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Information about *The Secret Place*

The Secret Place was begun in 1937 by a woman who wanted to provide a way to draw Christians closer to Christ and one another. It's now a quarterly devotional magazine with a worldwide circulation of more than 250,000 and editions in regular print, large print, and Braille. *The Secret Place* is published by Judson Press, the American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

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How to Submit Devotions

The Secret Place is written solely by freelance writers, and anyone may submit original, unpublished meditations for consideration. Original poems (thirty lines maximum) are also welcomed. Each submission should be keystroked or typed (if possible) and contain:

- your name, address, and phone number in the upper left-hand corner of each devotion.
- a suggested Scripture passage to be read.
- a title.
- a “Thought for Today”— usually a Scripture verse (cite full reference and Bible version), but may also be a pertinent thought. We use the New Revised Standard Version unless you specify otherwise.
- an original meditation of 150 to 200 words that relates to your Scripture reading and “Thought for Today.” (Do not quote other sources at length unless you include written permission to do so.)
- a brief concluding prayer.
- your name, city, and state as you would like them to appear in print.

We are especially interested in devotional meditations that:

- are original, creative, and spiritually insightful.
- are concise and focused on one theme.
- explore less familiar biblical passages and themes.
- address urban/suburban as well as rural/nature experiences.
- appeal to young adults as well as older adults.
- encourage outreach, mission, and service.
- are written by men as well as women, and young adults as well as older adults.
- reflect racial and cultural diversity and use inclusive language.

We retain the right to edit submissions as necessary for clarity, brevity, and inclusivity of language. If making personal references, please do not use actual names. We work nine to twelve months ahead of schedule, so please plan any seasonal submissions accordingly. We pay \$20 for each submission published and purchase first rights to the use of original, unpublished material in *The Secret Place* and unlimited rights for use in related electronic material (www.judsonpress.com). Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your submissions (maximum six at a time) for their return if not accepted. E-mail devotions will be responded to via e-mail. If we are unable to use your submission, please allow one to two months for notification. Since we work well in advance, notification of publication may take as long as two years. Thank you for contributing to this ministry through your support, submissions, and prayers.

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Daily Bible Readings for December 2017

Faith in Jesus

December 1	F	Acts 13:44-49	Contrasting Responses by Jews and Gentiles
December 2	S	Acts 3:1-10	Crippled Beggar Requests Alms
December 3	S	Acts 3:11-21	Repent and Believe in Jesus

Faith to Discern

December 4	M	Deuteronomy 31:14-15, 23; 34:9	Joshua Discerned as New Leader
December 5	T	1 Samuel 3:1-9	Eli Senses God's Call to Samuel
December 6	W	1 John 4:1-6	Test the Spirits
December 7	T	John 9:13-17	Blind Man Discerns Jesus as Prophet
December 8	F	Romans 1:8-12, 16-17	Paul's Strategy: Jews First, Then Greeks
December 9	S	Acts 14:21-28	Door of Faith Opened to Gentiles
December 10	S	Acts 13:1-12	Spirit-filled Leadership Discernment

Faith to Persevere

December 11	M	Colossians 1:24–2:5	Rejoicing while Struggling and Suffering
December 12	T	Acts 17:22-33	Both Jews and Gentiles Called to Repent
December 13	W	Philippians 1:27-30	Believing and Suffering in Christ
December 14	T	2 Timothy 2:1-10	Suffering so Others May Be Saved
December 15	F	2 Corinthians 1:3-11	Consolation when Afflicted
December 16	S	Acts 14:1-7	Speaking Boldly, Forced to Flee
December 17	S	Acts 14:8-11, 19-23	Proclaiming Christ Faithfully Despite Angry Opposition

Faithful Seekers of the King

December 18	M	Exodus 1:22–2:10	God Saves Moses
December 19	T	Isaiah 42:1-9	Light to the Nations
December 20	W	Micah 5:1-5	A Peaceful Ruler from Bethlehem
December 21	T	Matthew 1:18-25	Faithful to God's Plan
December 22	F	Matthew 2:13-18	Escape for Family; Massacre of Infants
December 23	S	Matthew 2:19-23	Holy Family Settles in Nazareth
December 24	S	Matthew 2:1-12	Wise Men Seek, then Worship Jesus

Faith to Unite

December 25	M	Ephesians 4:17-24	Live the New Life in Christ
December 26	T	Ephesians 4:25–5:2	Live as Imitators of God
December 27	W	Colossians 3:1-11	Disciplined Living in Christ
December 28	T	1 Corinthians 12:27-31	Leadership Gifts in the Church
December 29	F	1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 22-26	Accept the Gifts of Weaker Members
December 30	S	1 Peter 3:8-12	Experience the Unity of Spirit
December 31	S	Ephesians 4:1-16	Seek the Common Life from Above

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1

Philippians 2:5-11

Untangling Holiday Disappointments

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

You can tell a lot about people by the way they handle tangled Christmas lights. Have you ever wondered why such a sacred holiday season often causes some of the most irksome annoyances? Perhaps it's because we're disappointed with anything less than the ideal Christmas card scene etched on our minds.

A good antidote for holiday disappointment is to remember all of the inconveniences Mary and Joseph endured in order to usher the Savior into the world. Smelly animals were present at their son's delivery. Local shepherds were the first visitors. If the trip *to* Bethlehem had been difficult, what was it like when they *left* with their little one? Most of our own irritations likely seem petty by comparison.

We can get back on track by remembering the real reason for Christmas. God took on human form to provide our salvation. That focus will never fail to put us in the right frame of mind, even when we face tangled Christmas tree lights.

PRAYER: Life-giving God, your humble advent on earth as our Savior amazes us. Amen.

Dennis E. Hensley—Fort Wayne, Indiana

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2

Job 1:1-21

God Is Always Near

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."

Job 1:21

What's your favorite part of the day? For me, it's waking up slowly on one of those rare unplanned Saturday mornings. Or pausing in the midst of my to-do list to watch my dog sleeping in the sun, feet flung happily into the air.

It's easy to be thankful for the best parts of the day, but the story of Job challenges us to be thankful for the worst moments as well. God uses all the seasons of life—both the good and the bad—to develop our trust. Sometimes it is only after we have walked through loneliness, grief, fear, confusion, and pain that we see how the Great Comforter has walked with us through it all. It is only through facing one trial that we receive the strength to face the next one.

Perhaps this Advent season is going to be difficult for you. Take heart! Even when calamities seem to prevail, you can persevere knowing that the One who sees all and knows all is still in control.

PRAYER: Great Comforter, let me feel your presence today. Amen.

Janet Beagle—West Lafayette, Indiana

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3
FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

1 Timothy 1:3-7

Family Trees

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: I urge you . . . to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. 1 Timothy 1:3-4

Some people collect stamps and others salt and pepper shakers. I collect branches on family trees. For over forty years I have been researching, interviewing, and growing pedigree charts. We have wandered through cemeteries as far away as Oxfordshire, England, and Hesse, Germany.

People often skim over the “begat” lists in Genesis and 1 Chronicles, but pedigree was important to the descendants of Abraham. Matthew and Luke have family trees for Jesus which establish that he descended from King David in fulfillment of prophecy. “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations” (Matthew 1:17).

It appears that some first century Christians had lost perspective and were obsessing about their Jewish pedigree or straying into obscure Greek philosophy. Both 1 Timothy (1:4) and Titus (3:9) warn against myths and endless genealogies that detract from what is important: *faith*. Christmas and Advent are a time of reenacting family traditions that may reach back several generations. But whether in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, or Bethlehem in Palestine, it is about *faith*. Whether in Abraham’s Mesopotamia, David’s Jerusalem, or Mary and Joseph’s Bethlehem stable, it is about *faith*.

PRAYER: God of the ages, may we remember that this season is about *faith*. Amen.

David Laubach—Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania

David Laubach is the retired associate executive director of American Baptist Home Mission Societies, immediate past chairperson of the Green Lake Conference Center, a curriculum writer for *Judson Bible Journeys for Adults*, the moderator of the Aldenville Baptist Church, and a proud grandfather. He is also the author of *12 Steps to Congregational Transformation: A Practical Guide for Leaders* published by Judson Press.

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MONDAY, DECEMBER 4

Luke 1:57-66

He Began Praising God

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Luke 1:64

I hit a deer on the way to the Christmas program at church on Sunday. Someone asked me, “What were the first words out of your mouth when that happened?”

I was pleased to be able say, “Thank you, God.” I was grateful nothing more serious happened. What are the first words out of your mouth when you face an unexpected challenge or difficulty?

Zechariah heard from an angel the amazing news that his wife would bear a son. But Zechariah had doubts (Luke 1:18-20). As a result God silenced him for the duration of his wife’s pregnancy. When his son was born, Zechariah’s tongue was loosened and he could speak again. The first words out of his mouth were words of praise. He didn’t complain about how hard it had been to be silent; he didn’t make excuses for his previous lack of faith. What Zechariah did was begin to praise God. I want the first words out of my mouth each day to be words of praise.

PRAYER: In this season of Advent, may my speaking and my living reflect the hope I have in you, O God. Amen.

Gerald Roberts—Franklin, Indiana

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5

Isaiah 60:1-5

Light Reflectors

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah 60:1

Bright beams streamed through the blinds at daybreak. After several days of pale, expressionless sky, abandoning the warmth of my bed was less of a struggle for me that sunny morning. In fact, I was excited because the delicate morning light would make the winter landscape especially photogenic.

Armed with my camera and a protein bar, I embarked on a photographic expedition. Heading North on Highway 57 out of Oakland City, I pulled off the road to admire the Patoka River. The naked, umber-toned branches of maple and oak trees reached for the fluffy cumulus clouds populating the Wedgewood blue sky. The still river mirrored the beauty of the landscape with stunning accuracy. My mind was so busy drinking in the splendor I forgot to take a picture.

Let us strive to reflect God’s light. If we are still and let God’s presence envelope us, we will glow with God’s glory.

PRAYER: God of every color and hue, guide me in the direction of your light so I may be a reflection of your love. Amen.

Heather R. Smith—Oakland City, Indiana

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6

Psalm 103:1-5

Giving Praise

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Psalm 103:1

My doctor has told me that I should walk daily no matter what the weather conditions might be. He said that if it is cold outside, I should put on warm clothing. Likewise, if it is raining, I should take an umbrella. But the main thing is that I am to walk every day. I normally take the advice of my doctor, but over the past several weeks I have neglected that daily walk.

On a recent cold day, I had to go to another office to take care of some business. I wanted to take the car. After all it would be quicker and warmer. But I found myself putting on a warm jacket, hat, and gloves and stepping out into the bitter cold. I soon found myself praying and thanking God for being so gracious to me. To my amazement, I did not notice the cold. We can always find things to complain about, but Psalm 103 shows us myriad reasons to offer praise to God.

PRAYER: Giver of every good and perfect gift, we praise you for all that we receive from you. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Joe Jarvis—Weirton, West Virginia

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7

Matthew 1:1-17

Shaking the Family Tree

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew 1:1

I don't know about you, but I don't want to shake my family tree too hard. I'm afraid to see who might fall out. Most of us probably have a few unsavory characters in our lineage. I choose not to advertise mine.

Yet that's exactly what Matthew did when he compiled Jesus' genealogy. Matthew could have composed a perfectly acceptable list instead of this scandal-laden account. But look at the record. It includes Tamar, who, out of desperation, disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law; the prostitute Rahab; Ruth, whose romance with Boaz included a provocative move while he slept; and Bathsheba, whose marriage to David followed adulterous betrayal.

In Bible times, women were seldom acknowledged in genealogies and certainly not women with such disgraceful stories. Matthew's candid account reflects the divine plan of salvation. God rejects no one who turns from sin and accepts divine grace. God loves us as we are and can transform us into more than we can imagine.

PRAYER: Thank you, God, that through Jesus, anyone who turns to you in repentance becomes a part of your family. Amen.

Diana Derringer—Campbellsville, Kentucky

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8

Colossians 1:15-23

The Real Deal

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. . . .

Colossians 1:15

As I stood in line the other day to check out at a store, the woman ahead of me gave the clerk a \$100 bill. In order to make sure it was not counterfeit, the clerk held it up to the light. On an authentic bill, the watermark portrait, which is hidden unless held up to the light, matches the printed portrait on the bill.

Just as the watermark matches the portrait on a genuine bill, Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God on earth. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus. He represents God to us in a way we can better understand.

In today's society, people are looking for the real deal, and we find just that in Jesus—Emmanuel, God with us. The indwelling Christ enables us to represent God to the world.

People see the outside of a person and not the inside. When we say we are Christians, people hold us up to the light to see if our actions and words match who we say we are. We may think we can hide our sins, misery, and guilt. However, the truth eventually emerges. Our challenge is to confess our sins and imitate Christ in all we do so that people will see Jesus in us.

PRAYER: Illuminating God, I pray that others will see Jesus in all I say and do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Jodi Wheeler—Tucson, Arizona

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9

Isaiah 60:19-20

Blackout

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: for the LORD will be your everlasting light. . . . Isaiah 60:20b

Don't you enjoy the Christmas lights as you drive through your neighborhood? We can't deny their beauty. But during the oil crisis of 1973 the president of the United States asked Americans to help conserve energy. Some cities banned outdoor Christmas lights. That year the concept of Jesus as the light of the world became more real to me.

As much as the beautiful lights dazzle me, I sometimes question the expense and the amount of work it takes to put them up and take them down. Seldom do they actually remind me of Jesus, and often the light displays become very competitive. The spirit of Christmas isn't measured by the number of lights we put up anyway.

As we are surrounded by light during this Advent season, consider the One who is the true light of the world, Jesus Christ. Though humans did not have eyes to see the full splendor of Jesus' light when he walked here on earth, one day we will see his true glory.

PRAYER: Source of all that is and that shall be, we rejoice in your gift of light to the world—Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sherrie Muphree—Odessa, Texas

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

Isaiah 40:9-11

While Shepherds Washed Their Socks

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40:11

Misheard lyrics of Christmas music abound. One such example is "Olive, the other reindeer." Perhaps more familiar is "While shepherds washed their socks." Of course the correct words are "While shepherds watched their flocks." This mondegreen (misheard lyrics) got me to thinking. It was just as unlikely for angels to appear to shepherds at work tending their flocks as it is for them to appear at a neighborhood laundromat while someone was at work washing socks.

But the Bible is populated with ordinary people whom God met in the workplace and amid the events of daily living. The prophet Amos was a shepherd; Micah was a farmer. Joseph was a carpenter and Matthew a tax collector. We know Lydia to be a seller of purple cloth and Anna a prophet. In biblical times God called ordinary people to do extraordinary things. We should not be surprised that God still meets us in our workplaces and daily lives to call us to faithful service and devotion.

PRAYER: Beckoning God, open us to the possibility of your call to us in daily life. Amen.

David Laubach—Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania

MONDAY, DECEMBER 11

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Faith with Endurance

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable. . . . 2 Timothy 4:2a

Our church recently held an event to recognize missionaries. These leaders, for the most part, accepted the call to missionary service as a second career or a new job after retirement. Their zeal reminded me that there is no retirement age for Christians. We need to be working to spread the message of salvation until we breathe our last breath. Unfortunately, that is not what actually happens. It is often said that twenty percent of church members do eighty percent of the work needed to facilitate the ministry of a church. Many members apparently have lost their endurance, while others may not have even labored at all for the faith.

While Paul was in prison and near death, he didn't give up working for God's glory, nor should we. Maybe it's time to say "yes" when we hear of a need instead of waiting for someone else to do the job. Better yet, let's seek out a need that fits our skills and abilities and volunteer to do what we can.

PRAYER: Holy God, open my heart to what you have called me to do and give me the courage to follow through. Amen.

Christine Henderson—Cibolo, Texas

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 12

Isaiah 9:1-7

Peace on Earth, Really?

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

While I was teaching a lesson series on the Christmas story to my Sunday church school class, one of the members asked, "Where is all of the *peace* that God has promised us?" Following an interesting and passionate discussion about the lack of "peace on earth," it hit me! Our focus was worldly. We were thinking about the conflicts raging around the world. We were actually looking for spiritual solutions to global unrest. But our focus needed to be on God's divine meaning.

A spiritual approach reveals that we realize peace when we are reconciled with God through Jesus. Therefore, living a life of peace is a choice. Nothing can rob us of our peace; we freely relinquish it when we allow our circumstances to cloud our vision and cause us undue concern. But God wants peace to be the fabric that holds us together at the deepest level and encompasses every aspect of our life. So the peace that God has promised us resides within. It's our choice!

PRAYER: Giver of peace, thank you for your gift of peace. In Jesus' holy name, Amen.

Rick Beck—Louisville, Kentucky

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13

Philippians 3:7-11

Self-Glory or Self-Worth?

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. Philippians 3:7

When I was eight years old, my mother took me to my sister's high school Christmas concert. During the performance of "O Holy Night," I was captured by the lyrics, "Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth." I understood the message.

Still, I sometimes measure my worth in terms of achievements and appearance. The result is trophies and uniqueness that merely produce self-glory. Ironically, it is not in pride, but in humility, that I find self-worth. I find it in the One who humbled himself for my sake. The Son of God descended from heaven to the womb of a young woman, hiding his royal splendor and power in a cloak of humanity. He came in lowly obscurity and died the death of a criminal. He came to suffer for my sins and to offer me a crown of righteousness. In light of what Jesus Christ has done for me, there is nothing I can do to add to my worth.

PRAYER: All-sufficient God, help me to know my worth and to be content in you alone. Amen.
Cheryl Frisch—Eau Claire, Wisconsin

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14

Romans 8:31-39

No Badness in Me

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Romans 8:34

In the early years of my husband's prison ministry, our family was invited to attend a Christmas service in the chapel. I was nervous about taking our three preschoolers to a prison service so, in the weeks prior to the service, I coached them for the visit and reviewed rules about contact with strangers. To put it in terms I was sure they would understand, I told them we'd be near "bad men."

On the night of the service our children and I were seated in the chapel. Then more than 200 inmates filed in, all wearing brown prison-issued uniforms, each with his prison number emblazoned on the front and back of his shirt. Our daughter watched wide-eyed. Just as the service began she whispered, "Mama, where are the bad men?"

I was truly humbled. May we see others as God sees them, for we know that nothing in all of creation can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

PRAYER: God of us all, help us to see others as you see them. Amen.
Esther Zeiset—Newmanstown, Pennsylvania

Priorities

With so many deadlines,
We scurry through life itself
To be here or there by a certain time
With many preparations to be accomplished
Before we can even get there.
Hustling and bustling,
We travel on without conscientious thought,
Plowing roads of unimportance,
Failing to experience joys along the way,
Swirling endlessly to reach an accomplishment
Which has no real depth, worth, or meaning.
Stop! Lavish in the laughter of yourself.
Be selfless and reflect in the silence.
Rest in the deepness.
Stay there and refresh in the love
Of God who patiently awaits.

Ruthmarie Brooks Silver—Eagleville, Pennsylvania

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15

James 4:13-16

Against the Plan, Across the Country

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: . . . “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” James 4:15b

Just before Christmas break, the movers came and packed our household belongings into their truck. We slept on the floor one last night. In the morning we piled into the van, gave a prolonged farewell to our family in town, and drove up the mountain pass out of Idaho. The road ahead spanned more than 2,000 miles before we would get to our new home in Ohio.

I was in my senior year of high school so I didn't want to move away. None of us wanted Christmas without grandparents, New Year's Day without cousins, church hunting, house hunting, and winter in a land where the trees in the forest seemed like overgrown tumbleweeds compared to Idaho's majestic evergreens. Yet, as I look back, I realize that was one of the best decisions our family ever made. We had each other for Christmas and New Year's. We found a wonderful church. We purchased a house by the end of the school year, and spring brought the most beautiful blossoms I had ever seen.

PRAYER: God of my life, help me to remember that you have better plans than I have. Amen.

Jessica L. Dundas—Painesville, Ohio

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16

Luke 1:39-45

Babies Rejoicing

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

Luke 1:41a

Christmas music inspires joy. During the December when I was pregnant, I discovered that even babies in the womb like holiday music. I could feel my unborn child move when music was in the air. She was especially active during our church's musical Christmas program.

Babies in the womb can hear sounds from the outside world, but one sound that gets a lot of attention from expectant mothers is music. Research shows that babies begin to hear sounds at about seventeen weeks. By twenty-six weeks, a baby's heartbeat speeds up in response to sounds from outside the womb. At thirty-three weeks, researchers have observed babies breathing in time to music, and at thirty-eight weeks, fetal movements vary according to the type of music.

The following Sunday, the Gospel reading was Luke's account of Elizabeth's experience during Mary's visit. I remembered my baby leaping the previous Sunday and was thankful for the intimate connection to the biblical story.

PRAYER: Thank you, God, for the indescribable gift of life. Amen.

Beth A. Palm—Rockford, Illinois

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 17
THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

Luke 2:8-14

A Singing Army

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” **Luke 2:13-14**

Carol was in the pulmonary intensive care unit struggling against cystic fibrosis. She told me that she had been comforted by the music of angels singing. Obviously I had forgotten all that I had been taught about pastoral care and proceeded to explain that the Greek word in Luke 2:13 had the “army” of angels speaking the words “Glory to God in the highest” rather than singing them. She was insistent that angels sing, and I acknowledged that fact in my prayer with her.

We often depict angels with harps and songbooks making music, but the Bible only hints that they sing. The New Revised Standard Version has angels singing in full voice (Revelation 5:12), but, alas, the Greek word again denotes “saying.” It is what the angels are saying and their attitude of worship and praise that is noteworthy. During this Christmas season, let us use our voices in the true spirit of worship to sing and speak our heartfelt praise. Carol would approve.

PRAYER: Eternal God, let us both say and sing the timeless message of good news and peace on earth. Amen.

David Laubach—Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania

MONDAY, DECEMBER 18

Matthew 1:18-25

The God Who Understands

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” **Matthew 1:23**

What emotions do you most associate with the Christmas season? Unfortunately, Christmas is a time of sorrow for many. Young people experience feelings of isolation and loneliness when they aren’t invited to celebrate with friends. Middle-aged people struggle to meet the financial demands of the season. And seniors note the painful absence of numerous loved ones who have passed on before them.

Still, Christmas can be a time of great joy if we consider its true meaning: “God with us.” Throughout the Old Testament, God variously demonstrated God’s love for people. However, it wasn’t until the witness of Jesus Christ that humanity could come to fully appreciate the true nature and depth of God’s love. As one born among us, Christ communicated God’s profound empathy regarding our hopes, joys, fears, pains, and struggles. That’s the essence of Christmas.

PRAYER: Ever-present God, your gift to humankind fills us with unspeakable joy. Amen.

Jonathan Emerson-Pierce—Toronto, Ontario, Canada

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19

Colossians 1:9-14

The Box

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. . . . Colossians 1:9

While wrapping Christmas presents, I chose a small box in which to place a gift card. When I lifted the top, I found a gift card for my son already in it. This surprised me; I thought I had already wrapped my son's gift and put it under the tree. So I ran to the tree. Sure enough! There was a gift to my son: a small box neatly wrapped in bright green metallic Christmas paper tied with silver ribbon and a silver bow. It was such a pretty looking Christmas gift sitting there under the tree.

"What is in this box?" I wondered. I tried to remember what other gift I had bought my son but came up blank. Thinking that perhaps I had accidentally wrapped someone else's gift and labeled it for my son, I decided to open the box to view its contents. The box was empty. How I laughed at myself for wrapping a completely empty box by mistake!

Aren't we like that sometimes? We look like we have it all together on the outside—a very attractive package but completely empty on the inside? In today's Scripture passage, the apostle Paul told the believers at Colossae that he was praying for them to be filled with the knowledge of God's will through the Holy Spirit. Let's make that our prayer today as well.

PRAYER: Mighty God, fill us with your Spirit and the knowledge of your will so that we may walk in a manner worthy of you. In your Son's Name, Amen.

Harriet Michael—Louisville, Kentucky

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 20

Psalm 46:8-11

Be Still and Know

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Be still, and know that I am God!” Psalm 46:10a

Sometimes it is so hard to be still, isn't it? We have many worries, cares, frustrations, and stresses in our life. We tend to feel overwhelmed during the Christmas season. We have work to do and deadlines to meet, gifts to buy and presents to wrap. From the time we are kids in school until the time we die, we are continually bombarded with busyness.

Close your eyes and visualize Jesus standing next to you holding a basket. Recall the psalmist's words: “Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you (Psalm 55:22). Then take your burden, your worry, or your concern and place it in the basket. Now that he has your burden, spend some time in silence and listen to what he might say to you. Just be still and know that Christ can take care of all that concerns you today. And as your day progresses and you feel the urge to take your burden back, remind yourself that you have given it to Jesus.

PRAYER: Burden-bearer, help me to be still and allow you to carry my burden. Amen.

Justin Steward—Frewsburg, New York

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21

Acts 4:13-22

Regifting

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “. . . for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Acts 4:20

Over the last few years there has been some debate about the appropriateness of “regifting.” Should we or shouldn't we? The Thursday before Christmas is National Regifting Day in recognition of the concept of regiving a gift you cannot use or do not want. Personally, I am ambivalent on this subject, but I am certain I have been the benefactor of regifting.

Thinking about regifting, I realize the growth of the church following Christ's death and resurrection has been accomplished through regifting. The disciples and the small group of original believers took the gifts they received from Christ—love, mercy, compassion, grace, joy, hope, forgiveness—and passed them on to anyone willing to accept them. Those recipients did the same. Eventually, 2000 years later, a Sunday church school teacher named Mrs. Fibigger passed them on to me. I now regift them to anyone willing to read my writing and listen to me speak. Regifting is not a new concept.

PRAYER: Generous God, thank you for your gifts that keep on giving. Help me to be a regifter like so many before me. Amen.

Mason K. Brown—Forest Grove, Oregon

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22

John 3:16-21

Hallelujah, What a Gift!

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16

When my children were young, they all wanted skateboards for Christmas. We gave one to each child. It brought us great joy to watch them unwrap their gifts on Christmas morning and then run out to play. I will never forget looking out the window to see my six-year-old son embracing and kissing his skateboard. It was just a piece of fiberglass with wheels on it, but it brought him a great deal of joy.

God loved the world so much that God gave us Jesus. No gift we give or receive can compare in value or significance. My children are all grown and have children of their own. The skateboards they received that Christmas have long since been worn out and thrown away. But the gift they received when they accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior is still as alive and fresh as it was the day they all received him. Hallelujah, what a glorious gift! No one can outgive God.

PRAYER: Thank you, God, for sending your only Son into this world to save us. Amen.

Norma Vera—College Station, Texas

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

Hosea 6:4-6

Lasting Love

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Hosea 6:4

A high school boyfriend once brought me a beautifully wrapped book on Christmas Eve. Convinced of his affection, I waited eagerly to hear from him when he returned to town after the Christmas break. I waited in vain. He never called me again. His loving words and thoughtful gift meant nothing.

When I recall my heartache over that boy, I can imagine God’s disappointment with the Jews of Hosea’s day. Hosea compared their love for God to a misty morning cloud that dissipates in the sun’s heat. Each week the people offered sacrifices and promised to serve God, but they didn’t follow through. Their ungodly actions spoke more about their spiritual condition than their Sabbath prayers did.

Occasional bursts of spiritual devotion can’t sustain a growing relationship with Christ. Our love for him isn’t a decorative accessory that we merely attach to our lifestyle when we’re in the mood. Jesus calls us to make a daily decision to follow him. When we do, we enter into a love relationship that lasts.

PRAYER: Embracing God, you deserve all of my affection. Help me love you faithfully. Amen.

Donna Savage—Las Vegas, Nevada

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
CHRISTMAS EVE**

Luke 2:1-7

Swaddling Clothes

Thought for Today: And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

Surprise! Our forty-five-year old daughter announced that she was going to give birth to twin girls. When they arrived six weeks prematurely, we flew across the country to find them in their neonatal incubators. In a few weeks they would be home swaddled in sleep sacks and wrapped in wearable blankets fastened with Velcro.

I recalled a conversation with an anthropologist who told me about the ancient practice of swaddling infants with cloth strips to keep their limbs immobile. This custom is still practiced in many countries today.

In Luke's account of baby Jesus in the manger, he twice tells us that he was wrapped in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:7, 12). It is what a caring mother would do and is almost the only thing that was normal about Jesus' birth in a stable.

In Ezekiel 16:1-8, the prophet painted a picture of a desperate and abandoned Israel. As a nation, she was unwashed and unswaddled, unloved and uncared for. The prophet then described the care that God subsequently lavished on Israel when she was found: "I clothed you with embroidered cloth and with sandals of fine leather; I bound you in fine linen and covered you with rich fabric" (Ezekiel 16:10).

We should pay more attention to the "sign" of the swaddled child that the angels highlighted for the shepherds. God cares for us as Mary cared for Jesus—even in surprising situations and places.

PRAYER: Loving God, as we celebrate the birth of the Christ child, help us to resist the desire to keep Jesus in the Bethlehem manger, bound and helpless. Amen.

David Laubach—Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 25
CHRISTMAS DAY**

Galatians 4:1-7

Living Nativity

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son born of a woman. . . . Galatians 4:4a

Whether it's a living nativity spectacular at Radio City Music Hall, a village reenactment in a barn on a cold snowy night, a children's Christmas pageant at the church, or a ceramic crèche in our living room, we are familiar with the impulse to dramatize the birth of Jesus. We sometimes get the details wrong: three kings at the manger, too few angels, or too many sheep and camels. In reality, the Magi arrived when the holy family was in a house (Matthew 2:11) with no mention of camels or kings. There was an army of angels (Luke 2:13), and the ancient tradition based on Isaiah 1:3 is that there were an ox and ass at the stable, but no sheep or goats.

But the biggest "detail" that we get wrong is forgetting to put ourselves in the story. The reason for the nativity is that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). We are the lost; indeed, we are the reason for the season.

PRAYER: Redeeming God, help us to see that we are part of the living nativity. Amen.

David Laubach—Pleasant Mount, Pennsylvania

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 26

Psalms 119:105-112

Plugged In

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105

Sleeping bodies were sprawled everywhere as I made my way to the kitchen on Christmas morning. I realized change had crept upon us; small bodies had grown and now took up a lot more space on the floor. I noticed another change also. Christmas tree lights once helped me navigate through the shadows. Now little red or green lights glowed and slender cords snaked to every outlet, recharging electronic devices. Tablets sat on chairs clustered around outlets in the dining area, while in the living room, phones sucked up juice like drink coasters. In the kitchen, I had to unplug two more phones in order to start the coffee.

As sunlight emptied the house of sleepy shadows and brewing coffee filled it with warm wakeup smells, I realized this tangle of cords sprouting from every outlet showed how careful we are to keep our devices charged so we can stay connected to the world. How much more important it is to stay connected to God.

PRAYER: All-powerful God, help us to be careful to recharge our spiritual batteries each day. Amen.

Kathy O'Neill—Kennedale, Texas

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 27

Psalm 126:1-6

Jovial Memories

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy. . . . Psalm 126:2

The family had gathered for our annual Christmas dinner. My wife had knocked herself out to prepare a scrumptious meal—except for the ham. A friend had given me a recipe. His ham was always so delicious that I wanted to duplicate it. I announced my plan to the family and was met with unanimous skepticism. Undaunted, I confidently executed my plan. All afternoon I carefully watched over my masterpiece and was eager to prove everyone wrong.

My ham was a disaster. Not only was it ugly on the platter, the consistency was stringy and the taste only remotely reminded us of ham. Even though my offering was a culinary disappointment, merriment spontaneously filled the room. Everyone let me know that this was one time when father definitely did not know best. I made certain that the ham was soon gone, but the story of this Christmas dinner will warm our hearts for years to come.

PRAYER: Thank you, God, for laughter. It lightens the heart and causes the world to smile. Amen.

Mitch Carnell—Charleston, South Carolina

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 28

Philippians 4:10-20

Lessons Relearned

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19

I am often guilty of forgetting how God provides for my needs. I had been saving for some necessary extensive dental work. Small amounts from many paychecks were added to my little envelope of savings. I almost had enough saved. Then I learned of a coworker with unexpected medical bills. Andrea didn't know how she'd eat that month. I felt compelled to share. Yet, the spirit of practicality argued that I needed that money for my own doctor. I decided to share with her anyway.

The day before my surgery, another coworker, Lily, slipped me a check. She was sharing her Christmas bonus with me. The check, made out to my dentist, was the exact amount I'd shared with Andrea two months earlier. Now I had never told anyone of my gift to Andrea. When the exact amount was returned to me just in time for my surgery, I knew God was behind this generous gesture. Even when I forget God's promises, God doesn't forget my needs.

PRAYER: Faithful God, forgive me for the many times I forget your promises. Please be patient with me as I learn to have faith that you will continue to supply my needs. Amen.

Pat Nance—Roanoke, Texas

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29

Titus 2:11-14

Grace Appeared

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.

Titus 2:11 (NIV)

In 2010, the Copiapo mining accident in Chile caught the world's attention. Thirty-three miners were trapped underground with little hope of rescue. Despite daily drilling from above to reach them, most rescuers and family members doubted that anyone had survived. But on day seventeen the drill bit reached the area where the miners were and returned with a note attached: "We are well in the shelter, the thirty-three of us." It took another fifty-two days to successfully rescue all the miners. All the while, they had clung to the hope of rescue, waiting for someone to reach down and pull them up.

When it comes to humankind's desperate need to be rescued from a dark and bleak captivity, God responded by providing Jesus, the Savior of the world. Jesus is our blessed hope—indeed, our only hope. We are not alone. Even in the darkest places, God's light and grace appear to announce salvation. Let's encourage one another with the message that help has arrived.

PRAYER: Sustainer of life, we praise you for sending Jesus to bring us salvation. Amen.

Mike Medeiros—Glendora, California

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 30

1 Peter 3:13-17

First Things First

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. . . . 1 Peter 3:15b

My three-year-old grandson said he was hungry so we opened the refrigerator and looked inside. "I want waffles," he said. A sign of the times, I grumbled inwardly. Who looks in the refrigerator for waffles anyway? But this was no time for waffling; my grandson was hungry. So I pulled out my old contraption and baked waffles for him. He loved my waffles and filled my heart with joy when he declared, "Grammy, you're a good cooker!"

I'd always been told to be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks me to give the reason for the hope that I have. But I had never felt prepared. What would I say? Then I remembered: if I had not already had a waffle iron, I would not have been able to prepare waffles. By the same token, if I did not already have Christ set apart as Lord in my heart, I would not be prepared to give an answer for the hope that I have. First things first.

PRAYER: Most high God, thank you for helping me see the right order of things. Amen.

Margaret D. Pagan—Baltimore, Maryland

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 31
NEW YEAR'S EVE**

Luke 6:37-38

Crash Meeting

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. . . .” Luke 6:37

It was the first time I had visited the new church. The pastor’s sermon about forgiveness spoke directly to my heart.

After the service, as I backed my car out of my parking spot, I felt a jolt. My bumper had connected with another. In my rear view mirror, I saw the other driver, an older gentleman, in his Volkswagen. We got out of our cars and met in the middle of the lane.

“Are you okay?” we asked at the same time. We looked each other over. Nothing was bleeding or broken.

“No harm done,” I said.

He extended his hand and smiled. “My name’s John. You sat near me in the back row.”

“I’m Gina.” I shook his hand. “Nice to bump into you again.”

Neither of us looked that closely at either bumper. There was no way either of us could stand at the foot of the cross and tell Jesus that a little chipped paint and a small dent mattered. Jesus couldn’t have spoken more directly to us at that moment unless he would have appeared at the collision scene.

That new church became my home church. My new friend John and I often sat together in the back row.

Jesus was very clear in his command that we forgive each other as we would like to be forgiven. During the year ahead, we will have many opportunities to put Jesus’ words into practice. May the Holy Spirit give us the grace to forgive.

PRAYER: Loving and forgiving God, guide our interactions with others. Amen.

Gina Napoli—Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Daily Bible Readings for January 2018

A Sincere Faith

January 1	M	Psalm 56	In God I Put My Trust
January 2	T	1 Kings 18:30-39	The Lord God Defeats Baal
January 3	W	Jeremiah 29:4-9	Faithful Living in Another Land
January 4	T	Matthew 5:13-16	Always Live as Salt and Light
January 5	F	Revelation 2:8-11	Be Faithful When Tested
January 6	S	Daniel 1:3-7	Training Plan for the Captives
January 7	S	Daniel 1:8-21	Stand by Your Principles

A Bold Faith

January 8	M	Acts 4:13-22	We Must Speak about Jesus
January 9	T	Acts 5:27-32	We Must Obey God, Not Humans
January 10	W	Esther 4:5-17	Prayer, Fasting, and a Bold Move
January 11	T	Daniel 3:1-12	All Ordered to Worship the Image
January 12	F	Daniel 3:13-18	We Will Not Serve Babylonian Gods
January 13	S	Daniel 3:24-25	King Astonished at Jews' Survival
January 14	S	Daniel 3:19-23, 26-28	God Delivers from the Fiery Furnace

A Prayer for an Obedient Faith

January 15	M	Nehemiah 1:4-11	Plea for God's Forgiveness and Mercy
January 16	T	Jeremiah 25:8-14	Disobedience Results in Israel's Downfall
January 17	W	Joel 1:13-20	A Renewed Call to Repentance
January 18	T	Daniel 9:1-3	Seeking Answers through Prayer and Supplication
January 19	F	Daniel 9:9-14	Prayer of Confession for Israel's Sins
January 20	S	Daniel 9:20-24	Receiving Answers to Prayer and Confession
January 21	S	Daniel 9:4-8, 15-19	Daniel's Prayer of Confession and Supplication

A Strong Faith

January 22	M	Genesis 46:1-7	A Vision Sends Jacob to Egypt
January 23	T	Joshua 1:1-9	Joshua, Be Strong and Courageous
January 24	W	Ezekiel 1:26-2:7	Ezekiel Called to Speak to Israel
January 25	T	Acts 16:6-10	Paul Called to Macedonia in a Vision
January 26	F	Daniel 10:1-9	Daniel Sees a Vision
January 27	S	Daniel 12:8-13	Time of the End
January 28	S	Daniel 10:10-19	Be Strong and Courageous

Faith without Works Is Dead

January 29	M	James 2:8-13	Fulfilling the Law
January 30	T	Leviticus 19:13-18	The Royal Law
January 31	W	Psalm 143	Teach Me to Do Your Will

**MONDAY, JANUARY 1
NEW YEAR'S DAY**

1 Timothy 4:7-10

New Year's Resolutions

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 1 Timothy 4:8

In college, I was once given an assignment to write about New Year's resolutions. I tackled the subject from a statistical angle and discovered that dieting, exercising, and smoking cessation topped the list. In today's scriptural selection, Timothy tells us that while attention to one's physical well-being is of some importance, caring for spiritual needs holds greater weight, since the benefits impact not only the current life but also extend into the future.

The challenges and needs of today often absorb all of our energy. Why should we think about the future? However, the Bible encourages us again and again to prepare for Jesus' return. With this in mind, I've revamped my New Year's resolution list. I'm determined to pay more attention to my spiritual life, be watchful, and strive to live a life that makes pleasing God my top priority.

PRAYER: O God, as another year begins, I resolve to live in a way that honors you. Amen.

Monica A. Andermann—North Bellmore, New York

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

Aging Gracefully

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts. Ecclesiastes 5:20

There's nothing quite as dramatic as being asked the basic question: "How old are you?" For some, the query sends shock waves throughout their system. Others take it in stride and answer with a smile. Biblical writers never shunned the subject of age. Here are a few examples:

- "Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated" (Deuteronomy 34:7).
- "In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap . . ." (Psalm 92:14).
- "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life" (Proverbs 16:32).
- "So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

This year we will all celebrate another birthday. Don't fret over it!

PRAYER: God of the ages, bless us with joy and wisdom as we serve you. Amen.

Douglas Raymond Rose—Grand Prairie, Texas

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3

Luke 2:22-38

Simeon and Anna

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation. . . .” Luke 2:29-30

They were old. They had seen rulers come and go. They had witnessed the restoration of the temple in which they stood. They had hoped all their lives, as had many generations before them, for the Messiah to come. They had suffered the wavering of strength, the fading of memory, the blurring of sight. They had lived the long hollowness of grief. They must have known days when strength was spent and hope seemed vain. Weren't there times when they doubted that they had anything left to give to life? They were ready to die. But God said, “Not yet.”

One more day, they gathered strength with the dawn. One more day, they yielded to the Spirit's leading. One more day, they were faithful to hope. That day, they were given everything for which their hearts had hungered. They had dreamed and dared to ask, and they received. With work-calloused hands they touched; with age-dimmed eyes they saw; with blazing hearts they recognized God's salvation.

Blessing—blessing was what was given to them, and blessing was what their Spirit-freed tongues gave back. They praised God and witnessed to God's faithfulness. Words of encouragement and comfort, thankfulness and joy poured from the lips of these faithful ones.

Their work was done. Now, at last, they were ready to depart in peace.

PRAYER: Eternal God, keep our hearts open and our lives faithful, for as long as you give us breath. Amen.

Beth Ann Gregory—Grand Island, Nebraska

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

Try Something New

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”
Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)

Although many people enjoy shoe shopping, I don't. There is nothing more comfortable than a well-worn pair of shoes. The problem is that they do not last forever so new ones have to be purchased. At first the new shoes are slightly uncomfortable and the battle between feet and shoes begins.

Isn't life exactly the same? Sometimes we feel so comfortable in the life we are living that we forget it is time to move on and try something new.

Step out and embrace something new today. Your insides may tingle with nervous butterflies. You may be anxious, but as with a new pair of shoes, you will go through the breaking in process and eventually slip comfortably into your new role. The pain will subside and you will find yourself feeling good again. Who knows where the Holy Spirit will lead you as you walk in God's footsteps?

PRAYER: God of life and life anew, allow me to step forward to embrace new things today. Amen.

Cindy Lee—Todmorden, Lancashire, United Kingdom

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5

Matthew 7:21-23

Passport Problems

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” Matthew 7:21

“Happy deportation day!” This was the greeting my friends received as they awoke. The Scottish official's cheerful words contrasted starkly with the mission team's distraught feelings. After months of planning, fundraising, and anticipating, they had mistakenly overlooked some important details. Instead of being able to help spread the gospel, they were forced to board a plane and return home.

My friends *looked* as if they were going to Scotland. They *told* people they were going to Scotland. They even had T-shirts made with the word “Scotland” on them. They thought they had everything in order, but they hadn't followed all of the rules.

We, too, may look as if we're going to heaven. We may talk about it, display Christian bumper stickers, and act as though we're going, but if we do not follow God's orders, we will not get in. Fortunately, God has a simple entrance policy: believe and follow Jesus. He will grant us our passports into heaven.

PRAYER: Redeemer of humanity, help us to put our faith in you so we can receive all of the blessings you have for us in this life and the next. Amen.

Christian Townsend—Cedarville, Ohio

**SATURDAY, JANUARY 6
EPIPHANY**

Job 9:1-10

Seeing Stars

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “. . . who made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south. . . .” Job 9:9

During an evening walk with my girlfriend, we were looking for the Big Dipper constellation. I didn't see it until she pointed it out. I commented that I needed her to help me see the stars.

There are times when we cannot see God in our lives either. But God is with us always, glimmering in some miraculous way, just as the sun brightens the day and the moon and stars illuminate the night. Sometimes, however, we need to be reminded of God's faithfulness and constant presence. Other people can help us recapture God's light. The spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study also point us to the light. On this day as we remember the journey of the Magi to the home of Jesus and his parents in Bethlehem, let us also lift our eyes heavenward. A star guided the wise men in their quest to find the king of the Jews. Look at the stars tonight and be reminded of God's presence.

**PRAYER: O God, help us acknowledge your presence whatever our situation might be. Amen.
Michael Prihoda—Medford, Wisconsin**

SUNDAY, JANUARY 7

1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Sleeping Saints

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed. . . . 1 Corinthians 15:51

Every other month, I conduct a short worship service at a local nursing home. The woman who can't hear very well sits next to her friend who can't see the page numbers in the hymnal. One gentleman seems to be caught in a world of his own. Others appear to be sleeping in their wheelchairs. This week I used 1 Corinthians 15 as my text to share the good news about our resurrection bodies. The promise of a new and better existence in exchange for worn out bodies drew knowing nods of affirmation from a few in the audience.

But for most of the elderly saints, it was the music that stirred their souls. While they don't always appear to respond to the spoken word, the singing of precious hymns still resonates with them. Today we closed the service by singing "Amazing Grace." The sleeping saints revived and joined in the singing. I couldn't help but smile knowing that one day we will arise and sing again!

PRAYER: Thanks be to you, O God, for giving us victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Dan Nicksich—Grant, Michigan

Taking Time

I wonder, as I look ahead
At life's very short road;
What did I do or not do
To ease someone's heavy load.

Has a careless word hurt the feelings
Of a person close to me?
A word foolishly spoken,
A word I could not retrieve.

From birth to death the years fly
As sand before the wind;
The days flash before us.
A ticking of the clock sounds within.

So fast, so little time
In this world to do some good;
To do for my fellow human beings
All that I possibly could.

We don't need the praises
Or acclamations of others;
We get all the praise we need
By serving our sisters and brothers.

Helping one another
With kindness and love;
Giving something of ourselves
Is all God asks from above.

We can't wait for the morrow;
It may never come.
It seems that the right time
May never arrive for some.

Now is the time to make our mark.
To do what good we can do;
For in loving and helping others
We to ourselves are true.

Edwin Small
Published posthumously

Note from the Editor: "Taking Time" was the last poem written by Edwin Small who passed away in 2016. It was read at his memorial service. He always made sure his seven children received their own personal copies of *The Secret Place* each quarter. His son Dan is now carrying on the tradition. The poem and accompanying information was submitted by Edwin's daughter, Peggy Redoute of Clinton Township, Michigan.

MONDAY, JANUARY 8

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Giving Thanks in All Things

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:18

It was a January morning. The air was moist with fog. I headed off to work, unaware that temperatures had dropped below freezing at sunrise. I was traveling a road that paralleled the Pennsylvania Turnpike when my car hit a patch of black ice and went into an uncontrolled skid. Unfortunately, a small tow truck was coming from the opposite direction.

The impact was not as bad as it might have been. Although my car was totaled, no one was injured. If the collision had occurred a quarter mile earlier, I might have shot across the strip of grass down onto the turnpike. Instead, I slid into an empty field. Additionally, the vehicle I hit was large and sturdy which offered the other driver more protection.

In the “Thought for Today,” Paul encouraged his readers to find the bright spots in the midst of difficult times. Developing this habit can make a definite difference in our times of pain and testing.

PRAYER: Pain-bearer, in all our hard times, may we turn to you with a spirit of thanksgiving. Amen.

Cheryl L. Weber—Denver, Pennsylvania

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9

James 1:2-3

No Complaints

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy. . . . James 1:2

I was having one of those weeks when it seemed as though everyone I encountered was in a grumbling and complaining mood. It took a lot of prayer and personal restraint on my part not to let these complainers adversely affect my mood. Then I received a call from a woman telling me how thankful she was for Christian friends and for God’s goodness. Getting a call like that might not seem like such a big deal, but this woman’s personal circumstances made it phenomenal.

She had a terminal illness. The doctors had done all they could for her. She had asked to be brought home so that she could spend her final days with her pets, family, and friends. We talked for quite a while that day and when we finished, I realized that ours was the most uplifting conversation I’d had in a long time. My friend reminded me of the importance of keeping a thankful heart and positive attitude in the face of trials.

PRAYER: Help me, O God, to always have a grateful heart. Amen.

Veronica Bowman—Asheboro, North Carolina

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10

Joshua 4:19-24

A Memorable Place

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal. . . . Joshua 4:20

When I was a teenager, the local churches held events during which various youth groups gathered together. One such event was “Easter Camp.” It was always a memorable time. Besides simply enjoying our time together, we benefitted from the opportunity to look seriously at our faith. We explored spiritual issues such as the faithfulness of God, the call to follow Jesus, and our need to depend on the Holy Spirit to lead us through the tough places.

At a campsite in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho, the Israelites paused from their journeying. With the twelve stones carried out of the Jordan River (Joshua 4:8), Joshua built a memorial—a place to remember what God had done for them.

We, too, need those places where we shake ourselves down, let the old things drop off, get ourselves ready, and then take on what God has for us next. Think about what God has done and can do for you. It’s just a campsite away.

PRAYER: Faithful God, in my busy life, let me stop and reflect on your ways, and then move on, being confident of your Spirit’s leading. Amen.

Peter Veugelaers—Wellington, New Zealand

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11

Romans 8:12-17

Wow—I’m God’s Daughter!

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. Romans 8:15a

I opened my e-mail at the end of the workday and saw that I had an urgent message from my boss. She asked me to call her first thing in the morning. Dread overcame me, and I thought the worst. Every possible negative scenario I could imagine flashed before my eyes.

My face must have betrayed the fear and anxiety that I felt when I arrived home, because my husband asked, “What’s wrong?” I told him about the email. His reaction was different from mine. He said, “That sounds good.” He then asked me an important question that changed my perspective: “What are you afraid of?” Then he added, “Faith and fear cannot coexist, love.” His simple statement was a reminder to me that I shouldn’t let fear be my first reaction. It also brought to mind today’s Scripture reading which assures me that I am an adopted daughter of the Almighty. I have direct access to God, so what is there to fear?

PRAYER: Embracing God, thank you for adopting me and giving me the assurance that I don’t have anything to fear. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Tanya Solomon—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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FRIDAY, JANUARY 12

Leviticus 22:17-22

An Offering without Defect

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable in your behalf. Leviticus 22:20

Hebrew law called for animal sacrifices. This requirement served the very practical purpose of supporting the priesthood, since the priests were allowed to eat at least a portion of most of the sacrifices. However, each offering had to be without defect. As Leviticus 22:22 notes, animals that were flawed—blind, lame, diseased, etc.—were not acceptable. But why not? A blind or lame animal would taste just as good and be just as nourishing as a healthy one, wouldn't it? Probably so, but that wasn't the point.

Sacrifices had a spiritual purpose as well as a practical one, and the spiritual purpose could only be served by a perfect animal. God was trying to teach the Israelites that they were to give their best, not their discards.

Do you ever give God your discards instead of your best? Do you give God a small fraction of your income because tithing is too expensive? Do you go to church only when you feel like it? Do you avoid opportunities to serve God and other people because you would miss a favorite television show? God wants our best and isn't satisfied with anything less.

PRAYER: Holy God, I want to give you my best, not my discards. Teach me to do that, and show me when I fail to do it, so that I can learn to always put you first. Amen.

Don Davidson—Bedford, Texas

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13

Isaiah 55:6-9

Formula-Free

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. Isaiah 55:8

As a math teacher, I work with students to improve their skills with formulas. Students memorize and apply rules for fractions, decimals, ratios, and proportions. In the process, they build predictable patterns for finding and solving equations.

When we want to solve personal problems, we often wish for the same predictability. But if we were to take the same approach to praying, we'd reduce the process to a series of step-by-step methods. Instead, God offers an ongoing relationship in which we get better acquainted with one another as we ask for guidance. On the days when the factors of our circumstances don't fall into a neat, tidy order, the value of connecting with God in prayer is inestimable. As our souls settle in with the Almighty, our ability to perceive divine precepts multiplies.

Are you in the process of making an important decision? You don't need to remember a formula. Spend time with God, and you will receive the wisdom you need for your solution.

PRAYER: Omniscient God, we rest in your ways and thoughts. Amen.

Lynn R. Hare—Portland, Oregon

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

My Help and My Deliverer

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. Ecclesiastes 4:9

Because her class was not available during our worship services, my three-year-old daughter attended "big church" with me. To keep her entertained, I set scissors, crayons, and paper on a folding chair next to me. She used it as a desk. During the sermon, she cut the paper into tiny snippets that scattered onto the chair and down to the carpet. Eventually, she began picking up the clippings with one hand and placing them in the palm of the other. Soon that hand was too full and many pieces again fell to the floor. I formed a basket with my hands, but she turned her back to me. This was *her* problem and she would take care of it herself!

How often had I, too, been intent on remedying my own problems and turned my back on God? Taking the plastic bag that had contained the scissors and crayons, I again offered assistance. This time my daughter emptied her hands into the bag and, together, we gathered the remnants.

PRAYER: Thank you, God, that we don't have to face life alone. Amen.

Rebecca MacKenzie—Apache Junction, Arizona

MONDAY, JANUARY 15
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY

2 Kings 5:19b-27

Situation Vacant

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, thought, “My master has let that Aramean Naaman off too lightly by not accepting from him what he offered. As the LORD lives, I will run after him and get something out of him.” 2 Kings 5:20

Many bright young graduates are looking for jobs. Of course, not just *any* job. Street cleaner? Dish washer? Probably not.

Elisha was the son of a well-to-do farmer. But God called him to leave his post and follow Elijah to become his personal servant. He learned great lessons from Elijah. Later when Elijah was taken into heaven, Elisha picked up the mantle and became God’s man in Israel. The servant post was vacant once again. Gehazi became Elisha’s servant, but turned out to be a great disappointment because he was corrupt and misused his influence.

There are plenty of vacancies to be filled in our communities—some with pay, some without. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a day of service. People from all walks of life work together to meet pressing needs. Am I willing to offer myself?

PRAYER: Here I am, God, willing to fill that essential vacancy. Amen.

Marion Turnbull—Liverpool, United Kingdom

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16

2 Kings 6:8-23

My Protection and My Hope

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Then Elisha prayed: “O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. 2 Kings 6:17

Today’s Scripture reading tells an amazing story. Elisha and the city of Dothan were surrounded by the Aramean army. Elisha’s unnamed servant was terrified, but Elisha himself was completely calm in the face of great opposition. He knew there were more *with* them than *against* them. He prayed for the eyes of his servant to be opened, and then he, too, was able to see the mountains filled with horses and chariots of fire (often interpreted as a divine protective force).

During most of our journey through this life, we are not able to see with our natural eyes the immense resources God dispenses for our protection and help. The story of Elisha reminds us that even though we may not see with our natural eyes, we can be confident that God is active beyond the visible circumstances. The obstacles that we face and the opposition that we encounter are not the whole picture. The whole picture is dominated by God.

PRAYER: Omnipotent God, help me to believe in your power and protection. Amen.

Phil Kendon—Kloof, South Africa

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17

Ephesians 3:14-21

A Mistyped Word

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. Ephesian 3:17

When proofreading manuscripts, I sometimes find a correctly spelled word that I didn't mean to use. I depend on the fallible me to catch those errant words, and the fallible me is, well . . . fallible.

My spiritual life seems to have similar characteristics. Even though I try to do what Jesus wants, my failures slip through. Why? Because my Christ-likeness is not something *I* can accomplish.

As my Sunday church school teacher read her notes while teaching about the indwelling Christ, she said, "That Christ may swell in your hearts . . . oh, I meant to type 'dwell' but it says 'swell.'" I started to laugh, but isn't that what Christ is supposed to do? He is to become greater; I am to become less (John 3:30). He is to swell up in me, filling me with more and more of himself. What an awesome spiritual word picture God painted in my mind through that mistyped word.

PRAYER: Living God, how great you are, even using mistakes to teach us and help us to be more like Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lucinda J. Rollings—Greenwood, Indiana

THURSDAY, JANUARY 18

Psalms 92:12-15

The Older I Get . . .

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap. . . . Psalm 92:14

While visiting a little village in rural England, my wife and I saw a T-shirt that read "The Older I Get, the Better I Was!" I would have laughed harder, except for the glaring truth of those words. The older we get, we notice changes in our bodies, our families, our country, and the world in which we live. It's always been that way, and it will remain so.

But the good news is that even in old age we can be fresh and youthful, vibrant and productive. I've known many older Christians who love reading their Bibles, praying, participating in worship, and sharing Jesus with others. Instead of being cranky or complaining, they still produce fruit and show that God is their rock.

Stay close to Jesus who loves to be close to you. Praise God even when you don't feel like it. Look forward to the future God has in store for all who believe in Jesus. "The Older I Get—in Jesus—the Better I'll Become!"

PRAYER: Eternal God, thank you for better days ahead and good reasons to praise you every day of my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

John Fischer—Aberdeen, Washington

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19

Psalm 146:1-10

Winter Storms

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God. . . . Psalm 146:5

Last January my husband and I were driving home from a dinner with friends when we received a phone call. It was our tenant and dear friend, Madison, who rents our condominium. She had horrible news for us: the condo was on fire. She was sitting across the street watching it burn. The police had been called and the fire fighters were already working, but the fire had completely taken over the building, decimating our condo unit and destroying her possessions. Thankfully, no one was harmed.

That night I could barely sleep. My mind raced with questions: “Where will Madison live now? How did the fire get started? Will our insurance cover the reconstruction?” The financial questions weighed on me heavily because I was thirty-two weeks pregnant, and we still held a mortgage on the property. The condominium was also 2000 miles away from where we were living. I felt intense sorrow and fear and a bewildering sense of powerlessness. “God, why is this happening now? We are about to have our first child! Why? Why? Why?”

It was in the midst of waiting that I realized that God was with me and would take care of all of us. We waited on our insurance company to determine coverage and on the demolition crew to do its work so that reconstruction could begin. Later we had the privilege of seeing the condo, which had been destroyed by fire, restored to an even better version of what it had been before. A beautiful new home for Madison became a reality. God was with us.

PRAYER: When I am in the midst of life’s storms, it is often difficult to see you or to have hope that you will be faithful to see me through it. But I thank you, O God, for all of the ways in which you have been faithful to me in the past. Please help me to remember your faithfulness and to rest in who you are, no matter what life brings. Amen.

Rachel Hadley—Lafayette, Colorado

SATURDAY, JANUARY 20

Genesis 24:15-21

The Right Choice

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful. Genesis 24:21

It seemed so right. It was the right color. It was close to the right price. It had an awesome stereo. The young man saw everything as a sign that this car was the one that God would want him to have. His dad suggested that he have it checked out by a mechanic before he signed anything. The salesman suggested that the car might not be available that long. All the signs pointed to that dotted line where he excitedly put his signature.

Buyer's remorse set in three days later when the car wouldn't even start. The mechanic said those two terrifying words, "New engine." What happened? All the signs had said that it was a go. Or did they?

Abraham sent his most trusted servant to find a wife for Isaac. All signs pointed toward Rebekah, but the old man was wise. He waited until the specific sign he had requested in his prayer played out in full. He moved only when he was sure.

PRAYER: Creator of time, let me hear your voice and move with wisdom as I seek to follow your path. Amen.

Darren Stroh—Lamar, Colorado

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21

Psalms 15:1-5

Less Complaining; More Preparation

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Psalm 15:1

One Sunday morning following the worship service, I overheard a brief conversation between two parishioners. It transpired in the church parking lot as they were preparing to drive away. One of the men, who was definitely agitated, exclaimed, "I didn't get much out of the service. Did you?"

"Not much," the other replied. That was disconcerting to hear. But I have to admit, on occasion I have been guilty of thinking the same thing.

All too often we go to church with the attitude, "What am I going to get out of it today?" Then we go home and say, "I didn't get anything out of it." Rather we ought to go to church saying to ourselves, "What can I put into it?"

Here are some ways to augment your worship experience: make physical preparations before the last minute, prepare your heart before you walk through the church door, and use the moments of quiet before the service to set aside distractions and center your thoughts on God.

PRAYER: Holy God, forgive me for my self-centered attitude. Amen.

Wayne Greenawalt—Aurora, Illinois

MONDAY, JANUARY 22

Psalm 32:8-11

Little Requests

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Psalm 32:8

For months I had been hunting for a book I knew I owned, but had mislaid. It was a Christian study book that I had begun and needed to set aside for a while because of other obligations. I had all but given up finding it. One day while preparing for an upcoming project, I prayed. “Please, God, help me know what I should use.” I picked up another book and put it back down. It didn’t feel like the one I should use. I picked up another and to my surprise, it was the book I’d been looking for! I had written down the wrong title, and therefore, even though the book was literally right before my eyes, I couldn’t see it.

Although it sounds like a trivial request, God heard my prayer and knew I needed an answer. In the previous months when I searched for it, I just “wanted” it. But at this point, it was material I needed for my project. God knew I wasn’t ready to work on my next project earlier, and finding it might mean losing it again. Now that I have it, I can begin work in earnest.

God promises to instruct us in the way we should go. I really was frustrated with trying to decide which direction to take next. God didn’t let other materials feel “right” for my work and literally led me to the right book. There is no doubt this is the material I should use. The answer I received right after I prayed leaves no question.

When we have *big* requests such as a career change, health issues, and the rearing of children, we often go to God in prayer. But when it comes to little things, like finding a book, we often hesitate to ask God for help. Even here, however, God knows just what we need and where to find it!

PRAYER: God of my life, you know me better than I know myself. Thank you for answering my prayers whether big or small. Amen.

Margie J. Harding—Greensboro, Maryland

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23

Luke 10:25-37

Good Samaritan

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.” Luke 10:33

I thought, “I’m dead.” God thought otherwise.

Every morning I drove to work from Cannon Falls to Red Wing, Minnesota. This particular morning the thermometer read twenty degrees below zero. At 4:17 a.m. I removed the dip stick oil warmer, slipped my key into the ignition, and fired up the engine. After a few minutes the heater thawed my chill. I shifted into reverse and the wheels broke loose from the frozen snow.

My restaurant job required me to arrive early. On a clear day my drive took thirty minutes. But that day, my car blew a freeze plug and I lost my antifreeze. Coasting slowly to the side of the road, I wondered how I would survive the cold.

I had barely finished praying when I heard a tap on my window. “You okay?” A dairy farmer’s wife had perceived my dilemma from her kitchen window. Good Samaritans are everywhere. One rescued me. I’m alive.

Prayer: O God, thank you for those who reach out to us in our time of need. Amen.

Lee Escobedo—Tucson, Arizona

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24

Ecclesiastes 11:5

Check Please

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb, so you do not know the work of God. . . . Ecclesiastes 11:5a

During a family trip to France, we stopped to eat at a local restaurant. Once we finished our meal, my family sat at our table, waiting about twenty minutes for our check. Finally, my parents decided to look up how to ask for a check in our English-to-French book. “*L’addition, s’il vous plaît,*” my mother asked in French, and we were out of there in another minute.

Later, while visiting friends, my mother brought up the incident. “Oh!” her friend answered. “That’s because in France it is considered impolite to bring the check before the customer asks for it.”

Just as cultural differences hindered my family’s interaction with the French, so our limited understanding of the Divine hinders our interactions with God. Sometimes, God does things differently from the way we might expect. This doesn’t mean God did something wrong. It simply means that we don’t understand because we have limited knowledge.

PRAYER: Creator God, give me the faith to continue to trust in you. Amen.

Theresa M. Hughes—Newtown Square, Pennsylvania

THURSDAY, JANUARY 25

Zephaniah 3:14-20

God's Delight

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. Zephaniah 3:17a (NLT)

My car's engine was idling as I waited in the carpool line to pick up my daughter, Brittany, from kindergarten. I knew the kids were already outside, huddled together on the grass. As I inched forward to round the corner, I spotted Brittany. I could tell she'd been watching for me. When her eyes found mine, I gazed at her face. It lit up as her tiny grin turned into a huge smile. She squealed with delight, proclaiming loudly to her friend next to her, "There's *my* mommy right there!" She waved at me excitedly and didn't take her eyes off me.

My heart soared with joy as happy tears spilled from my eyes. What a blessing to have my child rejoicing in my mere presence. I took great delight in that moment.

Then I heard God whisper to me, "Lisa, the delight you feel about Brittany is exactly how I feel about you. I delight in you simply because you're my child."

PRAYER: God of love, help me to grasp the profound truth that you delight in me as your child. Amen.

Lisa Preuett—Taylorsville, Kentucky

FRIDAY, JANUARY 26

Matthew 24:36-44

Tumbling into Eternity

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Matthew 24:42

One quiet afternoon, I heard my husband frantically calling my name. I found him on our deck, bleeding profusely, after tumbling down a flight of backyard stairs. I phoned a friend for help, and we took Bill to a hospital where they stitched him up.

That morning I had been very tired, so I did not curl my hair or put on makeup. Since I "knew" I would not be going anywhere, I dressed in old jeans and a T-shirt. But before that day was over, I had met nurses, doctors, receptionists, and other patients. I doubt they cared how I looked, but it was a lesson to me: you never know when an emergency will arise, so look presentable.

There's also a spiritual lesson here. Jesus has promised to return. But many people "know" it won't be today. They think they have all the time in the world to consider whether or not Jesus is God's Son. But they, too, may be caught unprepared. Are you ready?

PRAYER: Dear God, I am sorry for my sins and believe Christ paid the penalty for them. I am ready to meet you. Amen.

Shirley Brosius—Millersburg, Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27

1 Samuel 1:21-28

Giving Back to the Giver of Life

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. 1 Samuel 1:27

She wore a beautiful little white dress. Her eyes sparkled as her mother and father brought her forward to stand in front of a room full of strangers. Her parents wanted to dedicate their daughter to God so they stood before the church and made that commitment. In turn, the congregation also made a commitment both to God and to the young couple, promising to encourage and assist in any way possible.

Hannah made a promise to God too. She had no children, but she promised that she would give her firstborn to God if she were blessed with a child. When Samuel was born, she did exactly that. She said, “I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:28).

What have you given back to the Giver of life? Are you raising your children in ways that lead them closer to God? What are you teaching your grandchildren?

PRAYER: Giver of life, help me to live my life so that others will see Jesus in me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Andy Clapp—Whitsett, North Carolina

SUNDAY, JANUARY 28

Ephesians 6:10-17

Miniature Shields

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. Ephesians 6:11

The pastor’s sermon with its effective props caught everyone’s attention. His subject was the armor of God. To illustrate the shield of faith, he held up a small cardboard shield that barely covered his heart. He explained how ineffective it would be when the enemy’s darts assaulted us. All the surrounding area not covered by the tiny shield would be an easy target.

Struggling unsuccessfully to avoid darts in my own life, I realized how small my shield of faith had become. After the sermon, I ruefully remarked to a friend, “I think I need a bigger shield!”

She could have told me to read the Bible more, pray more, believe, and take God’s Word to heart in order to increase my faith. Instead she remarked, “That’s when we who love you and are part of the body of Christ can come alongside you with our great big shields.” Like an ice pack on a feverish brow, her kind words soothed my weary soul.

PRAYER: Divine protector, thank you for those who come alongside to share their big shields with those who find theirs inadequate. Amen.

Charlotte H. Burkholder—Rockingham, Virginia

MONDAY, JANUARY 29

John 1:1-9

Waiting for the Light

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. John 1:5

For months—years actually—I was stuck in a dark place. I was tired and worn out. I was afraid that people might come to my house—yet, ironically, I was indescribably in need of companionship. I felt God had abandoned me.

In 2010 I'd written a book and after that pinnacle of achievement, I asked, "What do I do now?" Without anything else to reach for, I slipped into a downward spiral of emptiness.

Then, gradually at first, and then more quickly, came a bright ray of hope. I visited old friends. I invited them willingly into my home. Energized, I began writing again. Once again I became my old happy self. I reached out and even made new friends. It was then I realized God doesn't ever abandon us. In our human way, we just imagine it to be so. Pain, loneliness, and darkness are only temporary events in this short adventure we call life. How wonderful when we experience dawn, the first light of morning.

PRAYER: God of light, remind me that you are always ready to help. Give me patience to wait for your perfect light. Amen.

Richard Bell—Arlington, Washington

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30

Psalms 4:1-8

Answer Me When I Call

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Answer me when I call, O God of my right! Psalm 4:1a

"Answer me when I call to you!" I can still hear my mother's voice speaking to me when I was a child growing up on a small family farm in rural South Carolina. She often scolded me for not responding when she called. The words were a command, not a request. They conveyed impatience and irritation with being ignored. They came with authority, demanding an immediate response!

In today's Scripture reading, we find David saying the same thing to God. Could he really do this, we might ask? Some scholars pair Psalm 3 and 4 as morning and evening psalms, respectively. If this is the case, we find that David had a problem. Absalom was attempting to destroy him. At a profound level, we hear the pain and anguish contained in David's prayer, for it came from the very depths of his being. There, in the pits of darkness, David experienced the compassionate touch of God. Gladness filled his heart once again. God will do the same for you.

PRAYER: Attender to all our prayers, please hear us when we cry out to you. Amen.

George West—Anderson, South Carolina

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31

1 Chronicles 3:1-9

Important

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: These were born to him in Jerusalem: Shimea, Shobab, Nathan, and Solomon. . . . 1 Chronicles 3:5a

Bored and with nothing to do, Jared stood behind his grandma and looked over her shoulder.

Grandma Nan pointed to Uncle Virgil's picture in the family album. "Do you remember his story?"

"Yeah. He ended up in prison after murdering his wife. Sorry he's in the album." Jared turned to leave the room.

"Wait a minute. Do you know what happened after he served a few years?"

"No. Probably croaked."

"Eventually. But before his death, he accepted Jesus as his Savior and Lord."

Jared apologized for being so jaded and quick to cast judgment on Uncle Virgil. Then he remembered that even in King David's family there were problems. But God had a plan and loved each person even with their flaws.

Solomon wasn't perfect. But God used him to write Proverbs and the Song of Solomon. He will always be remembered for having great wisdom.

Have you ever thought you were unimportant? Have you sometimes assumed that whatever you said or did wouldn't matter? Both of those thoughts are false assumptions. Your words and actions will be remembered by others. You are alive today because God has a special plan and purpose for your life. Listen to the gentle whispers from the Holy Spirit reminding you of your special uniqueness and importance to Jesus.

PRAYER: Redeemer of humanity, we rejoice because we are part of your family. Amen.

Priscilla Tate Gilmore—Salem, Oregon

Daily Bible Reading for February 2018

Faith without Works Is Dead		
February 1	T	Romans 3:21-31 Justified by Faith
February 2	F	Galatians 2:15-21 Christ Lives in Me
February 3	S	Galatians 3:6-14 Spirit Comes through Faith Not Law
February 4	S	James 2:14-26 Faith without Works Is Dead
A Disciplined Faith		
February 5	M	Deuteronomy 8:1-3 People Live by God's Word
February 6	T	Psalms 141:1-4 Set a Guard over My Mouth
February 7	W	Matthew 12:33-37 Judged by Your Words
February 8	T	Luke 6:43-45 From the Heart the Mouth Speaks
February 9	F	Matthew 21:14-16 Infants and Babies Speak
February 10	S	Matthew 5:33-37 Say Only "Yes" or "No"
February 11	S	James 3:1-12 Control Your Tongue
Faithful Disciples		
February 12	M	1 Kings 17:17-24 Widow's Son Restored to Life
February 13	T	Luke 7:11-17 Jesus Raises Widow's Son
February 14	W	James 1:22-27 Care for Widows and Orphans
February 15	T	Acts 5:12-16 Peter's Healing Ministry
February 16	F	Acts 8:4-8 Philip's Preaching Ministry
February 17	S	Acts 9:32-35 Aeneas Healed, Residents Turn to God
February 18	S	Acts 9:36-43 Calling the Church to Active Service
The Good Fight of Faith		
February 19	M	Acts 16:1-5 Timothy Joins Paul's Team
February 20	T	1 Corinthians 4:14-21 Timothy, an Active Teacher with Paul
February 21	W	Philippians 2:25-30 Epaphroditus, Paul's Coworker
February 22	T	1 Thessalonians 3:1-10 Timothy, Paul's Envoy to the Churches
February 23	F	1 Timothy 6:2b-8 Teach the Sound Words of Christ
February 24	S	1 Timothy 6:9-10 Money, Root of Many Evils
February 25	S	1 Timothy 6:11-21 The Good Fight of Faith
The Lord Will Provide		
February 26	M	Deuteronomy 8:11-20 Don't Forget the Lord's Provisions
February 27	T	Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus Tested in the Wilderness
February 28	W	Luke 22:39-46 Angel Confirms Direction for Jesus

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1

John 2:1-11

God Uses People

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. John 2:7

Jesus’ first miracle took place at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Wouldn’t it have been interesting to talk with the unnamed servants who followed the counsel of Mary when she said, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5)?

We learn from reading this story that six stone water jars stood nearby. The jars each held from twenty to thirty gallons of water that was used for ceremonial hand washing. At Jesus’ request, the servants filled the jars completely. Then he told them to draw out some water and take it to the chief steward. Somewhere in the process, the water had turned into wine—and plenty of it!

How amazed the servants must have been when they realized they had been instruments in such an amazing miracle. They had been obedient; they had filled the jars with water. But they couldn’t claim any of the credit for the transformation. The all-surpassing power came from God. They were simply instruments, players in this miraculous scene that resulted in Jesus’ glory being revealed and the disciples putting their faith in him (John 2:11).

God is powerful, but God often chooses to use people to show that power. Our call is to let the Almighty employ us in divine work, and to give God the praise when great things happen.

PRAYER: Almighty God, allow us to be used by you in powerful ways. Amen.

Ken Atchison—Milford, Ohio

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2

John 15:9-12

Thank You, Strangers

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John 15:12

As a habitual hiker and advocate of fresh air, I took for granted the many safety precautions that are in place for pedestrians. However when vision and balance presented problems for me, my daily walk, assisted by a four-wheel walker, increased my admiration for those who have installed devices that make streets and sidewalks safer.

Consider, for instance, the ADA compliant mats that designate “wait areas” at street crossings and the neon light figures that show when and where to cross streets safely. I also appreciate car drivers who have the right of way but still stop to let me cross. And I thank the people who open heavy business doors to let me through. Most of all, I thank God for helpful human beings who are quick, able, and loving enough to help those with physical and visual disabilities

The Bible teaches us to love one another. I am especially grateful to strangers who have shown Christ-like love to me.

PRAYER: God of love, give us a spirit of gratitude toward those who are visible manifestations of your great love. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Connie Bretz—Phoenixville, Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3

Psalms 93:1-5

The Great Waters

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD! Psalm 93:4

Have you been to the ocean? Did you notice that when you go to the beach, no one sits down on the sand and faces inland? Instead everyone faces the water, because young and old alike are mesmerized by the constant rising and falling of the waves. Parents watch their children carefully as they play near the water’s edge. Young people swim out and maybe surf the larger waves. Still others are content to simply be on the beach, digging for shells and searching for that perfect piece of coral.

Psalm 93:4 (“Thought for Today”) provides a vivid picture. Read it again and visualize the ocean waves crashing on the shore. While the ocean water sources abundant life, it can also take it away in an instant. How comforting to know that the One who gave the oceans their power is also powerful enough to have raised Jesus from the dead and will give us life eternal if we trust in Jesus’ name.

PRAYER: O God, you are mighty. Help me to always trust you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Todd Spichke—Plymouth, Minnesota

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 4

Psalm 25:1-10

Lack of Leadership

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me. . . . Psalm 25:4-5a

Today's worship service was frustrating! Our music director was ill, so our small praise team had to sing *a cappella*. One member of the team woke up nauseous and dizzy, so we had only one alto. Another had an irritable baby and had to leave early. The microphones weren't working properly. The pastor was on vacation. Several people stepped in to fill some of his usual roles: prayer, Scripture reading, announcements, and the children's message. But with so many people in unfamiliar roles and no clear leader, there were many awkward pauses. People looked at one another, each wondering what was supposed to happen next.

Without proper leadership, life is uncomfortable and chaotic. Without our Savior's wisdom and leadership, we wander aimlessly. With no clear life goals, we make poor choices. Unfortunately, the consequences of our lack of spiritual leadership can be far more severe than one uncomfortable and chaotic worship service. We miss out on the abundant life Jesus so graciously offers us.

PRAYER: Divine Teacher, give us your guidance and the determination to follow. Amen.

Nancy Hamilton Sturm—Wichita, Kansas

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5

Ephesians 4:25-32

Kind and Forgiving

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:32

In my home town after World War II, power mowers were basically unheard of, so my dad built one using an engine from a washing machine. However, it didn't last long due to harsh use. The local cemetery had been severely neglected and a couple of young men were hired to clear out all the brush and mow the entire grounds. When they found their equipment inadequate, they borrowed my dad's mower. They used it continually for a week. When they brought it back, the engine was ruined because they had run it out of oil.

My dad accepted the results without showing anger or making any demands of the men. He had helped the men previously when they were in a bit of a mess and could have been in real trouble. Dad and these men had returned from the war together. He had bonded with them and wanted to see them do well. Their friendship continued over the years.

PRAYER: Forgiving God, teach us to forgive. Amen.

Walter N. Maris—Savannah, Missouri

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6

Psalm 121:5-8

Fences

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. Psalm 121:8

I once had a job that required a commute through miles of beautiful farmland and forests. One afternoon an oncoming car blinked its lights in warning. I immediately slowed down, and as I rounded a curve, there, in the middle of the road, stood a cow. Cars waited patiently on both sides of her. She looked confused and rather surprised that her exit from the pasture had resulted in such a dilemma. We all watched as she turned around and plodded back into the pasture through the portion of downed fence that had provided her with an escape route.

I have often thought of that cow. When I have crossed God's boundaries, I, too, have found myself regretful and perplexed. I realized later that the "fences" were there to protect rather than confine. The cow's safety and security lay within the boundaries the farmer had posted. Outside the fence she endangered herself and others. Seeking security, she returned to her keeper. Like the farmer, our Keeper gladly welcomes us back.

PRAYER: Sustainer of life, thank you for keeping us in all times and places. Amen.

Valerie Bryant Bennett—Knoxville, Tennessee

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 7

Luke 8:43-48

Daughter

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Luke 8:48

The woman who touched Jesus had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years. She desired to be healed secretly because she was deemed ceremonially unclean. She must have felt horrified when Jesus verbally noted that power had gone out from him. When she confessed her actions and subsequent healing, Jesus addressed her as "daughter." She was the only person Jesus addressed in this way. How many times had this woman been shunned? Now Jesus tenderly referred to her as though she were a family member.

Furthermore, Jesus did not want her to be a secret follower. He wanted to free her both physically and spiritually. She needed to make a public profession of what had happened to her so she could be released from the stigma caused by her condition. I'm sure she never forgot Jesus' tenderness. Likewise, we should never be afraid to bring our problems to Jesus.

PRAYER: Great Physician, thank you for gently responding to my hurts and needs. Amen.

Mark Weinrich—Mesquite, Nevada

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 8

Proverbs 18:15

Bowls

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: An intelligent mind acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. Proverbs 18:15

My mentor placed before me three bowls. The first was filled with dirt, twigs, and garbage. The second was turned upside down. The third was facing upward, empty. “Think about the way these bowls might represent your mind,” he said.

Gesturing to the filled bowl, he said. “This bowl is filled with junk. There’s no room for anything new. If this were your mind, you’d never know if there was anything more valuable with which you could fill it.”

Next, he pointed to the second bowl. “This bowl is upside down; you can’t put anything in it. If this were your mind, you would never discover anything outside yourself. You could never consider new ideas.”

Finally, he picked up the third bowl. “This bowl is open, free to be filled with new ideas and understandings. If you always leave open space in your bowl, you’ll be able to understand life in new ways.”

PRAYER: Author of my faith, help me to read your Word with an open mind. In Christ, I pray. Amen.

Megan Alms—Indianapolis, Indiana

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 9

Psalms 117:1-2

The Shortest One

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Praise the LORD, all you nations! Psalm 117:1a

In high school and college I was teased for being only five feet two inches tall. I was one of the shortest girls in my class. Finally I grew another half inch! That doesn’t sound like much to most people, but that extra half inch was important to me. It gave me more confidence, and that made a difference in my life.

Psalms 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible. It contains only two verses, but they say it all. The words “Praise the Lord” open and close the chapter. The psalmist encourages everyone to praise God and receive God’s love and faithfulness. These two short verses serve as a universal call to worship that emphasizes God’s covenantal relationship of love with humanity.

I am still only five feet, two and one-half inches tall. Through the years I have been the beneficiary of divine love and have experienced God’s enduring faithfulness. As a result, my spiritual stature has increased and I continue to praise God.

PRAYER: God of the nations, I praise you with my entire being. Amen.

Lena Woodden Nelson—Kingsville, Missouri

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10

Psalm 46:1-3

Why Me, Lord?

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change. . . . Psalm 46:1-2a

I had never heard such powerful winds. It was October 29, 2012. As I watched news coverage of Hurricane Sandy, I was certain the winds would break my windows. But they didn't. Apart from interrupted cable service and downed branches, my home and immediate neighborhood were intact—unscathed, seemingly sheltered.

The next morning, I spoke with family and friends about the hardships they faced. I viewed news coverage of the destruction. I prayed for the hurricane victims. Then I asked, "Why me, Lord?"

It's a question people often ask in crises. But my "why me?" was not uttered in self-pity. Overwhelmed, I asked, "Why am I the recipient of so much grace?"

God's help during life's storms is not about our worthiness. God loves the person who is impacted by a storm just as much as the one who is not. Divine grace is a mystery. The next time God helps you in an extraordinary way, ask, "Why me, Lord?" Then find someone to whom you can extend grace.

PRAYER: God of us all, lead us to imitate you as we show grace to the people you bring across our paths. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Toni R. Samuels—Stewartsville, New Jersey

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11

Luke 19:1-10

God Makes House Calls

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Luke 19:5

When my seven-year-old son saw a new child wandering aimlessly in our neighborhood, he invited him to shoot baskets in the yard and ride his bike. The child seldom made eye contact nor did he smile. I overheard him asking my son, “Do you have a dad?” Finally he opened up and told us that his parents argued and that his father had disappeared. His sister moved away, and he and his younger brother were at home with his mother who suffered from alcohol dependency.

On one occasion we persuaded the child to stay for Sunday dinner. He admitted that family dinner was new to him. We joined hands around the table and prayed. After dinner the lad asked why we held hands. We explained, “By joining hands we connect with each other and with God.” We also told him we believed God’s unseen hand was holding ours. The child took it all in and then asked, “Does God come to anybody’s house?”

PRAYER: Ever-present God, help us to seek out those who are searching for you and help them find their way. Amen.

Lenora McWhorter—Park Forest, Illinois

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12

Acts 9:1-19a

Meeting Jesus

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Acts 9:4

The road to Damascus has always fascinated me. Was it a busy road or off the beaten path? Was it shaded by trees or was it part of a barren landscape? Historians tell us that three major trade routes led out of the city of Damascus, so it was heavily traveled. By studying a map we find that it would have taken Paul at least a week to cover the distance between Jerusalem and Damascus on foot.

The Damascus road will always be known by Christians around the world as the setting for one of the most dramatic conversions recorded in the Bible. Yet, how many people do you know with that type of drastic experience? Most folks in my circle of Christian brothers and sisters have had more quiet conversions.

We don’t need a lightning bolt experience to meet the Holy One and join the ranks with Paul as ambassadors for Christ. Thankfully, Jesus meets us on the road where we are.

PRAYER: Redeeming God, thank you for transforming experiences on the road of life. Amen.

Kay L. Campbell—Boca Raton, Florida

Hebrews 4:14–5:10

Christ, Our High Priest

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:16

At age nineteen, Nate was charged with a crime. A store manager had caught him trying to steal two items and had called the police. Although Nate was not taken to jail, he did have to appear in court. Because he was a first-time offender, had been a good student in high school, and had recently enrolled in college to pursue a degree, his defense attorney was able to resolve the situation. Nate received mercy from the court and was ordered to pay a modest fine.

Just as Nate had a defense attorney working on his behalf, as Christians, we have a high priest who intercedes for us every day. In Hebrews we find several passages depicting Jesus as the high priest (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-5:10; 6:20; 7:11–8:2). The office of priest, an important one in the Old Testament system, is fulfilled by Jesus. Although we might stumble sometimes and disappoint Christ, he continually shows immeasurable grace and mercy toward us, offering us the gift of forgiveness and a new beginning.

PRAYER: Loving God, thank you for your love, even when we disappoint you. Amen.

James C. Hendrix—Muncie, Indiana

Forgive

“Forgive them!” Jesus asked his Father.

“Forgive the lashes to my back,
the false accusations,
the pierced hands and feet.
Forgive—they don’t know what they do.”

“Forgive!” The words echo from Calvary.

“Forgive your enemy,
the one who rejects you,
he who wounds and
breaks your heart.”

Forgive is not an idle word.

It opens the door to heavenly realms.
Jesus extends his hand,
“Well done, my child,” he says.
“Enter into my peace.”

Jewell Johnson—Fountain Hills, Arizona

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14
VALENTINE'S DAY
ASH WEDNESDAY**

Esther 4:1-17

Passion to Change

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry. . . . Esther 4:1

For years, my friend's husband had been cold, often cruel, and sometimes verbally abusive. "I don't want your notes, your flowers, or candy on Valentine's Day or any other day," she said to him, "I'd rather have a sign of change in you." Eventually she saw it. And their marriage was saved.

God also looks for a sign in us—a visible sign that speaks of inward change. Abraham showed the sign of faith when he took Isaac to be sacrificed. Joseph displayed the sign of integrity when he fled temptation. David demonstrated the sign of courage when he trusted in God. Mordecai wore sackcloth and ashes as the sign of anguish and God began the process of freeing the Hebrew nation. What signals your inward change?

PRAYER: God of life and life anew, let the change inside me be evident before you and others. Amen.

Janet Perez Eckles—Orlando, Florida

Janet Perez Eckles dedicates her life to serving Christ through her work as an author, international speaker, radio host, host of the "Cooking in the Dark" video series, women's Sunday church school teacher, missionary, and founder of JC Empowerment Ministries. She is also the author of *Simply Salsa*, published by Judson Press. But God's grace is made most evident through Janet's blindness. The Lenten theme she has chosen is "Passion Turned to Action."

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

Hebrews 11:29-40

True Heroes

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. . . . Hebrews 11:32

I confess that in my daydreams I am usually heroic. I imagine myself as a great sports figure, a military hero, or a popular public servant. And I doubt that I am alone in this. Being a hero gives us meaning, value, and purpose. But too often, we have replaced the hero with the celebrity. Character is not always a factor as children and adults alike choose someone to imitate.

But we as Christians are not forced to pull our heroes from popular culture. The Bible is full of real heroes whose character traits we can admire. We have Joseph's perseverance, Noah's obedience, David's reliance on God, and Paul's scholarship. We can show diligence like Moses, put our faith into action like Abraham, and trust like Rahab. We may not have the money or talent of today's celebrities, but we do have something that the biblical heroes had—the power of the Holy Spirit.

PRAYER: God of ancients, thank you for heroes to admire and imitate. Amen.

Bob La Forge—Freehold, New Jersey

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Colossians 3:1-4

A Person of Integrity

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Set your minds on things above. . . . Colossians 3:2a

I hate to admit that sometimes my life revolves around what others think of me. I work hard to impress my colleagues. Have I become merely an actor on a stage? As we know, actors prepare by rehearsing the dialogue and mannerisms of the role they're to play. Then with words, actions, and the right attire, actors sway their audience into believing that they *are* that character.

Often we prepare for the day in the same way. We choose our attire to help fulfill the role we hope to play. We mentally rehearse the proper dialogue. We engage in these roles because we seek the applause of this world. But God does not want us to be captivated by human applause, nor does our Maker want us to set aside the person whom we were created to be. Instead, the Holy One wants us to step boldly into our God-given role as a person of integrity.

PRAYER: Creator God, give me a clear vision of the person you want me to be. Amen.

Doug Lim—Los Angeles, California

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As a valued subscriber to *The Secret Place*, please note that you should have received your next issue of the devotional by this time. If you have not received it, please call Judson Press Customer Service at 800-458-3766 or e-mail customerservice@judsonpress.com.

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

Joshua 1:1-9

Marching Orders

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9

God gave Joshua his marching orders to lead the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Joshua knew challenges would come all along the way, so God’s command for him to be strong and courageous was apropos.

When my husband graduated from college, he accepted a teaching position 1200 miles from our home. Family support we had always enjoyed was no longer available. We were looking ahead to our future, but were afraid and sometimes discouraged. After we were settled in our new city, a neighbor welcomed us with a pie to which the words of Joshua 1:9 (“Thought for Today”) were attached. As we read that verse, we were encouraged. It wasn’t long before we found a church, and our future began to look brighter.

There are times in everyone’s life when the rivers look too wide to cross and the mountains too high to climb. But God is with us wherever we travel.

PRAYER: God of the open road, teach us to be strong and courageous. In Jesus’ name, Amen.
Christine Hammock—Sumiton, Alabama

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Isaiah 2:17-22

Passion to Trust

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Turn away from mortals, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they? Isaiah 2:22

“Janet, you are so brave,” a friend said recently. “You’re unable to see a thing and yet you travel by yourself!”

I grinned, “I travel with the Holy Spirit,”

On a recent mission trip, I landed in Quito, Ecuador. It was my first time there. The airline employee guided me out of the plane, grabbed my two suitcases, and led me to the airport’s exit.

“What does your friend who is picking you up look like?” he asked.

I leaned on my white cane and gave a quick smile. “I don’t know. But no worries, she’ll recognize me.” We waited and waited. An hour later, I tried to call her but I had no cell phone service. When worry knocked, I remembered in whom I needed to trust—not in the friend who didn’t show up, but in our God who never leaves us stranded. I sat down and prayed. Hours later, God sent someone to pick me up.

PRAYER: During this season of Lent, O God, remind us that when others fail us, we must passionately trust in you. Amen.

Janet Perez Eckles—Orlando, Florida

**MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19
PRESIDENTS' DAY**

1 Timothy 2:1-4

The Leader as Servant

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 1 Timothy 2:1-2

Why would anyone want to be the president of a nation? Some seek the position because they enjoy the power that almost certainly accompanies it. Others become leaders because the rewards seem attractive. Still others accept a leadership role out of a sense of duty or obligation.

There is nothing wrong with any of these motives. After all, an effective leader quite naturally acquires power and knows how to handle it. And all leaders should be rewarded for their efforts. Furthermore, a strong sense of duty compels leaders to do their best. But too much emphasis on any of the three separates the leader from the people who put him or her into position.

So one more motive is essential, and that is service. A leader who has a genuine desire to touch people's lives for the better—one who sees the needs and wants to be part of the solution—empowers others. As we pray for our leaders, and specifically for our nation's president today, let's pray that each step he takes will be based on a desire to serve others.

PRAYER: O God, we remember to pray for our president and others in high positions today. May everything they do revolve around service to others. Amen.

Ingrid Dvirnak—Elizabeth, Colorado

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 20

1 John 4:1-6

Check It Out

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God. . . . 1 John 4:2

“Come on, you’ll like it,” I told the hesitant horses. I picked the tall green grass that grew along the road and held it over the top of the fence. Three of the farmer’s six horses decided to walk across the field to me. They cautiously sniffed the grass and then took it from my outstretched hand.

At other times, they had refused the grass and turned away. I wondered why. Were there nettles in with the grass? Did they smell my hand lotion?

As Christians, we also need to be careful about what we take in as nourishment. Some teaching is presented as being from God, when it really is just someone’s idea. Some people deliberately try to deceive. Others are just repeating what they heard in the past and are themselves deceived.

Follow the horses’ wisdom and check out any teaching before believing it as truth. If it doesn’t line up with God’s truth, turn away and go on with your life.

PRAYER: God of discernment, thank you for giving me your Word to guide my life. Amen.

Helen L. Hoover—Rogers, Arkansas

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

1 John 3:11-17

More than Words

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: . . . we should love one another. 1 John 3:11b

My eight-year-old grandson recently went with his family to an art fair. As they browsed through the vendors’ tents jam-packed with glass earrings, ceramic knickknacks, oil paintings, and tie-dyed T-shirts, my grandson miserably queried, “Why do they call it an art fair if they don’t let you do any art?”

Art is more than observation, just as love is more than words. Love goes beyond elegant concepts etched in calligraphy and suitable for framing. Love is far more than verses read at weddings or platitudes embossed on greeting cards. Love is the hard stuff! Its inconspicuous grit and grime is surprisingly ordinary.

- Love is the long night rocking a crying, sick child; listening to the same story for the hundredth time; spending money you don’t have to care for someone.
- Love is the mixed up mess of making another’s troubles seem more manageable; quieting a friend’s hurting heart; helping the helpless.
- Love is the upheaval of being available to pay attention when you really don’t want to, and going that extra mile when no one is watching.

PRAYER: Holy God, equip us for the difficult task of loving. Amen.

Beverly Taylor—Aurora, Colorado

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 22

1 Corinthians 15:12-26

God Is Good—All the Time

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15:26

My sister clung tightly to her hope in Christ as she battled leukemia. Ever my mentor, she taught me faithfulness even during her illness. As I sat at her bedside reading her journal, I was struck by one particular entry: “The last test of faith is death.”

How I waged my own battle with her cancer and with my dubious hope in Christ! Her disease was unforgiving. I believe it’s common to cry out “No!” to the approaching death of a loved one. But isn’t it because we’ve forgotten for a moment that God has already answered our cry to escape it? In Christ, death has been vanquished and life is our destiny. Passing from earth into heaven is clearly a pinnacle moment when we fully realize our salvation.

After singing praise songs to my sister one afternoon as death drew near, she declared, “I still believe.” And with my hope fixed on Christ’s defeat of our last enemy, I confess, “So do I.”

PRAYER: Gracious God, help us to see death as the seamless passing into a timeless eternity with you. Amen.

Sue McGee—Johnstown, Pennsylvania

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 23

Numbers 15:37-41

Tassel Free

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: “You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them. . . .” Numbers 15:39a

It’s easy to forget something small. A world full of background noise masks the less urgent tasks, and they quickly drop to the bottom of the list. Significant time and energy are required to keep our daily lives flowing smoothly.

To help the people of Israel remember the rules, God told them to sew tassels on the corners of their clothes. Whenever they felt the weight of the tassel or the fringe brushing their skin, they were reminded of the Law. God did not give the Law to burden them, but to help them live the righteous lives they were intended to live.

When life is busy and important decisions need to be made, it’s vital that we know how to live righteously. If we take the time to learn God’s way of living, we gain strength to move through the frustrations and disappointments that inevitably come our way. As Christians, we don’t wear tassels today, so what are we using to help us remember God’s precepts?

PRAYER: Life-giver, teach us your way. Amen.

Samuel Tyler—Potts Grove, Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Swapping Stories

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. . . . 2 Corinthians 5:18

There have been hundreds of books written about how to succeed as a writer. Most are written by prominent editors or authors who are full of wisdom and have years of experience. The books are about every type of writing—fiction, nonfiction, playwriting, screenwriting, and poetry. Entire books are even dedicated to dialogue or characterization or setting.

Using these books as learning tools helps aspiring writers become published authors. Then, in turn, they might write a book about what they've learned about writing. It's a wonderful cycle of loving and learning.

As Christians, we have a similar situation with the authors of the Bible. When we read the Bible, we are learning from those who lived before us. This cycle has been going on for thousands of years as new people experience God and then share their stories. It doesn't have to stop with us! If you've learned anything about God, anything at all, then you can share it with others and continue telling the story.

PRAYER: God of the ages, give me a passion for sharing the story of your saving grace. Amen.

Charnell Peters—Indianapolis, Indiana

**SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25
SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT**

Psalms 57:1-3

Passion to Believe

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: I cry to God Most High . . . who fulfills his purpose for me. Psalm 57:2

My five-year-old son stood beside me in the kitchen. I ran my fingertips along the countertop to find the cup with his favorite juice. "Here you go, honey,"

"Mommy," he said hesitantly, "will you always be blind?"

Tears burned. I bent down toward him and cupped my hands on his cheeks. "No one knows, sweet baby," I whispered, "But even if I can't see, I'll always take care of you and your brothers."

Decades have swept by since that promise. And through God's grace, I kept it. Now that my sons are grown, I reflect how, in spite of my blindness, I found the richness of my role as a mom and wife. The reason is that I simply embraced a passion to believe. I believed that God had a purpose for me. I'm convinced that, no matter what I lack, God's path for my life is traced on a map of divine love.

PRAYER: Holy Guide, as we walk through this Lenten season, enhance our passion to believe. In Christ Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Janet Perez Eckles—Orlando, Florida

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 26

Luke 5:12-16

Time Alone

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray. Luke 5:16

I have always been fascinated by fly fishing. I especially like the picture of the lone fisherman standing in the river at sunrise with mist still resting on the water. I can imagine the only sounds he hears are the water lapping against his waders and an occasional hoot of an owl far in the distance. His surroundings are serene and peaceful. He is purposely detached from the noise and chaos of everyday life.

Many of us live a fast-paced life that can wear us down quickly. Do we allow time to get away to unwind and reflect?

Jesus did that quite often. He left the crowds and distractions to commune with God and be refreshed and strengthened for the tasks at hand. While we don't have to take an actual fishing trip, we can be intentional about setting aside moments to meet God and be refreshed and strengthened for whatever lies ahead.

PRAYER: God of renewal, help me to be diligent in making time to spend in your presence. Amen.

Michele Jones—Orlando, Florida

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Bought with a Price

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:20

My wife and I have visited many antique stores. What seems to interest us the most are the price tags. How could a set of old salt and pepper shakers that were probably purchased for one dollar be worth thirty or forty dollars now? How is it that an old butter churn is priced right at a hundred dollars? The sellers evidently think they are worth the price on the tag, and some buyers must too.

Our interest in antiques makes me question the worth of items in today's world. While we are confronted daily with the price of the commodities for which we are shopping, I wonder if we are ready to pay a high enough price for that which really matters?

During Jesus' ministry on earth, he had compassion for those deemed worthless by the society in which they lived. By surrendering his life to provide forgiveness for everyone who repents of their sins, Jesus demonstrated the infinite value of every person. Therefore, do everything to the glory of God!

PRAYER: Redeeming God, we seek to glorify you every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Stanley L. Hayes—Fife Lake, Michigan

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28

Colossians 4:5-6

Nice or Nothing

THOUGHT FOR TODAY: Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. Colossians 4:6

“If you can’t say anything nice, then say nothing at all.” I recall hearing this when I was a child. And as a mother, I passed this principle down to my children, too.

In the electronic age in which we live, various forms of social media have opened the floodgates of communication. In just a matter of seconds, our words can potentially reach multitudes across the world through the Internet.

Scrolling through the feeds on Facebook and Twitter, I find myself wondering, “How deafening would the silence be if we took heed to this simple but profound instruction of ‘nice or nothing?’ Would Twitter cease to tweet? Would the number of ‘Posts’ or ‘Likes’ on Facebook decrease?”

In today’s Scripture, we read Paul’s instructions to the church in Colossae. He directed them to use grace as the savory seasoning for their words. It would be like salt and would make one’s speech more compelling. By being gracious in their speech, they would respond more appropriately to others. When we take a few extra seconds to pause and sift our words through the simple principle of “nice or nothing,” we, too, can season our speech with grace and offer a better tasting response.

PRAYER: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14). Amen.

Connie Camden—Frankfort, Kentucky