

# UNLOCKED

DAILY READINGS FOR TEENS

through the valley of the shadow



JUNE • JULY • AUGUST

*Unlocked—Daily Readings for Teens*

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Cover Story:

*Shadowside*

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## CALMING THE WAVES

READ: PSALM 107:1, 23-32; MATTHEW 8:23-27

**M**y life lately has been more like a ship tossed around on a stormy sea than a little canoe making its way across a peaceful pond. Relationship issues have come up and I have dealt with loss. As much as I want peace, it is hard to find. Nothing has come easy for me.

I identify with the merchants mentioned in Psalm 107. Out on the sea, they experienced waves and scary conditions. The waves took them up high and then dropped them down low. They moved around without knowing what to do, trying to figure out a way through the storm, trying to make it on their own. They could not figure out a way to travel safely. Then, they did something that I have been doing a lot of lately. They cried out to God.

The noisy storm was stilled. Everything calmed down. God was right there with the merchants, with all who were on the ship and afraid. Can God do the same for us?

When I have reached out to Him in the storms of life that I have faced, I have definitely felt His presence. I have found Him waiting to move into action. I have found that I am never alone. We are never alone. 📖 *Emily Acker*

📖 What kinds of storms have you been facing lately? When we are afraid and life is chaotic, God is right there with us. He doesn't expect us to figure things out by ourselves. He alone has the power to calm the storms. And He loves us so much that Jesus, God in flesh, died and rose again to make the way to be with us. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He is always at our side. By defeating sin, death, and the devil, He has already saved us from the storm of being lost forever. So now the storms of life, as bad as they are, pale in comparison. As Christians, we can be sure that Jesus is always moving into action on our behalf, whether it be in the storms of our unbelief and sin, or the storms of other areas of our lives. And one day, He will return to calm every storm and get rid of all fear and chaos for good. \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Jesus is always with us through His Holy Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church), giving us peace even in the midst of the storm. Can you think of a time you've felt God's presence and peace in the midst of a storm? If so, what was it like? Consider taking a moment to ask God to help you know His peace and presence. He delights in answering these prayers. \_\_\_\_\_

*He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. Psalm 107:29 (NIV)*



## FRIENDS OF GOD

READ: JOHN 15:12-17; ROMANS 5:10-11

**W**hen you look around at school or at church, how can you tell which people are friends with each other? It's pretty easy, right? They hang out together. They choose to sit near each other, they talk and laugh and update each other on their lives. They might do things together like play games or sports or work on projects. After a while, they probably start acting like each other too.

Friendship really is a great gift from God. He designed us for community with other people...and with Himself. And even though humanity turned away from God, rejecting Him and becoming His enemies, the Bible tells us Jesus has made us friends with God through His death and resurrection. In Jesus, God made the way to forgive our sins and draw us close.

So, how can you tell if someone is friends with God? If they spend time with Him. After all, that's how friendships grow—by spending time together. We became God's friends when we put our trust in Jesus. Now we can grow in that relationship by hanging out with Him. And Jesus showed us what kind of friendship He wants to have with us when He came and lived among us. The God of the Universe did life with people. Jesus ate, traveled, sailed, fished, went to parties, went to synagogue, and sang hymns with His followers. He taught them, healed them, and He also listened to them. Being friends with Jesus is pretty amazing when you think about it.

Today, even though we're waiting for Jesus to return to earth the same way He ascended into heaven, we can still do life with Him because His Holy Spirit lives inside Christians. We can talk to Him, and listen to Him talk to us, as we pray and read and study His Word—the Bible—both by ourselves and with other Christians. And the more we get to know Jesus, the easier it will be to discern His voice, kind of like how you can recognize your friends' voices even in a crowded room. No matter what we're doing or where we are, we can choose to interact with Jesus. He is always eager to listen to us, help us, and share our joys and sorrows with us.

Friendship with God is the most wonderful friendship we'll ever experience. And as our relationship with Him grows, we'll treat other people in a more loving way because we've experienced God's love for us. More and more, our decisions will reflect His love. **✠** *A. W. Smith*

**✠** In what ways do you want to grow in your friendship with Jesus? Has spending time with Him already affected the things you value and the ways you treat others? How so? (1 John 4:19) \_\_\_\_\_

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*So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God. Romans 5:11 (NLT)*

## SIN RESPONSE

READ: MARK 14:66-72; LUKE 19:1-10; ACTS 3:18-22; ROMANS 2:4


**W**hat do you do after you sin? That probably wasn't the question you were expecting. We all know that we sin, but do we like to think about that? I certainly don't.


After we sin, sometimes we think we can just forget about it, pretend it never happened. "Deny and it shall disappear." For example, after King David had Bathsheba taken to his palace so he could have sex with her, she became pregnant, and David tried to hide his sin by having her husband Uriah killed while he was away at war (2 Samuel 11-12). But God sees and knows everything we do.

Sometimes we feel ashamed when we sin. Peter denied Jesus, not once but three times, all after insisting he would stay true to Jesus even to death. When Peter realized what he'd done, he broke down and wept. He was ashamed and likely wished he could take back what he just did.

Sometimes we may not think we are doing anything wrong when we sin. Saul was a hater of Christians. He unabashedly hurt and killed many who followed Jesus. In fact, Saul believed this was what God wanted him to do. He was known to search for Christians with the sole purpose of harming them. Saul didn't even see his sin as doing anything wrong.

There is one more response to sin, and my favorite example of that is Zacchaeus's. See, Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and he frequently cheated people out of money. He was short (like me), so he climbed up a tree to be able to see Jesus as He passed by. Then Jesus looked right up at him. He told Zacchaeus that He would be staying at his home. Zacchaeus's response? He welcomed Jesus joyfully. Then he admitted that his sin was wrong and repented, not only paying back the people he stole from, but giving them four times as much as he had taken.

David, Peter, and Saul (also known as Paul) eventually had encounters with God and repented of their sins too (2 Samuel 12; John 21:15-24; Acts 9). Similarly, Jesus invites us to repent of our sins often. Because, even as Christians, we'll still struggle with sin until Jesus returns. There are many responses to the sins we commit, but the only real way forward is confessing our sins to God and receiving His forgiveness (1 John 1:8-9).  *Kimberly Brokish*

 Sin is a big deal to God because it causes harm to His good creation and to our relationship with Him, but He wants so much to forgive and restore us that Jesus became human and died on the cross for us, then rose from the grave (more on page 104). Consider taking some time to confess any sins that come to mind to God and thank Him for His sure forgiveness through Jesus. \_\_\_\_\_

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*"Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out." Acts 3:19 (CSB)*

## A BROKEN WINDOW IN A BROKEN WORLD

READ: MATTHEW 5:43-47; JOHN 16:29-33

**M**y brother was selected to participate in his middle school's play, so my family gladly showed up to watch the performance. While we sat in the audience, some unknown person crept into the parking lot and broke into our minivan. Although the would-be thief found nothing to steal, this individual did leave a mound of broken glass and a shattered window in our vehicle.



I felt violated. More so, I felt angry. *This person had no right to do this!* I also felt annoyed that this meant I couldn't drive our van to my own school while we waited to have it repaired. Instead, my parents taped plastic over the busted-out window and dropped me off on campus. Because my mom needed to drive to work afterward, I arrived so early that the school hadn't opened its doors yet. As I sat waiting to enter, I fumed about the inconvenience a stranger had caused because they wanted what wasn't theirs. The person who damaged our van didn't have any right to harm our family's property. Feeling anger about this situation was natural. Over time, though, I realized I believed I had a right to avoid the problems other people face in this broken, sinful world. I assumed I deserved exemption from troubles because I trusted God.

Scripture tells us something different, though. Those who put their trust in Jesus still experience pain. Entering a relationship with God through His Son doesn't promise a blissful life. After all, Jesus Himself experienced rejection and injustice. And that means He understands our struggles. He also says we can expect to face trouble. But, when we have Him in our lives, we can be encouraged knowing He loves us, and He has overcome the brokenness of this world. 🗝️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🗝️ When we're afraid we're unsafe, anger is a natural response, because as humans we are worthy of safety. Can you think of a time you experienced trouble that wasn't your fault, that may even have been caused by someone else? Since the world has been broken by sin, we all experience injustice. And, in fact, we all cause injustice. That's why Jesus came to save us. He took all the sin and injustice of the world on Himself and defeated it through His own death on the cross. Then He resurrected from the dead, defeating death itself. One day He will return to resurrect His people and flood the world with His perfect justice. In the meantime, He invites us to participate in His kingdom of love and justice, resisting the temptation to take revenge and instead relying on His Holy Spirit within us to provide guidance and wisdom in how to love others, even our enemies. When we face injustice and trouble, how can we respond according to these truths? \_\_\_\_\_

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*"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*  
*John 16:33 (NIV)*





## TRUSTING GOD WITH THE WORST-CASE SCENARIOS

READ: ROMANS 8:31-39; 1 PETER 5:6-11


I have many tactics that I use to try to deal with anxiety, and it seems like I am always trying something new. Recently, I was thinking about how I tend to try to push aside the worst-case scenarios that come into my head and stress me out, and I wondered if there might be a better solution. What if, instead of trying to push aside the worst-case scenarios and stop thinking about them, I thought about how God would be with me even if any one of them were to come into being. Because the truth is, if we know Jesus, He is always with us. When we go through difficult times, He is right there beside us, loving us and caring for us.

So, if I am worried about a health issue that might come up, instead of trying to push that thought away, I can think about how God would be with me in that situation. What strength and comfort could He provide? How could He work through His people—the church—to help with this issue? Similarly, if I am worried about money or relationships, I can think about how God would be right there with me to provide wisdom and support.

As we remember that Jesus has been through the hurt and suffering of human life too, and He has promised to always be there for us, we can be sure He will help us in any battle we face. As worries mount, we can accept that, yes, bad things might happen, but we serve a God who is bigger than anything we will face—and He will be right there with us.  *Emily Acker*

 Do your thoughts ever jump to worst-case scenarios? This happens to all of us from time to time. In these moments, how could it be helpful to remember that God would be with us in these situations and then consider all the ways He might provide for us? \_\_\_\_\_

 Can you think of a time God helped you through a difficulty? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

 Jesus promises to always be with His people—He died and rose again to make the way for us to be with God forever. He is always eager to help us, and He often helps us through each other. If you're experiencing anxiety that won't go away, who is a trusted adult you could talk to? If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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 remember, I [Jesus] am with you always, to the end of the age."  
Matthew 28:20 (CSB)*

**GIANT**

READ: 1 SAMUEL 17; 2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10

**D**ear Mother,  
Grandfather's stories are true. The giant smells. Now his stories feel like mine. But I suppose that's the purpose of a story. To let you know you're not alone.

It might be the giant's breath or body, but we could smell it from a mile away. Like rotten meat. Like that time when a mouse died in the wall and we couldn't reach it. The smell of the army masks it, but not much. I can smell the blood on the shields. The body odor from days of warfare. The dirt, churned to mud by our advance. It almost made me forget the giant.

Then he would laugh. Guffaw. He'd grab his bouncing stomach and laugh with all his might as we hacked at his toes and ankles. Or when others were crushed beneath his naked feet.

The Prophecy of the Scroll is our only hope. I pray it's true, because the army is useless. We leave scratches as he laughs. We are fully incapable of defeating him. We've used all manner of weapons to no avail. Siege Engines and Catapults. Fire and Poison. Nothing stops him. And so, slowing him from reaching our village is our goal. We've lost a third of the army so far, but holding him here on the Plains of Ardak-Drun, even for a few days, should be enough time for you and my sisters to escape to the mountains. Even if I die, knowing you are safe is worth it.

Should the Scrolls prove true, and the chosen one arrive, I will send word. Should his sword be sharp and the stones of his sling fly true, should he stand on his own strength and not that of an army, should the one foretold by those of old lay his sandals upon the sands of Ardak-Drun, I am confident that the uselessness of the army will be but kindling to fuel his glory.

Embrace my sisters, tell them the stories of old.

Love, your son. **✠** *Jacob Marchitell*

**✠** In 1 Samuel 17, when a nine-foot-tall warrior named Goliath terrorized the Israelite army, David killed him with just a stone and sling. This points to the future promise of the Chosen One. All our efforts are useless against the death that awaits us. But God didn't leave us to die alone, weak and afraid of the power of death. He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to fight the battle *on our behalf*. He defeated death by giving up His own life for us on the cross, and then rising from the grave, so we could one day be raised to life just as He was. So now, whenever we are afraid, we can look to our King. Not a king who stays hidden in his palace, but a King who "gave up his divine privileges," stood on the front line of the war, and defeated death by Himself (Romans 5:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11). In hard times, how can looking to Jesus give us hope? \_\_\_\_\_

*Christ Jesus, our Savior...broke the power of death. 2 Timothy 1:10 (NLT)*

## LIKE A MARIGOLD

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20, 35-38, 42-44, 54-57

**H**ave you ever read verses in the Bible that talk about how we'll be raised from the dead like Jesus was? It's one thing to picture Jesus being raised from the dead after only three days, but it can be harder to imagine how bodies that have been dead a long time could ever be alive again.

But maybe a metaphor for resurrection would help. Have you ever seen marigold seeds? They are thin, long, dry seeds that are white on one end and black on the other. They look nothing like a marigold flower. But, when we bury the seeds in the ground, eventually these tiny, unremarkable seeds grow into vibrant flowers bursting with orange and yellow petals.

God can take those shriveled seeds and bring them to life. And He promises to do the same for Christians. In fact, the Bible actually compares our coming resurrection to what happens when seeds grow into plants. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes, "It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength" (verses 42-43).

Even though our bodies die, death is no match for Jesus—He conquered sin and death by giving up His own life for us on the cross. He will resurrect our bodies one day, and when He does, our bodies will be even better than before. No matter what happens to us on earth, we have the hope of resurrection.

So, next time you see a pot full of magnificent flowers, think of the dry, shriveled little seeds they came from. Our amazing God made those flowers grow, and He promises to do the same for us. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ Raising dead bodies is no greater problem for God than turning seeds into plants. In other words, it's no problem for Him at all. Jesus rose from the dead, and He'll raise believers too. He'll give His children bodies that are even more wonderful than those we had before. It's amazing to think about! How could knowing that Jesus has power even over death affect the way we view death? (Romans 8:38-39) \_\_\_\_\_

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*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)*



## CREATION'S PRAISE

READ: PSALMS 19:1-4; 148:1-14; ISAIAH 55:12

**A** silver moon,  
a single star,  
shining in the morning dark.

Waves are gently  
rolling in,  
riding on the restless wind.

Sleek and smooth,  
sands lie fresh,  
washed by the ocean's salty breath.

Daybreak beams  
soft and bright,  
rejoicing in the coming light!

So may we,  
with hope revived—  
praise Him with the morning tide.

Today's poem was inspired by a moment when I sensed creation joyously reflecting God's glory and beauty. The Bible shows us that all creation praises God as Creator. Psalm 148 says this includes the heavenly host, things on earth, in the ocean—even the sun, wind, and rain. And, last but not least, it includes people. 🕯️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯️ Can you think of a time when you experienced a moment of wonder at God's creation? As you read today's Scriptures, consider taking some time to ponder the ways God may be revealing Himself to you—whether it be through creation, His Word, or specific people or circumstances. Then, maybe sing a favorite song of praise, or write down a simple prayer or poem to help you celebrate that moment in praise to Jesus. (Luke 19:37-40; Colossians 1:15-23) \_\_\_\_\_

*Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.  
Psalm 148:3 (NIV)*

## THE GOD WHO GOES BEFORE US

READ: GENESIS 28:15; DEUTERONOMY 31:1-13; PROVERBS 3:26

**H**ave you ever read Deuteronomy 31:8? It says, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” The book of Deuteronomy consists of messages that Moses gave the Israelites about the future. At the time, God had already parted the Red Sea and delivered the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and now they were wandering in the wilderness, waiting for God to bring them into the Promised Land. Moses wanted to encourage the people to trust God, and he also instructed them in how to act righteously—how to live according to God’s good ways.

When Moses was nearing the end of his life, he spoke the words of Deuteronomy 31:8 to Joshua, right before Joshua would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses wanted to offer his successor the peace of knowing that God was preparing the way ahead of him, that God would be with him, and that he didn’t need to fear any evil.

For me, reading this verse reminds me that my Father has my future in His hands, and I don’t need to be afraid of what is to come. I don’t need to try to take control or plan things out by myself—He already sits upon the throne.

Though this world may crumble around us, we don’t need to get discouraged, because God is good and His promise is secure. Jesus is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), and He went before us, living the righteous life we never could, making the way for us to be saved from the wilderness of sin and enter the abundance of God’s kingdom. He died, was buried, rose from the grave, and is coming back again to raise all His people from the dead to live with Him forever in restored creation. And even now, He promises to be with us, always (Matthew 28:20).

When I first read Deuteronomy 31:8, I immediately felt at peace. The promise that God will never leave us and that He will always be with us is such a comfort. It teaches me to quiet any worries I have and to never lose hope. Our God goes before us. 📖 *Molly McTernan*

📖 What kinds of things have made you feel afraid or discouraged lately? It’s not wrong to feel this way, and in fact, God invites us to be totally honest about this. How could remembering that God is with us and goes before us make it easier to bring all our concerns to Him in prayer? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians you can talk to when you feel worried? \_\_\_\_\_

*“The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” Deuteronomy 31:8 (NIV)*

## HOW LONG?

READ: PSALM 13:1-6

**H**ow long, God? Why is it taking forever for things to get better? Why can't my life turn around and be all that I hoped for? Why do you feel so far from me? How long, God, is it going to feel like this? How long can I survive like this?



You may have had thoughts like these at times, and they are similar to the thoughts of David when he wrote Psalm 13. In this psalm, David asks God if He will forget him forever. That's the way he's feeling as he writes—forgotten and abandoned. He is sorrowful and wrestling with difficult thoughts.

That might be just the way you feel sometimes. You might feel alone. You might worry about a hundred things at once. Your life might feel messy, and you might feel like God is far from you. But the truth is, God is so very near. He loves us so much that Jesus died and rose again to make the way for us to be with Him always. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can know that, even in our worst moments, Jesus is right there with us. He weeps with us and offers hope, comfort, and strength. And one day, He will make all wrongs right. When we rest in these truths, it can help us remember that God is trustworthy. He loves us, and He never leaves us.

That's what David does in Psalm 13. In the end, he remembers that God has been good to him. He might have felt abandoned for a time, but he knows that God is always good. David even says that he will sing praise to the Lord.

When we struggle, we can cry out and ask God how long we're going to feel that way. We can tell Him how abandoned and forgotten we feel. We can process all our messy feelings with Him. As we do this, the Holy Spirit helps us remember how good God is and rest in the truth that He is with us. He has always loved us, and always will. **✦** *Bethany Acker*

**✦** When we read lament psalms like Psalm 13, it can be tempting to skip right down to the “good part” in verses 5-6. We might want to skip over our feelings of hurt, sorrow, and frustration. But that's not what God wants for us. He is not afraid of our feelings. Instead of skipping these uncomfortable emotions, He invites us to process them with Him, even if that means telling Him how angry we are at Him. Are there any uncomfortable feelings you need to process with God right now? He invites us to come to Him in prayer and be honest with Him so He can bring healing to our hearts. \_\_\_\_\_

*But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. Psalm 13:5 (NIV)*

## CHANGING THINGS UP

READ: 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17; HEBREWS 4:12

**W**hen you do the same thing over and over again, it's easy to get tired of it. This can even be true of reading the Bible. If you've ever had your Bible reading routine feel like something you're just trying to get through and you've longed for it to be something more—longed to learn more and get more out of it—you can find a way to make things different. You can try new things so that your Bible reading routine helps you feel more connected to God and helps you grow in your faith.

First, you can start by asking God for direction. Spend time with Him in prayer, asking what He wants your Bible reading routine to look like right now. Ask Him where He wants you to be reading. Ask Him how He wants you to be studying. Ask Him to remind you of how He is with you as you read. Remember, the time you spend reading the Bible can be something you do together with Him, deeply in-tuned to Him. As you pray, you may not get any specific answers about where and how to do your reading, and that's okay—the point is to spend intentional time seeking God as you read His Word. He may be guiding you in ways you don't even realize yet.

If you've been studying your Bible alone, you could find someone to read it with you—maybe a friend, mentor, church member, or small group. You might even see if a sibling is interested in sitting down with you each day and letting you read to them. Then, discuss what you're reading with the person or people you choose to study with.

If you've never tried journaling about what you're reading in the Bible before, why not get out a paper and pen and give it a try? Write about what you're learning, what questions you have, connections to your life, prayers, and whatever else God lays on your heart.

The Bible is worth studying because it's God's Word—and it tells us the truth about Jesus's death and resurrection. It reveals His great love for us. So, if you feel that something in your Bible routine is lacking, ask God to help you find a way to change things up. *Emily Acker*

- 🔑 Have you tried out any Bible-reading routines? What did you like or dislike about them? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 🔑 Which of the suggestions above are you curious about? Do any other ideas come to mind? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 🔑 God delights in helping us find ways to spend time with Him and grow in our relationship with Him. How could you set aside time this week to be in His Word? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:4 (NLT)*

## THE LIST

READ: ROMANS 8; 1 PETER 2:9-10

**M**y hands shook with my effort not to take The List out of my pocket. *You can't control me*, I whispered through gritted teeth. I just wanted to walk into this building full of, I imagined, lovely people and be okay. Two steps from the door, my fingers curled around The List. I tried to squeeze my eyes shut as I felt myself unfold the paper. There, scrawled across the top was the word *condemned*. I jammed the paper into my pocket, turned around, and walked away.

The following day, I was looking forward to the moment that could change the trajectory of my future. I had prepared myself and worked hard. I sat in a chair, waiting for them to call my name. Instead, I felt the call of The List. I gripped the seat tight, willing myself not to listen. Once again, I opened it to see the next word penned below the first: *rejected*. I made my way down the hall, away from possibility, not even turning back when I heard them call my name.

Looking in the mirror that night, I thought I glimpsed a spark of new. Was it in my eyes? Could I be the person I wanted to be? Did the corners of my mouth turn up slightly more than usual? I felt a strange twitch on my lips, a desire to smile. But the desire fled when I watched my hand draw out The List once more. I don't know why I had this compulsion to read it when I already knew by heart what I would see: *stagnant*.

I sank to the floor, overcome by defeat and sorrow. The List lay beside me, mocking—wait! The words that I had read so many times were crossed out with bold, red slashes. I gripped The List and felt my heart leap as I read new words written over the old. Instead of *condemned* I read *approved*, in place of *rejected* was *chosen*, over *stagnant* was *alive*.

Finally, I understood. The List would no longer control me with its lies. I could live in the freedom of who I was always meant to be, and no one could take it away. 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:2 (NIV)*



🔑 Like The List in today's allegorical story, we all have voices in our heads, but what God says about us should trump anything our minds or other people say. When you become a follower of Christ, you are given a new identity. He takes all the sin and shame. By the blood of Jesus shed for you, you are no longer condemned, but forgiven (Romans 8:1; 1 John 2:12). You are no longer rejected, but a chosen, fully loved child of God (Romans 8:15; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 3:1). What are some practical ways you could spend time listening to what God says about you this week? Remember, we hear God's voice through His Word, His people, and His Spirit. (If you've never put your trust in Jesus and want to know more, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

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🔑 Satan likes to try to remind us of who we were before we met Jesus. He accuses and causes worries, fears, and anxiety to fill our minds. And even if Satan is not directly responsible for the voices in our heads, he is a primary source of them. The other source is the law, or God's commands, which God gave us to show us our need for Jesus. Yet, Satan uses the law to accuse us. The law's accusatory nature should lead us to Christ, but it often becomes the means by which we are continually enslaved by fear and anxiety. But the truth is this: in Christ, we are new creations—everything that was old has been transformed (2 Corinthians 5:17, 21). Although we will still struggle with sin and negative thoughts, we now have the power of God to choose righteousness and take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). We can choose to set our minds on things above by fixing our thoughts on Jesus (Philippians 4:8; Colossians 3:2; Hebrews 12:2). What kinds of accusing voices have been bothering you? Consider writing down these accusations, and bring them to Jesus in prayer. Then write down a couple verses that contradict these lies. Keep these verses close by so you can ponder them often and redirect your thoughts to Jesus. You can always ask Him to help you see the truth. \_\_\_\_\_

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🔑 Throughout our lives, we may need help to untangle the lies we've been believing about ourselves and discover the truth. Who are trusted Christians in your life you'd feel comfortable talking to about this, such as parents, pastors, youth leaders, or counselors? If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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.



## LISTENING TO ADVICE

READ: PROVERBS 12:15; 15:22; 19:20; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27

I like to do things on my own. I never enjoyed group projects in school because it seemed like I was the one to be the most focused or the one who cared the most about grades, so then I ended up putting pressure on myself to pick up the slack from everyone else. Plus, I know what it is that I want to do, and working in a group is difficult because people have lots of different opinions about what should be done or how it should be done.



As I grew into adulthood, that dislike for working on group projects continued in the form of just generally wanting to do my own thing. Sometimes, it's hard for me to listen to the advice of others because I know what it is I want to accomplish, and I know how I want to accomplish it.

But the times I have sought advice and truly listened to what others had to say about different circumstances I was facing, I was able to make a better decision about how to move forward. When God saves us, He places us in community for a reason. He says, "All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). We're often tempted to think that we don't need other people, that life would be simpler if we just did things ourselves, but we are meant to lean on one another. We are not meant to do this life alone. There is so much freedom and confidence that comes from turning to other people and truly listening to what they have to say. 📌 *Tynea Lewis*

📌 Do you like group projects? Why or why not? Can you think of a time when having multiple people's perspectives and abilities resulted in a better outcome than one person could have produced on their own?

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📌 What is one area of your life that you could benefit from listening to the advice of others? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

📌 Who is a trusted person in your life who could provide wise and godly counsel when you are facing difficult situations or decisions—someone who embodies the wisdom described in James 3:12-18? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. \_\_\_\_\_

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*Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.*  
*Proverbs 19:20 (NLT)*

## AMBASSADORS, WE

READ: ROMANS 5:8-11; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; EPHESIANS 6:19-20

**W**ould you like to be an ambassador to a foreign country and work in an embassy? You'd live in that foreign country and be able to speak for your country's leader, because you would be their official representative.

Did you know that the land the embassies are on is actually considered a really small part of their home country? So, say, the U.S. Embassy in Mexico is actually a tiny piece of the United States of America, right smack dab in the middle of Mexico City.

Turns out that if you name Jesus as your King, then you actually are an ambassador for Christ! The church is kind of like an embassy, right here on earth. Christians are given this awesome opportunity to speak for God as we share our faith and His love with the world around us.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul is appealing with his whole heart to the lost ones in Corinth. He shares how the heart of his King, the God of the universe, longs for the world that has turned its back on Him to be reconciled to Him. Paul writes, "We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God.'"

God's embassy is still on earth, even when we turn our back to Him. His church, the ambassadors, are still here. God doesn't want anyone to live outside of His territory. He wants the whole world to be reconciled, to come to Him, and to live as residents of His kingdom.

So He sends His ambassadors—you and me—to the people around us. We ambassadors for Christ can pray for our friends, share our stories, and explain God's wonderful plan to those around us. 🗝️ *Kristen Merrill*

🗝️ One day, Jesus will return to reign as King over all creation. He will renew the heavens and the earth, and He will resurrect His people from the dead to live with Him in His eternal kingdom. Until then, the church can offer a glimpse of that kingdom. What are some ways the church can point to Jesus as King? How can we show people what Jesus and His kingdom are like? \_\_\_\_\_

🗝️ It's because God loves us and longs for us to be reconciled to Him that Jesus died on the cross and rose again. To learn more about how we can be reconciled to God through Jesus, and how to share this good news with others, check out page 104.

*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, "Be reconciled to God." 2 Corinthians 5:20 (CSB)*

## WALKING IN DARKNESS

READ: JOHN 1:1-9; 8:12

**H**ave you ever been outside during a cloudy night when you couldn't see the moon or even the stars? The darkness can feel all-consuming. And trying to find your way through that darkness can lead to some serious scrapes and bruises!

Sometimes, going through life can feel the same way. The darkness of sin and brokenness feels all-consuming. It's easy to get lost.

Thankfully, wherever we go, we always have light with us.

The apostle John starts his Gospel by declaring that Jesus is “the true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9). Later in this book, John recounts how Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). Apart from God, all people are lost in the darkness of sin, but Jesus gives His light to everyone who trusts in Him.

And we really do need light, even when we think we don't. Just like trying to find our way home in a pitch-dark night, going through life without the light of Jesus will leave us lost and hurt. But Jesus saves us from the darkness of sin through His death and resurrection, and He leads us safely home. As John 1:5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” We can always rely on Him, even in the darkest nights. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** If we know Jesus, we know the Light of the World. Sometimes we don't feel like we need Him, but making our way through life without Him is like walking in darkness. Jesus wants to light our way. To learn more about the good news of Jesus, check out page 104.

**✦** As Christians, we're looking forward to the day Jesus will restore creation and rid the world of darkness forever. In the meantime, we know He is always with us. In what ways have you experienced the darkness of our broken world lately? What has left you feeling hurt and lost? Jesus knows all our pain and confusion, and He longs to comfort us in His love. Consider taking a moment to come to Him in prayer, telling Him about your hurts and receiving His compassion. \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** When you feel overwhelmed by the darkness, who is a trusted Christian in your life who can help remind you of the reality of Jesus's all-powerful light? \_\_\_\_\_

*“I [Jesus] am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12 (NIV)*



## LOST LUNCH MONEY

READ: EXODUS 34:6; PSALM 86; 1 JOHN 3:1

I stepped off the school bus and headed down the sidewalk toward my third-grade class. Sticking my hands in my pockets, I felt for the envelope with that day's lunch money. I expected to find it there, but I wanted to reassure myself.

However, I didn't locate the envelope of coins in my pockets, or in my backpack. The payment for my lunch that day must have fallen onto my seat on the bus, but I had already watched the school bus pull away from the building.

I knew I could charge that day's lunch and bring payment for it the next day. But I dreaded explaining to my parents that I'd lost the money. I feared getting in trouble for being irresponsible. Later, at dinner that night, I somberly told my parents about the missing money. Although I anticipated a scolding, my dad responded differently.

"That's okay. Don't worry; we have more money to cover it," he replied.

My whole body slumped with relief. Instead of showing frustration with me for my mistake, my dad showed me mercy. That day, my earthly father gave me a glimpse of our heavenly Father. No parent is perfect (mine included), but our parents do influence how we believe God sees us. In this instance, even though losing my lunch money was a mistake and not a sin, my dad's response helped me trust God's heart for me.

For those who put their trust in Jesus, resting in the work He did on the cross to pay for our sins and give us His righteousness, we receive God's mercy. No longer are we charged with guilt because of our sin; instead, we belong to a Father who shows us His goodness with abounding grace and compassion. His mercy is bigger than any sin we could commit or any mistake we could make. As His children, we can revel in the truth that God responds to us, even in our messes, not with great anger—but with great love. **✦** *Allison Wilson Lee*

**✦** Has someone ever shown you God's heart toward you? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** Do you struggle to believe that God is compassionate toward you in your mistakes? If so, why do you think that is? We all feel this way from time to time. Who are trusted Christians you could talk to about this, such as parents, pastors, youth leaders, or counselors? \_\_\_\_\_

*But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. Psalm 86:15 (NIV)*

## DOES GOD LIKE ME?

READ: GENESIS 1:26-31; PSALM 35:27; PROVERBS 3:11-12; ISAIAH 62:4

If you grew up in church, you've probably heard over and over that God loves you. And He does! But did you know that He also likes you?

This is a truth I've struggled to accept. It's easy for me to believe that God loves me, because that's His job! It's just who He is. But I can fall into the false belief that it's only a duty-bound love. That He loves me only because He has to, not because He truly enjoys who I actually am.

Make no mistake, God does love us because of who He is. His character is unchanging, and so is His love for us. Nothing can shake that. But I think it's important to also remember that God *likes* us. He *enjoys* our presence with Him. He delights in us—and even rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). He created us and gifted us with our unique personalities and abilities—and He likes what He made!

It may seem trivial or self-centered to wonder if God likes us, but it really does matter. It affects the way we interact with Him. We may believe that, because we are fallen and sinful, we are unlikeable. And when we believe that we are unlikeable, all we can focus on is our own smallness and unworthiness before the Lord, instead of focusing on His goodness and majesty and love. But as the Holy Spirit helps us grow more secure in our belief that God legitimately enjoys our presence and wants to spend time with us, it frees us from that insecure self-focus on our own unworthiness and allows us to truly enjoy God's presence like He enjoys ours.

Jesus died and rose again to make the way to be with us forever. Let's take a moment and think about that. He *died* because He wanted to be with you. He most definitely likes you. 📌 *Taylor Eising*

📌 Do you find it easier to believe that God loves you or that God likes you? Why? How does this affect the way you view God and the way you approach Him in prayer? \_\_\_\_\_

*The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.*  
Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)



## PERFECT SACRIFICE

READ: ISAIAH 53:4-12; COLOSSIANS 1:22; HEBREWS 9:11-28; REVELATION 5:12

**Y**ou gave up Your life,  
 You are the Perfect Sacrifice—  
 God's precious Son,  
 The Holy, Just, and Righteous One.

Speak to us softly, O Lord, we pray,  
 Speak to us clearly, O Lord, this day!

You alone are good,  
 Teach us, Lord, to live as You would—  
 Holy and pure,  
 By faith, Your blood the costly cure.

Speak to us softly, O Lord, we pray,  
 Speak to us clearly, O Lord, this day!

Risen from the dead,  
 You are Life, the Living Bread—  
 Lamb that was slain,  
 Bearing the curse, took up our pain.

Speak to us softly, O Lord, we pray,  
 Speak to us clearly, O Lord, this day...  
 Speak to us, Lord,  
 that we might obey.

Sometimes, when I try to describe the sacrifice of Jesus I am stilled into silence. Trying to put the most profound mystery in the universe into everyday words is sort of like visiting the Grand Canyon and bringing home a single snapshot. The photo is accurate, but it's simply incapable of capturing the grandeur you see and feel—gazing across a chasm so vast that the bottom is a hazy blur. Only by hiking down inside can you begin to experience the canyon's true depth and beauty.

That's sort of what it's like when we think about the matchless glory of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. It simply cannot be experienced from afar—it is something we must *enter into*. Christ's blood was shed on the cross, for us. He not only bore our sin, but He took up our suffering and pain (Isaiah 53). Come, and gaze with me there. 📌 *G. Kam Congleton*

📌 Throughout the Bible, Christ's sacrifice is portrayed in many ways. For example, we find similar descriptions in Isaiah 53:12 and in Hebrews 9:28. What do you notice is included in Hebrews that is not mentioned in Isaiah? Why do you think this is? \_\_\_\_\_

📌 The life-changing truth of the gospel is deeper than any words can convey, that because of the sacrifice of Jesus's shed blood, God Himself can dwell with us—and in us—making us one with God. (More on page 104.) Which description of Jesus's sacrifice resonates with you most today? \_\_\_\_\_

*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. Romans 3:25 (NIV)*

## GROW AND CHANGE

READ: PSALM 139; ROMANS 8:28-29, 38-39; PHILIPPIANS 1:6

**A**t times, growing up is hard. Change is exciting, but at the same time such a difficult thing to go through. Feeling your body change. Seeing things around you shift. Knowing that your mind is growing and your perspective on things will not always be the same.

Change feels strange, but as we experience it in ourselves and in the world around us, we don't have to be afraid. There are some things that are never going to change.

When life feels different than it used to, we may feel unsteady and disoriented, but it can help to remember that God will not change. His love is always constant. The promise of eternity will never fade. The gospel is always true. Jesus died and rose again for us, and if we've put our trust in Him, we can know with certainty that He is with us—forever. He will never leave us.

Throughout our lives, we will continue to grow and change. We will find new things to be passionate about and new ways to enjoy life. We will find new purposes for our lives, and we'll get excited about what is to come.

As we go through all those changes, both the good and the bad, the struggle and the joy, we can remember that God is there with us. When we need something to ground us, we can pray to Him. When we need something to remind us that, even as we are drastically changing, some things in our lives will always be the same, we can think of His unchanging love. **✦** *Bethany Acker*

**✦** As we grow in our walk with Jesus, He will continue to reveal Himself to us in various ways, and He will keep forming us to become more and more like Him. This means our perspectives on different things will likely shift throughout our lifetimes. And that's okay! As we pursue Jesus and study His Word, He will help us bring all the areas of our lives into alignment with Him. And this is a lifelong process. Who are some people in your life who can walk through this process with you—such as parents, pastors, counselors, youth leaders, and friends? Consider taking some time to ask a trusted Christian adult how their perspective has changed over the years. \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** When the world around us changes, how could remembering that Jesus never changes help us come to Him in prayer? Do you have any favorite Bible passages that remind you of this truth? \_\_\_\_\_

*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:17 (CSB)*





## A WELL-WATERED GARDEN

READ: ISAIAH 58:6-12; JOHN 4:14; 7:38-39; GALATIANS 5:13-23

Look over there, Jett—under those tall weeds!” Kyra jumped over a stream as she and her brother explored the area behind their new home. When they had lived by the sea, their family made their living as fishermen, but when the dragon wars encroached on their tiny coastal town, they had to flee inland. They hoped to make a fresh start in this new village in the Amplio valley. Kyra pushed aside some of the rough grass to get a better look. “Are those trata fruit?”

“Looks like trata fruit to me,” confirmed Jett. “Let’s pull up these weeds so we can see the plants better.” They began pulling the grass and thistles that had grown more than waist-high. Sure enough, they found other fruits and vegetables too. Kyra said, “Somebody must’ve planted this garden long ago. I’m surprised the trata plants survived in the middle of all these weeds.”

“Let’s work this garden instead of planting a new one,” Jett said, remembering their old garden back home. Its produce had helped them through many a tough time. “We’ll need to bring water from the stream—and the weeds will come back if we let them.”

Kyra paused thoughtfully. “You know something? I came across a verse in Isaiah this morning—‘You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.’ I’ve heard it said that Isaiah points to our need for Jesus. Remember how everyone who believes in Jesus has living water flowing inside us, and how He produces good fruit in our lives? As His people, I guess we’re His garden. I like thinking about how He’s the One watering that garden.”

Jett rubbed a trata leaf. “I want to be like that—producing fruit instead of thistles. I don’t want to cause harm, like the wars do. I want to bring good into the world. But every day, I keep finding more sin in my life—like how we’ll keep finding weeds in this garden. I know Jesus has already made us holy through His death and resurrection, but I can’t wait till He comes back and we won’t struggle with sin anymore.”

Kyra nodded. “Me too, but I’m also thankful the Spirit tends our hearts every day, rooting out the thorns of violence and greed so we can be people of mercy and kindness.” *—A. W. Smith*

🔑 When we know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in us and works to produce good fruit in our hearts. What does this fruit look like? (Hint: read Galatians 5:22-23.) \_\_\_\_\_

🔑 The Holy Spirit also makes us more aware of the sin in our lives. Consider taking some time in prayer, confessing any sin that comes to mind and resting in Jesus’s sure forgiveness. \_\_\_\_\_

*“You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.”  
Isaiah 58:11 (NIV)*

## WHERE IS MY HOLY SPIRIT ZEAL?

READ: ACTS 2:1-14; ROMANS 12:4-21; GALATIANS 5:22-23

**W**hen people first hear that Christians all receive the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14), there can be a sense of excitement as they anticipate a life-changing, empowering moment. In the Bible, we find the account of the day of Pentecost. Jesus's followers are all sitting together, because after Jesus died and rose again, but before He ascended into heaven, He'd told them to wait for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). Then, the Holy Spirit comes in a very visible and dramatic way—including flames and wind! The Bible goes on to show the instantaneous transformation in the apostles—they went from fearful to courageous, and they shared the good news boldly.

But what happens if your experience of the Holy Spirit isn't quite like you expected? You may ask yourself, *Why don't I feel different? Where is my Holy Spirit zeal? Is something wrong with me?* Do not panic. It's okay if your experience is different from what happened to the first disciples.

The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to all believers (1 Corinthians 12:11; 1 Peter 4:10-11). We are called to use our different gifts to share the good news and the gift of salvation, and also to serve one another in a variety of ways. For example, some Christians receive a gift of teaching or wisdom that they can share with others through speaking or writing as they listen and offer support to those in need. The Holy Spirit also strengthens us to battle through difficulties and overcome obstacles, empowering us to resist temptation and love others, even our enemies. God the Holy Spirit always glorifies God the Father and God the Son (Jesus) and never contradicts the Bible, but each believer's experience of the Spirit is unique and personal to them.

If you wonder if the Holy Spirit is doing anything in your life, remember that God works in many different ways. Although you can't always recognize what is happening on the inside, it doesn't mean *nothing* is happening. The Spirit's work is sometimes a gradual process—like in nature when seeds are planted and it takes time to witness the results. Other people may begin to notice positive changes in you, such as becoming more self-controlled and showing more joy and love, which are fruits of the Spirit's work (Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Timothy 1:7).

So, embrace your journey with the Holy Spirit. Remember, it's a lifelong process. You can trust God's timing as you seek His direction and rely on Him in faith. 🕯️ *Cindy Lee*

🕯️ What questions do you have about the Holy Spirit? Who are trusted Christians in your life who can help you dig into Scripture and discern what the Spirit might be doing in and through you? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Romans 12:11 (NIV)*

## THE ANTICIPATION OF SOMETHING ASSURED

READ: ROMANS 5:1-11; 15:13; HEBREWS 11

**H**ope is a four-letter word. Yet, between those four letters is a tremendous range of nuance. People can use hope to convey an innocent wish. “I hope it doesn’t rain on the picnic.” Or hope can be used to reveal an unrivaled desire. “I hope my grandma lives through Christmas.”

Our hope often conveys what we *want* to happen, but it doesn’t change what *will* happen. We have no control over the weather, people’s lifespans, or much else. So why is such a persnickety and ultimately powerless word plastered across churches? Because biblical hope is more than a mere desire. It carries a very special subtext. Anticipation.

Hope can be frail because it often shatters when the desire is unfulfilled. But what if you knew that what you hoped for was going to happen? Romans 5:5 says, “Hope does not put us to shame.” Why? Because the hope this verse is talking about is a hope placed in God Himself, and God always keeps His promises. This verse is talking about the hope that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection has cleansed us of our sins. The hope that Jesus will come back again. The hope that we will live with Him in the new heavens and new earth one day. The hope that we will see our fellow believers again, and sorrow and pain will be gone forever. These are all things God promises to those who accept His gift of salvation by putting their faith in Jesus.

Hebrews 11 starts by saying, “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” This chapter goes on to describe many people who were able to act in faith because they put their hope in something certain—God. So hope becomes the anticipation of something assured, not just a four-letter word. 📖 *Abigail Scibiur*

- 📖 How can hoping for something assured change our outlook on life or even the way we act? (Hint: read 2 Corinthians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 4:13-14; Hebrews 10:22-25.) \_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 What are some specific promises God has made that we can put our hope in? Consider starting your own list of Scriptures about those promises to look at whenever you feel discouraged. \_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Remember, our hope is ultimately in Jesus Himself (Ephesians 1:12). Because of His death and resurrection, we can rest in His promises, and we can also be honest with Him about what we want and need. There is power in expressing our desires to God in prayer because He has the power to change things. Consider taking some time to express your desires to Jesus. He is listening. \_\_\_\_\_

*And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:5 (NIV)*

## IT TAKES PRACTICE

READ: 2 TIMOTHY 2:15; 3:14-17

**D**o you ever find the Bible confusing and frustrating? That's totally understandable! The books of the Bible were written thousands of years ago in different languages and in different times and places in history. It's going to be difficult to understand at times. And it's normal to read a passage for the first time and feel like you just don't get it.

Learning to understand the Bible better is kind of like learning to ski. It takes practice. If you decided to take on the biggest hill you could find your very first time skiing, you'd probably tumble your way down to the bottom, and end up with a few new injuries. And if you try to tackle a difficult Bible passage without any help or training, you'll probably end up confused and frustrated. But the more you work at skiing, the better you can do it. And the more you read and study the Bible—at church, with others, and on your own—the more you'll understand it.

If you wanted to learn to ski, you would probably seek out a ski instructor. And a Bible instructor is a good idea too. In a way, the Holy Spirit is like our Bible instructor. When we put our trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, His Holy Spirit lives inside us. And He helps us understand what God is saying to us and apply it to our lives. We can also ask other Christians for help when we don't understand something—like our pastors, youth leaders, family members, or friends. God doesn't leave us to figure everything out on our own. He gives us community and His very own presence!

Just remember, anything worthwhile takes time and effort. So don't give up when reading the Bible gets hard. Keep practicing. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 The whole Bible points to Jesus (Luke 24:27; John 5:39; 20:31; Acts 8:26-40). And if we know Jesus, we have His Holy Spirit living in us. So, as we read the Bible on our own and with others, He will help us understand what it says. How has Jesus helped you understand His Word so far? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Have you come across a Bible passage that's particularly difficult to understand? That's okay—even Peter said Paul's writings were sometimes hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16)! And there are some things we may never fully grasp until Jesus returns. Who is a trusted Christian in your life who could look at this passage with you and help you find scholarly resources that could help you understand it better—like study Bibles, commentaries, websites, or videos? \_\_\_\_\_

*The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.  
Psalm 119:130 (NIV)*

## THE DARK CHAPTERS

READ: PSALMS 13:1-6; 37:23-24; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

**A**re you going through a really difficult time? Do you wonder if there's a way out? Perhaps you're overwhelmed with grief, anger, or frustration. When we're in the middle of painful situations, it can seem like they're never-ending.

*Will the hurt ever pass? Is this it? Am I trapped like this forever? We may ask ourselves, Who can help me? Why doesn't anyone understand?*

These questions are totally natural when we're going through an intense season. Everyone has what I call the "dark chapters" in their lives. Some last hours, days, weeks, or even years. They can be excruciating. But all is not lost.

The world we live in has been broken by sin, and with it comes imperfection, failures, and trials...but we don't suffer alone. We have a heavenly Father who loves us unconditionally, more than anyone can comprehend (Ephesians 3:19). He sent His Son, Jesus, to be *God with us* (Matthew 1:23). Jesus lived as a human, and He personally understands all the hurts and sorrows of life. Jesus willingly died on the cross for our sins and rose again, so everyone who trusts in Him can become God's child. In every dark chapter, we can know that Jesus is with us, and we can look forward to the day He will return and make all things new and whole.

Even when we think God is far away, He is with us, guiding us. And He can bring good even out of terrible situations (Romans 8:28). Just look at the Bible—so many people went through incredible personal challenges. But in the midst of the dark chapters of our lives, God invites us to cry out to Him and honestly lament our pain—this is why we have so many amazing lament psalms written by people like King David. Time and time again, God meets His people with His compassionate love and brings hope, even to situations that seem hopeless.

So, if you are currently struggling, remember that these moments will not last forever. They are episodes, chapters, life segments...but not the whole picture. 📖 *Cindy Lee*

📖 What kinds of difficult things have you gone through? How have you seen God bring hope? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Are you in a "dark chapter" right now? In addition to talking to God, who can you be honest with about what you're experiencing? If you are in danger, tell a trusted adult right away. \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Do you know anyone who is going through a difficult chapter in their life right now? How could you come alongside them today, perhaps through prayer, listening, or helping them? \_\_\_\_\_

*Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.  
Romans 8:18 (NLT)*

## ETERNITY HAS NO END

READ: JOHN 3:16; 14:1-3; REVELATION 21:1-6

**T**ime passes so quickly. We go from being children to adults. We see ourselves in the mirror and notice changes happening right before our eyes. Technology advances, new political leaders take control. Life moves at a fast pace, and sometimes we long for it to slow down...But what will eternity feel like?

As we grow up, we learn that things in this life don't last. Job opportunities come and go. Relationships fall apart. Death happens. We get used to dealing with losses and endings. But eternity contains none of that.

God has given us the chance to live forever. Because He loves us, Jesus died and rose again so we could have eternal life. We have the opportunity to experience something beyond what we have ever experienced before. We are used to thinking in terms of everything having a start and an end, but when Jesus returns, the new heavens and new earth will have no end. Our future with God is an eternal one. We will not lose it. We will not want to leave it. No one can take it away from us (John 10:28-30; 16:22).

There is a peace that comes from knowing that something is going to last. Eternal life can be our future. If we know Jesus, we have something immeasurably wonderful to look forward to. Time passes quickly, but when we know what the future holds for us and that our time with God will have no end, we don't have to be afraid. **✦** *Emily Acker*

**✦** Have you ever tried thinking about this present life as just a small part of your whole life—with eternity waiting for you? How could this change our point of view? \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** Thinking about eternity can be overwhelming. It's too big for us to wrap our minds around. And nobody knows exactly what it will be like. But we do know that we will get to be with God and all His people forever, filled with His love and joy, free from sin and all the brokenness it causes. To learn more about God's promise of eternity for those who put their trust in Jesus, check out page 104.

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



## THE GIFT THE WORLD CANNOT GIVE

READ: PSALM 4:8; JOHN 14:25-29; 16:33

**A**s a younger teenager, I was so interested in reading fiction. It provided entertainment, romance, adventure, comedy, and interesting plots. Not to mention, it also provided an escape from the real world, thrusting me into an author's made-up fantasy. During stressful or anxious times in my life, I strolled through the young adult shelves at my local library seeking reprieve. The desire to shrink out of reality became a struggle, as I felt more desperate after each book. At the time, I felt like the only thing that could give me peace was books, or something to constantly read.

Then one day, I lost my library card. I spent months without reading. Fortunately, that gave me time to dive into my dust-collecting Bible. Diving into the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), I did not leave my room for the next hour. I was stuck on a specific chapter—John 14. In verse 27, I was stunned to read what Jesus told His disciples. Here, He gives them a specific gift. Peace! He specifically stated that He would give them “peace of mind and heart.” That changed my life. Furthermore, Jesus said that His peace wasn't like the peace that created things could give. As followers of Christ, we have access to the eternal peace that transcends what any other person or thing can give!

Today, I still love reading. And I'm still a teenager who loves romance, adventure, comedy, and interesting plots. But my heart was what changed. Now, I look for my peace in the One who I can always rely on. 🕯️ *Evelyn Cardriche*

🕯️ One of Jesus's names is “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Because Jesus died and rose again to forgive us and save us from sin and death, everyone who trusts in Him can have “peace with God” (Romans 5:1). That means our sin no longer makes us enemies of God—instead, we get to “rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God” (verse 11). And it's because of this relationship that we can bring God all of our worries and, as Philippians 4:7 says, “experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand.” When Jesus returns to restore creation, all His people will feel perfectly at peace all the time. And until that day, He invites us to draw near to Him whenever we feel unpeaceful, resting in His great love for us and bringing Him all of our concerns, desires, and needs. Through the Holy Spirit, He will help us experience His peace more and more throughout our lives. Can you remember a time in your life when you experienced God's peace? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

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*“I [Jesus] am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.” John 14:27 (NLT)*

## EACH SMALL WORRY

READ: 1 PETER 5:6-11

**E**ach small worry can quickly become a big worry. It expands from the place inside of me where a little thought pops up. I start to think about it more and more. I consider all the scenarios and things that could happen. I start to worry about how I'm going to stop things from getting worse. I wonder how tomorrow will be. I worry about other things too, as the fears really begin to take over. But before any of that happens, I can give it to God. It's so good to know that, when a small worry starts in my mind, I can immediately hand it over to God.

The Bible says we don't need to be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6), and it doesn't help to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:25-34). It isn't up to us to try to control things by worrying. Instead, we can go to our heavenly Father in prayer and give it all to Him. He invites us to tell Him about everything that worries us. He has so much compassion on us, and He wants to help us. Because He loves us dearly, Jesus died and rose again so everyone who trusts in Him could be brought near to God. And when Jesus returns, He will put an end to everything that is worrisome.

It isn't easy to stop worrying, but it is possible with God. I try to hand Him my worries each time they pop up, and instead focus on something I'm grateful for (Philippians 4:8). This doesn't always work, but when it does, I'm glad I did it. Anytime I hand my worries to God, I'm grateful to know that He will take care of things for me. 🕯️ *Bethany Acker*

🕯️ What kinds of worries do you struggle with? Consider taking a moment to tell Jesus about these.

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🕯️ Sometimes, we experience thoughts and feelings that are too much for us to handle on our own, even by praying and reading the Bible. But God wants to help us in lots of ways, including through other people such as medical and mental health professionals who can help us figure out if what we are experiencing is worry, anxiety, or something else. If you find yourself feeling afraid, stressed, or worried a lot of the time, or if your thoughts keep going to dark places or "what if" scenarios and you can't seem to stop, who is a trusted adult you could talk to? If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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.

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



## VIRUS DETECTED

READ: PROVERBS 3:5-6; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:5; EPHESIANS 2:8; 1 PETER 5:6-7

**U**PDATE FAILED. VIRUS DETECTED.” Siren stared at the vile green letters on her monitor. There was one last thing she could try. She drew the small drive out of her pocket. The Willpower Program (or WPP) was rumored to be strong enough to revive any device that had been affected by The Virus. And Siren’s computer had been infected for a long time now. She had tried everything—flying to planets all over the solar system, asking experts, even rebuilding her operating system. Finally, she had built her own copy of WPP from the coding she’d seen at programing stations around the galaxy.

She inserted the drive. “This has to work.” *You could always try the blue button*, a small voice whispered in the back of her mind. “No, I won’t.” *It’s the only option.* Siren shook her head. Everyone knew the button was left over from long ago. If pressed, it sent a signal back to the manufacturer. And everyone knew the manufacturer was not to be trusted. A monster that could wipe out her entire system if she gave it access to her computer. She couldn’t risk compromising her hard drive.

The thought was interrupted as her screen flickered—fuzzy, then checkered, emitting a gentle hum. Siren’s heart pounded as the computer monitor simmered out, leaving silence. WPP had failed. She fell to her knees in front of the machine and cried. Everything was on there. Her life, her memories, pictures of her colony. *You could always*—“Fine!” Siren jabbed the round blue button in the center of the computer.

She squeezed her eyes shut. There was a gentle hum. She opened her eyes. Her apartment was cast in a beautiful blue light. “Is that it? Did that fix it? All that searching, and all I needed to do was press the blue button?” Relief settled over Siren as she skimmed through the files. All safe. But others out there were still battling The Virus. She needed to tell them. 📌 *Natty Maelle*

📌 Do you find yourself in need of a reset, but scared you’re too far gone? You are never too far gone. Jesus came to earth to live the sinless life that we can’t, and He died on the cross to pay for our sins. He came back from the dead three days later, defeating death and sin. For you. So, if you think you can’t be saved, don’t worry. Just reach out to Him. (See page 104.) Even as Christians, we need to be reminded again and again that Jesus saved us, and is still saving us, and will save us in the end. What He started—that is, salvation—He will complete (Philippians 1:6). \_\_\_\_\_

*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you in due time. 1 Peter 5:6 (NIV)*

## DOES IT PAY?

READ: PSALM 37:1-9; 1 PETER 2:19-25; 3:8-18

**H**ave you ever seen someone do something wrong and, instead of getting in trouble, they end up reaping a reward for it? You may have heard the saying, “Crime doesn’t pay.” But unfortunately, in this broken world we regularly encounter people who seem to benefit from being dishonest or breaking promises. It can be hard to watch someone gain wealth with ease by deceiving or exploiting people. But the Bible tells us not to envy those who seem to be rewarded for doing evil. God sees what’s happening, and the day will come when He’ll reward those who serve and obey Him.

Yet, none of us can serve and obey God perfectly. We may be tempted to think of ourselves as better than “those evil people,” but the truth is, we all fall short (Romans 3:23-25). We all end up deceiving others and breaking promises for our own selfish gain. That’s why Jesus came to live the perfectly honest, perfectly just life that we could never live. As God the Son, Jesus always served and obeyed God the Father—and He did so out of love for the Father, and for us. Ultimately, Jesus died on the cross, taking all our sin upon Himself, and then He rose from the dead, victorious over sin and death. This was the only way for God to save us. Through Jesus, we are forgiven of our sins and we have the assurance of living with Him forever when He returns.

Until that glorious day, it can help to remember that God is not okay with injustice. All sin must be accounted for. But Jesus endured the cross to pay for our sins for us. One day, those who have been forgiven by Jesus will receive their reward—eternal life with Him. Though it may sometimes seem like doing wrong pays off, it doesn’t. God promises to right every wrong at Jesus’s return. And even now, He lives in us through His Holy Spirit, empowering us to live with honesty and justice, to serve and obey God because of His great love for us. **✠ A. W. Smith**

**✠** How have you seen others benefitting from doing what is wrong? This can be so discouraging. When you see this happen, you can bring it to God in prayer and ask Him if there is some way you can bring honesty and justice into the situation. \_\_\_\_\_

**✠** We all do wrong, and often we seem to get away with it. When are you tempted to be dishonest or pull yourself up by pushing others down? Jesus understands temptation, and He is full of mercy. When you notice temptation, you can turn to Him and be reminded of His perfect love and truth. You can also confess any sin to Him and ask for His help to move forward in love. \_\_\_\_\_

*Trust in the LORD and do good. Psalm 37:3 (NIV)*

## IT IS GOD

READ: JOHN 14:12-21; 15:1-17

**L**et me understand when it's You, God  
 Telling me to go  
 Speak loudly to me, God  
 So that I can know  
 Let me feel You with me, God  
 As I simply live  
 Knowing You are right beside me, God  
 Help me to give  
 Let them understand when it's You, God  
 Helping me to stand  
 Show them You're supporting me, God  
 And I'm following Your command  
 Let them know You move in me, God  
 You're a part of all I do  
 Show them You are helping me, God  
 I am nothing without You *Emily Acker*

**I** When we put our trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, we are given the Holy Spirit, sometimes called the Spirit of Christ. As we seek to abide in Jesus, we may often find there are things we do in life that we know we would never be able to do without God's power working through us—such as forgiving others, loving our enemies, speaking the truth in love, acting with self-control, giving generously, or enduring hardships. Yet, we cannot take credit for any of this—for, as Philippians 2:13 says, “It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” If you know Jesus, how have you seen Him working in you? How has the Spirit been transforming you? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this, and ask Him to point people to Himself through your life. Remember, as we rest in Jesus's great love for us, His love naturally overflows from us to others. \_\_\_\_\_

**I** John the Baptist made it very clear he was not the Messiah and consistently pointed to Jesus. What might it look like for us to follow his example? (If you want to dig deeper, read John 1:15-39; 3:22-36.) \_\_\_\_\_

*“I [Jesus] am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5 (NIV)*

## A PLACE IN THIS WORLD

READ: PSALM 139; PROVERBS 3:1-6

**W**hen you feel like you don't have a place in this world because you don't think you're as talented as others or you aren't sure what to do with your life, remember that God made you. God doesn't make mistakes. When He created you, He knew what He was doing. He knew just who you would be.

You don't have to worry about whether or not you have a place in this world when you remember that God is the Creator of the world, and He is also the Creator of *you*, and He wants you here.

Maybe you don't feel as talented as the other people around you. Maybe you aren't sure what to do with your life. It's okay to have some doubts. It's okay to take your time to figure out who you are, what you enjoy, and what you're good at. Let God guide you. Let Him lead you. Remember that He knows you better than anyone else. He crafted you intentionally. He has given you the abilities you have, and if you know Jesus, He has also given you spiritual gifts. You can ask Him to show you how to follow His leading in your life, one step at a time.

You have a place in this world for a reason. God wants you to be here. Your talents are your own, and God will work through you as you seek Him. He will take care of you and guide you and help you find a deep sense of purpose in living your life with Him. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 Do you ever wonder about your place in this world? We all feel this way from time to time, and it can be helpful to remember who our Creator is. He made us just as we are, and He has given purpose to our lives. The truth is, Jesus rejoiced to save you through His death and resurrection, and He doesn't need you to *do* anything. He delights in having you with Him, and He invites you to share in the joy of His good work—pointing others to Jesus and partnering with Him to bring restoration to the brokenness around you. In times when you're feeling particularly discouraged or frustrated, who is a trusted Christian in your life who can lovingly remind you of the truth and help you receive God's help and encouragement? (If you want to dig deeper, read Zephaniah 3:17; Matthew 25:23; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Hebrews 12:2-3.) \_\_\_\_\_

📖 When we feel pressure to figure out "what to do with our lives," how could it be freeing to remember that God knows us, He loves us, and He calls us to follow Him one step at a time? \_\_\_\_\_

*Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands. Psalm 119:73 (NIV)*

## CHAPEL VISITORS

READ: LUKE 5:27-32; 18:9-17; ROMANS 5:6-11; 1 JOHN 2:1

**T**he small chapel was an inconspicuous building tucked along a side street off of Main. The leaders on the mission trip hadn't mentioned the little church, but they had told the students it was okay to explore the area in the evening after dinner as long as they stayed in pairs and didn't go too far. The chapel itself had worn pews with only a few people scattered across several dozen rows. Xavier's friend Liam had protested that it "wouldn't be fun" and "there wasn't much time," but Xavier had responded, "There's nothing better we could do than pray."

So, Liam begrudgingly took a seat near the front with his friend. Xavier stole a glance around the room and thanked God that he wasn't like Liam, who wanted "fun" instead of wanting to pray. Then he thanked God that he wasn't like the drunk, staring blankly a few pews over, barely aware of the world.

Hearing a noise, he turned and glanced at someone slinking into a back pew, with a shirt that literally blazed, "I am the enemy" in flaming letters. Xavier thanked God that he knew better than to enter a church dressed like that.

The man in the t-shirt didn't lift up his face. He just hoarsely whispered, "God, I need another chance, because I am the problem in my life." **📖** *Gideon Eising*

- 📖 Today's story is an allegory of a parable Jesus told in Luke 18. Which character do you relate to most today—Xavier, Liam, the person in the middle pew, or the man in the back pew? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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- 📖 Jesus was telling this parable "to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness" and looked down on everybody else (Luke 18:9). When are you tempted to look down on others? Are you sometimes tempted to think of yourself as "less of a sinner" than the people around you? \_\_\_\_\_

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- 📖 Is God too harsh in forgiving only the humble? Can our pride get in the way of grace? Read Luke 18:16-17. Jesus died and rose so *all* who put their trust in Him—relying on His perfect righteousness, not any imperfect righteousness of our own—can be forgiven (more on page 104). Yet, even Christians can forget we need Jesus just as much as anybody. But, through the Holy Spirit, God helps us walk in humility and resist sins like pride. And even though we sin daily, we can come to Him with repentant hearts, knowing His love and forgiveness are sure. Because Jesus shed His blood on the cross for the person you're tempted to look down on, and for you. \_\_\_\_\_

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*"I [Jesus] have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent." Luke 5:32 (NLT)*

## THE POWER OF SAYING “THANK YOU”

READ: PSALM 116; LUKE 17:11-19; REVELATION 4:6-11

**H**ave you ever considered how much difference the words “thank you” can make? The Samaritan healed of leprosy in Luke 17 seemed to know the power of these words. While on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus met a group of ten men who were social outcasts because of the leprosy that had deformed their bodies. Jesus told the diseased men to show themselves to the priest, and they were healed! After this astonishing miracle, only one of the ten took the time to come back to Jesus and say thank you. Where were the others? Had they already forgotten who healed them? In our lives today, it can be easy to take things for granted, like the nine men did. When our prayers are answered, how often do we retrace our steps like the Samaritan and thank God?

Jesus completely changed the lives of the ten lepers, and He has changed our lives too! By dying on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins and rising from the dead, Jesus has given us the best gift of all: a personal relationship with Him and salvation from sin and death. When we remember this amazing gift, it can move us to thank Jesus for His great love and for all He has given us, just as the healed Samaritan did.

Simply saying “thank you” to God can be a natural way for us to praise Him. In the Bible, a great example of this kind of praise is demonstrated by the psalmists. Psalm 118 begins by declaring, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.” The rest of this joyous psalm recounts how God provided for the psalmist’s life. Similarly, in Psalm 116, “death wrapped its ropes around” and “the terrors of the grave overtook” the writer of this psalm, but God saved them (verses 3, 8). So the psalmist glorified God’s name by giving thanks.

Besides exalting God’s name, saying “thank you” can also open our eyes to the beauty around us. The more we thank God, the more we will naturally notice the ways He is at work in our lives. When we stop and take time to appreciate the things around us, our perspective changes to one focused on God’s goodness. 🙏

*Emma Schoessow*

🙏 On the day Jesus returns to resurrect us from the dead, we will be completely healed and whole. Then, we will get to praise and thank Him for all eternity as we live together with Him on the new heavens and new earth! In the meantime, as we see glimpses of His goodness and healing now, we can thank and praise Him each day. Where have you seen God’s goodness and healing in and around you? Consider taking some time to thank God like the psalmists and the Samaritan. \_\_\_\_\_

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever.  
Psalm 118:1 (NLT)*

## FEAR ON THE LAKE

READ: MATTHEW 1:23; 28:20; MARK 6:45-54; EPHESIANS 4:2

**A**s I stood at the lake's edge, I was observing a genuine SOS moment. A young family member—I'll call him Ford—had just received a kayak for his tenth birthday. He loved to be on the water, so a kayak seemed a fitting gift for him. Since our party took place near a small lake, the family gathered to watch Ford test out his new watercraft.

As we admired Ford's skills, he glided toward the bank, laid his paddle in the kayak, and leaped from the boat to the grass. His forward motion sent the kayak backwards, moving out of reach while he stood watching it drift away.

We ran to Ford to find out what had happened. He'd gotten scared, overwhelmed at being on the water alone, and decided to abandon ship. But Ford had failed to recognize this act would leave his birthday present on the lake with no one controlling it. We watched his bright blue kayak float farther and farther away. Then two fishermen approached offering to help. After a few expert casts, one of them hooked Ford's kayak and pulled it to shore.

Fear had led Ford to make a drastic decision. And, though we may not all kayak, we have all been struck with fear and made choices we've later regretted. That day at the lake, Ford had gazed at the vastness of water all around him and felt overpowered. He believed he faced the challenge of managing the kayak all on his own. Yet, he didn't paddle alone that day. Ford had trusted in Christ to forgive his sins and bring him into a relationship with God, so Jesus was present with Ford. And when we trust in Jesus—believing that His death and resurrection has provided payment for our sins to make us pure in God's sight—He is with us too. Whenever we feel like we're in over our heads, we don't even need to ask Jesus to climb into the boat with us; He's already there—every time, on every lake, no matter how far from shore we drift. 📖 *Allison Wilson Lee*

📖 Can you think of a time you made a bad decision out of fear? We all have moments when we feel overwhelmed by our circumstances, but Jesus doesn't expect us to handle life alone. How could remembering that Jesus is "in the boat" with us help us when we feel overwhelmed? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Even when we do make bad decisions, Jesus has so much compassion on us. He is eager to help us, and oftentimes the way God helps His people, is through His people—like those fishermen helped retrieve Ford's kayak. Has someone ever helped you when you messed up? How? \_\_\_\_\_

*Immediately he [Jesus] spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."*  
Mark 6:50 (NIV)

## HEALED

READ: PSALM 103:1-5; REVELATION 21:1-6

**W**hen was the last time you had a cold? Maybe you have one right now. They can be so annoying, but the process of healing from a cold can point us to an amazing truth about Jesus. Even though sickness invaded God's good world when humans chose sin, God created us in a wonderful way so that when our bodies get hurt or sick, we're usually able to heal and fight off germs and infections. Our ability to heal is such evidence of God's loving care for us in our very own bodies, and it can also point us to the day Jesus will return, raise us from the dead, and permanently heal us of every hurt and sickness.

But, as we wait for that day, sometimes our bodies can get really sick and not be able to get better on their own. In those cases, God might use doctors or medicine or even a miracle to heal us. But even if He chooses not to heal us right away, we can still trust Him, remembering that Jesus is fully God and fully human, and He truly empathizes with us in our suffering.

Isaiah calls Jesus, "a man of suffering who knew what sickness was...he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains...he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds" (Isaiah 53:3-5). Jesus willingly entered into all the pains and sorrows of human life, and He went to the cross to take the punishment all our sins deserved. Because He was whipped and beaten, because His flesh was torn and bruised, because He died on that cross for us...we can be forgiven and made whole. So, even when our bodies are slow to heal, we can cling to Jesus's promises to be with us in every moment, and to restore all of creation, including our bodies.

As we experience the sicknesses and injuries that will inevitably come, we can thank God for giving us wonderful bodies that can heal. We can thank Him for the doctors and medicine He often uses to help us, remembering that God alone has the power to heal. And, once we know Jesus as our Savior, we can thank Him for healing us from the disease of sin, and we can rest in His promises to be with us and to fully heal our bodies one day too. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 How can the experience of healing from an illness or an injury point us to the ultimate restoration Jesus will bring when He returns? While some sicknesses and injuries may never fully go away until Jesus returns, we can bring our pain and frustration and anger and sorrow to Him in prayer anytime. We can be honest with Him and ask for healing, and we can also find rest in His comfort and strength, even in the midst of our pain. \_\_\_\_\_

*My soul, bless the LORD...he heals all your diseases. Psalm 103:2-3 (CSB)*



## RUNNING OUT OF GAS

READ: EXODUS 20:8-11; MARK 1:21-22, 32-38; EPHESIANS 2:4-10

**I** imagine this: *Cars zoom by as you sit on the side of the road. You hope no one you know sees you stranded, your car out of gas. You can't believe you forgot to fill up the tank! Your brother even reminded you this morning. In humility, you wait for him to come to your rescue. And now you'll be late for soccer practice.*

With school, sports, friends, family, clubs, social media, jobs, youth group, volunteering, college applications, and so...much...more, there is A LOT to do. It's no wonder we turn to stimulants such as caffeine, sugar, and screens to feel more alert and keep up with life. But these things can't sustain us, and eventually we crash. They mask the real need: rest.

Regular rest refuels our bodies, enabling us to do more than we otherwise could. Ironically, we can actually do more in less time when we rest. And here's the secret: one of the benefits of resting in God's presence is that it allows Him to refuel us and refresh our souls (Psalm 23:1-3), thereby giving us the energy—and the wisdom—to do the good work He has for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). This type of spiritually rejuvenating rest is called a Sabbath, which God demonstrated for us when He rested after the work of creating the universe (Exodus 20:11).

Jesus is God the Son, and He is also Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). During His ministry, Jesus regularly spent time in the Father's presence to rest and refuel for the work before Him. For example, in Mark 1:35, "Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray," making time to meet with God the Father after a very busy day of healing and preaching.

We too can spend time resting in God's presence, being refueled for the work He has given us to do. And even when we overdo it and end up drained, He has so much compassion on us. As we seek Him, He will help us learn to live in the rhythms of work and rest. **✦** *Tracy Mikula*

**✦** Have you ever taken a Sabbath rest, pausing from work and busyness, even if all the tasks or to-do lists aren't finished? What was it like? Taking regular times of intentional rest can help us remember that Jesus has already done the work of saving us. Because Jesus died on the cross for us and rose from the grave, we don't ever need to strive to do enough or be enough. Rest is not something we earn—Jesus gives us rest in Himself (Matthew 11:28-30). Consider taking some time to think about what you spend your time on, and ask God if there is anything He is inviting you to drop from your schedule, at least temporarily, to take the rest your body and soul need. \_\_\_\_\_

*"Be still, and know that I am God!" Psalm 46:10 (NLT)*

## IMITATORS OF CHRIST

READ: JOHN 13:1-17; EPHESIANS 5:1-2

**H**ave you ever seen a child imitating an adult? It can be so cute to watch a small child try to mix pretend food in empty pots, imitate a parent's expression, or repeat a phrase they haven't fully mastered yet. That's how kids learn. They imitate the people they see.

The Bible says something similar in Ephesians 5:1: "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children." But we weren't always God's children. In fact, at one time we were all separated from God because of our sin. But God loves us so much that Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross to save us, and He rose from the dead to make the way for us to be with Him always. Once we put our trust in Jesus, we can know that we have been adopted into His family and we belong to Him forever. And, just as kids imitate the people they spend the most time with, God calls His children to imitate Jesus.

So how can we imitate Jesus? Well, we can start by looking at what He said and did in the Bible. As we read and study God's Word, we see how much He loves us. Especially in the accounts of Jesus's ministry on earth, it's captivating to see how Jesus responded to people. No matter if they treated Him with honor or contempt, Jesus wanted them to know His love (Matthew 9:36; 23:37; Luke 23:34). We can also learn about His relationship with God the Father. Jesus is God the Son, and He loved and trusted the Father through everything. And in all kinds of situations, Jesus's character was revealed by His actions. As we study Jesus's life and trust Him to help us follow His example in our own lives, we will act more and more like Him.

Of course, none of this is possible in our own strength, but as Christians we have the Holy Spirit living inside us, transforming us into Jesus's image. When we rely on the Holy Spirit, we can learn how to "live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ" (Ephesians 5:2). **■** *A. W. Smith*

**!** Everyone imitates other people—from little kids to elderly adults. Can you think of anyone you imitate, whether intentionally or unintentionally? Why do you think that might be? \_\_\_\_\_

**!** In John 13:1-17, what do you notice about how Jesus acts and how He treats people? Consider taking a moment to ask God to help you learn how you can imitate Jesus in your life. If you want to dig deeper, you could start reading through the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). \_\_\_\_\_

*Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God. Ephesians 5:2 (NLT)*

## WELL WITH MY SOUL

READ: PSALM 46

I never thought I would have to let go and say, “It is well with my soul,” like the old hymn. I never thought I would have to learn to be okay with the storms in my life.

I prayed for God to take them. I begged Him to change things and make my life better.

Then I learned to accept the struggles. I realized that even in them, God was still good. Even if this life got difficult—and it has—my God has not failed me.

If you have ever lost a loved one, then you know how desperate you can get for them to just get better. You may have begged God to heal them. But if He didn’t, what then?

Many things happen that shake us and make us doubt God’s goodness. We might beg and beg and wonder why He doesn’t seem to hear us.

But He does. He listens. He cares. The things that grieve us, grieve Him too. And He will be there for us always, even when He doesn’t calm the storm.

My God remains good through all of life’s struggles. He never changes, despite all that changes in my life. In every difficult moment, He is there. He takes care of me. He holds my hand and gives me the strength I need, moment by moment. Good times come and go. Storms sometimes feel like they are lasting forever. But no matter what comes my way, I am choosing to trust God to help me through. 🕯

*Bethany Acker*

🕯 We don’t know why painful things happen in our lives, but we do know that Jesus weeps with us. Jesus is God in flesh, and He experienced suffering and hardship. Because He loves us, He died and rose again to make the way to be with us and to one day put an end to suffering, sin, and death forever when He returns. In the meantime, He has given His Holy Spirit to everyone who has put their trust in Him. Through the Holy Spirit, He is with us in the midst of our suffering, feeling our hurts with us and offering us comfort and strength. Find out more on page 104.

🕯 Have you ever been surprised by a storm in your life? Did you see any glimpses of God’s goodness in the midst of it? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 What might it look like to trust God in the middle of a storm? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Do you have any favorite Bible verses that remind you of how trustworthy God is? If not, consider asking a parent, pastor, youth leader, counselor, or friend to help you find some. \_\_\_\_\_

*In panic I cried out, “I am cut off from the LORD!” But you heard my cry for mercy and answered my call for help. Psalm 31:22 (NLT)*

## WARRIOR

READ: EXODUS 14:14; 33:22; ISAIAH 42:13; ZEPHANIAH 3:17

**G**o to the boulder!" He did not yell over the noise of the battle, but Rhyn heard, and without even having to look for the rock he had sent her to, she knew exactly where to go. So Rhyn ran to it. It wasn't a very big rock, but if she crouched down, it would cover her on one side from the battle that was raging. Rhyn's weapons and hope were long gone—she had lost them somewhere when the fight began, and now it was a full-blown war spread out before her. She had been running without much direction. This way from a sword, another way from a javelin, here from the pounding of horses' hooves, and there from the clashing of shields against metal. Everywhere mud. Everywhere blood. Nowhere safe to run.

But then, the king was there. Of course, he had always been there. She'd just forgotten to look for him and follow his voice above all the noise, and she'd become disoriented and lost her purpose on the battlefield. Rhyn could hardly believe he'd come for her, but he had.

That's when she caught sight of the ogre. It's a mighty wonder how time slows in the moments before the worst thing can happen. And Rhyn saw it all move before her like dripping honey. The ogre approached, he lifted his ax, his eyes fixed on her. And then from above her, perched on the rock, one mighty warrior halted the ogre in his steps, his sword meeting the ax with a harrowing zing. The king took a step over her and, with one heavy thump, thrust his shield into the dirt, covering her completely from the battle. Now she could see nothing but the safe haven he had created around her, the rock and the shield, and amid the raging battle, she was safe. 🗡️ *Abbi Bloem*

*But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior. Jeremiah 20:11 (NIV)*

🗡️ Often we view Jesus as merely a kind, gentle teacher. But the Bible tells us that Jesus is also our Rock and our Shield (Psalms 3:1-8; 18:2; 28:7). And He is the dreaded warrior we see glimpses of in the Old Testament. How could this image of Jesus as the Divine Warrior help us understand how He acts on our behalf?

🗡️ As humans, we are helpless to save ourselves, but Jesus fought for us all the way to the cross. He defeated sin, death, and all the powers of evil and darkness by dying for us and rising from the grave. Because He has saved us, nothing can tear us away from His love (John 10:27-30; Romans 8:35-39). If you want to know more about this good news, check out page 104.

🗝️ When Jesus returns to restore creation and raise us from the dead, He will right every wrong, and every foe will be silenced. In the meantime, He wants to help us through everything we face, even when we forget to listen to Him, even when we fail to trust Him. How can these truths give us hope when we experience the battlefields of life? \_\_\_\_\_

🗝️ Jesus calls us to listen to His voice and follow where He leads, and He empowers us to do so through the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we get to be part of His good and purposeful work—because He has extended grace and forgiveness to us, we can extend grace and forgiveness to others, bringing His light to dark places, fighting the lies of the enemy with the truth of the gospel, and extending loving kindness amidst the harshness of our broken world so that others may know the love of Jesus too (Matthew 5:14-16; Ephesians 6:10-20; Philippians 2:1-18; 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). And, don't forget, we also get to rest in the safety of God's tender love for us (Psalms 18:19; 23:1-6). We can learn to rely on God and discern His voice by spending time with Him through praying and reading His Word, both by ourselves and with fellow Christians. Who are trusted Christians in your life? How could you help each other listen to and follow Jesus? How could you remind each other of the hope of the gospel and the sureness of God's love, even in tough times? \_\_\_\_\_



## DOING LIFE TOGETHER

READ: ACTS 2:40-47; GALATIANS 6:9-10; EPHESIANS 4:1-16

**H**ave you ever heard Christians talk about “doing life together”? It can be hard to understand exactly what this looks like. But I got to experience it in a variety of ways this week.

I have some friends in my church who, like me, are married with young kids: Sam and Kristi, Kongcheng and Haju, and Evan and Nicole. We were all struggling in various ways this week, and I was amazed at how we came alongside each other. Kristi and I dropped off two dinners at Nicole and Evan’s house. I also dropped off a dinner at Haju and Kongcheng’s house. Sam helped watch my kids so I could catch up on house cleaning—while he also helped with cleaning. And a few of us were able to go to one another’s houses to just spend time together.

I had been reflecting this week on how, when I was little, my parents had lots of siblings in town who also had young children, and they got to raise their kids together. It was such a blessing for our families. Today, I don’t have any siblings in town who have young kids, and yet, God provides through His family, the church. I get to raise my kids with my siblings in Christ.

Doing life together will probably look different at different life stages. During our teen years, it might look like studying for a quiz together, helping a friend practice their lay-up, or just sitting with someone and bringing them their favorite snack when they’ve had a bad day. It’s amazing that Jesus has made us, as individual believers, into one body, which is His church, through His death and resurrection. And when we remember this, we can work together as the body of Christ, loving and supporting one another and truly doing life together.

To work together like this, we need to be honest with each other about our needs and struggles. And that’s difficult. It requires trust and vulnerability. But when we share our needs and struggles with trustworthy people, it leads to the most beautiful community imaginable, reflecting the beauty of our Creator and giving us a glimpse of His kingdom. 🕯️ *Taylor Eising*

- 🕯️ Are you part of a local church? According to today’s Bible passages, how is the early church similar to or different from your church? \_\_\_\_\_
- 🕯️ If we know Jesus, we are united with other believers through the Holy Spirit, and we share a common goal of growing in our faith, caring for others, and telling people about Jesus. How does this enable us to do life together in a deeper way than we can with non-Christians? \_\_\_\_\_
- 🕯️ How does doing life together reflect the love of Jesus and show others what God is like? \_\_\_\_\_

*And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had.*  
Acts 2:44 (NLT)

## WORTH THE WAIT

READ: PROVERBS 25:15; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-8; 1 PETER 3:15-16

**H**ave you ever heard of ginseng? It's a valuable plant used in a lot of health foods. And those who grow ginseng need to have a lot of patience. While many seeds will sprout within a week or two, when you plant ginseng seeds, they can take *over a year* to sprout! That's a long time to wait for a plant, especially when you can't see any activity above the surface of the soil.

Planting something like ginseng can help us remember what it's like to tell someone about Jesus. Every time we witness to someone—that is, tell someone about Jesus and what He's done to save us—we're planting the seed of God's Word. We may not see the results right away, but that's okay. Jesus is at work, even if we can't see it. So, instead of getting discouraged, we can be patient. We can trust that God loves us, and He knows what He's doing.

And in the meantime, we can continue watering and tending to the seeds of the gospel by showing people Jesus's love and goodness. As we patiently care for the seeds we've planted, we can show others how Jesus patiently cares for us (1 John 4:19). It may take a long time for a seed to grow. But when it does, it produces fruit that lasts forever.

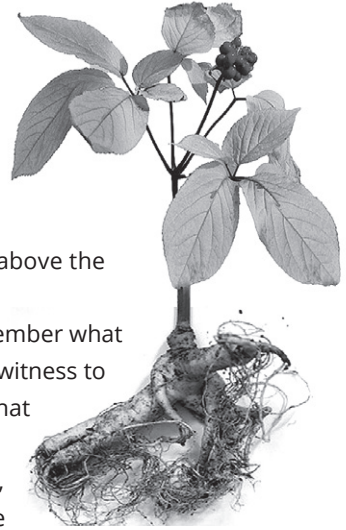
And that's worth the wait. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 God calls us to be part of His good work by planting and watering seeds of the gospel, remembering that He is the only One who can make those seeds grow (1 Corinthians 3:5-8). Have you planted seeds of the gospel by telling someone about Jesus? Have you been discouraged because you haven't seen any results? It can be hard to be patient, but as we rely on the Holy Spirit, we can keep showing people God's love and praying for them, leaving the timing up to Him. Consider taking a moment now to pray for some of the people in your life who might not know Jesus yet, asking God for ideas of ways you could share His love with them.

📖 It may be that we won't ever see the results of the seeds we planted or watered, but God promises that His Word will accomplish His purpose. How might this truth free us to trust Him with the results, and keep planting and watering? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 If you want to know more about the gospel and how to share it with others, check out page 104.

*"It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it." Isaiah 55:11 (NLT)*



## WRESTLING WITH GOD?

READ: GENESIS 32:24-32; HOSEA 12:3-5; EPHESIANS 4:22-24

**W**hen I was an RA (resident assistant) in college, I had this resident who used to tell me she and God had been “wrestling” about something. She would spend entire days with the Lord, crying and repenting, and wrestling with Him about different behaviors and attitudes in her life.

Now, I had been a Christian for a while at that point, but I didn’t understand what she meant by that. Why would God, as she would say, “knock her out” like that?

But then tonight, nearly two years later, a friend and I were talking about a ministry role that she is in. She made a reference to how she and the Lord are “negotiating” how long she’s going to be there. And I realized that I think I finally know what my resident meant.

I’ve had so many situations since those conversations with her when the Lord and I have wrestled. When we have negotiated. When I have wanted my way, and the Holy Spirit has convicted me otherwise. I’ve had cry sessions in the car when I’ve confessed to the Lord that I can’t do this. I don’t know how to do this right.

And while we may metaphorically wrestle with God, in Genesis 32, a man named Jacob actually physically wrestled with God. Then, God gave Jacob a new name: Israel, which means “struggle (with or of) God.”

I’ve learned so much from having these vulnerable moments with God—not that you’re necessarily changing God’s mind on something, but you’re engaging with Him, learning from Him, and redefining your heart to His purpose. Together. 🙏

*Natty Maelle*

🙏 Many Bible scholars think that Jacob actually wrestled with Jesus, who is God the Son. Jesus loves us, and He welcomes our wrestling matches. He knows we won’t always understand His plans, decisions, or commands. But when we don’t like what He has to say, He doesn’t want us to ignore Him or try to hide our thoughts and feelings. He wants us to be totally honest with Him! He wants us to tell Him about how we feel and wrestle with Him over it. That doesn’t mean He’s going to change His mind, but it will help us know—and trust—Him better. \_\_\_\_\_

🙏 Are you wrestling with something right now, but you’re afraid to give it to the Lord? Jesus has your best interests at heart. He loves you and wants to help you grow. Holding back from Him can only keep you from the goodness He offers. What do you need to wrestle with Him about today? \_\_\_\_\_

*So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)*



## HOW MUCH GOD LOVES

READ: LAMENTATIONS 3:22-26; EPHESIANS 3:14-21; 1 JOHN 4:16

**T**en or fifteen years ago, when I was a teenager and struggling through that often awkward and difficult phase of life, I wish I had known just how much God loved me.

I knew of God's love. I felt it in my life. But I didn't realize just how great it is.

As the years have gone by, I've learned to rely on God more and more. The more I rely on and lean into Him, the more I feel His love. Each day, I feel Him with me. Through the challenges I face, I know He is always there. Through any future challenges, I know He will not abandon me (Psalm 16:8; Matthew 1:23; 28:20; Hebrews 13:5).

God has proven Himself to me over and over through the years. I feel loved by Him because of the way He takes care of me. I feel loved by Him because I know He has given me the gift of salvation through Jesus's death and resurrection, and I will one day live on the new heavens and new earth with Him when He returns.

I wish, as a teenager, I could have grasped how big God's love for me is. I wish I had allowed His love to wrap around me and give me peace. I have never faced anything alone because He has always been with me. God's love never fails and never ends, and I am always okay because of it.

And, just as God loves me, He loves you too. 📖 *Bethany Acker*

📖 Have you ever had a moment when you realized in a new way how much God loves you? What was that like? If not, you can ask God for this anytime. He is eager to answer these prayers. \_\_\_\_\_

📖 We can have full access to God's love because of Jesus. (If you want to know more, see page 104.) In Ephesians 3:19, Paul prays for the Christians in Ephesus, "May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully." God's love is beyond our understanding, yet the Holy Spirit helps us grow in our awareness of His love throughout our lives. Do you have any favorite Bible verses about God's love for you? Consider choosing a verse to read every day this week, and as you read it, ask God to help you experience His love more and more deeply. \_\_\_\_\_

📖 All of the truths in today's devotion are from Scripture. If you want to read more about God's love, here are a few places to start: Psalms 13:5; 26:3; 94:18; Isaiah 54:10; Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16-17; Romans 5:5-11; 8:35-39; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:4-6; 2:1-10; 1 John 4:10.

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

## SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-13; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-7

**H**ave you gone through something really hard lately? Maybe there's been sickness or a death in your family. Maybe your parents are separating, or your best friend moved away, or your family is struggling financially. Even if you haven't personally experienced suffering like this yet, chances are you know someone who has. As we go through life in a world that has been broken by sin, we might find ourselves asking, "Where is the hope in all this?"

It may help to think about it this way. Have you ever seen a stained glass window? These works of art can be beautiful. But they look very different in the dark than they do in the light. When there's no light shining through the window, all we can see are a bunch of little pieces of dark glass. But when the light shines through them, we see vibrant colors that reveal the patterns or pictures the designer crafted there.

Life can feel that way too sometimes. From our point of view, life can seem dark and dull, especially when we're going through hard times. But Jesus hasn't left us to suffer alone in the dark. He came into our broken world and lived among us, and He said, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life" (John 8:12). Jesus can shine through any difficulties we face—He can make a beautiful picture of our lives (Romans 8:28-29).

That doesn't mean our lives will be easy. But Jesus will be with us through it all. He knows what it's like to go through terrible hardship—He suffered and died to save us from sin. When we face hard times in our lives, He is close beside us, and He can use even the most difficult situations to help us grow in our relationship with Him and show others His love. He can shine through our suffering so we—and others—can see a clearer picture of who He is. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** Jesus understands how we feel when we're hurting—He faced terrible suffering and death to give us eternal life. But, when He returns, He will restore creation and raise all His people to live with Him forever; then suffering will be no more. And even now, He is with us. We can trust Him to make something beautiful out of our lives. What kinds of hard things have you experienced lately? Consider taking a moment to tell Him about whatever is weighing on you. \_\_\_\_\_

*Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.*  
1 Corinthians 13:12 (NLT)

## LACKING NOTHING FROM OUR SHEPHERD

READ: PSALM 23; PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13; HEBREWS 13:5

**G**rowing up, I participated in a program at my church where I learned Bible stories and memorized Scripture. I remember memorizing Psalm 23 when I was in second grade. However, the words of this psalm didn't mean nearly as much to me as a seven-year-old as they do now.

Psalm 23 is an incredibly popular psalm. Verse 1 in particular is frequently quoted by pastors, speakers, and authors: "The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need." So, it's probably not surprising that for most of my life, this psalm (especially verse 1) felt cliché and stale to me.

It wasn't until college that God used this verse to open my eyes to a hard truth I had been desperately needing to see—and accept—for so long. In short, I had spent several years hoping to date a particular guy who simply wasn't interested in dating me. However, even though I knew he wasn't interested, I still spent countless hours thinking (and daydreaming) about him and the possibility of having a relationship with him. To say that I was dissatisfied with my situation would be an understatement. All I wanted was *him*. God had clearly shown me this guy wasn't meant for me, but I ignored Him.

However, there was a moment during my college years when Psalm 23:1 seemed to come to life. God used it to gradually change my perspective on the guy I had been hoping to date. Some Bible translations say that we "lack nothing," or that we won't be "in want." It felt like God was telling me, "You don't need to want *anything*, Grace—including that guy—because I've given you *everything* you need." I still struggled to accept the reality of my singleness, but I was encouraged by the comforting truth of Psalm 23:1. Jesus is our loving Shepherd, and when we know Him, we have everything we need. **✦** *Grace McCready*

**✦** It's not bad to desire things—including romantic relationships—but these desires can sometimes turn into idols. And idols will never fulfill us. Only through Jesus can we experience real contentment, regardless of our circumstances. If we've put our trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, we'll live with Him forever in restored creation. And even now, He is with us through His Spirit, His Word, and His people. And that's what we truly need—God's presence with us. If we got everything we ever wanted, but we didn't have God with us, we would never experience true fulfillment. Consider spending some time with Jesus in prayer, asking Him to help you lay down any idols in your life and experience true contentment in Him. \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** When you have questions about dating, who is a trusted Christian adult in your life you could talk to? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. \_\_\_\_\_

*The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need. Psalm 23:1 (CSB)*

## THE LOVED ONES

READ: DEUTERONOMY 7:7-8; PSALM 34; ROMANS 8

I twirled the marble beads on my bracelet, cool against my skin. Grey, grey, bright blue. The turquoise color had intricate swirls of sky blue, the result making the bead look like an ever-moving sky. These bracelets reminded us of the love of Ahavah, the love He daily shows us. Quickening my pace, I hurried to the meeting of the Loved Ones. Every week we met to share our stories, and this would be my first time to share.

Laughter and soft conversation spilled from within the willow tree leaves as I parted the delicate branches. They sat in a semi-circle beneath the great willow, this group I had come to cherish. Aspen waved me over in excitement, her own beaded bracelets sliding up and down her slender wrists.

“Welcome, Loved Ones!” Rowan’s brown eyes were warm as he addressed us individually. “Who would like to share their story of the week first?” Aspen placed her hand on my shoulder encouragingly.

I stood and pointed to my blue bead. “As many of you know, I just recently joined the Loved Ones. I always felt like something was lacking in my life—there was this void in my heart I couldn’t fill no matter what, or who, I tried to fill it with.”

I lifted my arm graced with the bracelet. “Here is my story of Ahavah’s love: I was feeling deep grief because, as you know, my sweet cat of many years passed away. When I opened the Word, I read Psalm 34:18, ‘The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.’ I felt such overwhelming love in that moment, and I watched one of my grey beads transform into this blue. Now, I look to it as a reminder of that precious revelation of Ahavah’s tenderness toward me.” Heads nodded all around me and several eyes shone with tears as I took my seat.

Aspen stood and shared one of her Loved moments, the colors on her many bracelets shining as she gestured excitedly. I breathed a silent prayer of gratitude to Ahavah for constantly showing His care to His Loved Ones. *What color will you show me next, Ahavah? May I always be looking for the many ways that You love.* 🕯️  
Savannah Coleman



*...neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:39 (NIV)*

- ❗ *Ahavah* is a Hebrew word we find in the Bible, and it means love. In Deuteronomy 7:7-8, for example, God chose to save His people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt because of His *ahavah* love for them, not because they earned or deserved His love in any way. Have you received God's gift of love through the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son Jesus for you (John 3:16-17)? Once we belong to Him, we can know that we are no longer condemned because, by the blood of Jesus, we are forgiven and set free from the bondage of sin and death (Romans 8:1-2). Whatever we go through in life, we can be confident that God is for us because He already gave the ultimate for us—Jesus (verses 31-32). If you want to know more about this good news, see page 104.
- ❗ Although circumstances may be heartbreaking, and people may abandon us or let us down, we can be confident that nothing and no one will ever be able to separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ (verse 39). Can you think of a time when you experienced God's redeeming, unconditional love for you? Consider taking a moment to express your gratitude and praise to Jesus, and perhaps also share this story with others. As we ponder God's immeasurable love, may it well up in our souls and overflow from our lips and in our actions (Psalm 34:1-3).  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- ❗ God never stops showing love to His children. Not only does He listen to us—He delivers us, He provides for us, and He is close to us when our hearts are broken (Psalm 34:4, 6, 7, 9, 18). We are not promised a trouble-free life, but we are ultimately promised deliverance (verse 19). Jesus echoed this promise when He said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). We can look forward to the day Jesus will return; then everything will be made new and whole, and all His people will dwell with Him forever. In the meantime, we can choose to meditate on all the many ways God daily shows His love to us. In today's story, people wore bracelets that reminded them of the ways they had experienced God's love in their lives. What is one way you could create a tangible reminder of God's goodness to you?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## THE BEREANS

READ: PROVERBS 30:5; ACTS 17:1-15

I absolutely love reading about the Berean Jews in the Bible. They show up in Acts 17:11, and in truth, I think this is the only place that mentions them by name. But this one verse is packed with helpful insight on how to live life well.

Paul and Silas were going from town to town preaching the good news of Jesus's death and resurrection, and they made a quick stop in Berea after a harrowing visit to Thessalonica. Some of the Thessalonians did not respond well to the gospel and even caused riots because they didn't want to hear Paul and Silas speak any more. But the Berean Jews responded very differently to the message Paul and Silas brought.

First, the Berean Jews received the word Paul preached with eagerness. They were *hungry* to hear more about God and *joyful* that someone had brought the message about Jesus! When God's truth is brought to us, we too can receive joyfully as we learn more about our faith and the God who loves us more than we could ever imagine.

Second, the Bereans examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul and Silas taught them was accurate. This is a habit I hope we all can cultivate more, me especially! In a world where information and opinions are pouring out at us from all directions, we have one solid place we can go for truth: the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God, and it reveals the truth about who Jesus is and who we are. So, when we hear something new about our faith, it is necessary that we check the Word to see if what we are hearing lines up with God's truth.

When we understand how amazing the gospel is, we can be joyful when we hear it taught, and we can be careful to check new ideas against the truth in the Bible. 📖  
*Abbi Bloem*

- 📖 When was the last time you felt eagerness and joy in learning about Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Can you think of a time when something felt good to hear, but didn't line up with God's truth? \_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Examining the Scriptures is a good way to know if what we are hearing lines up with God's best for our lives. What steps could you take today to know God's Word even better? \_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Some people in Thessalonica did receive the good news, and later Paul wrote affectionate letters to them. If you want to dig deeper, check out the books of 1 and 2 Thessalonians in the Bible.

*Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Acts 17:11 (NIV)*

## DISTRACTED SHEEP

READ: PSALM 23; JOHN 10:1-30

**D**id you know that sheep can be easily distracted? If a shepherd is leading a flock, and a stranger gets in the way, the sheep can lose their focus on the shepherd and scatter. And when sheep scatter, they can get into trouble. They might get stuck in dangerous places, or they could be attacked by a hungry predator. Away from the protection and care of the shepherd, sheep are lost and vulnerable. That's why they need to keep their eyes and ears trained on the shepherd.

Throughout the Bible, God compares us to sheep. And when Jesus came, He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Sometimes we can be easily distracted and forget to stay focused on Jesus, which leads to problems. But Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave to forgive us and save us from sin and death, and He promises to care for us and provide for all our needs. He's the One we should always follow.

But even when we do get distracted and wander away—when we're captivated by people or possessions or ideas, chasing after them in hopes they'll solve our problems or satisfy the deep longings of our hearts—our Good Shepherd chases after us. When we are lost and vulnerable, He has compassion on us. Every day, every moment, He helps us leave sin behind and follow Him.

There's nothing in this world that can give us the peace and joy that Jesus does. So, when we get distracted and start looking to created things to provide what only the Creator can give us, we can listen for our Good Shepherd's gentle voice. He speaks to us through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). We can rely on His love for us and trust Him to lead us well. And even when the temptations are strong, as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit living within us, helping us turn away from sin and turn our eyes and ears upon Jesus once again. Instead of trying to solve our problems on our own, we can bring all our concerns to Him and trust Him to lead us where He wants us to go. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** Do you know anyone who looks to Jesus to guide them in their daily life? What is it like to be around them?

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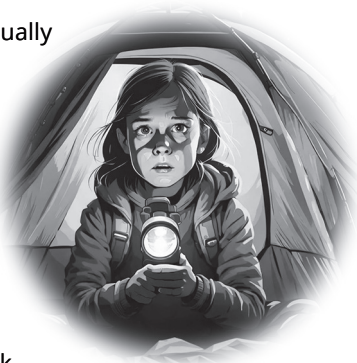
**✦** Consider taking some time to talk to Jesus. You can ask for His help with tough situations and temptations, confess any sins that come to mind, and rest in His never-failing love for you. If you want to dig deeper, read Isaiah 40:11; 53:4-6; Zechariah 10:2; Mark 6:34; Luke 15:1-7. And if you want to know more about trusting Jesus to be your Shepherd, check out page 104.

*For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 Peter 2:25 (NIV)*

## COMFORT IN THE LIGHT

READ: JOHN 1:1-15; 8:12-18; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:6

**V**acation time for my family when I was a kid usually involved tents and sleeping bags. We enjoyed the outdoors, and camping helped us stay close to nature—while also saving on hotel costs. As a little kid, I took notice of signs where we camped warning us of bears in the area. Although my parents reassured me that we'd be safe inside our tent, I asked to hold a flashlight when I bedded down for the night. Even though I realized a flashlight would offer little defense against a black bear, I found comfort in knowing I could flick on that light whenever I felt afraid in the dark.



I still go camping, but I no longer grasp a flashlight as I fall asleep. Sometimes real life seems far scarier than a night at a wooded campsite, though, and now I need a different kind of light to fortify me during life's uncertainties and unknowns.

In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." In His holiness and love, Jesus dispelled the darkness of confusion and sin so that we might know God. He did this by laying down His life for us. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, believing He died and rose from the grave to make the way for us to have a relationship with Him, Jesus shines His light into our hearts, so we never have to walk in darkness. In times of worry or questioning, Jesus gives Himself as the Light that pierces through the gloom of our fears. 🕯️ *Allison Wilson Lee*

🕯️ Have you ever felt like you're wandering around in the darkness without a light? How can we look to Jesus to quiet our hearts in unsettling seasons? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ You may not have all the answers you want as you face uncertainty, and that's okay. God is not afraid of our questions. You can bring your questions and confusion to Him anytime in prayer. And you can draw near to Him by reading His Word, the Bible. When you feel lost, who are some trusted Christians you can talk to, such as parents, pastors, youth leaders, or counselors? \_\_\_\_\_

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. Isaiah 9:2 (NIV)*



# LIKE A BROKEN FINGER

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27; 1 PETER 4:10-11

**W**hen was the last time you hurt one of your fingers? It happens often—it’s so easy to accidentally cut, bruise, break, or burn our fingers, and then we have to figure out how to do everyday things like eat or write or drive with a hurting or bandaged finger while we wait for it to heal. We don’t tend to think about our fingers much...until we can’t use them. Then we see how much we really need them. They’re way more important than we ever knew!

And God says that’s exactly how it is with the believers who make up His church. All the people who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior are referred to as “the church,” or “the body of Christ,” and every single member is important—just like every part of our physical bodies is important. Each person has a job to do for the body to function properly.

If we exclude members of the body of Christ because we think they have nothing to offer, it’s like we’re operating with a broken finger. But, if we stress that each person has a part to play in the church, more people will see how valuable and welcome they are.

In the same way, if we believe that we have nothing to offer the church, then we are limiting what the church can do. Do you think you’re not really needed or maybe even able to serve Jesus? If so, you’re wrong. Things you can do may seem small to you, but each part of the body of Christ is needed. Because, if you know Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit living in you. God has equipped and empowered you to serve, and you are a valuable part of His body. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** Can you think of a time someone showed you Jesus’s love? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** Throughout our lives, we may be able to build up the body of Christ in different ways. In this season of your life, what can you do to serve and show people Christ’s love? What are some of your natural abilities and spiritual gifts? If you’re not sure, who is a trusted Christian you know who could pray with you and help you discern how God has equipped you? \_\_\_\_\_

*Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.  
1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV)*

## SAME GOD

READ: ROMANS 2:9-16; 3:21-31; TITUS 3:3-8

It was a sweltering Sunday. We were a few days into the mission trip, and I decided this must be the usual climate in Costa Rica. The small church was filled with people. There was no air conditioning. We were on the third hymn when my vision began blurring. All I could think was, *I need water*. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness was gripping the back of the pew. Soon I felt my dad's strong arms. He carried me from the stuffy sanctuary into the small church office.

A few years after this experience, someone shared with me that he viewed God as a disappointed father, a father who would point his finger and judge you. Yes, Scripture says that God will judge all of our hearts (Romans 2:16). Yet, I reminded that person, the same God who is a righteous judge loves us so much that He sent His Son Jesus to die for our sins so we could be forgiven. God saves us “because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). Though it is in God's character to judge our hearts justly, it is also in His character to pursue us with love (Luke 15:1-32; 19:10).

That morning in Costa Rica reminds me of God's grace. I had not heeded what my dad wisely advised me: to stay hydrated. So, I suffered from dehydration. However, my dad picked me up when I was too weak to walk and carried me to safety. This is what God does for us too.

Yes, God always wants us to listen to Him and bring all our thoughts, words, and actions in line with His good ways. Yet the same God knows we fall short, and, through Jesus, He saves us from sin and death and offers us a life free from shame and condemnation (Psalm 34:5; Romans 8:1). A life lived in the fullness of God's grace and love. He is our Advocate, Savior, and Father—He cannot be divided. He is all of His attributes at the same time and in complete fullness. Because He is the same merciful God. **✦** *Daemis McMurphy*

✦ When do you struggle to see God as a good Father? Why do you think this might be? Consider taking some time to tell God how you feel. You can bring Him all your questions, doubts, anger, fear, sorrow, and disappointment. And you can ask Him to show you His true character as a good Father, Savior, and Advocate, all in one. He will be faithful to do this. \_\_\_\_\_

✦ We can be sure God is a good Father because He mercifully sent Jesus. Do you know someone who is struggling to see God as a good Father? Consider taking some time to pray for them. \_\_\_\_\_

*But—When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4-5 (NLT)*

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CROSS: CHRIST OUR SIN-BEARER

READ: ISAIAH 53:1-12; MATTHEW 26:27-28; 27:35-54; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:19, 21

**E**arly I come to behold Your face,  
Seeking still Your glorious grace,  
Christ who died...holy...divine,  
Love crucified.

Blessed be the Lord my God,  
Blessed be, O, blessed be,  
Blessed be the Lord!

In shame the sun did turn away,  
As darkness in the silence reigned,  
God in flesh afflicted then,  
Cursed for all our sin.

Holy is the Lord my God,  
Holy is, O, holy is,  
Holy is the Lord!

Hail the light of breaking dawn,  
Christ the King, the Risen One!  
Wounded God who intercedes,  
'Tis Thy blood we plead.

Blessed be the Lord my God,  
Blessed be, O, blessed be,  
Blessed be the Lord!

As He bore in His body the curse for our sin, who can imagine the deep agony Jesus felt—hanging in the darkness those final hours? The cost of our sin to God is truly unfathomable, yet His love for us is greater still, for He gave Himself up to save us (John 3:16; Ephesians 5:25-27). As we reflect on both the glory and the sorrow of the cross, let's pray for the courage to turn *toward* God when we feel forsaken, knowing that on the cross Jesus hung in that silent, empty space for us—*so we never have to*.

Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we can be certain that through any silence—or any suffering—we are not alone. *God is present*, and He is also *at work*, in every joy and every pain, to draw us into Himself (Romans 8:28-29). The cross stands as stark proof that God will walk through death, darkness, and despair to bring us near (Psalm 23:4). May our praises never cease for Christ our Sin-Bearer—for "God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). 🕯️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯️ Consider taking a moment to picture Jesus on the cross. It is good and right to turn to Him in praise, and also in lament, honestly crying out to Him about anything that is troubling you. He is worthy to receive it all.

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*When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.  
Galatians 3:13 (NLT)*

## NEW TOOLS

READ: PSALM 139; MATTHEW 11:28-30; JOHN 3:17; 16:7-14

I work in the office of our local fire department, and unfortunately sometimes part of the fire department's job is locating the bodies of people who have drowned. This is a valuable service that can help bring some peace to the victim's family. However, it can be difficult to locate people under water—especially in more harsh weather conditions. So, our fire department recently purchased a new tool to help them do this. Previously, the fire fighters had to walk through the water in a line, spread out every few feet to thoroughly search an area. But now, from what I understand, they have an underwater drone that will do most of the searching for them. All they have to do is use it.

In a similar way, sometimes we have things that are hidden in *us*. Sins. Struggles. Frustrations. We might just look across the waters of our hearts and assume there's nothing there. Or we might be in the water, wading aimlessly. Or we might be ruffling the waves, stirring up the silt and creating a difficult waterway. Or we might even be tying cement blocks to some of our struggles, hoping they'll just sink, disappear.

But there's no need. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, we have His Holy Spirit to help us with the hidden things of our hearts (John 16:7-14). So, we can pray Psalm 139:23-24, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way." If we ask the Lord to search us and help us process the things that may be hidden even from ourselves, He is more than willing to bring us into His rest. He is willing to get in the water with us, not just convicting us and leaving us to wallow in how wretched we feel, but encouraging us, and leading us through (John 3:17). 🕯️ *Natty Maelle*

- 🕯️ Have you ever asked the Lord to search you, like David did in Psalm 139? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_
- 🕯️ What stops you from asking the Lord to search you? The fear of being fully known can hold us back from being open with God, but He already knows everything about us, and He loves us completely. \_\_\_\_\_
- 🕯️ Consider taking some time to ask God to search you, and then pause and listen. He may bring to mind a sin He wants you to confess, a hurt He wants to touch, or a lie He wants to free you from. He may invite you to make a change in your life. His correction always comes with hope. As you listen to God, who are trusted Christians in your life who can help you discern His voice? Remember, God never contradicts His Word, the Bible.

*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the everlasting way. Psalm 139:23-24 (CSB)*

## AN UNCHANGING GOD

READ: EXODUS 34:5-6; MALACHI 3:6; MATTHEW 7:24-29; 14:22-33

**T**he world is constantly changing. There are always new technologies being developed and new ways of doing things. Each generation puts different emphases on different issues. It can be easy to feel like our parents and grandparents don't understand what we're facing today because certain things about life are just different. Yet, no matter which generation you're from, growing up is a process everyone has to go through, including Jesus. He knows what it's like to be a teenager in a changing world filled with lots of different opinions, and He knows what it's like to be misunderstood (Luke 2:41-52).

Even though everything around us feels like it's changing faster than we can keep up with, one thing remains the same. God. Hebrews 13:8 says that Jesus is the same today, tomorrow, and forever. His love, His trustworthy character, and His commitment to rescuing His people and restoring His creation can never be shaken. Having Jesus be the constant in our lives helps us find our bearing. It helps us to know where to look when everything else is uncertain.

We never have to worry about God changing and becoming something different. We don't have to worry that He's not going to understand us. We don't have to be afraid that He's going to want something different from us. We know He's going to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. 📖 *Tynea Lewis*

- 📖 How do you tend to handle change? Are you someone who enjoys change, or not so much? \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 📖 What is one thing you've seen change in the last five years, either in the world or in your own life? Do you think people view this change differently depending on which generation they're from? How might God be bringing good out of this change? (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28-29) \_\_\_\_\_
  
- 📖 How could knowing that God doesn't change, and yet He perfectly understands everything going on in our world and in our lives, bring us comfort through all the changes we experience? Consider taking some time to talk to God about the changes around you and about what you think and feel about them. \_\_\_\_\_

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



## SHADOWSIDE

READ: PSALM 23; 1 JOHN 1:1-5

**C**hester turned his face to the sun one last time before climbing into the truck. Though the sun hung low in the sky like always, not providing much warmth, Chester knew he would miss it almost as much as he would miss his family. He was leaving all light and warmth behind to work in the shadowside mines for three months. It paid well, and his family needed the money.

As the truck ventured into the plains of the planet's dark hemisphere, Chester craned his neck to see the last wisps of the sun's glow fading behind them. Then he turned around and stared into the darkness ahead. There were no roads here, no people except for those carted out to work in the mines. Because Athebos was a tidally locked planet, which meant one side always faced the sun and the other was perpetually in darkness, cities were built on the perimeter of the two halves in what was called the twilight belt.

Athebos was a mineral-rich world, and nearly all its interplanetary exports came from mining. Brightside mining operations were deep underground, safe from the sun's intense heat and radiation, but solar panels on the surface kept the mining tunnels warm and well lit. Mining on the opposite side of the planet, however, was an entirely different experience. Far from the sun's rays, the battery-powered shadowside tunnels were always dark and cold. When the day's work was done, you could go up to the surface, but there was no warmth or light there either—only a solid blanket of stars in the eternal darkness of night.

As the truck drove deeper into the darkness, Chester suddenly felt panic seize his heart. Thoughts whirled through his mind. *What if something happens to my family? What if working out here still isn't enough to provide for them? What if I never see the sun again?* Chester closed his eyes and took deep breaths. One of his favorite psalms came to mind, and he repeated one of the verses over and over in his head. *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* He opened his eyes and looked outside. The darkness was thick and unmoving as molasses, but a sense of peace began to loosen the grip of panic in his chest. He was going shadowside, but he wasn't alone. Jesus, the One who defeated death itself, was here with him in the darkness. 🕯️ *Courtney Lasater*

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

🔑 Have you faced a “valley of the shadow of death” in your own life? What was it? How did you make it through?

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🔑 Jesus faced the valley of the shadow of death quite literally when He willingly left the glory of heaven, took on human flesh, and died on the cross for our sins. When He rose from the dead, He defeated sin and death so that we could enjoy the light of His presence for all eternity (1 John 1:1-5). If you know Him as your Savior, you can rest in His promise to be with you through every dark valley. Nothing can ever separate you from His love (Romans 8:35-39). If you want to know more about what it means to know Jesus, check out page 104.

🔑 Have you ever felt Jesus’s presence in the dark valleys of your life? What was that like? If you’ve never felt Jesus’s presence with you, you can ask God for this anytime; He delights in answering these prayers.

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🔑 Spending time in the Word is one of the primary ways we can spend time with Jesus. If you want to dig deeper, you can read more about how Jesus is the Light in Matthew 4:16; John 1:1-5; 8:12; 12:46; Acts 26:9-18; 2 Corinthians 4:6; James 1:17.



## DISAPPOINTMENTS


READ: GENESIS 50:15-20; ROMANS 15:23-24; EPHESIANS 1:1-2; 6:19-20


Life as he knew it was over. His most precious possession was out of reach. Impossible to retrieve. He lay on the floor, nose touching the ground, limbs outspread in utter dejection. He was eighteen months old, and his red ball had rolled behind the sofa.


She was eighteen years old, and the college she wanted to go to had accepted her. But her estranged father wouldn't pay for a private school. Her hard-working mother couldn't. She sat on the sofa, tears running down her cheeks.

He was old. Near the end of his life. He had always wanted to go to Spain. Plant new churches. Tell the good news to people who had not yet heard. Yet here he was under house arrest in Rome. How could he accomplish his dreams when his movements were so limited? Paul picked up a pen. "To God's holy people in Ephesus..." Perhaps a few people would read the letter he wrote.

No matter your age, life can have its disappointments. If Paul had been free to do more traveling, he might have touched hundreds of lives. Because he couldn't travel, he wrote letters, often with help from others. Letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and Philemon. Instead of words that might be heard by hundreds in the first century A.D., he wrote words that would be read by millions or even billions over many centuries. Words that would change hearts and minds. Even today. Even in parts of the world unknown in Paul's time.

God, in His infinite wisdom, doesn't always give us what we ask for. Has God said "no" to some of your requests? Maybe you didn't make the team. Or get a part in the play. Or get accepted into the school you really wanted to attend. God always listens to our prayers. But sometimes He has a better plan. Be open to His leading.  *Carol Raj*

 Can you think of a time when you didn't get something you wanted, but later you were grateful for how things turned out? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this. \_\_\_\_\_

 As Christians, we trust God with our eternal salvation, believing that Jesus's death and resurrection has made the way for us to be forgiven and be with God forever. Yet, sometimes it feels so hard to trust Him with our desires. Remember, Jesus cares about our longings. He holds us and weeps with us in our pain. And when He returns, our every desire will be fulfilled. How could these truths help us draw near to Jesus in times of disappointment or suffering? \_\_\_\_\_

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



## A CLEAN UNIFORM

READ: PSALM 103:12; MATTHEW 18:21-33; COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

In Matthew 18, Jesus said to forgive people “seventy times seven” times (verse 22). Have you ever read this and thought, “I’m sure I’ve forgiven \_\_\_\_\_ that many times already! I’m done!” You might already know this, but this verse doesn’t mean we should literally forgive someone seven times seventy—or 490—times. It means we should forgive someone every time they wrong us—the way Jesus forgives us unconditionally, every time we sin.

God’s forgiveness never runs out. Ever. His love for us is inexhaustible. Even though all of humanity turned away from God, choosing the filth of sin instead of His love, He kept pursuing us, determined to make the way for us to be with Him again. That’s why Jesus died on the cross. He took all our sins upon Himself, bearing the guilt and shame we deserved. And then, He rose again. Through His sacrifice, Jesus cleanses us from all our sin—past, present, and future.

So now, as forgiven people, we are called to forgive others. It might help to imagine that forgiving other people is like cleaning a sports uniform. You might have just washed it yesterday, but it will get dirty again the next time you have a game. And every time it gets dirty, you wash it—even though you know you’re going to get it dirty again. You wash it whenever it needs to be washed. That’s the way Jesus calls us to forgive too. Again, and again, and again.

It’s never easy. But remember, you can talk to the person who wronged you and be honest with them about how their actions have affected you. Forgiving someone does not mean you let them continue harmful behavior, and in some cases you may need to set up some loving boundaries or even go to the authorities. But, since Jesus took away our sins, He calls us not to hold others’ sins against them. And Jesus doesn’t just *tell* us to forgive, He makes it possible. Once we know Jesus, His Holy Spirit lives in us, empowering us to forgive as we’ve been forgiven (Luke 7:47). When we ponder how often we do, say, or think something that’s wrong—and how we are forgiven by Jesus every single time—it makes it a little easier to forgive those who do wrong to us. 🕯️ *A. W. Smith*

🕯️ Can you think of a time someone forgave you for something you did wrong? How did you feel? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Is there someone you’re struggling to forgive? Consider spending some time in prayer. You can process your thoughts and feelings with God because they matter to Him, and you can ask for His help to forgive the person who wronged you. Remember, forgiving someone doesn’t always mean being in close relationship with them. If someone is hurting you, seek help from a trusted adult. \_\_\_\_\_

*Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. Colossians 3:13 (CSB)*

## THE ONE SACRIFICE

READ: ROMANS 3:21-26; 6:14; EPHESIANS 1:3-10

I have started a program to read through the Bible in ninety days. That means I've been reading a lot from the Old Testament each day. Wow, if there's one thing I'm learning through my reading, it's that we have so much to be thankful for when it comes to Jesus, His death on the cross, and the way He gave Himself as the one sacrifice to pay for all our sins.

Before Jesus came, God's people, the Israelites, were living under the law. The law proves that all of us fall short of God's glorious standard and reveals our need for Jesus (Romans 3:23-24). In those days, people were required to offer animal sacrifices regularly to cover their sins. Yet, in faith they looked forward to the day God would fulfill His promise to deal with the sin problem once and for all, even though they didn't know how He would do it.

And God did fulfill His promise—Jesus came as the final sacrifice. He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). His death on the cross does not merely cover our sins but removes them. So now, we no longer need to offer sacrifices. Because of the death of Jesus, we know grace. A grace that changes our lives. A grace that is available to all of us, no matter how badly we have sinned. Because of the death of Jesus, we are redeemed. All our sins are forgiven. They are forgotten (Isaiah 43:25). We can have a special relationship with God because we are connected to Him through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It's easy to forget what the death of Jesus really did to change our lives. It's important to remember just how different life was for God's people who came before us, for those who lived before Jesus gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice. 🕯

*Emily Acker*

🕯 What does it show us about the character of God that He sacrificed Himself for us? \_\_\_\_\_

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🕯 How is the permanent forgiveness Jesus offers different from the temporary covering of animal sacrifices? If you want to learn more about Jesus's forgiveness, check out page 104. \_\_\_\_\_

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*God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV)*

## SHINING LIKE THE MOON

READ: DEUTERONOMY 8:10-18; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:16-18

**H**ave you ever looked up at the night sky and dreamt about what you might do in the course of your life? Maybe you'll make a scientific discovery that will save thousands of lives, or write music that will touch thousands of hearts. Maybe someday, everyone will see just how amazing you truly are.

All those twinkling stars seem to make space for dreaming, and the moon shines more brilliantly than them all. On a cloudless night, a full moon can illuminate the landscape, its pale glow moving us to wonder. And yet, the moon doesn't make any light of its own. Instead, it reflects the sun's light. Even though the moon shines brightly, it can't take credit for its brilliance.

And, just like the moon, we can shine too. We reflect a light that is not our own. It's God's. He made us and gave us the abilities we have. When we use those abilities, we are reflecting His glory and brilliance, not our own. When we realize this, it shouldn't make us feel less valuable or less important in the universe. On the contrary, it's because God has made humans in His very own image that we are the crown of all His creation (Genesis 1:26-31).

And, as Christians, we shine with a special kind of light. Because we've trusted Jesus to save us from sin and death through His own death and resurrection, we have the Holy Spirit living in us, filling our hearts with His love (Romans 5:5). God is working in our lives to make us more like Jesus so we can reflect His wondrous love to others.

As we go through life, we may be tempted to take credit for the things we do. But let's remember, we wouldn't be able to do anything without God. So, in everything we accomplish, we can reflect the humility of Jesus, the Creator of the universe who humbled Himself to die on a cross for us (Philippians 2:5-13). We can give all the glory to Him, rejoicing that we are His wonderful creations, the people He loves. 🕯️  
*A. W. Smith*

🕯️ What are some of the things you've accomplished? Consider taking a moment to praise God, thanking Him for giving you the ability to do all you can do. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ What are some of your dreams and hopes for the future? As you ponder how God has created you, and how He works in your life to help you serve Him and shine His light to others, you can ask Him to guide you in how to steward the gifts and abilities He has given you. \_\_\_\_\_

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. Psalm 29:2 (NIV)*

## GENTLE LIKE JESUS

READ: JOHN 4:4-30, 39-42

**W**hen I was 18, I took part in a scholarship program to earn money for college. All the participants stayed with host families during the week of rehearsals and competition. Volunteer drivers picked us up for events and then returned us to our host homes in the evening.

On the final night, I loaded my bags into the driver's car for the short trip to the auditorium. Impulsively, I locked the car door as I shut it. Then I realized my mistake—I had locked the car while it was running, locking all of us out of the vehicle. I dreaded walking back inside the host home to explain how I'd messed up.

But they all responded in a way I hadn't expected. They laughed with me (not at me) and quickly devised a plan. Our driver stayed with the car, waiting for a locksmith, while a host parent stepped in to drive my group to the auditorium. That evening, nobody scorned me for my mishap, which had certainly caused inconvenience. Instead, they surprised me with grace, with patience instead of criticism. I felt I didn't deserve their kindness, yet they extended it anyway.

This experience reminds me of John 4, when Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman at a well. She had a messy past, and it's likely she came to the well when she thought no one else would be there. She probably didn't feel she merited tenderness, either, especially from the Savior. Yet that's how Jesus approached her, with gentleness and patience, loving her into relationship with Himself. He spoke to her about salvation and worship, and He revealed that He already knew everything about her. He told her the truth about her life and extended His grace.

When we trust in Jesus, as the Samaritan woman did, we receive forgiveness from all our sins and we are credited with His perfect righteousness. Because Jesus died for us and rose again, we can be counted blameless in God's sight (Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:22). And now, as God's forgiven people, we are called to extend His patience, gentleness, and love toward others who don't seem to deserve it. Like Jesus did for the woman at the well. Like my roommates did for me the night I locked us out of our car. *✦ Allison Wilson Lee*

✦ Can you think of a time someone showed you patience and gentleness in a meaningful way? What was it like?

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✦ When we're tempted to beat ourselves up over our mistakes or sins, how can remembering Christ's gentleness help us come to Him and receive His help? \_\_\_\_\_

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*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.  
Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)*

## THE BEST LIFE

READ: MARK 9:20-25; JOHN 6:25-35; PHILIPPIANS 1:6

**D**o you truly believe that Jesus's way of life is the best way of life? I was raised in the church, and when I was presented with this question, my instinct was to say, "Of course!" Upon further examination, however, I began to realize that if I truly and wholeheartedly believed this, my life would look quite a bit different. If I fully believed Jesus's way of life is the best, would I take out my anger on my family? Would I have trouble forgiving those who wrong me? And would I neglect listening to what God has for me?

When we put our trust in Jesus to save us from sin and death, believing He died for us and rose again, we can be sure that we belong to Him forever. As Christians, we grow to trust Jesus more and more, bringing every area of our lives into alignment with what He says is best. Yet, this is a lifelong process, one that will only be finished when Jesus returns. So, remembering to trust Jesus is a practice that needs to be done often. One prayer I pray on a weekly basis is, "Jesus, I choose to trust you. Jesus, I want to trust you. Jesus, help me trust you more." Often, our trust is still pulled away from Jesus by the things of the world, and sometimes we hardly even want to trust Him. This is when the prayer looks like, "Jesus, I want *to want* to trust you."

This is a beautiful heart posture, because we're recognizing we can't live life on our own, even though we still have a desire to try. And this vulnerability actually helps us trust Jesus more and more, every day. There will be times of struggle when we're following Jesus, but continuing to turn to Him through the struggle is the best way to learn to trust Him more. In every situation, we can choose to believe that Jesus's way of life is the best way of life. 🕯️ *Joshua Schmitz*

🕯️ We all have times when it's hard to believe that Jesus's way of life is the best way of life. We're often tempted to do what we think is best instead of relying on Him and following His good ways. In what areas of your life have you found it difficult to trust Jesus? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Jesus invites us to be honest with Him about all the reasons it's hard for us to trust Him. He is eager to assure us of His love and goodness and help us grow in Him. He does this through His Spirit, His Word (the Bible), and His people (the church). Consider taking some time to be open with Jesus, and perhaps a few trusted Christians, about what you're thinking and feeling. \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ If you want to know more about what it means to trust Jesus to save you, see page 104.

*Then he [Jesus] said to them all, "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me." Luke 9:23 (CSB)*

## FISTS AND FAITH

READ: PSALMS 56:8; 62:5-8; ISAIAH 40:11; 43:1; 55:8-9

**W**aves roll wild across the lake  
 With every roar my soul aches  
 Grief and sorrow meld  
 Like the waters foam and quake

This pain and anger testify  
 My heart is still awake

The sharp intake of sobbing breath  
 Pounding beat beneath my chest  
 Alternating between sorrow and rage  
 But still, my God, you know my name

I don't always understand Your ways  
 Suffering and days of strain  
 The laying of flowers on a grave

I clench my fists  
 My grip is tight  
 But You uncurl my fingers  
 Turn this darkness into light

Like a child pounds her fists  
 Against the chest of the one  
 She knows best  
 I will feel my grief  
 But not forget  
 Your complete faithfulness

Your ways are so much higher  
 And although I don't agree  
 I know that You'll forever be  
 The One who carries me

Today I feel this sorrow  
 Tomorrow, perhaps joy  
 Always there is Your promise:  
 I will never walk alone

You bottle every tear that falls  
 You will handle all this rage  
 In You I am found and held  
 And ever, always safe 🕊

*Savannah Coleman*

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

- 🕊 What emotions do you notice in this poem? Can you think of a time you felt those kinds of emotions? Do you feel that way today? Everyone goes through seasons of grief, pain, and suffering. Whether you are facing a diagnosis you didn't see coming, missing a loved one who passed, or struggling with depression and anxiety, you are not alone.\* God never promised us a life free from troubles, but He does promise His presence and peace (Exodus 33:14; John 16:33). And, He promises that one day Jesus will return and make all things new—then everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will live with Him forever, finally free of all suffering and sorrow (Revelation 21:1-5). What emotions do these promises stir up in you? \_\_\_\_\_

🔑 God created us with many emotions and the ability to express them. Instead of shutting these emotions down, we need to process our grief and anger with God. Remember, Jesus is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), and He knows what it feels like to be human. He did not withhold Himself from any of the pain and sorrow of human life. He entered into it fully, ultimately suffering the agony of the cross so that He could be with us forever (Mark 14:32-36). But death could not keep its hold on Him—He rose again, defeating sin and death and darkness to save us. Nothing we could bring to Him could ever be too much. He already knows it all before we say a word, and He wants to shed His light on every dark place (Psalm 139; Ephesians 5:13-14). Have you ever tried to be open with Him about how you’re feeling? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

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🔑 David wrote many psalms where you can feel his raw emotion bleeding through the pages. His honesty is refreshing and cathartic. Even as he pours out his heart and relays the tragic things that happen to him, he reminds himself to place his hope and trust in God and continue to pour out his heart to the One who loves him (Psalm 62:5-8). (If you want to dig deeper, you can read a few of David’s psalms for yourself: Psalms 31, 34, and 62.) Consider taking some time to let yourself be honest with God and pour out your heart to Him.

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🔑 It can be difficult to give ourselves permission to feel the emotions God has given us, but God is eager to help us, and one of the primary ways He helps His people is through His people. Who is a trusted Christian you could talk with about what’s going on in your life and how you feel about it? \_\_\_\_\_

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🔑 \*If you’re struggling with anxiety, depression, or any other mental health concern, who is a trusted adult you could talk to? If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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.



## MY GIFT AND HER GIFT

READ: LUKE 7:47; JOHN 15:9-15; 1 JOHN 4:19

I don't know if anyone knows how difficult life is for me, living at the edge of our village. I lost my family long ago and all I can do is spend each day looking for some argoine—the substance we must eat to survive on this planet.

I wake up early in the morning and my body aches. I spent all day yesterday walking around, trying to find the fuel I need to live a little longer. Most of the people around me have families; they help each other find what they need to survive.

I open the door of my shelter and my eyes widen. There, on the ground, is the glowing red substance that is our food. *Who would leave this here?* I pull the argoine apart and devour it. Today will be easier. I can look for argoine for tomorrow, but what I have eaten is enough for today.

Over the next few days, I wake to a gift each morning. Confused, I decide to stay up through the night and watch to see who is bringing this to me.

Late in the night, I hear footsteps. I stand. "Who is it? Speak."

"It is me." The voice is old. "I know what it is like to be alone, to search alone, and I have brought argoine for you."

I can barely see through the darkness, but I spot my nearest neighbor, a member of the village who has been here since before my family arrived on this planet. She struggles to walk.

"Why would you bring it to me?" I ask. "It's difficult for you even to look for it."

"It is difficult, yes," she says. "But I have been sustained many days. I bring the extra to care for you."

"You could save it so you don't have to go out each day," I say. "Why would you give all that you have to me?"

"Someone once gave their all for me," she says. "That Someone completely changed my life. All I can do now is give to someone else." *Emily Acker*

🔑 Has someone ever surprised you by giving sacrificially? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

🔑 We love because Jesus first loved us (1 John 4:19), and because we know how much we've been forgiven (Luke 7:47). If you know Jesus, how has the gift that you received from Him—His life given for you—affected the way you live? (For more about knowing Jesus, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32 (NIV)*



## NEW SKIN

READ: EPHESIANS 4:20-24; COLOSSIANS 3:8-14; HEBREWS 10:10-14

**H**ave you ever seen a lizard shed their skin? Chameleons, for example, shed their skin whenever they get too big for it. Unlike humans, their skin doesn't grow with them. So, when they get too big, they need to shed their smaller, ill-fitting skin and grow new skin.

As Christians, we're called to shed our old, sinful habits. Things like lying, cheating, and gossiping no longer fit us because Jesus has saved us from sin and given us a new life. Just like a chameleon puts on new skin, we need to put on new, godly characteristics that fit who we are as God's children—things like kindness, patience, and humility. The Bible tells us that Christians take off the old self and put on the new self—the person Jesus has created us to be.

And the only way to do this is through the Holy Spirit. Once we've put our trust in Jesus, believing in His death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit lives in us, helping us turn away from sin and live in God's good ways instead.

We can be confident that Jesus has given us new life once we trust Him as our Savior. Then, we can celebrate that He has made us new people! That means our old, sinful ways no longer fit who we are because He has freed us from sin and given us His Spirit. It's time to shed those old, sinful habits by seeing ourselves as new people, dead to sin and alive in the Holy Spirit because of what Jesus has done for us (Romans 6:11). Then, others can see the new people Jesus has created us to be—people who are like Him, filled with His kindness and love. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** If you know Jesus, how have you seen evidence of God transforming you into a new person? How have you seen the Holy Spirit producing good fruit in your life (Galatians 5:22-23)? Consider taking a moment to thank God for this! (For more about trusting Jesus, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** What old, sinful habits do you still struggle to shed? Sometimes, these will be lifelong struggles, but we're not alone. Jesus loves us completely, and He has already secured our forgiveness through His own death and resurrection. He invites us to come to Him in our weakness and receive His strength (1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Hebrews 4:14-16). Consider taking some time in prayer, bringing your struggles to Jesus and thanking Him for His forgiveness. You can ask Him to help you shed these sins and walk forward in His good ways. \_\_\_\_\_

*Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Colossians 3:9-10 (NIV)*

## ISN'T IT MERCIFUL?

READ: LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

**L**ife can be tough, and we all make mistakes, but one thing that remains constant is God's mercy. In moments of doubt, fear, or guilt, we often forget just how merciful our heavenly Father is. So, let's dive into this wonderful aspect of God's character and reflect on the question: Isn't it merciful?

**What even is mercy anyway?** Mercy is often defined as compassion or forgiveness shown by someone in a position of power toward someone who deserves punishment. In essence, it's about withholding punishment or offering kindness when it's not deserved. We all sin, and we all fall short of God's glory—however, God's mercy is abundant (Romans 3:23-24).

**Remember this: God's mercy is unfailing.** It's not based on what we do or don't do; it's a gift freely given (Ephesians 2:1-10; Titus 3:3-7). And Lamentations 3:22-23 tells us that God's mercies are new every morning. No matter how many times we stumble or fall, God's mercy is there to pick us up and set us on the right path.

**But, humans are imperfect.** You may sometimes feel overwhelmed by your own imperfections. You might worry about falling short of expectations, not just from others but also from yourself. But remember, God knows your weaknesses, and His mercy is tailor-made for your imperfections (Hebrews 4:14-16). He knows all your flaws, and He loves you anyway. He loves you so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for you so that you can be forgiven and dwell with Him for eternity (1 Peter 1:3-9).

**So, we can now live out God's mercy.** God's mercy isn't just for us to receive; it's also for us to extend to others (Colossians 3:12). We have opportunities every day to show mercy to our friends, family, and people we interact with at school, work, church, the grocery store, etc. By offering forgiveness and compassion, we can be living examples of God's mercy.

So, let's revisit the question: Isn't it merciful? Yes, God's mercy is a gift that keeps on giving, and it's available to us every day! We are loved and cherished, imperfections and all. And as we carry the awareness of God's mercy in our hearts, it shines through our actions toward others. God is always ready to forgive and heal, to welcome us with open arms. 🕯 *Matthew Shumway*

🕯 Can you think of a time someone showed you mercy? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 In Jesus's parable (or symbolic story) in Luke 15, what do you notice about God's mercy? \_\_\_\_\_

*The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning. Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT)*

## NOT ON MY AGENDA PART 1: LITTLE THINGS MATTER

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:55-58; HEBREWS 10:24-25; JAMES 2:14-26

**D**o you have a responsibility that feels like it doesn't matter? Part of my job is updating the township's website. When we have public meetings, I upload what are called agendas (which describe the meeting's subject matter) to the website. Not a big deal, right? Well one day, we had a board meeting where a very hot topic was being discussed. Citizens were up in arms, and what is usually a very relaxed meeting turned into a mess of questions and claims.

I attend the meetings to learn about and be involved in the community. I don't have to say or do anything. So, you can understand my shock when all of a sudden someone says, "We didn't know this whole issue was happening because the agenda wasn't posted on the website." Suddenly, I felt just as involved in this issue as the board members everyone was frustrated with. Was my not uploading the agenda a criminal offence? No. But the fact that I didn't complete my "small" responsibility was adding gasoline to an already fiery flame.

Sometimes, as Christians, there are things that we feel aren't a big deal. *Do I really have to read my Bible? Do I really have to go to church?* And while there isn't a set of requirements for being a Christian—other than repenting of our sins and receiving God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus—there are some things that are good for us to be part of. It's good to read the Bible because it gives God more opportunities to speak to us. It's good to go to church gatherings because it's good to be with other believers, encouraging one another, worshipping God together, and learning more about Him. It's even good just to pray before a meal because it helps us practice thankfulness. And, just like my little responsibility of posting the agenda, we might discover that those little habits make a bigger difference than we expected. 🕯️ *Natty Maelle*

🕯️ Is there a particular Christian habit you'd like to do more? Maybe practicing silence, or prayer, or thankfulness? Sometimes, we don't make something a priority because we don't KNOW what the Bible says about it. On the other hand, have you ever tried to work on different habits or responsibilities and just ended up getting discouraged and giving up? You're not alone. We've all done that. And Jesus is still with us—He knows we can't follow Him in our own strength, and He is eager to help us through His Spirit, His Word, and His people. Who are trusted Christians who can help you dig into what the Bible says about certain topics, discern how Jesus might be inviting you to follow Him in your daily life, and encourage you when things get difficult? \_\_\_\_\_

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

## NOT ON MY AGENDA PART 2: OWNERSHIP

READ: MATTHEW 7:1-5; ROMANS 8:1; JAMES 3

**Y**esterday, we talked about how the little habits we maintain as Christians can make a big difference. I shared the story of how I forgot to post information online prior to an important meeting at work—a responsibility that previously hadn't felt all that important.

After the meeting, I found myself trying to justify why I hadn't uploaded the agenda. Generally, someone else sends it to me, then I upload it. So, I went through my emails to see if the agenda had ever been given to me. I saw that I had requested it, never received it. But that was *months* ago. It was my job to keep track of what was or wasn't posted, and it was my responsibility to reach out to this individual and follow up with them. I'd had plenty of time.

At work the next day, it took everything in me not to pin the blame on this person. And while maybe I shouldn't take on all the responsibility for this error, it was in the end, mine.

As Christians, taking ownership of our thoughts, words, and actions is huge. In Matthew 7:3-5, Jesus warns us against calling out other people's faults but ignoring our own. Similarly, the book of James talks at great length about the impact of our words and deeds on other people who are made in the image of God. As Christians, we are called and empowered to walk with integrity and represent Christ well. Part of that is owning up to our mistakes and sins.

But taking ownership doesn't just apply to our interactions with people. Taking ownership for our sin is a massive part of salvation. When we accept Jesus's gift of forgiveness and become a Christian, we are admitting that, apart from Him, we are sinful people. And as we grow in our relationship with Jesus, He calls us to be open with Him about all our mistakes and sins, along with all our frustrations and hopes. As we yield to the Holy Spirit, He works in us, transforming us to become more and more like Christ and grow in His love. 📌 *Natty Maelle*

📌 A big part of ownership is accountability. We all make mistakes, and we all sin. It's tempting to not own up to what we've done—or worse, let someone else take the blame for it—and that's why it's important to have people in our lives who can hold us accountable. Who is a trusted Christian you can be honest with, especially when you're struggling? Consider asking them to help you grow, check in on you to ask how certain problems are going, pray with you, etc. \_\_\_\_\_

📌 Have you received Jesus's gift of freedom from sin? Carrying around sin can be incredibly heavy—especially when guilt gets involved. You can give all that to Jesus today. He died on the cross, taking all of that sin on Himself, and then He rose again, cancelling it all out (page 104).

*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other. James 5:16 (NIV)*

## LOVING THE WORD

READ: PSALM 19:9-10; JOHN 1:1-5, 15; LUKE 4:14-21; HEBREWS 4:12

**O**f all the things I learned at Bible college, the most important thing I learned was from Dr. Kroeze. In every class, Dr. Kroeze's excitement for the Bible was contagious. As he talked about the Scriptures, he would bounce up and down on his toes, close his eyes and gesture with his hands, and sometimes take off his glasses and spin them. Most classes ended a bit late because he never wanted to skip any detail. In fact, he got so caught up in teaching the Word that he'd never have time to finish everything he wanted to cover. I don't think we ever completed the syllabus. But that's okay, because the most important thing Dr. Kroeze taught me was how to love the Bible. He spoke with such wonder, affection, and excitement about Scripture that I couldn't help but fall in love with it.

If you've grown up in the church, it's easy for the stories in the Bible to become just that—stories. We can forget that these were real things that happened to real people engaging with a real God. But when we approach Scripture with childlike wonder and curiosity, letting ourselves get swept up in the drama of the story instead of only ever pursuing the exact correct theological interpretation of every little detail, we get a fresh taste of who God is.

Don't get me wrong—I love theology! And pursuing solid Biblical interpretation and sound doctrine are vital to the Christian faith. But sometimes we get so bogged down in the details that we miss the beauty of the larger story. We miss out on beholding the divine mystery of grace. Scripture tells the story of God's ridiculous, never-ending love for us, and His pursuit of His people through hundreds of generations. This pursuit culminates in God taking on human flesh in Jesus, walking among the people He'd been pursuing for thousands of years, teaching them the true meaning of the Scriptures they had been studying for generations, embodying God's own presence with them, then being killed by Jewish authorities on a Roman cross, only to resurrect from the dead three days later and then ascend into heaven. All because He loves us.

I think that's what made Dr. Kroeze fall in love with the Bible. It tells the story of Jesus, who loves us enough to lay down His life for us, who is powerful enough to rise from the dead, and who promises to raise us from the dead and give us eternal life when He returns. And that's a story worth listening to. *✠ Taylor Eising*

✠ What part of the Bible captivates your attention? Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

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*"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my [Jesus's] words will never pass away."  
Matthew 24:35 (NIV)*

## THE FREEDOM OF HUMILITY

READ: PSALM 10:4; MATTHEW 11:28-30; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-13; 1 PETER 5:5-7

**O**ne of the things that gives me the greatest anxiety in life is thinking about what others think of me. I worry about what the other shoppers think of me when I'm in the store, and I worry about what my family thinks of me when we get together. I've started to wonder, is it pride that makes me worry about all of this? Wanting to look good, and wanting others to think well of me?

In 1 Peter 5, we read about pride and anxiety—and the two seem to be linked here, just like they are in my own life. It says, “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (verses 5-7).

We’re called to be humble because God is not a fan of pride. Pride keeps us focused on ourselves instead of on God, and pride can easily turn into anxiety when we realize we fall short. But, once we know Jesus, we’re given a new identity in Him, so we don’t have to fear what others think of us. And, as His Spirit transforms us, He helps us repent of pride and grow in humility.

When we are humble, we’re trusting God will lift us up and put us in a good position at the right time, and when Jesus returns, we’ll share in His glory. While I concern myself with trying to make sure that I don’t fail and trying to look good in front of others, God asks that I just be humble. He wants to carry my anxieties for me, and He is always looking out for me. *📖 Emily Acker*

📖 It’s easy to worry about how others see us and try to figure out how we can impress them, whether with our lifestyle, accomplishments, humor, appearance, etc. But when we put our trust in Jesus, we receive a new identity: we are forgiven children of God, and we don’t need to try to impress Him or anyone else. We know we’re not perfect—that we desperately need Jesus every moment—and that’s okay, because He loves us. How could this kind of humility be freeing? \_\_\_\_\_

📖 Jesus shows us what true humility looks like. Jesus is God the Son, yet He “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:7-8). Jesus died for us, and then He rose again so we could be saved from sin and death. How can looking at Jesus help us walk in humility? \_\_\_\_\_

*“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Luke 14:11 (NIV)*


## YOU ARE GOD'S PRIORITY


READ: PSALM 139:13-16; ISAIAH 49:15; ROMANS 5:1-11


**H**ave you ever felt undervalued? You try to speak and state your views, but people disregard them, ignoring your ideas or even ridiculing them. Perhaps you have been overlooked in the planning or details of an event. In situations like these, it would be easy, and only human, to believe we are insignificant.

Negative comments, not being included, or breakups in friendships can leave anyone feeling despondent and miserable. We may be left with a sense of being second place or even completely overlooked. We feel hurt and disappointed. What can we do in times like these?

Remember that this world is imperfect and broken. People don't always realize they have excluded you or ignored you. You can accept the emotions you experience, and process them with Jesus and with people you trust, but you don't have to dwell on them too long. Instead, you can find hope in remembering the truths of God's kingdom.

God is a loving Father. He deeply cares for each one of His children. You are His unique creation. You are adored and cherished. Whatever situation you are currently dealing with matters greatly to God. You are a priority to Him. He wants you—and all of us—to enjoy relationship and eternal life with Him (1 Timothy 2:4). He loves you so much that He gave His Son, Jesus, to save you. Jesus's sacrifice was enough to cover your sins, and the sins of others who have hurt you. And through His death and resurrection, He is working to restore the brokenness inherited since humans first sinned at the fall. Jesus sees your pain, and He weeps with you. But He also says, it will not always be this way. He wants to draw you into community with other believers who will extend His love to you. Your laughter, trials, dreams, and ideas are important. Even if everyone else abandons you, God's love for you is constant. Whenever you feel insignificant, you can reach out to Him.  *Cindy Lee*

 When have you felt marginalized, forgotten, or last on someone else's agenda? You can offer this hurt and sadness up to God. Take heart, you are a priority to Him, and He loves you deeply. (If you want to know more about God's love and how to have a relationship with Him, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

 Who is someone in your life you can build up, reassure, and remind that they are valued? Kind words, sincere compliments, listening, a phone call, a thoughtful email, text, or message in a card are all ways of reminding people that they are valued and they matter. What could you do today? \_\_\_\_\_

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

## SPIDERS AND ROLLERBLADES

READ: EPHESIANS 4:22-5:2; HEBREWS 12:1-3; 2 PETER 1:3-9

**D**o you have vivid dreams? I dream vividly almost every night. Once, I had a hilarious dream about a team of ostriches flying, pulling me on a sleigh in the sky. We landed in a parking lot so they could take a break and join an exercise class.

But last night, I dreamed I was crossing an immense desert on rollerblades. Every few feet, there were tarantulas the size of umbrellas coming out of the sand to grab me. I had to be very careful where I stepped (not easy on rollerblades in sand) because, at any moment, the sand would start to move, and another spider would surface from beneath.

This ridiculous dream reminded me of living as a Christian. In life, we encounter many difficulties and fears (giant spiders, anyone?), and some of these surface when and where we least expect. So, we need to rid ourselves of things that hinder us from navigating well.

If I had been wearing different footwear in my dream, I would have been able to avoid the tarantulas more effectively and quickly. Similarly, as we rely on Jesus to help us rid ourselves of things not glorifying to Him, we'll be able to walk through hard times in a way that honors Him and helps us grow. When we rest in the truth of the gospel and Jesus's love for us, it gets easier to let go of the sinful patterns that hinder us. In addition, Jesus helps us put on the good things God equips us with, such as self-control, perseverance, and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-8).

In Ephesians 4, Paul reminds followers of Christ that, because Jesus has made us new, we will live differently than we used to. Not only are we to put off our old self, but we are to renew our minds and put on our new self, holy and righteous like God. As Jesus helps us shed the old ways of bitterness and anger, He helps us put on compassion and forgiveness. Then we can walk in His love, just as He loved us. 🕯

*Savannah Coleman*

🕯 How does sin hold us back from responding well to the fears and difficulties we face? Consider asking God to search your heart and reveal what sins you need to put off. Even as children of God, we will struggle with sin, but it no longer has to own us. As we renew our minds in the Word, spend time with the Lord in prayer, and pursue community with other believers, God will illuminate the things that need to change. He loves us so much that He sent Jesus to die and be resurrected to save us, and His ways are always best. He will walk with us in compassion and mercy, giving us the strength and hope we need to walk in His good ways. \_\_\_\_\_

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*For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace. Romans 6:14 (NIV)*



## LIFE IS SHORT

READ: PSALM 90:4; JAMES 4:13-14; 2 PETER 3:8

**H**ave you ever heard the saying, “Life is short, and then you die”?

That saying certainly applies to cicadas. Cicadas are big, noisy bugs that look kind of like grasshoppers. And every seventeen years, a certain type of cicada shows up from underground in a massive swarm to mate and lay eggs. But the cicadas don’t last very long. They live for only about six weeks once they emerge from the ground. Their lives are short, and then they die.

A cicada’s life is very brief compared to the lives of most people, but in a way, our lives are just as short. Sure, we may know people who live to be over ninety years old. This seems like a long time to us, but ninety years is only a brief time to God—after all, He is eternal. James 4:14 says, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”

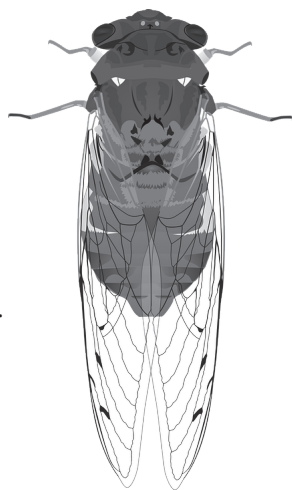
So, in a way, the saying is right. We live for just a short time, and then we die. But it’s missing something.

As Christians, we know that when we die, our spirits will be with Jesus. And one day, when He returns, He will resurrect our bodies from the dead and we will have eternal life with Him. For those who trust in Jesus, death is not the end. We will live with Him for ever and ever! We don’t have to fear death—or even a short life—because Jesus promises us eternity with Him. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

**✦** Do you know someone who has lived a really long time? No matter how old they are, their life is like a vanishing mist when compared to eternity. Our lives are short, but that doesn’t mean we have to fear death. Jesus was willing to die for us, and then He rose from His grave so we could be saved and have eternal life. And when we put our trust in Him, we can know that He will resurrect us from the dead and we will live forever with Him. (Find out more on page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

**✦** Do you ever think about the brevity of your life and the opportunities you may or may not have? How could it be comforting to know that, as Christians, we get to look forward to living in restored creation with Jesus and the whole family of believers for eternity? And how could this hope give us courage to follow Jesus here and now? (Romans 14:8-9; Philippians 1:21-26) \_\_\_\_\_

*What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. James 4:14 (NIV)*



## THE SANDAL'S EXAMPLE

READ: JOHN 13:1-17; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:15-21; 1 PETER 2:21-25

**A** few days after arriving in Romania as a missionary, I discovered two things: First, one of the sandals I had brought along, hoping they would last my entire year overseas, broke. Second, on the ground floor of my apartment building, a family ran a small shoe repair booth.

When I brought the busted shoe to the family members sitting behind their table, I primarily used gestures to indicate what I needed, since I spoke only a few words of Romanian. The broken sandal spoke for itself, of course. But they began communicating an idea I couldn't understand. Finally, the woman looked at me and stated in English, "The other shoe!" I nodded, then jogged up to my apartment and retrieved the sandal's partner. I handed it to the woman and settled on a plan to retrieve the shoes—one intact, the other soon to be made whole—later in the week.

Back upstairs, I pondered the request for the other shoe. I realized these small-business owners understood that restoring the mangled sandal required using the other one as the example to follow. Had they not looked to the unharmed sandal as the model for fixing the damaged one, they risked missing the mark with their work.

In our own lives, we are like that broken sandal, because we have all sinned. But Jesus, who is fully God and fully human, is like the intact sandal. He never sinned. We may be tempted to try to fix whatever seems to be wrong in our lives, but the truth is, we'll never be able to repair ourselves. Only God can do that. When we surrender trying to do life on our own and instead trust in Jesus—with faith in His death and resurrection—we enter a relationship with God. We also become new creations and embark on a lifetime of being restored to the way God designed us to be. So, as we wait for Jesus to return and finish His work of restoration in and around us, we can grow in loving and living sacrificially, in serving others and living righteously.

How? By keeping our eyes fixed upon Jesus and relying on His love (John 15:1-13; Philippians 2:1-18; Hebrews 12:1-3; 1 John 4:19). We meet Jesus when we're broken. But when Jesus saves us, He forgives all our sins, and His Spirit begins transforming us to become more and more like Jesus. Because it's only through Jesus that we are made whole. 📌 *Allison Wilson Lee*

📌 Living in our world that has been broken by sin, we encounter lots of confusing messages about which examples to follow. How could it be freeing to follow the example of Jesus, who never changes and always loves us, instead of the ideals of the world, which change over time? \_\_\_\_\_

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*"I [Jesus] have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."  
John 13:15 (NIV)*

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CROSS: CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

READ: PSALMS 62:5-8; 87:7; ISAIAH 1:18; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:30

**S**ure is the hope of our righteousness,  
 pure is the Word of the Lord;  
 He is the rock of my salvation,  
 He alone is my reward.

“Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
 says the LORD,  
 “Though your sins are like scarlet,  
 ...they shall be like wool.” \*

My soul waits in silence for God only,  
 His face, as the morning sun;  
 In Him my refuge and my salvation rest,  
 He is the Eternal One.

“Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
 says the LORD,

“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
 ...they shall be like wool.” \*

He is the fountain of all our joy,  
 He is the song that we sing;  
 Jesus the Son of Righteousness—  
 our God, the glorious King!

\* Isaiah 1:18

Bible scholars describe the gift of Christ’s righteousness in different ways: some picture it as being washed clean in God’s eyes; others say it is to be in right standing with God—like a person on trial being found not guilty. Receiving Christ’s righteousness certainly includes these truths, but it goes a step further. It not only means we are *set free* from guilt and punishment—that is, we are “free to go”—it also means we are joyfully *welcomed into* the fellowship of God’s family. Here, we are clothed in Christ’s righteousness: our place is set, our name is known, and we never need to prove our worth. In Christ, we are Home indeed. 🕯 *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯 Because Jesus has made the way for us to be transformed and made new, as Christians, we can freely confess our failures, while at the same time rejoicing confidently in Christ’s love, for we have received His gift: the sure hope of His righteousness. How is Jesus our ultimate refuge from sin, guilt, and fear? Consider taking a moment to confess any sins that come to mind to Jesus, resting in His forgiveness. (For more about the gift of Jesus’s righteousness, see page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

*For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” Romans 1:17 (NIV)*

## FOLLOW THE LIGHT

READ: PSALMS 32:1-11; 103:4; JOHN 8:12; ACTS 26:9-18

**B**linking open his eyes he looked out into darkness.

“How long have I been here?” he asked the darkness.

“Innumerable days,” came the melancholy response.

“How long shall I stay here?” he asked the darkness.

“An insurmountable time,” came the dreary response.

“Who shall stay with me?” he asked the darkness.

“None but your shadow,” came the disdainful response.

Then, a light flickered in the corner of his sight. A soft glow, glowing ever brighter.

“How long have I been here?” He asked the light.

“Long enough, my dear child,” came the loving response.

“How long shall I stay here?” he asked the light.

“Not a moment longer. Come and return to me,” came the guiding response.

“Who shall go with me?” he asked the light.

“My spirit shall guide you forever, no matter how far you stray,” came the gracious response.

A single tear of joy streaked his face as he now saw to whom he spoke.

“Then my Lord, I’ve but one last question. When may we leave?” **🕯** *Gracee Terrell*

**🕯** Have you ever felt you’ve strayed so far from God that He couldn’t possibly want you back? Sin is like a hopeless, dark pit. But God tells us in His Word that He always wants to restore us, and that Jesus is the One who seeks and saves us (Luke 15:1-32; 19:10; 1 Timothy 2:4-6). Jesus is the Light, and because He died for our sins and rose again, everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is forgiven and saved from the darkness of sin and death (Colossians 1:13-14; 1 Peter 2:9). Once we belong to Jesus, nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:35-39). No matter how far we fall, God will always be there to guide us back. He works through His Word (the Bible), His people (the church), and His Spirit—who guides us into all truth (John 16:13). Even when we forget our identity as beloved children of light, He mercifully reminds us of His love and truth and helps us follow Him faithfully (Ephesians 5:8-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:5-11). \_\_\_\_\_

*“...to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me [Jesus].” Acts 26:18 (NIV)*

## WHAT STRIKES YOU?

READ: LUKE 11:9-13; JOHN 16:1-15; EPHESIANS 1:18

In college, I had a professor who started class discussions about readings by showing us a picture of a lightning bolt striking the earth. Then she'd ask the question, "What struck you?" Sometimes, I like to ask myself this kind of question when I read the Bible. I like this simple approach of just looking for *one thing* that sticks out to me. It could be a word, a phrase, something someone did or said—or didn't say or do. I like to pay attention to how this one thing makes me feel, because when we read the Bible, we're not just reading for information or instructions. God is inviting us to interact with Him. The Holy Spirit helps us notice things, and He invites us to go deeper with God, to know Him better, to trust Him more.

So, when I read a passage in the Bible, I usually start by asking God to help me see what He wants to show me. I might have to read the passage more than once, but something almost always "strikes me" or sticks out to me. As I spend some time thinking and praying about it, I ask God questions and tell Him what I like—or don't like—about that one thing.

Here's an example: On Monday, I read John 16:1-15. In this passage, Jesus knows He is going to the cross the next day—and that He will rise from the dead three days later—and He promises His followers that the Holy Spirit will come to them after He ascends to the Father. When I read this passage, the word *receive* stuck out to me in verses 13-15: "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth...He will glorify me [Jesus] because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you."

As I contemplated the word *receive*, I marveled at the mystery of the Trinity—one God in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As I dwelt on the idea of the Holy Spirit receiving from the Son, I was struck by how God is so giving, and I felt restless. So, on Tuesday, I wanted to journal about the word *receive*, and I did. But as I was reading John 16:1-15 again, another word stuck out to me. This time it was *guide*. I had recently been thinking about how Jesus is our Good Shepherd (John 10:11), and it made me feel relieved to be reminded that God guides us—it was just what I needed to hear. Isn't our God so kind? As we seek Him and spend time in His Word, Jesus draws us into deeper and deeper relationship with Himself. He is so generous to give us understanding and to guide us. 🕯️ *Hannah Howe*

🕯️ How do you like to read the Bible? Have you ever tried talking to God about what you read? \_\_\_\_\_

*Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. Psalm 119:18 (NIV)*

## PRAYER STAIRS

READ: MATTHEW 14:22-23; LUKE 5:16; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

**H**ave you ever had to face the same problem over and over again? I think we all have from time to time. A few months ago, I had a difficult situation at work. It went on for quite some time, and I relied heavily on the Lord for guidance. It was during this time that I was reminded of the importance of prayer. The problem that I faced leaked into everything, but with practice, so did prayer.

When I sit in small groups at church, there are often moments when we're asked what we need to be doing more of in our walk with the Lord. I'd guess that seven times out of ten, people say they need to "pray more." And this is a great goal—God loves to hear from us, and He invites us to talk with Him through prayer continually. But then the next Sunday would roll around, and no one had prayed more.

I don't know about you, but I'm big into routines. So, I ended up building a routine of prayer. I prayed first thing when I sat down in my car, all the way to work, and on my drive home. There were two sets of stairs that I frequently prayed on. And to this day, when I reach those stairs or sit down in my car, I automatically launch into a prayer. And you know what? I saw God open and close doors for me in ways that I didn't deserve and couldn't imagine.

Prayer is important. But don't just take my word for it. The Bible tells us in the book of Luke that "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). And in Matthew 14:23, Jesus goes alone to pray after the death of His cousin, John the Baptist. Later, we see Jesus go to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray before He goes to the cross for our sins. Even though God the Son knew He would rise again, He still cried out to God the Father.

Jesus loves us, and He knows that we need to be talking with Him continually through prayer. He is our lifeline. So, what could your prayer stairs be? 🕯

*Natty Maelle*

🕯 If you know Jesus, He is always with you through His Spirit, offering guidance, comfort, and strength. Why is it important that we regularly take time to talk, and listen, to Him through prayer? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯 Do you have something that you could make your "prayer stairs" today? Think about your habits and the places you go regularly. Could any of those places become places of prayer? How might you go about building a habit of prayer in your life? \_\_\_\_\_

*Pray continually... 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (NIV)*

## BACK TO THE BEGINNING

READ: ROMANS 12:16-21; EPHESIANS 4:31-32; 2 TIMOTHY 2:22-26

**H**ave you ever worked on a complex math problem, only to realize that you made a mistake partway through? By the time you get to the end, there's no fixing it. All you can do is start over from the beginning.

The same can be true in our relationships with other people. Sometimes, we realize that a problem has been building and building in our relationship with a friend or family member. And the only way to fix it is to go back to the beginning of the problem.

Often, this means we'll have to admit where we did something wrong and apologize. This can be difficult to do, but God is eager to help us. He invites us to admit our sins to Him, remembering that He forgives us, and He helps bring us into right relationship with others.

How does God help us in our relationships? Well, through Jesus's death and resurrection, God made the way to bring us into right relationship with Himself. He forgave our sins, giving us His righteousness and restoring us to friendship with God. And if Jesus restored that relationship, He can help restore our friendships too. Because of His forgiveness, we can admit the things we've done wrong, and we can also forgive others for the ways they've wronged us.

So, when we get into a fight with someone, we can think back to the beginning. We can ask ourselves where we said or did unkind things, and we can ask Jesus to show us how we caused hurt. We can confess our sins to Jesus and rest in His sure forgiveness, and we can also pray for the other person and ask Him to heal the hurts we've caused each other. Then, we can go to that person and talk it over. It can be tempting to carry a grudge, but when we rely on Jesus—the ultimate restorer of relationships—we can admit our mistakes and our sins, we can experience forgiveness, and our friendships can be restored. **✦** *A. W. Smith*

- ✦** How can knowing that Jesus restored our relationship with God help us lean on Him to restore our other relationships? \_\_\_\_\_
  
- ✦** Is there a relationship you're struggling with? Consider spending some time in prayer, asking Jesus to help you see where you caused hurt and asking Him for forgiveness and healing in that relationship. Remember, forgiving someone doesn't always mean being in close relationship with them, and full restoration may only come when Jesus returns. If your situation involves a deep hurt, who is a trusted adult in your life who could help you set up loving boundaries? \_\_\_\_\_

*And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone...not resentful. 2 Timothy 2:24 (NIV)*

## JESUS IS ALWAYS THERE FOR YOU

READ: ISAIAH 41:10; JOHN 14:18; 15:12-15; HEBREWS 13:5

**H**ave people ever let you down so much that you don't want to get up again? I know I have felt like this many times. Or maybe you see all of your friends hanging out, and you feel like you're the "backup friend." Many times in my life, I saw my friends hanging out without me, and they would rarely talk to me. I'd always have to be the first one to reach out to them. Sometimes, I felt so severely depressed, I felt I couldn't even tell my family about what I was going through. And I felt that Jesus was ignoring me too.

But the truth is, even if it feels like you're alone in your troubles, someone is always next to you. Jesus is with you always and forever. He never ignores you. He sees your troubles and your sorrows. He always understands what you're going through, and He wants to be there for you.

Jesus died and rose again to make the way for you to become His friend. And Jesus empathizes with you—remember, He knows firsthand what it's like to be abandoned by your friends—and He invites you to talk to Him sincerely (Mark 14:50; Hebrews 4:14-16). Just tell Him what's on your heart, and He will listen and comfort you, often through His Word, the Bible. Jesus is the best friend who will never betray you. He will never leave you alone in the darkness. 🌸 *Violet Kotovets*

🔑 Friendships are an important part of life. In fact, friendship was God's ideal! Yet, in our world that has been broken by sin, friendship can sometimes feel out of reach. And even when we are surrounded by friends, these relationships can often leave us feeling disappointed. In times like these, how could it be comforting to know that Jesus is the friend we can always count on? \_\_\_\_\_

🔑 If you're having difficulty finding good friendships, consider taking some time to be honest with God and tell Him how this makes you feel. You can also ask Him to help you notice opportunities He may be giving you to invest in relationships with the people around you. \_\_\_\_\_

🔑 Today's devotion mentions feeling severely depressed. If you are feeling depressed, or if it's been more than a couple weeks since you've felt happy, tell a trusted adult. If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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 remember, I [Jesus] am with you always, to the end of the age." Mathew 28:20 (CSB)*



## WHERE ARE YOUR HABITS LEADING YOU?

READ: GALATIANS 5:16-25, 6:7-10; COLOSSIANS 3:1-17

**H**ave you ever thought about how your habits form you and take you places? For example, if you have a habit of brushing your teeth every day, your teeth are likely healthy. If you were to neglect this habit, it would be quite obvious.

Developing intentional, healthy habits is something that we, as Christians, are called to do. But there are other habits that seem to sneak in without us even realizing, and sometimes these habits are negative. These unexamined, negative habits could be hours of scrolling through social media, staying up way too late every night, or even keeping a messy bedroom (I've really struggled with that last one). These habits can leave us anxious, exhausted, and overstimulated.

Why do our habits matter to God? Well, Romans 12:1 says to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” It calls this our “true and proper worship.” Being a “living sacrifice” affects our whole lives—including our day-to-day habits. Of course, we can't do this perfectly. Jesus is the only perfect sacrifice. Through His sinless life, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead, He made the way for us to be with Him forever. And, if we've put our trust in Jesus, He is living in us through the Holy Spirit, empowering us to live as holy and pleasing sacrifices and to develop intentional, God-honoring habits. These habits help us focus on Jesus's presence with us and remember that we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. They could be Scripture reading, prayer, worship, being part of a Christian community, or journaling. These habits are easier some days than others, but when we continue in them, we often find that we continue to trust Jesus and His love for us more and more. And as we grow in our understanding of His love, we also grow in our love for God and our neighbors. We learn to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24).

Forming habits is not about trying to earn your way into the Kingdom of God. We can only become God's people by putting our trust in Jesus. Habits, however, are great practical ways to deepen our relationship with Jesus and learn to walk in step with Him. *✠ Joshua Schmitz*

✠ Over the next few days, consider paying attention to your habits. What do you do when you get up in the morning? Before you go to bed? Before you leave home? When you get home? As you notice these habits and patterns in your life, ask, “Where is this habit leading me?” Is it leading you to live according to today's Bible passages (Galatians 5:16-25, 6:7-10; Colossians 3:1-17)? \_\_\_\_\_

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

## ONE THING

READ: PSALMS 27; 63; 84

**W**e sing of Your power,  
 We lift up Your might,  
 We praise Your goodness and grace!  
 We exalt You as holy,  
 We kneel to Your Name—  
 But for a glimpse of Thy face.

In Your face is delight  
 that none can contain,  
 gladness, glory, and beauty!

For You are our Maker,  
 our soul's one desire—  
 Our spirit is thirsting for Thee.

Your presence, O God,  
 Your beauty we seek,  
 Your face as fair as the dawn!  
 For nothing on earth  
 shall yet satisfy—  
 Our heart yearns for Thee alone.

What do you think it means to gaze at God's beauty (Psalm 27:4)? Some Bible teachers describe it as simply *taking pleasure* in God—praising and delighting in every aspect of His being, much like we might take a long hike just to enjoy the coolness and calm of a secluded waterfall. Likewise, we can travel paths that lead us to the refreshing peace of God's presence (Psalm 23:2-3). The path is not hidden—many have gone before. Most notably, we can follow the words of the psalmists. May we read them, sing them, pray them—and let God speak through them. Day by day, let us join with David in saying, “Your face, LORD, I will seek” (Psalm 27:8). And as we do, may we grow to recognize and delight in His glory, His goodness, His grace...and yes, His beauty. For once we know Him, nothing less than *beautiful* will do. 🕯️ *G. Kam Congleton*

🕯️ What kinds of circumstances are the psalmists facing? Do they seem shy about asking for God's help? Is it possible that being in God's presence is one way we experience His help? \_\_\_\_\_

🕯️ Now the question is: How do we seek the presence—or face—of God? A great way to begin is to simply do what the psalmists do. Consider taking some time to talk to God, using the psalms as a model. Remember that as you seek God, *He is already seeking you*. We know this because Jesus “came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Without Jesus, we are all lost—adrift, cut off from where we belong—because our sin separates us from God. But, through Jesus's death and resurrection, we can be reconciled—or reconnected—to God (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Colossians 1:22). And so, putting our trust in Jesus is the first step in experiencing God's presence (Hebrews 4:14-16). (You can find out more about trusting Jesus on page 104.) \_\_\_\_\_

*One thing I ask from the LORD...that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. Psalm 27:4 (NIV)*

## A WEeping WARRIOR-KING

READ: 1 SAMUEL 20:41-42; ROMANS 12:10, 15-16

**D**o you ever feel ashamed for crying? Sometimes, it can feel like we need to be tough and strong, not weepy. But that's not what we see in the Bible.

In 1 Samuel 20:41, for example, we see how the mighty warrior-king David openly wept when he had to move away from his best friend Jonathan. It says, "David got up from the south side of the stone Ezel, fell facedown to the ground, and paid homage three times. Then he and Jonathan kissed each other and wept with each other, though David wept more."

And if you keep reading in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, and in the psalms David wrote, you'll find other instances when David cried. Yet, you'll also find stories of David's bravery in facing countless enemies. He killed lions and bears that came after his sheep, and he faced down the giant Goliath when everyone else was afraid to (1 Samuel 17:1-18:7). David was tough and strong—and weepy.

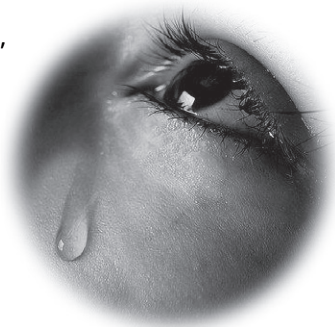
It was because of his confidence in God that David could have the courage to face his enemies, and the honesty to face his own emotions. He cried openly and without shame—and he's not the only one. Jesus cried too. Jesus is the ultimate Warrior-King, and He wept when His friend Lazarus died, even though He was about to bring the dead man back to life (John 11:35).

God gave us our emotions. It's not wrong to cry—it's how we process the way we feel when we're hurting. God invites us to use our tears, not only to grieve our own losses, but also to enter into the sadness of others. This is possible because Jesus promises to be with us in our grief, and He also promises to return one day. Then, He will wipe away every tear when He resurrects us from the dead and restores His creation. But in the meantime, we can take comfort knowing that Jesus sits beside us in every sorrow and weeps with us. 🕯

*A. W. Smith*

🕯 Does crying make you uncomfortable? God is not ashamed of your tears. In fact, God created us to have emotions, and crying is a healthy way to express those emotions. God loves us and cares when we're hurting. Jesus died and rose again for us so He could be with us in our pain, weeping alongside us. The next time you feel like you need to cry, you can picture Jesus weeping with you. How might knowing that He weeps with us affect the way we view our own emotions? \_\_\_\_\_

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Romans 12:15 (CSB)*



## THE WHITE STONE

READ: MATTHEW 28:20; ROMANS 8:12-25; REVELATION 2:12-17

**J**ust when you think it can't get any darker, I murmured as I watched over the hidden compound where we had to bring more Believers that morning. A small girl and her older brother were wrapped in a ragged blanket, hungrily eating hot soup. I wished we had arrived sooner, but now their parents were gone.

There was a rustle in the dense trees just beyond where I kept watch. Tensing, I gripped the handle of my weapon and crept forward. *Zon, be with me!* This prayer echoed in the frantic beating of my heart. When I burst through the trees, I nearly stumbled in my astonishment. He stood before me, brandishing a double-edged sword that gleamed like sunshine on the sea. "Do not be afraid, Psephos." His voice was the sound of mighty, rushing water.

"Zon? Is it you?" Tears of hope and longing welled up in my eyes.

"It is I," He answered, "the Living One."

I fell at his feet, tears tracking down my cheeks. Zon dropped His sword and sank to the ground, wrapping His arms around me. "I know you are weary. I have seen the evil and darkness in this land. You and many Believers have remained true to my name, even in the face of death."

"How much longer until you come to rescue us?"

Zon seemed to look into the depths of my soul. "Through my Spirit, I have given my people the power to remain faithful, Psephos. Yet, some among you are returning to their old ways and running after gods and possessions and experiences that will not satisfy. Only my love can satisfy you, and I have given it freely through my own death and resurrection. Remind the people of my words; encourage them to repent and return to me."

"Will you stay with me, Zon?"

"I am always with you, to the very end of the age. Those who love me will be victorious, because I am the Victorious One. Here is something to remind you that you are mine, and I will always provide for you." Zon placed something small and cool into my hand. I opened my palm to see a white stone with a single word written on it.

I read aloud, "*Athoos*. What does it mean?"

"It is your new name, my child. It means, *innocent*." 📖 *Savannah Coleman*

*"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it."*  
Revelation 2:17 (NIV)

- 🔑 Today's devotion is inspired by Revelation 2:12-17. This passage was written to the church in Pergamum. They lived in a culture where there was a lot of idol worship and sin, not unlike today. Jesus, the Living One, commends them for remaining true to His name and standing strong even in the face of severe persecution leading to death. How could it be encouraging to know that Jesus sees everything we're going through, and He is always close beside us, even in our suffering? \_\_\_\_\_
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- 🔑 As we continue reading in Revelation 2:14, we find that some of the Christians in Pergamum were turning back to idolatry and sinful practices, and Jesus urges them to repent. Then Jesus says that the victorious one will be given "hidden manna" (verse 17). Various Bible scholars debate what this passage means, but in Exodus 16, we see how God provided for the Israelites by giving them manna, bread from heaven to eat in the wilderness. Jesus harkens back to this in John 6, and He says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry" (verse 35). Just as God provided manna, He gave us His one and only Son—Jesus is everything we need (John 3:16; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:3). Once we put our trust in Jesus, we become children of God; we are adopted into His family forever. He promises us eternal life, and He satisfies our deepest longings. We no longer need to live according to the flesh—reverting to our old, sinful ways—because we have God's power in us to walk in freedom. Consider taking some time to ask God to reveal any old, sinful ways you've been going to instead of going to Him. You can confess any sins that come to mind, resting in Jesus's sure forgiveness, and you can ask Him for wisdom in how to move forward. In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians in your life you can be honest with about your struggles? \_\_\_\_\_
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- 🔑 While Bible scholars aren't totally sure what the "white stone" mentioned in Revelation 2:17 signifies, we do know that, in ancient times, some juries used white stones to vote for a person's acquittal. On our own, none of us is innocent; none of us deserve acquittal. Yet, because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross for us, we who are in Christ are no longer condemned (Romans 8:1). Through His sacrifice and resurrection, He has set us free! Sin results in death, but God freely gives us the gift of eternal life through His Son Jesus (Romans 6:15-23). (If you want to know more about this good news, see page 104.) How could remembering our innocence before God, a costly innocence purchased with Jesus's own blood, make us "eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14)? (If you want to dig deeper, read Romans 6:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-10; Titus 2:11-14.)
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## GOING TO GOD

READ: PSALMS 34:4-10; 46:1-3; JEREMIAH 29:13-14; 1 PETER 5:6-7

**S**ince I was eleven, I would write down the exciting points of my life and put them in my journal.

It was a way to acknowledge all the hidden thoughts and emotions in my mind.

This journal was also filled with anxious thoughts. These pages would often be left negative and unresolved. And when I reread them, I would get anxious and mad all over again.

It's been six years since I first started journaling. In that time, I've found that writing prayers at the end of my journal entries, whether difficult or happy, gives them a reason for hope and joy. When I pray, I talk to God and often become filled with joy because I know that God always hears me and won't push me away.

We all express our emotions in different ways. But one thing that is true for all of us is that God wants us to pray and rely on Him by giving Him all of our cares—He invites us to trust Him to take care of us (1 Peter 5:7). When we do this, we acknowledge that He's in control of everything in our lives and we have no need to worry, because He loves us. We have hope in knowing that God will never leave us. Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, we can be sure that He is always with us. Through everything we face, God is our hope. He is our reason to rejoice. **✱** *Chloe Chambers*

**✱** What are some ways you process your feelings? Journaling, talking with a trusted person, going for a walk outside, etc.? \_\_\_\_\_

**✱** If you've put your trust in Jesus, you can know that He is with you all the time, including when you're processing your thoughts and feelings. Have you ever tried talking to God as you process? It's okay to be totally honest with Him—He gets it, and He is eager to listen to us and help us (Hebrews 4:14-16). We can trust Him with all our feelings, even the messy ones. Consider taking some time to process whatever thoughts and emotions you're experiencing today, maybe through journaling. You can talk to God in prayer as you go, or end your time with a prayer. \_\_\_\_\_

*God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble.  
Psalm 46:1 (CSB)*

**SHARP**

READ: EPHESIANS 6:13-18; HEBREWS 4:12

**H**ave you ever tried to cut food with a dull knife? The process can be frustrating—and messy! Similarly, a dull pencil can hardly write, and a dull chisel will not only make slow progress, but it might end up ruining the item it's supposed to be shaping. A dull tool rarely does its job well. But there is one tool that never needs sharpening—the Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says the Word of God is “sharper than any double-edged sword.” Knives and other blades get dull and need to be sharpened pretty often, but God's Word is always sharp and powerful.

God calls us to engage with His Word often by taking time alone to read the Bible and apply it to our lives, and also by gathering with fellow Christians and learning more about what it says.

God often speaks to us as we read and study His Word. Sometimes He convicts us of sin, which can be painful. It may feel even sharper than a sword. But it's really a good kind of pain, sort of like the pain we feel when we exercise our muscles. And God always tells us how to deal with the sin in our lives: by confessing it to Jesus. He freed us from sin's power so we could be brought near to God and learn to walk in His good ways. But resisting sin isn't easy. At times, it's an outright battle. People used to fight battles with swords, so we use “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17) when we fight against sin and against lies Satan wants us to believe—lies like, God doesn't love us or won't forgive us for the wrong things we do.

But interacting with God's Word isn't always painful. We can be comforted and encouraged when we remember God's many promises, and when we remember the gospel—how Jesus, God in flesh, died on the cross and rose from the dead to defeat sin and death, and how He promises to return one day and resurrect us from the dead so we can live with Him eternally. We can find great hope in these promises. And that hope will never grow dull. 📖 *A. W. Smith*

📖 As you read the Bible, do you think about what God might be saying to you? It can be easy to forget that God's Word isn't like other writings—it's written by God Himself, and it's “alive and active” (Hebrews 4:12). Consider taking some time to read today's Scripture again, paying attention to what God might be saying to you. Sometimes He reveals sin in our lives that we need to confess and turn away from, or He reminds us to trust Him through a difficult time, or He gives us clarity on a situation in our lives, or He assures us that He will always love us. \_\_\_\_\_

*For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword... Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)*

## THE WAY TO GIVE

READ: 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-11

**H**ave you ever thought, “I’d give all my money for that”? We may have this thought about possessions we really want to have, but it also may occur to us when someone we love is hurt. We might be hesitant to give our hard-earned dollars to something that feels distant, like the church offering or an organization we don’t know much about. But when someone we love is seriously hurt or sick, we’d pay anything to help them get well again. We wouldn’t even hesitate to give away our whole savings.

When we really love someone, we’re glad to give. That’s how God wants us to give to Him—not because we have to, or because He needs anything (He doesn’t), but because we love Him. That’s what the Bible means when it says, “God loves a cheerful giver” in 2 Corinthians 9:7. Being a cheerful giver is when we don’t even hesitate to give all we have because we love the person we’re giving to so much.

Of course, giving our money to God won’t always feel this way. But when we remember all He has given us, it makes us more cheerful givers. Jesus gave up everything for us. God became human and took the position of a servant. He was willing to die a terrible death on a cross so He could heal us from the sickness of sin and death and bring us near to God. He gave His life for us, and then, He rose from the dead. So now, everyone who puts their trust in Jesus is made new. As Christians, we can know that we will be resurrected like Jesus was, and we will live with Him forever in the new heavens and new earth when He returns. And in the meantime, He is always with us through His Spirit. So we can experience the immense comfort, joy, and purpose that comes from knowing the living God. When we rest in God’s immeasurable love for us and remember all He has done for us, that is what compels us to give cheerfully. **■** *A. W. Smith*

**■** In the Old Testament, God instructed His people to give a tenth (or tithe) of their income to Him. In the New Testament, we see Christians giving to God in a variety of ways. When you’ve received money—whether from a part-time job, an allowance, or doing work for neighbors, etc.—have you ever given part of it to God through tithes and offerings? He calls us to give back part of what we’re given, remembering it all belongs to Him. But He wants us to do it willingly, not because we feel guilty or pressured. Consider taking a moment to pray and talk to Jesus, thanking Him for all He’s done for you and asking Him how He is calling you to give.

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*Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:7 (NIV)*



## A FAITHFUL FATHER

READ: DEUTERONOMY 31:6; PSALM 94:14; JOHN 14:18

I am adopted from China. From what little I know (and understand), my biological mother abandoned me in a public area to be taken to an orphanage. Even though I was adopted as a little baby, I have insecurities about being abandoned or left behind again, although none of that has happened since I've been adopted. But I've heard that traumatic events, like being abandoned as a baby, can still affect a person, even if you don't actually remember the event.



While I have not been abandoned since that time, I know people who've had family and friends abandon them, and they often wonder if God will abandon them too. But the truth is, God never leaves His children.

No matter what trials are going on in our lives, or no matter how far we're running from God, He never leaves His children! And nothing can ever tear us away from Him (John 10:28-30). Once we belong to Jesus, nothing we do could ever separate us from His love (Romans 8:38-39). Because He died on the cross for us and rose from the grave, nothing—including people, circumstances, or wrong choices—can take us away from Him. How can we be sure? Because He has *promised* never to leave us! And God keeps His promises. People on this earth may leave us, but God never will. He is a faithful Father. 📖 *Lilly Wiscaver*

📖 Life in our broken world can be really hard, and there are times in all of our lives when we wonder if God has abandoned us. And so, it's good to remember God's faithfulness and His promise never to leave us. Can you think of a time you experienced God's faithfulness in your life? Do you have any favorite Bible verses that remind you of His trustworthy love? If you want to dig deeper, read Psalms 9:10; 23:4-6; 27:10; Isaiah 49:15; Luke 15. And if you want to know more about what it means to become God's child through Jesus, see page 104.

📖 If you struggle with fears of being abandoned, don't keep these fears to yourself. God has so much compassion on us, and He invites us to tell Him all about our fears, and also to tell trusted people who can help us find healing. Who is a trusted adult you could talk to? If you need someone to talk to, you can request a free conversation with Focus on the Family's Counseling Department by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) weekdays from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. (Mountain Time). Please be prepared to leave your contact information for a counselor to return a call to you as soon as possible. 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.

*For he himself has said, I will never leave you or abandon you. Hebrews 13:5 (CSB)*

## SHARING IN SUFFERING, SHARING IN COMFORT

READ: JOHN 16:33; ROMANS 1:12; 12:15; 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-12

**S**econd Corinthians 1:1-12 has been one of my favorite Bible passages for quite a while. Paul and Timothy are encouraging the Christians in Corinth, saying, “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” (verses 3-4). I have quoted this passage to other people, and also reminded myself of its truths, many times. But recently, I was struck by just how wonderful God’s comfort is.

I had been going through a long, drawn-out season of stress. It felt like whenever one thing in my life got easier, something else got harder, and I was just feeling so discouraged. But, in the midst of this hard season, I had a friend who was going through suffering too. Some of her struggles were similar, some were different. But her friendship has helped me understand this passage in a deeper way. That we comfort each other “with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” It’s such a rich and sweet thing to be able to share, not only our prayer requests, but also the ways God has been revealing Himself to us along the way.

This friend and I text each other verses and worship songs and other things that have been resonating with us. We tell each other what we’re wrestling with, what’s confusing to us, and how we’re trying to lean into God’s love. We help each other process, and sometimes we cry together. We pray for each other—on the phone, through text messages, on walks, in our living rooms, and at church. We also celebrate good news together, and just generally help each other laugh!

I feel like I’m beginning to understand the gift God has given us in the church in a new way. Because even though we suffer, there’s something really amazing about knowing that we suffer alongside each other. We have companionship, not just with fellow Christians, but with Jesus Himself, the One who suffered for us as He went to the cross to save us. He made the way for us to be with Him. And once we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we not only have the promise of eternity, we also experience God’s great love and kindness and wisdom in so many ways in our everyday lives. Yes, we will suffer. But 2 Corinthians 1:5 touches on a beautiful mystery: “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” Somehow, in some way, our suffering is participation in Christ’s suffering. And whenever we go through hard things, His comfort is always so near.

As I’ve shared some of the ways I’ve seen God working in my life with friends, it’s helped me to realize that what God is doing in and around me really matters.

It's good to celebrate and treasure the ways God reveals His love to us—whether through His Word, His people, music, nature, or any number of things—not just brush these gifts aside and forget about them. Our God is alive and active, and being in relationship with Him is just so good. As we press into His invitations, as we notice and ponder the ways He is offering us help and comfort and even joy, our understanding of the good news of Jesus continues to grow and deepen. And as we tune our hearts to the work of His Spirit, we find a hope and purpose that goes beyond our suffering. Because even in the midst of hardship, we find joy in living life with Jesus. 📖 *Hannah Howe*

*And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:7 (NIV)*

- 📖 Can you think of a time you were encouraged by hearing about what God is doing in someone else's life? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Especially when we go through hard things, why is it so important to be on the lookout for the ways God is working in and around us? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Can you think of any ways you've seen God working in your life lately? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 📖 Do you have any Christian friends or mentors you can share not only your prayer requests with, but also your questions and fears, and your big and small testimonies of God's faithfulness in your day-to-day life? If no one comes to mind, you can ask God to help you identify someone in the future. \_\_\_\_\_  
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## REFLECTIONS ON THE CROSS: CHRIST OUR PEACE

READ: ISAIAH 9:6; ROMANS 5:1; COLOSSIANS 1:15-22

**J**esus purchased peace for me,  
died upon that cursed tree;  
Now He is my hope and rest,  
beneath His blood our righteousness.  
Yes, He offers peace to all—  
always, ever, loving.

Jesus fills my heart with song,  
paid the debt for every wrong;  
Now He makes my face to shine,  
His own love becoming mine.  
Yes, He offers peace to all—  
always, ever, loving.

Christ the King, once a child,  
by His body reconciled;  
Lord of Life, strong yet meek,  
glory to the Prince of Peace.

Yes, He offers peace to all—  
always, ever,  
loving.



This poem celebrates the reconciling peace Jesus offers. Reconciling implies something has been torn apart or broken. And so it has! Our relationship with God has been broken. We—and creation itself—are “cursed” (Romans 5:17; Galatians 3:10, 13), separated from God by sin and ruled by its consequences: death and decay. We are living in a good creation gone bad.

However, as Colossians 1:20 wondrously proclaims, God “made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.” By faith we simply accept God’s payment for us. Jesus took the curse of sin upon Himself on the cross—and by His resurrection destroyed it! This means every kind of brokenness will be undone (Romans 8:18-25; Revelation 21:1-5). Though we are still waiting for the final Hallelujah upon Christ’s return, the payment has already been made. Heaven and earth will again be at peace. On that day we will join the heavenly host in their joyful shout: “The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). **✠** *G. Kam Congleton*

**✠** What sticks out to you about the reconciling peace Jesus offers? (If you want to learn more, see page 104.)

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*Through Him [Jesus Christ] God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross. Colossians 1:20 (NLT)*

**RUNNER**

READ: PSALM 139:7-10, LUKE 15:1-7, 11-32

**M**y dog Ellie likes a good run around the neighborhood. She likes to escape out the front door, even if it's only open a crack. She doesn't come back without a chase, she is NOT smart when it comes to the busy street we live on, and if there's a rabbit she's long gone! More often than not she comes home muddy. More than once she's come home injured and needing extra care.

When I catch up with Ellie and call for her to come, she wags her tail, and then she's off again. Other times she looks at me with wild, laughing eyes as if to say, "Come home? Not happening!" These times she goes a little farther, gets a little closer to the cars, or visits the unfriendly dog down the street. And there I am, calling, shadowing, hoping to get close, and always waiting for her to come back. By the time she does, Ellie is usually extra thankful to be back under my protection, and usually she regrets running out the door in the first place.

It took a few years of this for me to realize how like my dog I am. I'm a runner. If that door gets opened even just a crack, there I go, away toward whatever sin looks interesting at that moment. I don't come back without a chase, I am NOT smart when it comes to the lure and lies of the devil, and if there's a rabbit trail to follow, I go! More often than not, I get covered in the muck and mud that comes along with sin, and sometimes I get injured by my choices and need extra care. Always, always I am sorry and so thankful to be back under Jesus's protection.

I think about how I never leave Ellie to run the neighborhood alone. I'm always as close as she'll let me get, hoping to snatch her up out of harm's way. Jesus is the same way with me. There I am getting into more and more trouble, and there He is—calling, shadowing, and snatching me up out of harm's way. And eventually, when I realize I need to be back under His wing of protection, Jesus is right there, ready to care for my hurts and help me follow Him again.

We all go through doors we shouldn't and find ourselves out from under the protective wing of our loving Father. Don't let the lies of the enemy keep you from going back to where you're well-loved. Jesus is always waiting, and often closer than we think. 📖 *Abbi Bloem*

📖 As Christians, we know Jesus is always as close as can be (John 10:27-30; Romans 8:35-39). Yet, there may be times when we feel distant from Jesus because we've been stubbornly going our own way. But because He loves us, He wants to help us turn away from sin and back to Him. How could today's analogy give us hope to turn to Jesus, even when we've really messed up? \_\_\_\_\_

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

**EVEN HERE**

READ: GENESIS 3:1-9; PSALMS 89:9; 107:29; EPHESIANS 2:4-10

**N**yoka twisted her scaly blue body around and laughed as she watched the other merpeople, who swam behind her. The chilly ocean water and vibrant coral made it a perfect day for a game of capture the flag. As she continued to maneuver her way through the seaweed, looking for the red flag, a flash of a dark fin caught her eye. Nyoka had never seen a creature like that before, so she ducked behind some particularly large stalks of kelp and then tore off after it.

Within minutes, she found that the gray figure was swimming farther and farther down into the depths of the ocean. Her Father's voice of warning tugged at the back of her mind, but Nyoka continued her pursuit. She watched the creature abruptly change its course and dive down into a narrow, rocky hole. She knew the passage well, for it was the one place her Father forbade her to go. The mermaid waited only a moment before following.

Darkness engulfed her. As her eyes started to adjust, Nyoka shook her head. That was when she heard a cackle from behind her. Through the haze, she felt she could almost make out the creature's form, its tail swaying back and forth. "Finally, you are mine!"

Her heart skipped a beat. "Wh-who are you?" She managed to stutter. But the creature only laughed again and then appeared in front of her face. "I am Death." The faint light from above started to dim, and the water churned darker. Nyoka felt herself starting to fade, her scales beginning to lose their color. Her eyes closed, and she managed to cry out softly, "Father, save me."

At the whisper of those words, the ocean came alive. The salt water went from midnight black to clear blue as light flooded the space around her. A thunderous voice echoed into the deep, and the dark form fled in terror. Nyoka opened her eyes and saw her Father swimming toward her. "I'm sorry," she sobbed. "I'm so, so sorry." He only pulled her closer and softly spoke into her ear, "Even here, I am with you." 🗝

*Molly McTernan*

🗝 Has there ever been a time when you felt like you were too deep for God to save you? We've all sinned, choosing to go our own way instead of listening to God. The result of sin is death, and none of us can save ourselves. Yet God, in His great mercy, is so eager to save us. Jesus was willing to die for us, and then rise again, so we could be forgiven and saved from sin and death. (For more about this good news, see page 104.) Even as Christians, we sometimes think we're too far gone, and we need to be reminded again that Jesus saved us and is still saving us and will save us in the end. What He started—that is, salvation—He will complete (Philippians 1:6).

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*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. Ephesians 2:4-5 (NIV)*


## CHANGE AND THE ONE WHO DOESN'T CHANGE


READ: NUMBERS 23:19; PSALMS 100:5; 102:25-27; MALACHI 3:6


If you had asked me three years ago if I could ever see my life being what it is today, I would have given a definite “no.” At the time, my family—and world—were in a completely different place. The changes that I’ve gone through were unexpected and unrequested.

As you go through life, there are periods when big changes take place. Sometimes you’re expecting the changes, like when you start at a new school or when you graduate and it’s time to begin your adult life. And other times, changes seem to come out of nowhere. You might feel like your life is up in the air and you have no control over any of it.

As we face all kinds of changes, it’s important to remember that God doesn’t change. The One who made us and loves us—the One who wants so much for us to be with Him that He sent Jesus to die for us and rise from the dead—He remains the same through all the ups and downs. He has saved His people from sin and death, and He promises to return one day to make all things new and dwell with us forever. In the meantime, if we’ve put our trust in Jesus, we can know that He has given us His Holy Spirit to live in us, providing strength, comfort, and God’s own presence.

Through all of the changes in my life, I have been left a little more in awe of God than I was before. One, because He brings me through the changes and helps me as I adjust. And two, because I see how He is right there, the same as He has always been, being that constant in my life that keeps me steady.  *Emily Acker*

 Are you ever overwhelmed by the changes happening in your life? God sees you. He loves you, and He is carrying you through these changes. He will never abandon you. There is nothing in the world, or beyond, that can shake His everlasting love for you (Romans 8:35-39). Because Jesus went to the cross for us, we can always rest in His care for us and in His sure forgiveness. How could it be comforting and steadying to remember God’s faithfulness in chaotic times? Can you think of any ways you’ve experienced His faithfulness? What was that like? \_\_\_\_\_

 When life feels chaotic and unpredictable, God invites us to bring these feelings to Him and ask Him to help us remember His steadying presence. He delights in answering these prayers. In addition to talking to God, who are trusted Christians you can talk to when you’re struggling to keep up with life’s changes—such as friends, parents, pastors, youth leaders, or counselors? \_\_\_\_\_

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

## 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](https://unlocked.org/knowjesus) 🔑