that the Lord will overwhelm you with His joy! The Lord Jesus is faithful to guide us into His gift of joy, help us live in His joy, and teach us that even in the valley, He will be there to overwhelm us with the joy of His loving presence. 🙏

Ana Johnson

🙏 God Himself is joyful, and He invites us to share in His joy (Matthew 25:23; Hebrews 12:1-2). In fact, joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit, which means the Holy Spirit produces it in us (Galatians 5:22-23). Therefore, as Christians we can always choose to rejoice, remembering the Lord's goodness even in the hardest circumstances (Acts 16:22-25; 2 Corinthians 11:23-28; Philippians 4:4-13). Have you ever experienced the joy of the Lord? What was it like? _____

"I [Jesus] have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!" John 15:11 (NLT)

ONE GOD

READ: PSALM 115:1-13; MATTHEW 6:7-8, 19-34; 1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6

There is no one like God. There is nothing that could replace Him. Yet, all throughout history, people have been trying to make other gods. Even the Israelites, God’s chosen people, made idols for themselves to worship. We have tried to replace God. But nothing we make could ever compare to Him. In Psalm 115, we read that idols can’t talk or hear or see. Other gods are fake and worthless. They don’t offer any help or guidance. They are not worthy of worship.

Many of us already know that about false gods. And we tend to think we could never get tricked into worshipping one, that we know who God is and would never abandon Him. Yet, it’s easy to forget that idols come in many forms. Yes, some idols are statues made of wood or metal. But in Matthew 6, Jesus warns us about having money as our god. He says, “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be...No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money” (verse 21, 24).

As we go through life, there are times we might feel dependent on money. We might fall in love with it because of all it can do for us. How easy it is to make money our god.

But there is no one like the one true God. In Matthew 6, Jesus says that He takes care of us. He loves us. He guides us. He is there all the time. He hears every prayer and listens to every thought. He knows us better than anyone and can anticipate what we need before we even ask.

There are countless false gods we could fall for, but there is only one real God. There is only one worthy of our love. 🕯 *Bethany Acker*

🕯 Whenever we find ourselves chasing after an idol—whether it be money or any other created thing “instead of the Creator himself” (Romans 1:25)—God calls us to repent. We can confess our idolatry to Him, and we can rest in His sure forgiveness, because Jesus already took all our sins upon Himself on the cross, and His Spirit empowers us to turn away from sin. Because of His great love for us, we can love Him instead of loving money (1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 4:19). _____

🕯 In our broken world, dealing with money is not easy. How does God call us to view money? How does His love free us from the love of money? (1 Timothy 6:5-19; Hebrews 13:5) _____

There is one God, the Father, by whom all things were created, and for whom we live. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live. 1 Corinthians 8:6b (NLT)

GOD WILL CATCH YOU

READ: PSALMS 32:6-11; 91:15; 94:17-19; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5

Help! Someone help! You're falling and there is nothing to grab onto to catch yourself. You awake with a start, your heart pumping hard. It was only a dream. You try to catch your breath.

The dreams where we are falling, where something gives out from under us and we have no way of saving ourselves, can be really scary. When things happen in our real lives that make us feel that same way, like there is nothing to grab onto and no way we can save ourselves, it can be even scarier.

Bad stuff happens in our lives. People harm us. We mess up. We find ourselves in situations we never wanted to get into. Through it all, God is just a call away. When we are slipping, He can catch us. When we are falling and we have nothing to grab onto, He will be there for us.

As life gets difficult, anxiety eats at us. We start to worry about the future and how we are going to make it. We wonder what we are going to do, who we can trust, how we are going to continue on with our lives. But God offers comfort when we are anxious. He is there to ease our fears.

When you are falling in a dream, you have no one to reach out to, no one to help you. But when you start to slip in real life, you're not alone. Seek out God, and find rest in the help He so generously gives. He is close beside you, eager to be found by you (Jeremiah 29:13; Acts 17:27). Know that He will respond to your cries and give you comfort. **✎** *Emily Acker*

✎ What scares you the most in life? What causes you to feel like you are falling and no one is going to catch you? Remember, Jesus is Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). He came to save us by dying on the cross and rising from the grave, so now everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is brought near to God. He invites us to turn to Him with everything that's troubling us, big or small. He has such compassion on us, and He longs to soothe our fears with His love. Consider taking a moment to talk to Him about whatever is on your mind. _____

✎ Jesus reminds us of His presence with us through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). When you feel that sinking feeling of dread or unease, who is a trusted Christian in your life you can reach out to? How could you pray with each other and remind each other of the hope Jesus has given us, pointing each other to His Word? _____

If I say, "My foot is slipping," your faithful love will support me, LORD. Psalm 94:18 (CSB)

THE MAZE

READ: PSALM 119:105; PROVERBS 3:5-6; ROMANS 12:1-21

Umar and Krish waited in anticipation. Today was the day they would go through the Maze, an important final test in their training. After this, they and all the others in their year would disperse to their various apprenticeships. As they gathered at the entrance to the Maze, their Guide showed them the map, carved onto an elaborate but weathered sign. “Now, when you get inside the Maze, it can be easy to lose your way. But you can always find the tower there in the middle, climb up, and see where you are and where you need to go,” the Guide explained, pointing to the wooden tower in the middle of the Maze.

Umar and Krish nodded, and when the Guide gave the signal to begin, they dashed side by side into the Maze. But as the two friends got further into the journey, they got more and more confused. As the sun began to set, Krish groaned. “We should be able to make a turn here, but we can’t. We should be near the end, but I don’t see it.”

Umar looked up. “Well then, to the tower it is!”

Once they climbed the wooden structure, they immediately saw where they had started making wrong turns. They could also see the end of the Maze and which way they could take to get there. When they finally made it out, the Guide and the others cheered.

“Well done!” the Guide intoned. “But, you know, many of you waited a long time to go to the tower. What you learned in the Maze today is a good lesson to remember in all of life. When we try to make it through life on our own, we’ll only end up getting lost and confused. We need the perspective of the Creator. He is eager to help us, and He invites us to come to Him for wisdom in every situation. He doesn’t expect us to know the way without Him. As you journey into your lives as young apprentices, may you never think that you walk alone.” **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ When have you felt lost and confused in life? When we know Jesus as our Savior, He promises to always be with us and guide us in His good ways. Through His Spirit, His Word, and His people, He helps us see things from His perspective, and He empowers us to make decisions that are rooted in love for God and our neighbors. We’re never lost with Him by our side. _____

✦ Are there any Christians in your life who love spending time in the Bible and prayer and who you trust for wisdom and perspective? How could you be intentional about spending time with them? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. _____

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:6 (WEB)

THE GOD WHO'S HERE

READ: PSALMS 23; 46; MATTHEW 10:29-31; EPHESIANS 1:3

Though I walk through darkest valleys
In the shadows of my fear
I can hold my head up high
because I know You're here

The sparrows do not worry
They're not afraid, they do not stress
Because the Lord cares for them
So, His children are certainly blessed

When mountains fall and earth gives way
We can have peace of mind
We have a fortress and refuge
As strong as any can find

We don't need to wander
Our Shepherd won't let us fall
We are secure, we have a home
His arms open to us all *Elizabeth Blanton*

🔑 Because the world has been broken by sin, we all feel afraid and anxious sometimes. Jesus Himself experienced deep distress before going to the cross (Matthew 26:36-46). But Jesus died and rose again to defeat sin and all its effects—including fear, worry, and anxiety. He will return one day to restore creation and raise us from the dead, establishing His rule and reign of perfect peace. In the meantime, He promises to always be with us, feeling our hurts with us and giving us His peace and strength even in the midst of difficulty (Matthew 1:23; 28:20). Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that we are never alone, because He is the God who's here.

🔑 When you feel worried or afraid, who are trusted Christians in your life who can remind you of Jesus's presence with you? _____

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39 (NIV)

THE SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY

READ: PSALM 91; JOHN 15:1-5; ACTS 16:22-25; COLOSSIANS 3:15-17

Today, while I was getting the hose and sprinkler sorted, I stood in the sunshine. It was nice, for a bit. But eventually the blaring sun was just too much. So, I moved my operation into the shade. Wow, was that better! Standing in the shadow of the house, I could keep on working and ultimately fix the problem with the hose.

In life, we can usually handle some discomfort; but we can't bear up under blazing heat at high noon for long. Our bodies weren't designed for it. God has made us lovers of shade.

As part of God's great care and provision for His people, He provides the shelter we need in every kind of suffering. He provides Himself. He Himself is the One standing so close by that His shadow is our hiding place (Psalm 32:7). Even better than a house!

God's comfort is always available as we abide in Jesus. "For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:5). From the comfort of His shade, we respond like the psalmist did, with great thanksgiving: "I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'" (Psalm 91:2).

Come and dwell in the shadow of the Almighty today. Allow His presence to be your comfort, to shield you from the harshness of the hot sun. How? When we pray, sing to Him, and read His Word, we choose to abide in the shadow of the Almighty. We can also talk with trusted friends and mentors who can pray with us and lead us into a deeper relationship with Christ.

Have you endured blazing trials, and found your shelter in God's shade? Perhaps you are the loving presence that offers a cool refreshing cup of water to the weary one in your life (Matthew 10:42). May God equip you to lead your friend into the shade. 🕯️ *Kristen Merrill*

🕯️ Have you experienced blazing hot sun and searched for any bit of shade to provide relief? Have you experienced the relief the love of God brings to us in our suffering? What was that like? _____

🕯️ How could you offer that shade to someone you know? (2 Corinthians 1:3-5) _____

🕯️ If you want to dig deeper: In John 4, Jesus sat down by a well in the heat of the day and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of water. Then Jesus said, "the water I give...will become...a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (see John 4:1-42; 7:37-39). To find out more about Jesus being our shade, read Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7; 121:5; Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34.

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
Psalm 91:1 (NIV)*

THE SEA

READ: PSALM 95:1-6

The ocean...the powerful water coming up to the beach and splashing against it. The beautiful color. The sparkling. The place for people to gather on the sand and spend hours swimming and just enjoying life. Who owns all of that? Who made it?

I love the ocean and everything to do with it. I love the Great Lakes. I love small lakes, rushing rivers, and trickling creeks. When I hear the “sea” mentioned in the Bible, I pay attention.

Psalm 95 says it is God who has made the water and who is the true Owner of it. It is His because He is the One who has created it. Where would we be without water, without Him sharing it with us? How can we look at the water and not see the power of our God and the greatness of all that He has created and done?

As I think about the ocean and the fact that it was formed by God, that it is His, I can’t help but feel awe. My God is amazing. The things that He has accomplished are amazing. How special it is for us to know this God and be saved by Him—the Creator and Owner of things like the ocean and each river and lake. **✎** *Emily Acker*

✎ Which part of nature amazes you the most? Consider taking a moment to think about how God is the Creator, not just of the whole world, but of that one thing in particular, and praise Him for it. _____

✎ Have you ever thought of Jesus as the Maker of the sea? Colossians 1:16 says, “everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth.” When Jesus spoke to the wind and waves during a fierce storm, everything became completely calm in an instant, and His disciples said to each other, “Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!” (Mark 4:41). Have you ever stopped to think about how the God who has created all things is the same God who has such a great love for you that He was willing to humble Himself and die for you (Philippians 2:5-12)? And He is the same God who is there for you each day. You can know the Maker of the sea, personally, intimately. If you want to know more, see page 104.

Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power, because you have created all things, and by your will they exist and were created.
Revelation 4:11 (CSB)



OLDER THAN A FOSSIL

READ: GENESIS 1:1-3; JOHN 1:1-18; COLOSSIANS 1:15-20; HEBREWS 1:8-12

Have you ever dreamed of being a paleontologist? There's something awe-inspiring about fossils, whether you find a rock with an imprint of a leaf or a marine creature on it, or go to a museum where entire skeletons are constructed. It's amazing what we can discover about the past through what we find in the ground.

Do you know how fossils are formed? When a living thing, like a plant or an animal, is buried in mud or clay for years and years, the material around it gets very hard as time goes by. Eventually, the plant or animal dissolves away, leaving openings in the hardened material. Those openings are exactly the shape of the plant or animal that has disappeared. When this process happens with animals, the flesh and hair and feathers wear away first, but the bones, teeth, and horns take longer to decompose. Over time, water finds its way into the cavity in the ground, and the minerals in the water gradually replace the bones and such until there is a complete replica of the original skeleton.

This whole process takes quite a while. You might say fossils are "as old as the hills," to quote an old saying. The ironic thing is, we aren't even sure exactly how old the hills are. But God knows. He existed long before the earth or anything in it. God is eternal, with no beginning or end. And we're not just talking about God the Father. Jesus, the Holy Spirit, *and* the Father have always existed. God is one God in three persons—that's why we sometimes refer to God as the Trinity. Together, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made the earth and everything in it. And that makes it even more awe-inspiring to realize that God came and lived among us as a human. Jesus is God incarnate, and He experienced all the same things we do, even death. But death could not keep its hold on Him—after three days in the grave, Jesus rose (Acts 2:24).

As finite human beings, we can't totally wrap our minds around these truths—even Bible scholars and pastors can't quite explain the mysteries of God. Yes, throughout our lives we'll learn more and more about God, but there will be many things we won't fully understand until we see Jesus face-to-face, and that's okay. As we look forward to that glorious day, we can marvel, wonder, and rest in the truth of God's greatness and eternal love for us. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ What are some of the mysteries about God that you have trouble wrapping your mind around? Who are trusted Christians in your life you could talk with about these mysteries? _____

All things were created through him [Jesus]... John 1:3a (CSB)

JESUS WEPT

READ: JOHN 11:28-36, HEBREWS 4:14-16

Composed of just two little words, John 11:35 is recognized as the shortest verse in the entire Bible; John simply wrote, “Jesus wept.” Because of how short it is, this verse is quite well known among Christians, but have you ever given much thought to its implications?

The verses surrounding John 11:35 tell us that Jesus’s friend, Lazarus, had died. Now, if you’re familiar with this story, you know that Lazarus didn’t stay dead. Jesus knew this too. But still, the Bible tells us that “Jesus wept.” In this moment, we see that both His compassion for the people around Him and the tenderness of His humanity brought Jesus Himself, the Savior of the world, to tears.

Besides making for a touching scene, why does this verse matter?

Another passage, Hebrews 4:14-15, tells us about a Great High Priest, the Son of God Himself, who can empathize with our weaknesses. Jesus came to earth to save sinners, being both fully God and fully man (Colossians 2:9). Jesus knows what it’s like to be human. He knows what it’s like to be tempted (although, unlike us, He never once gave in). He knows what it’s like to experience pain. He knows what it’s like to cry.

And this same Jesus is now our Great High Priest, the One who intercedes for us (Romans 8:34). Jesus is sinless, but because God loves us, He took all our sins upon Himself on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). He died for us, and then He rose again, making the way for us to be forgiven and brought near to God. Because of Jesus’s sacrifice, we can “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

We don’t have to be ashamed to ask Jesus for help and admit our weakness because He understands. In fact, we can approach Him confidently! Whenever we find ourselves on our knees before God, pleading for grace, we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus can truly empathize with our weakness. He, too, wept. 🕯

Katherine Billingsley

🕯 We can come to Jesus with all our sins and all our struggles because, being human, He fully understands our pain, and being God, He is the only one who can do something about it. What might God be inviting you to bring to His throne of grace today? How could the truth that Jesus empathizes with you give you boldness to approach Him? _____

Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need. Hebrews 4:16 (CSB)

MY FIRST BIBLE VERSE

READ: PSALM 23; ISAIAH 49:16; 2 TIMOTHY 3:16

As far as I can remember, the first Bible verse I learned was Psalm 23:6, “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” I was probably about ten years old. At that time, my parents were not Christian, so we didn’t have any Bibles at home.

So where did I learn the verse Psalm 23:6? It was from an obituary!

I grew up in Singapore, and obituaries in newspapers could cover the entire page, and they usually included a Bible verse if the deceased person was a Christian. Psalm 23:6 hits a chord in me. It is a beautiful promise and assurance from God!

I was young at that time and thought the word *Psalm* was printed wrongly and was supposed to be *Palm*. I also thought the number 23:6 was probably a house number. I still find it funny when I think about it now. Later in my life, my parents and I became Christians. I found out that the word psalm is, in fact, spelled correctly. But still, I hoped it had something to do with “palm.” When I first read Isaiah 49:16, “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands,” I was delighted to see the word palm. But more importantly, I got to know that God loves me very much!

Since first reading Psalm 23:6, I’ve observed that Psalm 23 is often used in funerals. When my grandma passed away, the pastor preached on this passage, reminding us that God is with us during our bad times, good times, and even boring times. For someone like Grandma, who stayed at home most of the time, life can be boring. It reminds me of the pandemic time when we were stuck at home. It was a challenging time. But Psalm 23 encourages us to trust in Jesus as He is our shepherd (John 10:11). He died and rose again so we could always be with Him, and He speaks to us through His Word, revealing how much He loves us. 📖 *Kelly Choy*

📖 Do you remember the first Bible verse you ever learned? Do you have a favorite Bible verse? _____

📖 Although Psalm 23:6 isn’t referring to a house number, we can have the assurance of living in God’s house forever by putting our trust in Jesus! Find out more about this good news on page 104.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Psalm 23:6 (NIV)

GOSPEL SPROUTS

READ: MARK 13:11; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-9; 1 PETER 2:12; 3:13-18

Have you ever eaten sprouts—like bean sprouts with rice noodles or broccoli sprouts with salad? They're crunchy, delicious, and nutrient-dense. And they're pretty easy to grow! Recently, I started growing my own sprouts. I took a seed mix, sprinkled it onto a sprouting tray, put water in the tray, and drained and rinsed the seeds three times a day for about five days.

The first time I grew sprouts was a pretty messy process! After I rinsed and refilled the tray each time, little seeds and sprouts fell out of the tray, littering my sink and counter. Rogue seedlings escaped every time. And when I harvested the sprouts—pulling them out of the tray by handfuls, drying them in a kitchen towel, and laying them on a drying rack on the dining room table—sprouts were EVERYWHERE. My kitchen towels and dining room table were covered in escaped sprouts. I scooped them up to feed to the chickens, who were very appreciative.

This whole experience reminded me of sharing the gospel. Often, we have a set idea of what it looks like to share the gospel with someone. We think, "I have to approach this person in this way and use these exact words, and then they'll come to know Jesus!" But the truth is, the seeds of the gospel are not so easily contained. When we put our trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, His Holy Spirit lives in us, creating new growth in us and carefully tending to the seedlings of our faith. And, much like my first time growing sprouts, those seedlings and sprouts that grow in us spill out even when we don't plan on it.

The gospel permeates every aspect of our lives, so spreading the gospel isn't a single, containable part of following Jesus. It's wild and unrestrained, tumbling out of us in ways we may not have expected.

Whenever we follow God's good ways, we are showing others what the gospel looks like. How amazing is that? God uses every part of our lives to show His goodness. Only He knows all the seedlings you've unintentionally planted. And He will faithfully tend them. 🕯️ *Taylor Eising*

🕯️ God may put us in unique situations to show someone who He is—or use a small interaction with someone to spread the gospel in ways we couldn't have imagined. Have you ever seen God use an unexpected situation or interaction to show people who He is? What was that like? _____

"In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." Matthew 5:16 (NLT)

BELIEVING AND LOVING

READ: MATTHEW 22:35-40; JOHN 6:27-29; 1 JOHN 4:7-19

There's so much pressure on me...I can't do everything my parents want me to do. I can't please all of my teachers. I can't be someone others look up to. I can't do it all. What does God require of me? How am I going to do that—how am I going to please Him, on top of everything else?

Have you ever had thoughts like these? You're not alone. Life gets busy, and it gets hard. In these times—and everyday—what is it that God requires of us? His command for us is a simple one: believe and love. The apostle John writes, "Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23).

First, we are to believe that God has saved us. We are to believe in the cross, the sacrifice, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are to rely on what He has done—not on anything we do or don't do. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He is always there for us and that we will have everlasting life with Him (Romans 10:9-13). Isn't that wonderful news?

Second, we are to love. Because God first loved us, we are able to love Him and others (1 John 4:19). Once we know Jesus, we have His Holy Spirit living in us, so we are able to love like Jesus does. Love our families. Love our friends. Love our enemies. See the world with His loving eyes, looking for those who are hurting and showing them His love.

So, when we start to feel overwhelmed by the expectations others have put on us—or maybe the expectations we've put on ourselves—we can remember that Jesus has freed us from all this condemnation and fear (Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 8:1; 1 John 4:18). God has kept things simple for us. He simply calls us to abide in Jesus (John 15:1-17), to live a life of believing in Him and loving Him and those around us. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 Do you ever feel like there is so much required of you that you are overwhelmed and you just want to give up? Who are trusted Christians in your life who can remind you of how much God loves you, what He truly expects of you, and how eager He is to help you? _____

Now this is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as he commanded us. 1 John 3:23 (CSB)

STARFISH

READ: ISAIAH 61:1-3; LAMENTATIONS 3:22-26; LUKE 4:14-21

Picture this. You're standing barefoot on the shores of a beautiful ocean. As you walk along the water's edge, breathing in the salty air and feeling the cool spray of the sea, you stop. You've seen something that catches your eye: a little orange starfish just offshore. You get closer, and your heart sinks when you see that two of its arms are broken off.

But then you notice...two of its feet are moving. It's alive. And that means it will live, because starfish can regenerate, growing new arms to replace the old ones. That's how God created them. He made it so that a wounded starfish can begin a new life.

Did you know that God also makes the way for us to begin again? When we go through times of transition in our lives, it can feel like part of us has been broken off, kind of like that starfish. Life changes can come in many forms, whether it be moving to a new place, changing schools or churches, losing a friendship, going through family upheaval like divorce, receiving a diagnosis that will change your life or the life of someone you care about, or experiencing the death of a loved one.

But even when we're hurting, there is hope. God sees all our hurts, and He hasn't left us alone in our pain. Because of His great love for us, Jesus died and rose again for us so that our lives can be regenerated. As Christians, we began a new life when we trusted Jesus as our Savior, and He promises to be with us in every new beginning. It can be scary to begin again, but with Jesus's help, we can start a new chapter of our life even in the ashes of disappointment and grief.

We may have doubts that things could ever be as good as they were before. But in every change we go through, Jesus goes with us. In times of uncertainty, when things feel unsettling and frightening and frustrating, we can trust Him to help us adjust and find new ways to live and heal and grow. If a starfish can begin again, we can too. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

✦ Have you gone through a major life change recently? How might God be inviting you to begin again? Who are trusted people in your life you can talk with about this change—such as parents, counselors, friends, teachers, etc.? _____

✦ When you have faced disappointment in the past, were there any ways you noticed God's presence with you? How did His love help you begin again? _____

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23 (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 📖