JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2021

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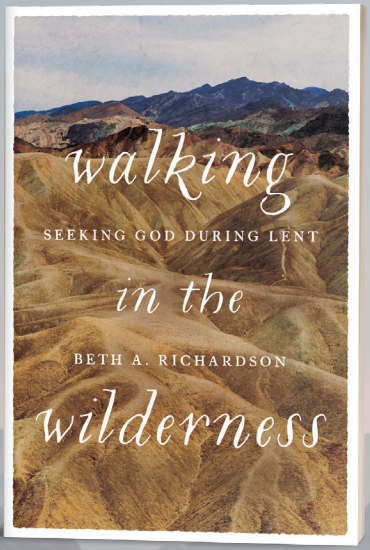

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COVER ART INTERPRETATION

Camino a Belén

Artist: Marie Tere Pérez
(Puerto Rico, Contemporary)

Interpreter: Kathryn A. Kimball, Former Curator, The Upper Room Chapel/Christian Art Museum

Wise men. Kings. Magi. Called by different names, their story appears in Matthew 2:1-12. They followed a star that guided them to Bethlehem where they encountered the Christ child and gave him "gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matt. 2:11, NRSV).

The three figures depicted on the cover are arrayed in the way that we would imagine kings to be. Each one wears a bejeweled crown and offers a magnificent gift. But the majestic, brightly colored figures hold out their gifts and look downward, perhaps a sign of humility. This posture is not what we might expect from earthly kings. The star appears above them indicating that they have traveled the "Camino a Belén" — the road to Bethlehem — and have now arrived to present their gifts to the child.

The kings have unique crowns, faces, robes, and gifts — the artist uses wide, dark borders to create a unique shape and identity for each one. At the same time, the lines merge and blend, binding the three together in community as they share a new identity shaped by their experience of seeking the Christ child. The striking geometric shapes and colors of their faces direct our eyes toward the gifts they have brought with them. Who are these figures to us today, and what do they represent? Perhaps they are us, each unique but part of a community bound together as followers of the child born in Bethlehem.

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Patient Faith

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

— Matthew 2:14-15 (NRSV)

When a new year arrives, I find myself impatient for a fresh start. Some years, the fresh start I anticipate is dramatic — starting a new job or forming a new habit. Other years, the fresh start is simply a return to a more predictable pattern of life after the bustle of the Christmas season. Regardless of the shape a new start takes, I want immediate results. But any meaningful change requires time and patience.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus experienced a dramatic new start when they fled to Egypt to escape Herod (see Matt. 2:13-15). At God's urging, they fled the land they knew for a place of safety, not knowing how long they would stay. I imagine that following God's instructions must have required a great deal of trust and patience from Mary and Joseph as they set out for Egypt, not sure what would come next.

From the stories in this issue, it is clear that even today faithful living requires patient faith. Rarely does God immediately answer the prayers of many of the writers. Clarity about how God is working for good in a situation often comes only in retrospect. Healing, if it comes at all, takes time and care and rest. But the writers in this issue also demonstrate that patient faith is worth the struggle because when we practice our faith with intention and listen for God in the midst of our challenges, we will find that God is with us always. I pray that as you read this issue, you will find strength to persevere and courage to wait patiently to see how God is moving in your life this year.

— Lindsay L. Gray
Editorial Director

From the Archives

With gratitude, we celebrated the retirement of our publisher, Stephen D. Bryant, in December 2020. His contributions to The Upper Room *have been far-reaching. His Editor's Note from the March-April 2010 issue is reprinted below.*

In celebration of this 75th Anniversary year of *The Upper Room*, I invite you to explore the "upper room" in the Bible. The upper room first shows up described as "a large room upstairs" (Mark 14:12-15, NRSV) where Jesus shared a last supper with his disciples. This meal would forever symbolize our shared life with God in Christ.

The same upper room plays a role on Easter. The "house where the disciples had met" (John 20:19) on Easter evening was that familiar room. As the disciples huddled there in grief and fear, the risen Christ came among them. He spoke peace to their hearts and gave them power to forgive (20:19-23). A week later, Christ returned there and overcame Thomas' doubt with convincing grace (20:24-29).

According to the account in Acts 1–2, the familiar "room upstairs" became the birthplace of the church. Following Jesus' ascension (Acts 1:9-11), the disciples "went to the room upstairs . . . constantly devoting themselves to prayer" for many days (Acts 1:13-14). They prepared for spiritual transformation while actively waiting for "the promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4). On the Day of Pentecost all those together in prayer "were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" the good news of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:4). Having been made one with Christ and one with each other, they became the body of Christ.

Why does the Bible never again mention the upper room? Because the place of new birth is not Jerusalem but any place people gather to seek Christ's transforming presence. So day by day as you read *The Upper Room*, pause to enter into Christ's presence right where you are. Make room in your heart for God's transforming love, and resolve to go where the Spirit sends you to be Christ's good news.

— Stephen D. Bryant
Former World Editor and Publisher

Where the World Meets to Pray

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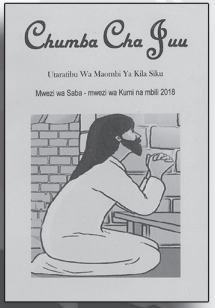
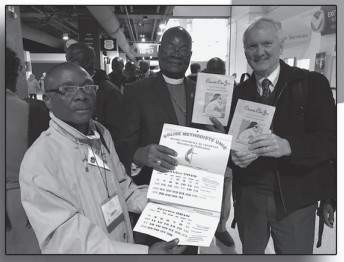
The Upper Room is now available in Kiswahili! This edition is produced by the East Congo Episcopal Area, United Methodist Church, publishing team.





THE JUNK DRAWER

FRI
JAN 1
2021

Read Luke 9:1-6*

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

— Galatians 5:1 (NIV)

Every time I opened the junk drawer in my kitchen, I became stressed out and frustrated. I could never find what I needed, and the clutter was unbearable. Finally one day I decided to clean out that jam-packed drawer. In doing so, I discovered that I was holding on to a lot of unnecessary items that I had tossed into the drawer because "I might need that later" or "I just can't give that up" or "I don't know what to do with this." In reality, I didn't need those things at all, and they ended up as burdens — making the drawer a cluttered mess.

In life I carry around my own personal junk drawer filled with harbored hurts, worries, shame, sin — you name it. I lug it around every day, avoiding dealing with the contents but also refusing to let them go.

Reading today's quoted scripture, I realized that for me the yoke of slavery was symbolized by the clutter of my junk drawer. Now, every time I open my newly cleaned drawer, I remember that I don't have to hold on to sin, shame, and anger because living with Christ has set me free.

Thought for the Day
Christ sets me free to live with abundant joy.

Prayer: Father God, help us rid our lives of harbored hurts and needless fears that keep us from the joy of your abundant life. Your son has set us free; help us to walk in that freedom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Maddie Falk (Texas, USA)

Prayer Focus: **SOMEONE HANGING ON TO AN OLD HURT**

* The Bible readings are selected with great care, and we urge you to include the suggested reading in your devotional time.

SAT
JAN 2
2021

PERSEVERANCE

READ Isaiah 40:28-31

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

— Isaiah 40:31 (NIV)

When I was younger and rode my bicycle long distances, the lesson of today's quoted verse was made very real to me. I remember seeing hills in the distance that appeared to be nearly vertical and impossible to pedal over. The mirage of the looming challenge stirred apprehension and dread in my mind, and I entertained thoughts of quitting and turning around to go home. But I always made the decision to forge ahead and confront the situation. Each time, to my surprise and delight, the impossibility of the climb evaporated as I started to ride up the hill. The steepness of the road melted away, and I was emboldened with the confidence to conquer the challenge. The ride required much effort; but with one pedal stroke after another I accomplished my goal, and a sense of achievement and confidence blossomed in me.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God can help me persevere to reach my goals.

How many times in our lives has each of us encountered a "steep hill"? With a strong faith in God and a personal resolve to see a task or difficulty through, we all can overcome obstacles that at first may cause us to recoil. But each victory we achieve strengthens us. As we strengthen our faith so as to move mountains, we can imbue others around us with the same strength.

Prayer: Dear Lord, grant us the strength and peace that comes from faith in Jesus Christ so that we will not shrink from obligations and opportunities we face each day. Amen.

Craig Sanford (Kansas, USA) — See p. 21.

IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE

SUN JAN 3 2021

READ Habakkuk 3:16-19

As for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me.

— Micah 7:7 (NIV)

One of my favorite scripture passages is Habakkuk's prayer. The passage became personal for me on the day my car malfunctioned on my way home. I stopped in the parking lot of the local shopping center because it started to rain. It was getting dark, my daughters and I were hungry, and I had hardly any money — not even enough to make a phone call.

I approached some police officers to ask them to call my husband, and when I returned to my car I prayed out loud to God. Soon people gathered around us offering help. God's presence was evident during this stressful moment. Although the problem was not yet resolved, I began to experience a sense of calm.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In moments of crisis, I will remain strong and praise God.

Being faithful does not simply mean attending church services and singing hymns every Sunday. It means praising and looking for God in every circumstance, no matter how bleak.

Habakkuk was in deep anguish and still prayed and praised God. Habakkuk reminds us to wait patiently. God did not forget the prophet, and God will not forget us.

Prayer: Faithful God, help us to remember that we are yours when chaos descends on us. Strengthen our resolve to praise you in all circumstances. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Angélica Afú (Panama)

MON
JAN 4
2021

GOD'S BLESSINGS

READ Psalm 103:1-8

Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

— Psalm 103:1-2 (KJV)

Today's quoted verses were my childhood pastor's favorite opening greeting to our small, rural congregation in eastern Virginia. He worked as a church planter and started many churches throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. I was one of the first people he baptized in that church. I was eight years old, and he preached the gospel to me throughout my childhood. The church is now large, and that pastor has long since passed on.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Remembering past blessings with gratitude strengthens me for today.

Today, my soul praises the holy name of the Lord for the many Christian congregations that have prayed for me throughout my life, from the church and pastor of my faith's beginnings to the loving congregation currently blessing me and my loved ones. The Lord's blessings are many. When we recount them in our hearts with gratitude, these blessings encourage us in all circumstances. They help us rejoice in God's abundance in the past as well as in the blessings of God which will surely come!

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the many blessings you have sent throughout our lives and for all blessings yet to come. We pray as Jesus taught us, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:2-4, NIV). Amen.

Gary E. Crum (Virginia, USA)

MEETING WITH GOD

TUES JAN 5 2021

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

The Lord said to Moses, ***"There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."***
— Exodus 25:22 (NIV)

I was in my twenties and working in the IT department of a hospital. The department was located in the basement of the parking garage, so I took walks at lunchtime to get out in the sun. I often walked to the chapel at the hospital, which is where I first found *The Upper Room*. As a new Christian, I hungered to meet with God and to hear God's voice, and God spoke to me through this publication and the Bible.

Today I still have that hunger, and God continues to speak to me through both this devotional guide and the Bible. I read it every morning during my quiet time. I pray, "Please, Lord, speak to me through your word." And the Lord does!

In the scripture quoted above, Moses met with God at the ark. Thankfully today we have God's Spirit living in us, allowing us to meet with God throughout the day, every day. God is our source of love, forgiveness, encouragement, teaching, and direction. I hope to continue growing in the practice of praying and meeting God throughout the day.

Thought for the Day
I can meet with God all day, every day.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for your word and your Holy Spirit. Thank you for allowing us to come to you at any time and for giving us ears and hearts to hear when you speak to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Irene E. Chomicki (Texas, USA)

Prayer Focus: **THOSE WHO WORK IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

WED
JAN 6
2021

CHOOSING A PATH

READ Proverbs 16:1-9

In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.

— Proverbs 16:9 (NIV)

For a long time I believed that there was only one clear path for my life and that if I missed it, I would be out of God's perfect will for me. But I think that obeying God is not that clear-cut. I now believe God has given us interests and talents in areas that will bring us a joyful life. Surely we have a say in the outcome, but I believe God can bless anything we put our hands and hearts to as long as we are seeking God. Proverbs 16:9 says, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps."

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
My God-given talents are tools for serving God's people.

What liberating words! When I faithfully plan a course of action, God will be with me every step of the way. God has given me talents and desires; it is up to me to use them. I was always afraid that God would call me to go somewhere I didn't want to go — to preach the gospel there. Maybe someday God will; but I also believe that God will place a desire in my heart to do so. For now, I just want to use the talents God has given me and minister in the circles I live in, remembering that God wants the best for me.

Prayer: O God, thank you for gifts and talents we can use to joyfully serve your people. Amen.

George Peters (British Columbia, Canada)

A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

THUR
JAN 7
2021

READ Psalm 4:1-8

I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.

— Psalm 16:7 (NIV)

In the past, sleep sometimes eluded me. Though I would try to relax, I would "replay" conversations from the day and consider how I might have responded differently. Sometimes I would fret about a difficult situation at work or the health of a loved one.

As my faith grew, I realized such brooding was counterproductive — God was calling me to focus on positive things (see Phil. 4:8). I started what I now call my blessing book. At the beginning of each year I purchase a weekly planner with several lines for each day. Before going to bed I spend a few minutes reflecting on the day — its accomplishments, challenges, and blessings — and list things for which I am thankful. These blessings can be as ordinary as a call from a friend or as remarkable as recovering from surgery. When I'm concerned about something, I make a notation to remind me that God is in control and prayerfully turn the situation over to the Lord. As I write, I give thanks for the many ways I encounter God's love.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Counting my blessings can bring me peace.

Lately it has become common for me to start my list of blessings with "a good night's sleep." My nighttime anxiety has been exchanged for the peace only God can give.

Prayer: God of peace, thank you for the gift of rest. Help us to trust you with our worries. Amen.

Lisa Stackpole (Wisconsin, USA)

FRI
JAN 8
2021

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE

READ Philippians 2:1-7

Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

— 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

While hiking a mountain trail on my way to explore an abandoned gold mine, I thought of the elderly man who had shown me the trailhead and described his hike up this same path 30 years ago. I also thought of the miners who must have made this trek countless times when the mine was operational over 100 years ago. They would have seen the same clear stream rushing along the trail, the same towering peaks, and even some of the same trees. They would have experienced the same challenges and undoubtedly many more.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Jesus walks with me today and every day.

Such is our spiritual journey. Others have gone before us, and the path is there for us to follow. We have the ultimate guide in Jesus Christ, and we can follow in his footsteps to avoid becoming lost. If we accept Jesus as our guide, it is important for us also to accept the responsibility of helping others we may meet along the way, whether their needs are physical, emotional, or spiritual. Jesus would not have left them behind, and so we are called to help those around us as well.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for those who came before us to guide us on the path to salvation. Thank you most of all for the example given us by Christ Jesus as we attempt to follow in his footsteps. Amen.

Robert E. Boertien (Oregon, USA)

THE GOD WHO CARES

SAT
JAN 9
2021

Read 1 Peter 5:1-10

Cast all your anxiety on [God]
because he cares for you.

— 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV)

While preparing to plant cassava, I had to clear tall grass from the plot of land. I decided to burn the partially green, partially dried grass. Because it was not a dry season, I thought this would be safe; but the fire burned much faster than I expected. I began to panic as the fire threatened to engulf the neighboring plots of land. Frantically, I threw sand on the fire to put it out. The smoke began to choke me.

Then I remembered to call on the Lord. I prayed through the panic: "Lord, help me; you always help me when I ask. Please don't let this fire cross the boundaries." The fire eventually died down, and I lifted my hands and thanked God.

Anxiety is a natural response to misfortune and danger. When we hold on to our anxiety and allow it to overwhelm us, fear may keep us from being able to think calmly or trust God.

Thought for the Day
The best thing I can do with my anxiety is to give it to God.

Today's verse reminds us that we can cast our fears on the Lord. In times of anxiety, we can trust that the God who cares for us will move to help us solve our problems.

Prayer: Dear God, help us when we cast our anxiety on you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Charity M. Kiregyera (Kampala, Uganda)

SUN
JAN 10
2021

TAKE HEART

READ Galatians 6:1-9

If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.
— Romans 8:25 (NRSV)

As a teenager, I would wake my sister every Sunday morning and ask, "Do you want to go to church with me?" She always said no, but then one day she said yes. So then I started asking, "Will you go on a mission trip with me?" Again, she kept saying no until one day she said yes. While we were in Haiti, my mentor, who knew how much I had wanted my sister to be part of the church, gave me a hug and said, "You did it."

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today I will trust God's timing.

But you see, I didn't do anything; God did. I was just a voice for God. Every Sunday morning that I asked my sister to come to church and she declined, God was one week closer to having another child in the kingdom. And God was smiling. As my mentor congratulated me, I realized that God was also thanking me for trusting God's timing. Every new "no" for me might be one less "no" for God. I just need to trust God's timing.

We don't always get an immediate answer from God, but it is our duty to serve God and do God's will even when we can't yet see God's plans or gifts. God has an answer; we may just need to give it more time.

Prayer: Dear God, provide us with the endurance to do your will and the patience to wait on your timing. Amen.

Rachel Turner (Texas, USA)

STRETCH OUT YOUR HAND

MON JAN 11 2021

Read Exodus 14:15-22

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back . . . and turned it into dry land. . . . and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground.

— Exodus 14:21-22 (NIV)

The year 2018 was one of enormous change for me. My daughter was born, and both of my grandmothers died within a three-month period. After constant prayer I came to the conclusion that the best way to find peace and rest is always to raise our hands in praise and prayer to God.

When the Egyptians were closing in on the Israelites after Moses led them out of Egypt, God commanded Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea to part the waters. After decades in bondage and slavery it would have been easy for Moses to decline in fatigue, doubt, or anger. Instead of allowing the situation to defeat him and his people, Moses chose to listen to God. He raised his staff and stretched his hand over the water. This one act of obedience opened the window for a miracle and delivered the Israelites from the hands of Pharaoh.

Thought for the Day
Praising God through my struggles helps lead me through them.

When we choose to worship God no matter our circumstances, God can do things that to the world seem impossible. No matter how exhausted we are under the weight of our struggle, God does not want us to despair. God is with us as we persevere.

Prayer: Faithful God, give us the strength to lift our hands to you when we are weak from struggle. Amen.

Zach Schaar (Ohio, USA)

TUES
JAN 12
2021

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

Read Isaiah 65:17-25

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

— Matthew 7:7 (NIV)

Growing up in the London suburbs, I remember mischievous children knocking at our door and running off before my mother had time to open it. She would be puzzled and then upset that her work had been interrupted. When I moved to a new town as an adult, I experienced the same prank and discovered how frustrating it was to open the door to find no one there.

Thought for the Day
God always responds when I call.

For many years I tried to lead my life without God's guidance. Finally, when everything fell apart, a wise Christian friend suggested I pray to God for help. Somewhat skeptically I "knocked" in prayer and to my amazement discovered God's door opened to me. With God's help and the assistance of Christian friends, I got my life on track. Over the years I have come to trust that when I knock at God's door, God will always open it to me.

I wonder if there are times when I am like the children playing their game. When have I knocked at God's door in prayer but not waited around long enough to hear an answer? Does God open the door to find I have vanished? The miracle of grace is that God constantly listens for our knocking and always responds in love by being there for us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, grant us perseverance and persistence in prayer. Amen.

Faith Ford (England, United Kingdom)

WED
JAN 13
2021

Read Psalm 34:4-19

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.

— Psalm 34:19 (NRSV)

During my senior year of college, all was well in my world. I planned to go to seminary and to marry my college sweetheart. But then she broke up with me. A few days later my Marine Corps Reserve unit was activated to go to Iraq, and I was told to be ready for an 18-month deployment. At the same time, I had a delay in receiving my commission as a Navy chaplain.

I felt rejected and alone, so I got on my knees and prayed. Right after praying, an idea came to me — I could work with my professors to accelerate my graduation before going to Iraq. By the grace of God, I was able to graduate early, I was accepted to seminary, and shortly thereafter received my commission as a Navy chaplain. Then my Marine Corps Reserve unit called to tell me that my position for deployment wasn't needed.

Thought for the Day
Today I will remember that God is with me in my troubles.

We all experience rejection and loneliness. While David was on the run from Saul, he must have felt rejected and lonely (see 1 Sam. 21–24). However, in today's reading, we see that David's relationship with God reassured him that God had not forsaken him but was close and wanted him to have salvation. And the same is true for us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to follow your example and draw close to God, even when it seems like our world is falling apart. Amen.

Rosario "Roz" Picardo (Ohio, USA) — See back cover.

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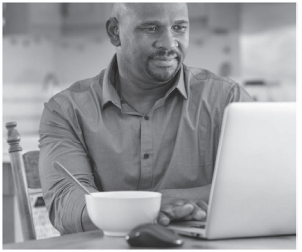

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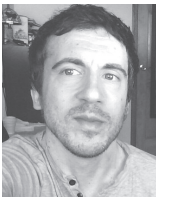
Real people. Real stories. Real faith.

Mary Ng Shwu Ling (p. 49) is a tutor who enjoys soap art, candle making, leather crafting, and cooking.

Verner Guthrie (p. 57) is a retired scientist. He likes to garden, paint landscapes, and do mission work.

Rebecca Bolin (p. 36) is an adjunct instructor at Texas A&M University. Her passion is working with international students.



Aaron Caruso (p. 51) is a freelance writer, a singer-songwriter, and a sports enthusiast.

Sister Alegría del Señor (p. 37) is a nun in Honduras who serves at the local public health clinic.

Alexandre de Azevedo (p. 70) is a psychology professional who works with children and adolescents at risk.

Madeline Twooney (p. 44) loves dancing while cooking and finds her greatest inspiration when she writes at Starbucks.

Craig Sanford (p. 8) is a retired power plant operator. He enjoys playing the piano and trumpet.

Share YOUR story today!

The people pictured on this page did.

See devotional.upperroom.org/guidelines for writers guidelines or send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the editorial office address (p. 1). Submit online: submissions.upperroom.org

THUR
JAN 14
2021

A BUTTERFLY'S LESSON

READ Jeremiah 18:1-6

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)

I once had the opportunity to visit a butterfly garden where I saw a variety of species of butterflies with their beautiful shades of color and differing sizes. I thought about the various stages through which these insects must pass to reach adulthood and become butterflies.

As I meditated on this image, I stopped to think about our spiritual life. We too must experience transformation in order to renew ourselves, to grow, and to share our faith with others by showing what God does in our lives. As followers of Jesus we become "the light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." (See Matt. 5:13-14.) Our words and actions are transformed!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Christ has the power to change my life.

And how do we experience such a transformation? Through a life of intimacy with God — by reading God's word, by praying, and by serving in Jesus' name. Just as nature renews itself every season, our spiritual life will be renewed when we follow the way of Christ.

Prayer: Transform us, Lord! Search us and change our whole being, giving us a new and sanctified life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Carolina Maia Faria (Minas Gerais, Brazil)

THE WAY OUT

FRI
JAN 15
2021

Read John 8:12-14

I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.

— Isaiah 42:16 (NIV)

When I was a young girl growing up in rural northeast Georgia, we would visit my grandmother every other year for Christmas in Rhode Island. Though I was excited to see my grandmother, I always dreaded one part of the trip — driving through the Lincoln Tunnel. The tunnel was long and dark. As soon as we entered, I would close my eyes, only peeking every so often to check our progress. When I told my father that it bothered me to be in the tunnel because it was so scary, he said, "Do you want to see your grandmother?" "Of course," I said. "Well, then," he would say, "we have to go through the tunnel to get to your grandmother's house." After that, I would always watch for the light at the end of the tunnel because I knew it would lead to my grandmother.

Later in my life, I was going through a difficult divorce; sometimes I wished there were another way. I begged God to help me avoid this "tunnel time" in my life. But just as my loving father had reminded me — the only way *out* is *through*.

Thought for the Day
God's light will lead me through any challenge.

Though this experience was unpleasant, I knew better days were waiting for me. I would catch glimpses of God's light even on the darkest days, and eventually I saw the full light at the end of my tunnel.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to stay focused on you and your light during the dark, scary experiences of life. Amen.

Michelle Scarboro (Georgia, USA)

SAT
JAN 16
2021

A BANGED-UP DIME

Read Psalm 51:1-7

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
— Psalm 51:2 (NIV)

I went to Houston after Hurricane Harvey as part of a disaster-relief team. We were working to clean out a house damaged by the flooding. While taking some debris to the curb, I noticed a small object lying in the street. Curious, I picked up the object and cleaned off the mud. It was a dime. The coin was no longer shiny and the edges were nicked and scarred. Yet it was still a dime and still worth 10 cents.

Thought for the Day
No matter my appearance, God knows my true worth.

I kept the dime as a reminder of the effects of the hurricane. The more I looked at it, though, the more I saw the dime as a symbol of our banged-up lives.

Often the world sees people as having little value. But God sees things differently. The Lord is mindful of us (see Ps. 8:4-6) even if we are banged up.

Sin and its consequences can also leave us scarred. Fortunately, God knows our value. My souvenir dime is a reminder that God is less concerned with our outward appearances than our intrinsic value. To God, every person is of infinite value.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to recognize our full worth and the worth of others, no matter how banged up we may be. Amen.

Thomas J. Doubt (Arizona, USA) — See back cover.

HOPE IN SUFFERING

SUN JAN 17 2021

Read Lamentations 3:19-26

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.

— Lamentations 3:22 (NRSV)

I was devastated when the biopsy showed cancer in my left breast. I felt the weight of the world crashing down on me. I could not stop crying. What will I do? Who will take on my work responsibilities? Where will I get the money for the expensive treatment? In my mind I was questioning God, *Why me?*

But God showed me that nothing is impossible. Slowly, financial help poured in, and tremendous prayer support came from all over. My loving husband never left my side and nurtured me throughout the difficult period of chemotherapy and recovery. I had a competent and compassionate oncologist. Above all, God encouraged me every day without fail through the Bible and devotional readings.

Six years have passed, and my doctor has announced that I am now cancer-free. Through my diagnosis, treatment, and recovery I came to know for myself that God indeed never fails. God's promises are true. As I enter into retirement, I am excited to discover new avenues for service and to tell my story to inspire others.

Thought for the Day
I will share my story of God's faithfulness with someone today.

Prayer: God who heals, help us to express our gratitude to you by offering our lives to you for your purposes. Use us for your glory. Amen.

Bezalie Bautista Uc-Kung (Philippines) — See back cover.

MON
JAN 18
2021

WORTH THE EFFORT

Read Psalm 145:13-21

The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

— Psalm 145:18 (NRSV)

When I was younger, prayer seemed like a chore to check off my to-do list. I would schedule time to pray and say the words I thought I should. Often I would simply ask for things I wanted, and if I didn't get them I would complain to God.

As I matured in my faith and grew closer to God, I began to ask for less and share with God more, and I often left my prayer time relieved of my burdens and fears. I found that prayer could be surprisingly refreshing — especially if I didn't talk *at* God but spoke *to* God.

Thought for the Day
I can experience God's love through prayer.

Now that I'm older, I've realized that far from being a chore, prayer can be like spending time with a beloved friend. The need to say something is often less important than simply being together. I try to listen more than I talk, and I revel in the joy of being with God.

God will listen to our prayers any time, regardless of what we've done in the past or where we are in our spiritual journey. All we have to do is show up, tune out distractions, and open our hearts. I'm not always successful in listening to God, but I've learned that it's always worth the effort.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for always being with us. Help us to remember that your love for us is constant and steadfast. Amen.

Abigail Gary (Pennsylvania, USA)

PATIENT WITNESS

TUES JAN 19 2021

Read Luke 13:6-9

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

— Galatians 6:9 (NIV)

As a pastor, I rarely saw significant impact from my sermons, confirmation classes, home and hospital visits, radio and television broadcasts, committee meetings, or any other work.

But Jesus' parable of the fruitless fig tree in Luke 13 teaches us that we were created to be fruitful and that we should be patient and graceful toward others. Like the vineyard worker who proposed giving the fig tree more time to produce, we are called to be patient and persistent witnesses and disciples.

We may not see results at first. Someone I taught years ago recently told me that as a youth she did not fully understand or appreciate my lessons, but she reread the class materials as an adult and found new meaning in them. This interaction reminded me that God will use our efforts in time.

Thought for the Day
I can trust God to use my faithful witness for good.

The apostle Paul understood this when he said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Cor. 3:6). We are called to be faithful and to trust that God's Holy Spirit, working through many, will bring a good outcome. Let us not grow weary in doing God's work.

Prayer: We thank you, God, for the gift of salvation and the call to be witnesses in word and deed. We pray in the power of our Savior's name. Amen.

Elmer A. Dickson (Florida, USA)

WED
JAN 20
2021

OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE

Read Romans 10:1-15

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

— Romans 10:14 (NIV)

I am an extrovert, but I find it intimidating to talk openly about Christ and following him. I feel at a loss for words, nervous of how my message will be received, and worried that I won't have answers to tough questions. Most people I know who openly speak of Christian faith can easily quote Bible verses for any occasion, have read mountains of Christian literature, and never seem to stumble answering any question. That is not me. I feel unprepared and too new in my own faith to tell others about following Jesus.

Thought for the Day
I don't have to have all the answers to share God's love with others.

But then I felt a prompting to "just start talking." That nudge quickly became one I could not ignore. I prayed for guidance and courage, and God answered with today's quoted verse. I realized that the Lord knows we will never have all the answers. Yet we still are directed to spread the message of God's love.

Over the weeks that followed, I spoke with many of my non-Christian friends about my faith. Most of my friends listened, a few asked questions, and one came to church with me. The more I talked about Jesus, the easier it became. I just needed to listen and follow God's guidance.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give us opportunities to tell others about your greatness and love. Amen.

Jennifer Brigandi (Ontario, Canada)

AN INVITATION

THUR
JAN 21
2021

Read Psalm 16:5-11

Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

— Ephesians 2:13 (NRSV)

One day when I was sitting at my kitchen table, I bent down to pick up a dropped utensil. I noticed a single, tiny ant wandering aimlessly on my ceramic tile floor. It was moving around in erratic circles, each growing larger and larger until the ant happened upon a grout line. The ant then continued along the grout line, following it to the door that led outside. Its tiny body slipped under the door, and it crossed the threshold into the freedom of fresh air.

The ant's meandering course made me think about my life's path. As a young man I wandered aimlessly through life; I always felt trapped and without direction. It wasn't until my future wife invited me to church that my life changed. That invitation set me on a path to the freedom found only in Christ. I felt calm as I sensed that I was, at last, headed in the right direction. In time, I crossed the threshold to the fresh air of peace, hope, and joy. What a blessing it was to have been shown that path!

Thought for the Day
My simple invitation can change someone's life of faith.

Prayer: God of grace and mercy, thank you for giving us a way to you. Amen.

Thomas Jones (Florida, USA)

FRI
JAN 22
2021

GOD'S WONDERFUL GIFT

READ Ecclesiastes 3:1-12

Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.
— Psalm 90:12 (NRSV)

"Let me finish typing this page," or "I'll come as soon as I make one quick phone call." As a busy pastor, I often said such things to my husband. People had expectations of me, and my responsibilities were a priority. But the page became three pages or the quick phone call lasted an hour, and the ball game was over or the sunset gone before I joined him.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today I will make the most of God's gift of time.

My thinking sounded logical, and it was easy to justify my excuses. Someday, I rationalized, we would have time for each other. My husband never complained, but I was missing golden opportunities with the one I loved. I did not know our time together would be cut short by his fatal stroke at the age of 65.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 reminds us that "there is a time for everything." In the apostle Paul's charge to Timothy (see 1 Tim. 6:17), we learn that God provides everything for our enjoyment. Time with a spouse is meant for enjoyment, but we get caught up in an overabundance of responsibilities that keep us from enjoying the life God wants us to have. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes it clear that time with those he loved was important. (See Mark 6:30-32.)

My feeble excuses stole the joy of God's precious gift of time with my husband. Though our work is important, God wants us to be happy in our daily lives.

Prayer: Dear God, help us not to let responsibilities rob us of time spent with those we love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Jeannine Brenner (Pennsylvania, USA)

GOODNESS AND MERCY

SAT JAN 23 2021

Read Romans 8:18-31

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

— Romans 8:28 (NRSV)

For 11 years I worked in the province of Huambo, Angola, as pastor and superintendent for a group of churches in my area. In 2017, I was appointed to the province of Luanda, and this change created some inconveniences for my family. My children needed to transfer from their current schools to ones closer to our new home. With the help of some brothers in Christ, we were able to get transfers for two children. But it was not easy to find a third transfer.

One morning in my prayer time I was worried. My son said, "Daddy, have faith; God did not forget us." God heard my prayer, and later that day we found a third school transfer opportunity.

My son gave me a lesson in faith and hope. When we are with God and believe in God's goodness and mercy, we can wait without worrying. As today's quoted verse reminds us, "All things work together for good for those who love God."

Thought for the Day
Trusting in God helps me to wait faithfully.

Prayer: Beloved God, teach us to trust in you and to stand firm with faith and hope. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Mateus Francisco (Luanda, Angola) — See back cover.

SUN
JAN 24
2021

OUR STRENGTH

Read Psalm 91:9-16

I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

— Psalm 91:2 (NIV)

Backpacking in the Grand Canyon was a dream come true. After weeks of training, I had arrived and was reveling in the beauty. On the fifth and last day, when our group was making the long 4,340-foot climb out to the canyon's South Rim, I felt my stamina waning. Somehow I lost my footing, fell, and started rolling uncontrollably down an incline on the canyon wall. A sense of panic swept through me. All the training I had done for the trip and my years of backpacking experience were not enough to help me. I could not save myself. Then suddenly, a small bush broke my fall.

Thought for the Day
When I fall, God is my strength.

This experience reminded me of our human condition. We tend to think that we are self-sufficient. We complete an education, work hard in our profession, and plan for retirement, and we often think we have things under control. But when difficulties come into our lives, we remember how helpless we are without Christ. Romans 5:6 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Our salvation and the strength for our daily lives come from God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for being with us each day. Remind us to rely on your strength in our life's journey. Amen.

Karen McBee (Texas, USA)

GOD'S SUPPORT

MON
JAN 25
2021

Read Isaiah 43:1-7

The Lord says, ". . . When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."

— Isaiah 43:1-2 (NIV)

An overwhelming number of commitments and a weighty course load left me physically and spiritually exhausted at the end of the college semester. To make matters worse, the weather seemed to mirror my feelings; it had rained for an entire week.

Thought for the Day
Regardless of what weighs me down, I know that the Lord is with me.

The evening before my last two exams, the rain subsided for a few minutes. I walked hurriedly from the library to my apartment, hoping to avoid the bitter cold and the impending onslaught of yet another storm. My lack of rest amplified my anxiety, and I knew that I needed calm. So while I walked, I prayed for rest and peace.

As I neared my apartment, I paused on a footbridge. Usually the creek flowing under the bridge was quite small, but the recent rains had forced it beyond its banks. As water crashed over the rocks that usually kept it contained, I remembered today's quoted verse: "When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you."

When I feel overwhelmed, I remember the overflowing creek and know that I am not like the creek's submerged rocks. In the most stressful moments, God will not let my trials sweep over me. Instead God will provide calm, strength, and guidance.

Prayer: Dear God, when we are overwhelmed, remind us of the calm, strength, and counsel that faith in you provides. Amen.

Samuel Driggers (Georgia, USA)

TUES
JAN 26
2021

IN THE MOMENT

Read Luke 5:1-11

Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

— Luke 5:3 (CEB)

Recently a friend told me of his plan to travel to the other side of Australia to see the wildflowers. I told him of my experiences in the Fitzgerald River National Park, which is renowned for its spectacular wildflowers. Although it was well past the official wildflower season when I visited, I was overwhelmed by the beauty and variety of flowers still blooming. Talking with my friend brought back some of the joy I had experienced. It put me back in the moment.

Thought for the Day
What story from scripture can I experience anew today?

I am glad that the Gospel writers put together vibrant and meaningful stories that capture much of what it was like to be with Jesus and to hear what he had to say. Their stories of what Jesus said and did can put us back in the moment. From the time that I was a small child, I have enjoyed hearing the stories of Jesus because I get a sense of what it would have been like to be there.

Being able to imagine what Jesus meant to the people of that time is a precious gift scripture gives us. It helps us to grow in our faith and understanding.

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for the stories of Jesus' life and teachings. Thank you for the people who have shared those stories with us. Amen.

Meg Mangan (New South Wales, Australia)

PROMISES IN UNCERTAINTY

WED JAN 27 2021

READ Psalm 36:5-9

How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

— Psalm 36:7 (NIV)

When the future seems uncertain and I don't know what I can hold on to and trust, I find it helpful to remind myself of three of God's promises from scripture.

First, God's love is constant. Our jobs, statuses, and relationships can change in a moment. But when life gets hard or we mess up, God is there showing us limitless and unfailing love.

Second, God's protection is certain. Psalm 36:7 reminds us that God is our shelter and refuge. No matter the storm, God will protect us and faithfully remain by our side. We can always hold on to God.

Third, we can count on God's provision. Jesus tells us that we don't have to worry because our heavenly Father knows our needs and will provide for us. (See Matt. 6:31-33.) For me, God's physical and spiritual provision have always been there.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Even in my uncertainty, God is faithful.

Though life might not always be great, God is faithful to God's promises. Amid changing circumstances, we can hold on to these promises from our unchanging God.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your promises to us. Help us to hold on to your faithful presence when we face uncertainty. Amen.

Adam Weber (South Dakota, USA)

THUR
JAN 28
2021

ENTERTAINING ANGELS

READ Deuteronomy 10:17-22

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

— Deuteronomy 10:19 (NRSV)

My husband and I invited Mina and her husband over for coffee and dessert. They are from Iran and had moved to our small town for graduate studies seven months earlier. But they told us that we were the only people in our town who had befriended them so far.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today I will show hospitality to a stranger.

As I read a thank-you note from Mina, I remembered the summer I spent in Taiwan on a volunteer trip. I didn't speak the language, the food was unfamiliar, the customs were new to me, and I looked different from everyone else. But through the hospitality of strangers, I was able to adjust and enjoy myself. That experience made me more aware of how international students, immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and other newcomers may feel. I know firsthand how refreshing it is when a stranger shows care, tries to get to know you, or introduces you to their loved ones.

We can all relate in some way to being an outsider. The Israelites were foreigners in Egypt, Jesus was an outsider in Jerusalem, and as Christians our home here is only temporary; our eternal home is in heaven. We can always demonstrate love and compassion. As Hebrews 13:2 instructs, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Prayer: Gracious God, help us always to show kindness and compassion to strangers and to be your hands and feet in the world. Amen.

Rebecca Bolin (Texas, USA) — See p. 21.

CHOOSE JOY

FRI JAN 29 2021

Read Genesis 12:1-9

The Lord said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

— Genesis 15:1 (NIV)

I often think about Abram/Abraham, and his story inspires faithfulness and obedience in me. I relate to his story because my own life story is similar in several ways.

Abram was not young when God called him to migrate from the land of his family, and neither was I. He was 75; I was 58. Abram went from material wealth to material wealth. But God told me, "I have something better for you than material wealth. My plan for you is spiritual wealth, living as a poor person in rural Honduras." God changed Abram's name to Abraham (see Genesis 17:5). And I also changed my name to better serve God.

Thought for the Day
I can choose how I feel about following God's call for me.

I have read Abraham's story over and over. It never says how he felt about leaving his home. But I am encouraged that I have the same freedom. I get to choose whether I walk through my new life with joy or with reluctance and bitterness. Most of the time, I am able to choose joy, but sometimes I still become discouraged. Being called by God is not a guarantee against discouragement. But even when we become discouraged, we can find a deep joy in faithfulness and satisfaction that we are following God's call for our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to savor the joy of faithfulness and obedience. Thank you for being our shield and our great reward. Amen.

Sister Alegría del Señor (Colón, Honduras) **— See p. 21.**

SAT
JAN 30
2021

A LIVING EXAMPLE

READ Ephesians 4:11-16

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

— Ephesians 4:15 (NIV)

After I gave a short orientation speech to the parents of our preschool class, three-year-old Miriam told her mother that she liked "the sermon." Miriam's father is the pastor of the church where our preschool is located. Along with teaching the normal preschool curriculum, I read Bible stories to the kids and pray with them before snack time each day. These faith-filled actions have become part of our daily routine.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can serve God through my daily activities.

With a loud and sometimes chaotic class of 20 preschoolers, I have wondered just how much of my teaching they retain. Also, I have often felt that I just wasn't doing enough in the church to serve God. However, after reflecting on Miriam's words, I realized that my actions and prayers are ways to teach the youngest in our church about Jesus. I am serving God in the little things I do every day. By being an example for my students, I am teaching them about faith and following Jesus. I may not be delivering a sermon, but my actions can be a living example of faith. We all can serve God through our words and actions of love — to children and adults alike.

Prayer: Creator God, help us grow in our faith as we become living examples of your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Christine Roger (Illinois, USA)

SEEKING APPROVAL

SUN JAN 31 2021

Read John 10:22-30

Jesus said, *"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."*

— John 10:27 (NIV)

As my wife and I prepared for a visit from our new in-laws, we noticed things around the house that hadn't bothered us before. The dinner plates seemed old, the hardwood floors squeaked, and the windows weren't clean enough. We felt certain these small imperfections would be detected by our guests. Even our rose garden we lovingly maintained became something to worry about.

As I sat and stared at a bunch of white, yellow, and red roses — wondering how I was going to get everything done — it occurred to me how my life seemed to revolve too much around the opinions of others. The need for approval from colleagues, friends, and family members seemed to occupy most of my thoughts, which left little room to hear from God. I permitted the words of people to drown out God's word. But God doesn't want us bound by the opinions and criticism of those around us. Rather, as children of God, we are to seek God's approval and God's thoughts.

Thought for the Day
God's opinion of me is what counts.

God's opinion should matter most. Other people's views may seem a reliable way to measure successes and failures; but in truth, only God's opinion is trustworthy. Only God can set us free from the hold others' opinions may have on us.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to hear your voice over the many voices that divert our attention from you. Amen.

Doug Lim (California, USA)

The Three Sillies

One of my favorite fables is "The Three Big Sillies." In the version I know from a childhood storybook, the first silly goes into the cellar to get eggs. She sees a gardening tool hanging from a beam in the ceiling and imagines it falling on someone's head and killing him. Overcome with fear and sadness, she forgets about the eggs, sits down, and cries. The second silly goes to see what has happened to the first, and when the first silly tells the second silly the terrible thing that she has imagined, the second silly begins to cry as well. Then the third silly — wondering what has happened — goes to the cellar to find the other two sillies sobbing. When the first silly explains why, he joins them.

I find the whole scene hilarious — that three people could become so captive to such a far-fetched thought. However, I also recognize the truth in it and that the tale is an allegory of how easily fear can guide our minds.

In the Book of Numbers, Moses sent spies to scout out Canaan. They returned with negative reports, and it's not much of a leap for me to feel the gloom when I read, "But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak [giants] there" (Num. 13:28, NIV). Hearing this, "all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night" (14:1, NRSV). Even in the face of God's assurance that God was with them, their fear won out. It kept them from entering the land that God had promised them — the land of milk and honey. And they wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

Fear can stop the sanest, smartest, most well-grounded persons in their tracks. Fear is easy to justify and deadly to all the beauty, wonder, wisdom, and mystery that can accompany human relationships. It only requires the slightest turn of the imagination for everything to unravel. Fear can come on quick and strong and spread like wildfire. Above all, it has an almost unequaled ability to be destructive to the full, rich, good lives that God wants to give us.

Fear can, of course, serve a purpose. There is a good reason that I get a knot in my stomach when I move toward the edge of a cliff or that I am nervous to drive in a rainstorm at night. But fear loses its utility when the most absurd scenario is the only one I can fathom, and I start to believe that the worst that can happen will most certainly happen despite plenty of evidence to the contrary and God's reassurance that the giants in the land are no threat.

Presumably the three sillies emerged from the cellar, but I wonder what it took for them to realize that what they were weeping over would never come to pass. As I look out over the horizon of a new year, the landscape can appear as formidable as it does inviting. It would require little effort to imagine any number of situations that might go wrong. But I feel the deepest resolve to not let fear have the final say. Maybe what I fear the most will turn out to be filled with joy. Maybe a new friendship that I am reluctant to make or an endeavor that I am hesitant to undertake will turn out to be the most life-giving. Maybe the horrible thing I perceived from a distance will turn out to be unimaginably beautiful close up. And certainly, whatever the scenario and however powerful my fear, God will be there, drawing me out of the cellar and toward abundant life.

— Andrew Garland Breeden
Acquisitions Editor

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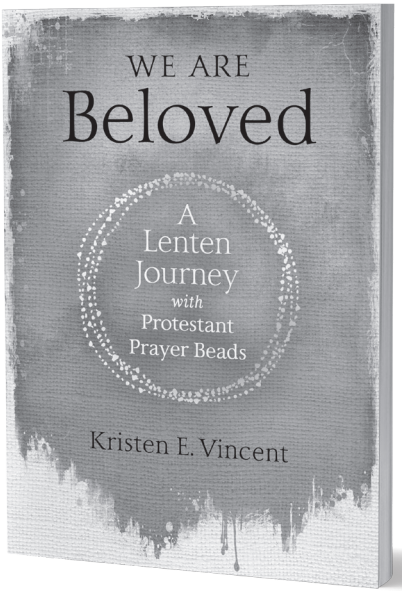
This Lenten season,

we hope you "grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Ephesians 3:18



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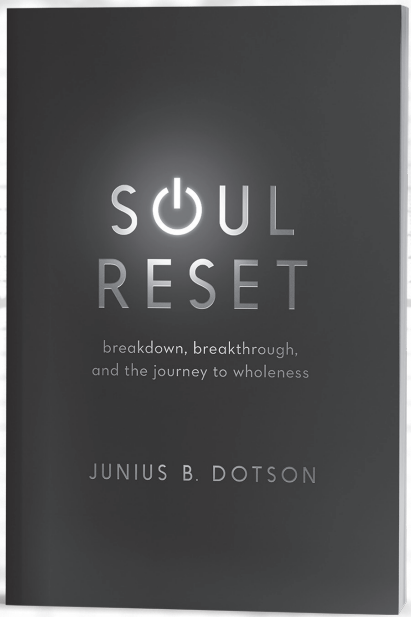

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MON
FEB 1
2021

LIONS AND BEARS

Read 1 Samuel 17:19-37

David said, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine."

— 1 Samuel 17:37 (NRSV)

For three years I faced one challenge after another. I was diagnosed with burnout and depression, and I had to give up my profession as a teacher.

Since then, I have had to deal not only with my recovery, but I have also struggled to pay the rent, other bills, and even to buy groceries. However, God has taken care of my husband and me every time.

Thought for the Day
God can use my adversities to strengthen my faith.

After each moment of uncertainty, I realized how much more I trusted God. Through each of these trials, I saw God strengthening our faith for the next challenge. We learned to be confident in God and God's promises for our lives.

I think David might have felt the same way when he faced Goliath in the valley of Elah. Although David was a youth and an unseasoned soldier, God had been strengthening and training him as he tended his father's sheep. God helped David protect the flock from the attack of lions or bears, and David learned to trust God. On the day of battle, David was confident in God's ability to grant him victory against the Philistine champion.

With this lesson in mind, we can trust in God's plan as we face our own lions and bears — or giants.

Prayer: Wonderful God, thank you for strengthening our faith in times of adversity. Help us to fulfill your purposes for our lives. Amen.

Madeline Twooney (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany) **— See p. 21.**

A POWERFUL LIGHT

TUES FEB 2 2021

Read John 12:44-46

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

— Genesis 1:3-4 (NRSV)

While walking to an evening worship service, I saw the soft, warm light from the sanctuary's stained glass windows glowing in the night. The windows provided a welcome but limited illumination to my surroundings. It occurred to me that this outward-bound light pales in comparison to what we experience during daytime services, when the sunlight pours through the windows and fills the church with brilliant color and warmth.

Sunlight is a symbol of the light that God gives to us — how vital and powerful both are for our lives. Just as the brightness of daylight far outshines the light that comes from the church windows at night, God's light is infinitely more powerful than what we humans can produce. Yet this humbling comparison can encourage us to continue with our outreach efforts so that God's light can shine through us, illuminating the loving message of God for all people everywhere.

Thought for the Day
God's light is infinitely bright.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to recognize our limitations, even as we seek to share the gospel with others. As Jesus taught us, we pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:9-13, NIV). Amen.

Wayne Brent (Texas, USA)

Prayer Focus: **THOSE WHO TRAVEL FAR TO ATTEND CHURCH**

WED
FEB 3
2021

GOD'S COMFORT

READ 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

— Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

"I have difficult news for you," said the doctor. "You have cancer." Shock and fear washed over me. Then came heartbreak and tears. Thus began the endless rounds of scans, medical appointments, and chemotherapy treatments. Battling cancer has been the toughest journey of my life. But God has held me firmly as we walk along this rocky path together, and along the way I have experienced God's peace and healing.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God's compassion can speak without words.

One day, as I was sitting in the cancer center's packed waiting room, I took a moment to study the faces of those around me. I saw fear, worry, and discouragement. I knew how they were feeling because I felt it too.

I heard God's clear call to comfort these fellow suffering souls. So I became a volunteer driver with an organization that coordinates free transportation for cancer patients to life-saving treatments and medical appointments. As I ride along with my new friends, we may discuss our latest treatment or procedure. Or we may just chat about a favorite restaurant or the weather. And sometimes we say nothing at all because there are no words. But most importantly, I have many opportunities to show God's compassion and to share Jesus' message of love and hope in ways I could never have imagined.

Prayer: Loving God, keep us aware of those around us who are hurting. Help us comfort them as you have comforted us. Amen.

Molly Johnson (North Carolina, USA)

GOD'S VOICE

THUR
FEB 4
2021

READ 1 Kings 19:9-14

If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.

— Deuteronomy 28:1 (NIV)

Our home is located next to a park where I often walk with my young daughter in the early spring. When the birds begin their spring migration, the park is filled with birds and their singing. One day we heard an exceptionally pleasant song, but we couldn't locate the bird. I asked my daughter to be quiet, and we both listened carefully. After some time of patient listening, we saw a little gray bird that was producing the beautiful sound. We had to remain quiet in order to hear the voice of the bird.

Later that night, I started to think about stories in scripture that relate to that experience. Sometimes we complain that we cannot hear the Lord's guiding voice. But we may not hear it because our minds can be filled with so many other thoughts. In those times, we can use the same method my daughter and I used to hear the bird. We can put aside all unnecessary thoughts, remain quiet in prayer, and focus only on God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can hear God's voice if I listen for it patiently.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to quiet the chaos in our minds so that we can take the time to hear your voice, accept it, and put into practice what you tell us. Amen.

Dmitri Semjonov (Rakvere, Estonia)

FRI
FEB 5
2021

RISKY LOVE

Read Hebrews 12:1-3

Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

— John 13:34 (NIV)

As I got home with a car full of groceries, my buddies — a pair of four-foot-tall sandhill cranes who wander the neighborhood — foraged in the yard. I sang out, "Hi, guys!" I love these birds, but that day they stalked toward me. Instead of admiring their red and gray plumage, all I saw were six-inch beaks. It felt risky to walk past them, so I retreated from them. I might feel safer if I never encountered the cranes, but I prefer enduring a few risky moments to forgoing the joy they bring me.

Thought for the Day
Loving like Jesus is worth the risk.

Loving people is risky too and can carry a sharp risk of hurt or loss. Relationships and ministries of all types make us vulnerable as we open our hearts to others. For me, parenting my son, who suffers from bipolar disorder, is sometimes exhausting and heartbreaking. But it is also one of the great privileges and joys of my life. I would rather risk grief than not love him.

When we are tempted to withdraw from loving people wholeheartedly, we can take courage from Jesus' example. He accepted the danger of loving us and never retreated. He was willing to risk it all on the cross because of his love for us, and we are called to love others the way Christ loves us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to love like you. Encourage us to be brave and vulnerable with others. Amen.

Kirsten Panachyda (New York, USA) — See back cover.

PATIENCE

SAT FEB 6 2021

Read Psalm 130:1-5

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope.

— Psalm 130:5 (NRSV)

I recently began a new hobby: candle making. In my first class, I made a candle by layering different shades of blue. I had to wait for the first layer to set before pouring another. The waiting process taught me patience.

Thought for the Day
Patience helps my faith mature.

Being patient is a vital part of life. Throughout our life of faith, we may wait to see the answer to our prayers. Patience with God and our circumstances is one sign of a mature faith, a quality that we develop over time.

In the Bible, God answered many prayers only after much time had passed. Jacob waited seven years for a wife and worked seven more after being cheated by his father-in-law. (See Gen. 29:15-30.) The Israelites waited four decades for deliverance. (See Ex. 16:35.)

We wait for what is worth waiting for; in the process, we learn patience. May God grant us patience to wait for God's divine blessings.

Prayer: Father God, grant us patience to keep anticipating, hoping, and trusting in you as we wait. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Mary Ng Shwu Ling (Singapore) **— See p. 21.**

SUN
FEB 7
2021

LOVE OTHERS AS YOURSELF

READ Matthew 22:34-40

Jesus said, *"This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

— Matthew 22:38-39 (NIV)

One of my friends in high school suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts. I tried to reassure my friend that I would always be there for support and encouragement, which my friend appreciated. But despite all the actions that I — and others — took, my friend died by suicide.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God loves me, and I can love myself too.

For a long time I couldn't see God in that situation. I felt responsible for my friend's death, and it damaged my self-worth. I felt like I wasn't enough. But then friends in my Bible study reminded me of the second greatest commandment according to Jesus: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If I couldn't forgive and love myself, then that guilt and anger would hinder my efforts to love others.

It's difficult to forgive and re-learn how to love effectively, but those actions are necessary for a life with others and a life with Christ. I continue to work on loving myself while I strive to love others as Jesus commanded.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the everlasting love and mercy you show us. Give us the strength to love ourselves and others like you love us. Amen.

Sam Engle (Kentucky, USA)

POWERFUL WORDS

MON FEB 8 2021

READ 2 Timothy 3:10-17

It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

— John 6:63 (NRSV)

I was confident that I was going to get an A in my humanities course. I had earned nearly perfect grades and eagerly participated in classroom discussions throughout the semester. Now it was time to reap the benefits of my labor. But instead I reaped bewilderment when my instructor showed me my final grade: C.

I asked my instructor for an explanation, and he began to read aloud the syllabus that he had handed out on the first day of class. He read that a student who arrives late to class would be counted as absent, and a certain number of absences would penalize his or her final grade. I realized that I had arrived late to class several times, and that was why I received a C despite my hard work.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God's word gives direction to my life.

Although it was disappointing, that experience led me to carefully read every syllabus for the rest of my college career. I've since graduated from college, but today I still try to read important words with great care. And the words found in the Bible are immeasurably more powerful than those found on any syllabus. The Bible contains God's message for us to read, believe, and apply. Without fail, it will provide positive direction for our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, renew our minds daily with your word through the power of your Holy Spirit so that we will live worthy lives. Amen.

Aaron Caruso (Connecticut, USA) — See p. 21.

TUES
FEB 9
2021

GOD IS GOOD

Read Psalm 145:1-9

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

— Psalm 145:9 (NRSV)

When I went through a difficult time, it was hard for me to understand what God was doing in my life. Everyone else seemed happy except me. I asked many questions: *Why won't God answer my prayers? Why do others have their heart's desires when I am living for God? Why doesn't God love me? What have others done for God that God has been so good to them?*

Thought for the Day
God desires good things for my life.

I started to believe that God did not love me, and I became frustrated and depressed. It took me many years to recognize God's goodness in my life and all the ways that God has blessed me.

I began to see that while things were not going the way I wanted them to go, God was still working for good. Finally I began to trust in God and understand that God shows goodness to each of us in different ways.

We may not understand why bad things happen to us or why God does not give us what we ask for and think we need. When we question God's goodness, we can pause to think of all our blessings. This practice can help us realize that God has been good to us and will continue to be.

Prayer: Dear God, open our eyes to see your goodness to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Enid Adah Nyinomujuni (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

BEING PRESENT

WED
FEB 10
2021

Read John 5:1-18

When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

— John 5:6 (CEB)

Each Saturday morning a men's group from the church where I am a pastor meets for breakfast at a local restaurant. It's an opportunity for men to talk honestly about their faith and the issues they face.

I enjoy these gatherings, but at times my mind is everywhere except the group's conversations. I get concerned that people can't hear one another, I worry that new people in the group may feel left out, and I often watch the restaurant staff, hoping they don't mind that we're lingering and taking up a few tables. My focus on why we're gathering — faith formation and relationship development — gets lost.

In scripture we see that Jesus was focused and knew that God was present in all situations. The phrases "Jesus saw" and "Jesus looked" appear dozens of times in the Bible. And in today's reading, Jesus was surrounded by people and noise and yet was able to truly see one man. Nothing else mattered to Jesus except that interaction.

Thought for the Day
The present moment holds abundant holiness.

So many things distract us from focusing on the present moment. Let us learn from Jesus not to miss the opportunities that God places before us every hour of every day.

Prayer: Creator God, help us to slow down, focus on what's in front of us, and experience your love here and now. Amen.

Christian Coon (Illinois, USA)

Prayer Focus: **LEADERS OVERWHELMED BY RESPONSIBILITIES**

THUR
FEB 11
2021

NONE FORGOTTEN

Read Luke 10:25-37

A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.

— Luke 10:33 (CEB)

It has often intrigued me that Jesus commended a social outcast in his parable about the good Samaritan. But until recently, I hadn't paid attention to the fact that of the ten lepers Jesus healed, the only one to return and thank Jesus for healing him was also a Samaritan (see Luke 17:11-19). And the woman at the well to whom Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah was a Samaritan too. (See John 4:3-42).

Thought for the Day
No one is an outcast in Jesus' eyes.

At one time I acutely felt on the outside of society, labeled and misunderstood. I saw no way to become more connected to other people. But Jesus Christ reached out and healed me. His living water quenched my thirst of body, mind, and soul. And he brought people into my life to whom I could be of service, which restored my dignity and allowed me to feel needed. Jesus always sees our true worth and lifts us up to that level.

Jesus not only accepts those the world ignores; he often gives them special recognition and attention. No matter our status or circumstance, none of us is forgotten by Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for helping us when we feel forgotten by others. Help us to see our true worth. Amen.

Victoria Walsh (Montana, USA)

STRONGER THAN FEAR

FRI
FEB 12
2021

Read John 20:24-29

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

— Hebrews 11:1 (NIV)

One day at church, I came across this saying: "Faith is stronger than fear." This reminded me of a difficult situation when my family and I found this to be true.

Thought for the Day
When I despair, God will help me overcome my fear.

Our daughter Rebeca called us one day to tell us that her four-year-old son, Esteban, had been hospitalized because his liver enzymes were dangerously elevated. He became a candidate for a liver transplant. Of course we felt great fear, but at the same time, with our united strength, we were able to say that with God nothing is impossible. Our whole family was grounded in the certainty and conviction that God would work a miracle in our grandson.

We placed our complete faith in God to face our great fear, and God sustained us. We rejoiced and gave thanks to God when Esteban made a full recovery.

Prayer: Merciful God, continue to sustain us by your grace as we pray, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matt. 6:9-13, KJV).

Vidal Cruz Rosado (Puerto Rico)

Prayer Focus: **CHILDREN WAITING FOR AN ORGAN TRANSPLANT**

SAT
FEB 13
2021

POWER TO PROVIDE

Read Philippians 4:10-19

Paul wrote, ***"My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."***

— Philippians 4:19 (KJV)

It was a cold, snowy winter. My three children and I were down to soda crackers and ketchup in our cupboard. My husband had moved out and was not providing food for the household. One evening in prayer I told God that we had nothing to eat. Then I got my children bathed and ready for dinner, trusting and believing in God's power to provide.

Thought for the Day
How can I answer the prayer of a neighbor today?

Before I had finished setting the table, there came a knock at the door. A friend from my church had brought several bags of groceries for us.

My friend mentioned that our local grocery store had a "buy one, get two free" sale. She had brought the "free" items to us and added even more. She said, "The Holy Spirit instructed me to bring this to you." Overwhelmed with joy, I thanked God for meeting our need.

The blessing did not end there. My sister in Christ prepared a full meal, with dessert, for my family and hers. We were blessed with dinner and wonderful company. That experience reminded me of the truth that God can provide for our needs. My cupboards and my heart were full.

Prayer: Gracious God, send your Holy Spirit to those who are suffering, and help us to meet every need according to your riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Amen.

Kellie Heisler (New Jersey, USA)

PLANTING SEEDS

SUN FEB 14 2021

Read 1 Corinthians 3:6-9

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

— 1 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

I love working in my garden. I am amazed that tiny seeds planted in the soil can sprout and grow into large plants that produce tasty vegetables and beautiful flowers. The vegetables become part of my meals, and the flowers brighten the day. Each time I work in my garden, I remember God's wisdom in creating tiny seeds that will become tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, or peas. I work to prepare the soil and make sure I have a sunny spot to plant. Then I plant the seeds and water them when necessary. But I cannot make the plant grow; only God can bring growth from those tiny seeds.

In our spiritual life, we can plant seeds of faith in others by sharing what God has done for us — by doing a work of love in Jesus' name or by sharing the good news of the gospel. We cannot finish the work of bringing others to Christ, just as we cannot make seeds grow and flourish in a garden. But we are co-laborers with God in planting and watering.

Thought for the Day
How will I plant a seed of God's love today?

Prayer: Our Father, may we plant the seeds of love that you will bring to fruition. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Verner Guthrie (Alabama, USA) — See p. 21.

MON
FEB 15
2021

A SIMPLE REMINDER

READ Psalm 92:1-4

I can do all this through [the Lord] who gives me strength.

— Philippians 4:13 (NIV)

I was feeling the stress building up at work, and I wasn't handling it very well. It wasn't possible to walk away from the situation, so instead I took a few moments to restart my computer. When the login box appeared, I typed in my username. Then I paused and smiled in the middle of a secular workroom as I typed in my password, which reminded me how much Jesus loves me and needs me to be right where I am.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In what simple ways can I remind myself of God's presence?

My work password has to include at least eight characters in a combination of upper- and lowercase letters, numbers, and a symbol. I had previously realized that the Bible provides perfect variety for this: book name, chapter number, colon, and verse number. Every morning I start my day with a reminder that God is at the heart of everything I do. When I lose sight of God's presence at work, I restart my computer and have the opportunity to reaffirm that God is with me.

Every month I get to pick a new affirmation to start my day. I take my time over this decision. I even look forward to changing my password! I enjoy this simple way of incorporating God into my digital life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to keep you at the center of our lives so that we will remember to call on you in all circumstances. Amen.

Lorna MacIntyre (Scotland, United Kingdom)

Prayer Focus: **PEOPLE IN STRESSFUL WORK ENVIRONMENTS**

RICH INHERITANCE

TUES
FEB 16
2021

Read Ephesians 1:3-12

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

— Ephesians 2:8 (NRSV)

Upon achieving the senior rank of Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Navy, I adopted this saying: "Never forget where you came from."

As a young adult I walked away from the faith that had been modeled for me by loving Christian parents. I forgot where I came from, even though the inheritance was freely given through my Lord and Savior.

Years later, on a Navy warship in the middle of the ocean, I found myself broken and bitter. At that moment I remembered where I came from. I remembered the sounds of my father praying in the middle of the night — calling out family members' names (including my own) in the name of Jesus. I repented and rededicated myself to Jesus Christ, and I vowed to make sure that I modeled my faith, prayed for others, and encouraged my sons and everyone around me in the rich heritage of a faithful Christian walk as it had been passed on to me.

Thought for the Day
I can model faith for others as it has been modeled for me.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to remember your great love for us when we forget where we came from. Help us to lift up those who are struggling with their faith and to call out their names to you as others have done for us. Amen.

Steven A. Schofield (Virginia, USA)

WED
FEB 17
2021

FROM STICKS TO BLOSSOMS

Read 1 Kings 19:1-5

We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

— Psalm 33:20 (NIV)

For much of the year, bushes known as "broom" appear to be a mass of bare, green sticks. During its dormant period, a broom bush may go unnoticed. When its twigs are cut in even lengths, tied together, and attached to a long wooden handle, they can be used as a household tool to sweep debris. In spring, buds appear on the bush and then burst forth into bright yellow blossoms. Their glorious fragrance summons passersby to inhale their lovely scent. Doing so makes those long months seem worth the wait.

Thought for the Day
I will wait expectantly for what God has in store for me.

When I pass by bare broom bushes in winter, I remember that Abraham and Sarah waited years for God to fulfill the promise of a son. David, the shepherd, must also have felt the difficulty of waiting between the time of Samuel's anointing of him and his eventual crowning as king.

Then, like blossoms on the broom bush, the waiting was rewarded. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. David was crowned king of Judah first and then Israel.

As we wait through seemingly barren times, we can remember the lesson of the broom bush. The bare, green sticks of our lives can blossom, making the wait worth it.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us remember the blossoms of the past as we wait for those to come. Amen.

Mary Hunt Webb (New Mexico, USA) — See back cover.

USED CANS

THUR
FEB 18
2021

READ Luke 8:26-39

Jesus said to the man, *"Return home and tell how much God has done for you."*

— Luke 8:39 (NIV)

Years ago, I knew a little girl who collected used cans on the street. She liked to write on used papers and put them in the cans. Most people on the street ignored her, and she was often insulted and called "used-cans girl." What she did was considered stupid and meaningless.

When she grew up, she remembered that she had been invited to church when she was young. She felt the Holy Spirit encouraging her to go to church, so she went. There she heard the story of a man who was an outcast — unclothed, living in a cemetery, possessed by demons, and considered insane. Yet Jesus helped him, and God's love saved and changed the man. No one is meaningless for Jesus.

In the same way, even when people did not respect the girl and considered her worthless, Jesus sought her, loved her, and changed her life. The "used-cans girl" is now used by God to teach, write, build mission houses, and preach the great love of God. That little girl was me. Even when we feel worthless like used tin cans — thrown away and trampled on — we can shine the light of Jesus for God's glory.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Jesus loves me even when I feel unworthy.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for your amazing and saving love. Remind us that through you we are worthy and can shine light for your glory. Amen.

Linda Chandra (Banten, Indonesia)

Prayer Focus: **THOSE WHO HELP KEEP MY COMMUNITY CLEAN**

FRI
FEB 19
2021

LOVE GROWS

Read Leviticus 19:9-18

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. . . . Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.

— Leviticus 19:9-10 (NIV)

Our church college group has been transformed through acts of service to residents and transients in our city. We were studying the book of Leviticus, and we were discussing the practice of leaving the gleanings (a portion of the harvest) as an act of loving our neighbor. One woman asked, "Why just the gleanings? Why not more?" Since we live in an urban setting nowhere near a farm, we created our own garden and named it Harvest of Hope. Seeds grew along with our love for our community.

Thought for the Day
How is God leading me to share what I have with others?

We came up with the idea of a "reverse tithe." We kept the gleanings and gave away most of the produce. On our first distribution day, the woman who originally posed the "why not" question handed a box of produce to someone and said, "I am so glad to meet you; we grew this for you." Her comment reflected her joyful obedience to God's command to love our neighbor. For the college group, it was the gift of love that kept on growing!

Prayer: Gracious God, we praise you for providing what we need. Help us to be aware and active in serving those in need with the resources you have so graciously given to us. Amen.

Mike Medeiros (California, USA)

Prayer Focus: **THOSE WHO FEED THE HUNGRY IN MY COMMUNITY**

NOT ALONE

SAT
FEB 20
2021

Read Daniel 3:13-30

May you be made strong . . . and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

— Colossians 1:11-12 (NRSV)

After a night at the children's hospital with our daughter, I did not welcome the telephone ringing at 7:00 a.m. I saw that the call was from my oldest son, Barry, who had been in another hospital for a few days with the flu. Irritated by the early hour, I answered the phone sleepily — but it wasn't Barry on the phone. It was a nurse calling to tell me that Barry had died.

Thought for the Day
God will be with me through any difficulty.

Barry was a diabetic and in renal failure, but he had recently made great strides in taking care of himself. Set to graduate from college after working at it for 17 years, his sudden death seemed particularly cruel in light of his recent progress. Grief compounded by concern for our daughter threatened to overcome me.

Our pastor pointed out in a sermon that though God didn't take Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego out of the fire, God did protect them. I finally understood that God does not promise freedom from difficulties. In fact, Jesus specifically said that his followers would have distress (see John 16:33, CEB). But God promises to be with us through whatever we face.

Whenever grief wells up, I draw strength from knowing that God is here with me and will work things together for good (see Rom. 8:28).

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for your presence with us in our challenges. Help us draw strength from you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Donnell King (Tennessee, USA)

SUN
FEB 21
2021

WHAT A BLESSING!

Read Psalm 19:7-11

[Jesus] went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

— Matthew 14:23 (NIV)

When my parents became Christians, they spent time reading the Bible and praying daily. My father gave me my first copy of *The Upper Room* when I was 13 years old; my mother, now 95 years old, continues to use this devotional guide each day.

Thought for the Day
Time spent in God's word is always worthwhile.

I am grateful for my parents' example of regularly spending time with God's word. Over the years, I have tried to make spending purposeful time with God a priority each day. Time spent studying scripture not only leads to a better understanding of who God is and God's purposes but also builds faith, brings joy, and creates hope.

The Upper Room has been a part of my devotional time throughout my life. I have been blessed many times by meditations or Bible readings for the day that were just what I needed. I am always amazed by God's timing and love for me when it feels like God is speaking to me personally through the devotional.

What a blessing it is to build the disciplines of prayer and Bible study into each day! What an encouragement to be part of a praying community of believers from diverse countries and cultures!

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for the blessings that come from setting aside time to read your word and to pray each day. Amen.

Ann Stewart (South Australia, Australia)

NO EXCUSES

MON FEB 22 2021

Read Luke 14:15-20

Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets."

— Luke 14:19 (NRSV)

When I was eight years old, my teacher told me I was a gifted writer. That was the first time someone had told me I was good at something. As a teenager I wrote in a journal occasionally, while dreaming of being published. But each time I felt a nudge from God to write something meaningful, I found other things to do — distractions that kept me from doing what God wanted. By the time I finished high school, I had convinced myself that no one would read what I wrote. For decades, I gave God a lot of excuses. Yet through prayer and support, I made a decision this year to follow God's leading.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus tells a story about a great dinner party. One by one invitees give reasons why they cannot attend. One has a field to tend, while another has animals to care for. Haven't we all given God similar excuses? Someone may love to cook, yet avoids volunteering at a shelter. People skilled in business or technology decline to help with a church project that requires those skills. Imagine all that can be accomplished if we stop making excuses! When we give all that we are, we create a world that is closer to resembling what God desires for us.

Thought for the Day
Sharing our gifts by serving others creates a better world.

Prayer: Eternal Father, forgive us for making excuses. Continue to guide our path so that we may serve you more wholeheartedly. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Kelly Desclos-Estes (Virginia, USA)

TUES
FEB 23
2021

HEAVENLY PARENT

READ Matthew 7:7-11

[God] comforts us in all our trouble so that we can comfort other people who are in every kind of trouble.

— 2 Corinthians 1:4 (CEB)

Being a parent doesn't come with a job description or manual. It is on-the-job training all the way. As a father, I am always learning.

I am no superhero or mighty pillar of strength. I am only a parent. When my child hurts, I react. When my child cries out, I hear. When my child asks for assistance, I do what I can to help.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God is my Father and will never leave me.

So why don't I let my heavenly Father do for me what I am more than willing to do for my own children? Why do I try to do it all myself? I am finally learning to go to my heavenly Father when I am frightened, lonely, bruised, or hurt.

God reassures us: "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" (Zeph. 3:17, NIV). I'm learning that God is waiting to give me comfort as a parent who wants the best for me, a father who will pick me up and hold me in his arms. God our Father won't go away — ever!

Prayer: Teach us, O Lord, to trust in your unfailing love. Amen.

Michael Morelan (Alabama, USA)

A CLOSER LOOK

WED
FEB 24
2021

READ Matthew 25:31-46

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

— Galatians 6:2 (KJV)

Twice a year my church picks up trash along two miles of roadway. We divide into groups and start at each end, working until we meet each other.

I remember the first time we went out. I was scanning the sides of the roads while riding to our starting point. Upon our arrival, I made the statement, "This shouldn't take long; there's not much trash along this section." We gathered up our bags and equipment and started out. About two minutes into picking up trash, I changed my mind. What I could not see riding by at 25 mph, I could see now that I was slowly walking. Where did all these pieces of plastic, foam, paper, and glass come from?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
If I slow down, God can show me opportunities to lift others up.

It then occurred to me that this same problem of perspective applies to other aspects of my life. How many people do I come in contact with each day at church, at the store, the bank, or at work, only to say, "How are you" and barely wait to hear the response, "Fine and you?" If I'm so busy with my own life that I quickly pass others by, I may be missing an opportunity to bear someone else's burden. It could be as simple as a word of encouragement, a listening ear, a prayer. When I slow down enough to hear or see the struggle in another's life, I can "fulfill the law of Christ."

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to see those around us who need lifting up. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

George Hilliard (Virginia, USA)

THUR
FEB 25
2021

THE COSTLY PERFUME

READ John 12:1-8

Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

— John 12:3 (NIV)

Mary made her way to Jesus, poured costly perfume on his feet, and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance. The perfume was worth about a year's salary for a skilled laborer. She expressed the depth of her love and devotion to Jesus with an extravagant gift. Others misunderstood her act, but Jesus accepted it. He honored her gift and told those around him to leave her alone. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus told the others that her sacrifice would be remembered forever (see Mark 14:9).

Mary wasn't bothered by others' opinions or comments. Showing her thankfulness for Jesus — who had accepted, loved, and valued her — mattered most. Mary showed us that the best form of worship is the one that most genuinely represents our love for God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
What gift can I offer Jesus today?

In the same way, we can pour out the praises of our hearts. We surrender our lives fully to Jesus through sacrifice and service. When we pour out our hearts to give fully of ourselves to Jesus, the fragrance of our love and devotion will fill our surroundings.

Prayer: Dear God, help us pour out our hearts to you and offer you our praise. Amen.

Elizabeth Livingston (Maharashtra, India)

Check for the March-April issue of *The Upper Room* in your church. Or subscribe and free your copy for a visitor or new reader. (See p. 1.)

JOY AMIDST GRIEF

FRI
FEB 26
2021

Read Psalm 139:7-12

The *Lord* says, *"Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."*

— Jeremiah 33:3 (NRSV)

In the months following my mother's death from ALS, I started my first semester of college, began a new job, and painfully continued life without my mom here to be a part of it. As unbearable as life without her can seem, I still somehow manage to find moments of joy that the Lord offers me in my grief.

Jeremiah 33:3 was my mom's favorite verse. Throughout her life, I never saw her doubt that the Lord was with her. When her final days were coming, I know she was filled with peace and joy because she knew in just a matter of time she would see her Savior. She called out and God answered her — daily. She didn't know exactly what God was doing amidst her suffering — only that God was present and would never abandon her.

Thought for the Day
True joy is found in the Lord.

Even on days when my grief seems unbearable, I remember that God walked through the ALS with my mom, walked with me as I witnessed her life ending, and still walks with me today. I sometimes struggle to be joyful and to live in the present. But the Lord is right here next to me — sustaining me through it all.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give us the strength to overcome whatever trials we face. We place our lives always in your hands. Amen.

Kristen Phipps (Texas, USA)

Prayer Focus: **YOUNG PEOPLE GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A PARENT**

SAT
FEB 27
2021

HOPE OF NEW LIFE

Read Matthew 6:25-34

There is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease.

— Job 14:7 (NRSV)

I had returned from the city of Natal, where I had spent seven long years with my family. I was almost 50 years old and was starting over after a failed professional experience. The prospects were not promising. As I was praying about my situation, I noticed that a large tree in the complex where I lived was extremely dry. Sometimes branches fell, putting at risk those who happened to be passing underneath. I saw no hope for that tree and thought it should be cut down.

Thought for the Day
God can make everything new in my life.

Spring came, and one morning I went to the balcony to look at the tree again. It was leafy and beautiful, with a huge green canopy! At that moment, I felt God speaking to my heart: "I will do with your life just as I did with this tree." My heart was filled with laughter, hope, and trust in God.

Today, I am a renewed and successful professional. I was reborn after a period of drought. God brought a miracle into my life that turned my story of failure into victory, to the glory of God. God is faithful, immensely good, and delights in the well-being of his children.

Prayer: Unchanging God, help those hearts which are dried up by the failures and hardships of life to find the hope of new life in you. Amen.

Alexandre de Azevedo (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) **— See p. 21.**

OPEN EARS

SUN
FEB 28
2021

Read Proverbs 2:1-10

The Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

— Proverbs 2:6 (NRSV)

The other night my young daughter was talking on the phone with her cousin. As she got ready to get off the phone, she said to him, "I'm about to get off of here; is there anything else you want to tell me first?" I have thought often about her way of ending her call — it struck me as a rather unique way to end a conversation.

As I thought more about it, I realized how wise I would be to follow my daughter's approach — not necessarily on my phone calls but during my prayer time. What if before ending my prayers, I asked God, "Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Thought for the Day
When I pray, I will listen as much as I speak.

Sometimes I am guilty of forgetting to stop and listen to what God may be trying to say to me when I pray. What if, instead of just "hanging up" on God, I stopped to listen to what God might have to say first? Instead of my doing all the talking, I want to learn to give God plenty of time to speak to me. From now on, I am going to see what God has to say before I "hang up."

Prayer: Father God, open our ears so that we can hear what you want to tell us each day. Amen.

Katrina Douglas (Tennessee, USA)

AN EASY PLAN TO USE *The Upper Room* IN SMALL GROUPS

Christ is among us in fresh ways when we gather together, listening to God and to each other.

Once a week, gather with other believers to share a longer devotional time of about an hour. You may meet any time during the week and replace that day's reading with Wednesday's reading.

- Begin by reading the Bible passage on the Read line and the day's meditation, allowing silence for at least a minute afterward. Then ask members to turn to the questions for that date listed below or on one of the following pages.
- Ask someone to read aloud the questions one by one, giving each group member the opportunity to answer after each question. If anyone prefers not to answer a particular question, move on to the next person.
- Discuss how everyone thinks differently, and try to hear what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you in all this.
- Decide what you will do with God during the week.
- Be quiet and pray together.

For a more detailed meeting guide, see
www.upperroom.org/resources/a-guide-for-small-groups

JANUARY 6: ***Choosing a Path***

1. Do you believe God has one clear path for our lives, and that we can miss the path and be out of God's perfect will? Why or why not? What scripture verses support your answer?
2. In what ways has God blessed your acts of service? How are you encouraged by those blessings?
3. How do you make sure you are seeking God in everything? How can you tell when you are seeking God and when you are not? What spiritual practices keep you focused on God?
4. What gifts and talents can you use to serve others for God? In

what ways are you already using those gifts for God? In what new ways would you like to start using your gifts?

5. When have you felt unsure of how to serve God? Who or what helped you find direction? How might you help someone else who is feeling unsure of how to serve?

JANUARY 13: *Encountering God*

1. Describe a time in your life when you have experienced loneliness and rejection. What did you do to combat those feelings?
2. Which verses from today's reading do you most relate to? Why? What verses from other psalms do you find encouraging?
3. Today's writer talks about the loneliness David must have felt in 1 Samuel. What other biblical characters experienced loneliness? How did they find peace and comfort? What can you learn from their stories?
4. In Psalm 34, David says that God answered him and delivered him from his fears. How might David's experience help you when you are going through a difficult time?
5. When you feel alone and rejected, how does your faith help you? What prayers, spiritual practices, or scripture passages remind you that God is always with you, even in your troubles?

JANUARY 20: *Opportunity to Share*

1. Do you find it intimidating to talk openly about your faith? Does it depend on the situation? Tell about a memorable experience from your life when you shared your faith.
2. Today's writer felt a prompting to start talking about her faith. When have you felt a prompting from God? How did you respond? What was the outcome?
3. Have you ever felt like you needed to have all the answers about your faith? Is it hard for you not to have all the answers? Why or why not?
4. Does following God's guidance get easier over time? How do you make sure you are always listening for God's guidance?
5. How can you share God's love with someone today? What new habits can you begin that will help you share God's love more effectively?

JANUARY 27: ***Promises in Uncertainty***

1. Are you in a place of uncertainty right now or have you been in one in the past? Reflect on those times, and share what you need from God, others, and yourself amid uncertain circumstances.
2. How has God shown you that God's love is certain? What does it mean to you that you are guaranteed unfailing love at all times? How does that change the way you respond to life's challenges?
3. When have you experienced God's protection in difficult times? How have you held on to that protection? What spiritual practices help you hold on to God in hard times?
4. Describe a time when you most clearly saw God's provision in your life — physically or spiritually. Describe a time when it felt like God was not providing for you in the ways you would have liked. How did you hold on to and remain close to God each time?
5. Of the three promises today's writer mentions, which one is the most encouraging for you today? What does it look like for you to hold on to that promise from God?

FEBRUARY 3: ***God's Comfort***

1. Describe a time when you were on a difficult journey. Did you feel God walking that path with you? How did you experience God's peace and healing during that time?
2. How do you respond when you see others struggling? Does your response change based on how much you are struggling at the time? Is it easier or harder for you to comfort others when you are also in need of comfort?
3. How do you remain aware of opportunities to show God's compassion to others? In what ways can you share the love of Jesus without words today?
4. What scripture passages and prayer practices help you to focus on the needs of those around you? How is God calling you to help those in your community who are hurting?

5. In what ways does your church reach out and show God's compassion to others? Do you participate in those efforts? In what other ways does your church community encourage you to help those around you?

FEBRUARY 10: ***Being Present***

1. Do you participate in a small group? In what ways have you benefited from the group? What practices might your group implement to help its members avoid distractions?
2. Why do you think Jesus was so good at focusing on others? What can you learn from Jesus' focus? How will you try to follow his example today?
3. List some common distractions that weigh on you before or during a worship service, small-group meeting, or devotional time. How can you intentionally avoid those distractions in the coming week?
4. Read your favorite scripture passage containing the phrases "Jesus saw" or "Jesus looked." Why do you like that passage? What does it teach you about yourself, Jesus, or others?
5. What helps you to slow down and focus on the present moment? How do you most notice God's love when you slow down in that way? How do you make sure you take time to notice the holiness of those moments?

FEBRUARY 17: ***From Sticks to Blossoms***

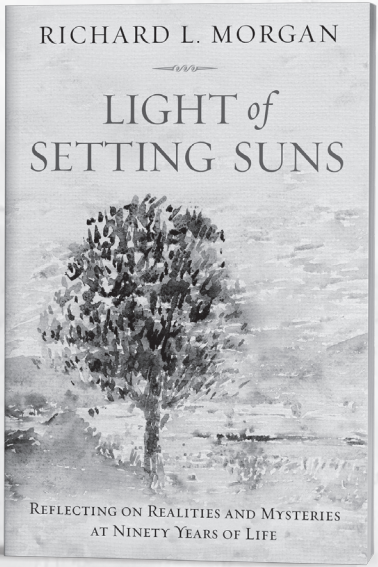
1. When have you had to wait for something that, when it came to fruition, was worth the wait? How was that experience similar to what today's writer describes about the broom tree?
2. Today's meditation references the waiting of Abraham, Sarah, and David. What other biblical characters had to wait? How do you imagine they felt in that waiting? What can we learn from their situations?
3. Who and what helps you respond to times of waiting with patience and hope? How does your faith affect the way you feel about waiting?

4. When you are experiencing a barren time, is it hard for you to believe that the "bare, green sticks" of your life will blossom again? What are your prayers like in such times? What scripture verses comfort you when you feel this way?
5. In what ways do you remember the "blossoms of the past"? What blossoms do you hope people will remember about you, your family, your faith community, or your country? Why do you think it is important both to remember what has passed and to anticipate what is to come?

FEBRUARY 24: ***A Closer Look***

1. Today's writer initially thought his project wouldn't take long, but he soon realized he was wrong. Has something similar happened to you? Why do you think our first impressions can so often be inaccurate?
2. What areas of your life feel rushed? How might you try to slow down in those areas? What do you think you might notice when you slow down?
3. In what simple ways can you bear someone's burden today? How will you be more aware of the opportunities that God provides to help and lift others up?
4. When you feel like others are too busy to notice your struggles, what helps you find peace and encouragement? What scripture passages do you most relate to in those times? What prayers bring you comfort? What activities help you find relief?
5. Besides bearing one another's burdens, what other actions make it possible to fulfill the law of Christ? How would your life be different if you and everyone around you tried to live in a way that would lift others up, bear one another's burdens, and follow the example that Jesus set?

Insider's look at navigating the spiritual challenges of aging.



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24	*25*	*26*	*27*	*28*	*29*	*30*

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7	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*13*
14	*15*	*16*	*17*	*18*	*19*	*20*
21	*22*	*23*	*24*	*25*	*26*	*27*
28	We have included this calendar for marking favorite scripture passages, favorite meditations, reminders, prayer lists, and other notes. However you choose to use it, we hope that it enriches the time you spend with God each day.					

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in faith so that you overflow with hope.

Romans 15:13 (CEB)

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MEET SOME OF OUR WRITERS

(Here and on p. 21.)

Mateus Francisco (p. 31) is a pastor who also serves as the chaplain and a teacher at Methodist University of Angola.

Kirsten Panachyda (p. 48) and her husband have two sons. They are a roller-coaster-riding, travel-loving, blue-hair-dying family.

Roz Picardo (p. 19) is a first-generation Sicilian-American and is a founding pastor at a multicultural church.

Bezalie Uc-Kung (p. 25) retired in 2018 as publisher of the Christian Literature Society of the Philippines.

Thomas Doubt (p. 24) is a Vietnam veteran and has been involved with Baptist Disaster Relief for 33 years.

Mary Hunt Webb (p. 60) has taught math, English as a second language, Spanish, and American Sign Language to adult students. She is a certified lay servant in her church. Mary enjoys herb gardening.

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