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THE UPPER ROOM®

WHERE THE WORLD MEETS TO PRAY

Stephen D. Bryant, Publisher

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COVER ART INTERPRETATION

The Baptism of Christ

Artist: Daniel Bonnell (USA, Contemporary)

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

In an essay, artist Daniel Bonnell describes his contemplative process of “being present with a work of art, sitting in silence, visually listening.”* Intrigued by the idea of “listening” with my eyes, I was reminded of the practice of *lectio divina* in which a passage of scripture is read several times so that the reader may gain fresh and deeper insight into its meaning and message. I decided to accept Bonnell’s challenge and do my best to visually listen to this piece of art.

As I listened to the image, I first noticed Jesus rising from the waters and imagined I could hear God’s voice surrounding him in a bright light declaring, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17, KJV). Next, my eyes were drawn to the Holy Spirit hovering over Christ, the shape of the dove’s wings mirroring the shape of Jesus’ arms and head. Christ is in the position he held on the cross, his hands bearing the weight of his body and his head bowed down. As I “listened” closely, I realized that Jesus’ feet lay one on top of the other with blood showing the nail wounds, the cross extending beyond his feet.

With this detail, Bonnell helps us understand that through baptism we are connected to Christ and the promise of our own resurrection. Like Jesus, who is surrounded by the light of God’s voice and the blue ripples of the baptismal waters, we are not alone. God is with us.

As we approach the season of Lent, let us strive to listen with our eyes and hearts, seeking out the presence of God in our lives.

*www.bonnellart.com/essay-on-being-present-and-the-art-critique

Holding On to Hope

Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

— Romans 5:5 (NRSV)

The new year seems to be a hopeful time for most people. It represents an opportunity for a fresh start. All too often, though, the hope with which we begin the year wanes more quickly than we imagined. After the joy and celebration of Christmas, we resume the routines of work, family life, community involvement, and school. The same old patterns can fill our time and sap some of the freshness and hope from our year.

This is not to say that hope fades entirely. Faith in God calls us to live lives of hope and to be beacons of hope for others. The hope we find in God is lasting in a way that the hope of a new year can never be. Hope in God grounds us in the eternal awareness of God's abundance, mercy, and love. The challenge is to embrace and live out this hope day by day.

Throughout this issue, writers give us glimpses and offer examples of how they find and sustain their hope in God during challenging times and in joyful ones. I pray that these stories will encourage and inspire all of us to find new practices and habits of hope that will keep us rooted in God's love and help us to become beacons of hope for others in the year ahead.



— Lindsay L. Gray
Editorial Director

From the Archives

Constructed in the 1950s, The Upper Room Chapel continues to be a place of prayer and worship for the staff of The Upper Room as well as for visitors from around the world. The description below appeared in the 45th Anniversary issue of *The Upper Room* in March/April of 1980.

The Upper Room Chapel leads the worshiper back across the centuries to the event which has become the center of Christian liturgy, the Lord's Supper. Ernest Pellegrini's life-sized wood carving *The Last Supper* is the focal point of The Upper Room Chapel. The carving, 17 feet wide and 8 feet high, is modeled after Da Vinci's painting *The Last Supper*, probably the greatest and most frequently copied masterpiece of religious art in the world. Both painting and carving capture that moment just after Jesus has said, "One of you will betray me," and show the disciples responding in agitation.

Visitors to the chapel often notice that the chancel of The Upper Room Chapel is an adaptation of the upper room as represented in *The Last Supper*.

The details are carefully reproduced: the ceiling of the chancel is of heavy walnut timbers like those suggested by the artist; the side walls of the chancel have tapestries copied from those in the painting; the floor is like the floor of the carving. Likewise, the altar table of heavy, elaborately carved wood is an adaptation from the artist's representation.

The symbolism of *The Last Supper* continues in the other chapel furnishings. Mounted on the chancel rail are shields symbolizing the life, ministry, and death of each of the disciples. There is no shield for Judas; in its place is the shield of Paul.

On the 45th anniversary of *The Upper Room*, the chapel brings us into the presence of Christ, in whose name we pray.

— Burt Martin
Cover Art Interpreter
from 1977-1981

Where the World Meets to Pray

Editions of *The Upper Room* daily devotional guide are printed in:
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ANGOLA

In 2018 the Portuguese-Africa edition of *The Upper Room* published its 100th issue of the magazine. A celebration service was held to commemorate this special accomplishment and to recognize the contributions of the magazine's writers, editors, and distributors.



Gifts to the international editions of *The Upper Room* help the World Meet to Pray.
www.upperroom.org/gift

TIME FLOWS AWAY

READ Psalm 90:1-12*

Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

— Psalm 90:12 (NRSV)

In our family we have a tradition of reading Psalm 90 on the night of December 31, as we pass into the New Year. I enjoy this opportunity to reflect on the mystery of the passing of time and of my passing with it, on the transience of human life. I like the sensory image of life fading away and being renewed (vv. 5-6): “In the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (NRSV). These words invite me to take a personal inventory of my earthly days. A great many are already behind me, with perhaps only a few still to come.

Looking back, I see countless signs of God's grace: the beauties of creation, new discoveries in science, access to the Bible, the joys and warm delights of a large family, good health, music and the arts, sports, and especially belonging to a lively Christian congregation.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God's hand has led me, is leading me, and will lead me tomorrow.

Looking to the future, I also feel a moment of sadness as the shadow of human mortality passes over me and I realize that all earthly life could be over at any time. But a moment later I rejoice, for I am sure that the Lord still has a plan for me beyond this life: eternal life in the light of God's glory.

Prayer: God of all our years, thank you for giving us blessings every day and opportunities to follow you. Amen.

Giunio Censi (Lombardy, Italy)

Prayer Focus: GUIDANCE FOR THE NEW YEAR

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

THUR
JAN 2
2020

THE BIGGER PICTURE

READ Ephesians 4:25-32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

— Ephesians 4:32 (NRSV)

Growing up I had a challenging relationship with my father. Though I knew he loved me, he often hurt my feelings by the things he said to me or the way he said them. I grew up thinking all sorts of negative things about myself that simply were not true.

As I grew older, God helped me to see that I was focusing on myself and my own hurt and not seeing the bigger picture. I realized that Dad's words were not always a result of my actions or presence but were more often a reflection of his own childhood trauma, fear, and brokenness. One day, he belittled me in front of my daughter. God softened my heart to say, "Dad, why did you say that?" He said, "When it's time for our visit to end, I feel hurt — but I shouldn't take it out on you." I realized then that

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today I will offer God's love in places of pain.

he simply didn't know what to do with the pain he was feeling.

I wondered how many times I too had lashed out at

others, or even God, out of fear or pain. I am grateful now that God has freed me from the pain of emotional abuse. Now, when someone speaks to me in an unkind way, I am better able to be tenderhearted and not take it personally. Knowing that God loves and affirms me, I can regard others — and myself — with compassion.

Prayer: Father God, help us to see the confusion, hurt, or anger of others and to offer love where there is insult. Amen.

Kristen Lowe (Wisconsin, USA)

LISTENING TO GOD

READ Matthew 13:1-9

Let anyone with ears listen!

— Matthew 13:9 (NRSV)

It was my junior year and I was embarrassed that I was still riding the bench on my high school basketball team. One day we had a home game, so all my friends were there. Suddenly, Coach called for me to go in! But I didn't hear him. I'm not sure whether the crowd was too loud, or I was sitting too far away to hear him, or I wasn't paying attention because I wasn't expecting to play. But other players realized what was happening and turned to me, shouting, "Adam! Coach called for you to go in!" With my heart swelling, I quickly took off my warm-up shirt, ran over to Coach, then heard him say, "Sit down!" It was too late. He had already sent someone else in.

This experience reminds me of Jesus' words after he tells the parable of the sower. He says, "Let anyone with ears listen!" But how do we listen to God? Maybe we have heard God speaking to us through scripture, in a song, in worship, or through another person. However or whenever God speaks to us, it's up to us to pay attention. I didn't hear Coach call me and missed my opportunity to play. But once we belong to God, the good news is that God never stops calling us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God never stops calling to me.
Am I listening?

Prayer: Help us, O God, to learn to listen for your call so that we will never miss an opportunity to serve you. Amen.

Adam Benson (North Carolina, USA)

SAT
JAN 4
2020

IN THE NEW YEAR

READ Lamentations 3:19-26

[The LORD's compassions] are new every morning; great is [God's] faithfulness.

— Lamentations 3:23 (NIV)

As the new year approached, I took some time to look back on this past year. I thanked God for the abundant blessings, favor, and grace I experienced. But I also remembered how many times I had complained to God this past year. Whenever God's plans differed from what I wanted, I asked,

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God's love and faithfulness enable me to live with hope.

"Why, Lord? Do you really love me?" But then, as time passed, I would realize that God's plans for me were always best.

This year, one of my resolutions is to avoid complaining to God, regardless of my circumstances. It is not an easy resolution. I may suffer hardships or disappointment. I may be tempted to complain again and ask, "Why, Lord?" I am aware of this, but I know that God's strength is always with me. God has blessed me in past years and will continue to bless me. I believe God's love and compassion are new every morning.

Even though I cannot know how this year will turn out, I choose to live with faith and hope, trusting that God will do many great things in my life. Thanks be to God for the years past, and thanks be to God for this new year.

Prayer: Beloved God, thank you for your love and faithfulness. Help us always to cling to you, both during struggles and each day of our lives. Amen.

Linawati Santoso (East Java, Indonesia)

GIVING WITH LOVE

READ Luke 21:1-4

Jesus said, "All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but [this poor widow] out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

— Luke 21:4 (NIV)

When my husband and our two-and-a-half-year-old great-grandson Carson returned from a walk one morning, Carson handed me what was left of a rose. Apparently, it was already wilted when he found it, and on the way home all but one rather sad-looking petal had fallen off. In spite of that, I valued it just as much as I would a perfect rose fresh from a florist shop because it was a gift from a person I love.

That's the way it is when we offer whatever we have to God with all our love. Jesus took notice when the woman in today's reading gave her two small coins to the temple treasury. When we give of our time, talents, and money to God, it is precious in God's eyes.

I'm sure God loves to see us take time to study the Bible and pray, to use our talents to help someone, or to give money to our churches and people in need. What we have to offer may seem less than what others have to give; but instead of comparing our gifts to others, God measures only the love with which we give them.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I want to offer God the best of what I have.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to give with joyful and generous hearts. As Jesus taught us, we pray, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:2-4, NIV). Amen.

Joanne Fleck (Oregon, USA)

MON
JAN 6
2020

GO AND GLOW

READ Matthew 5:13-16

Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

— Matthew 5:16 (CEB)

When I think about being a light to the world, I remember one of my favorite childhood toys: a glow-in-the-dark, synthetic-rubber super ball. If I carried it in my pocket all day, it was merely a ball that could bounce really high. But if I left it out in the sun, it would provide hours of nighttime play with its green glow.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
How can God use me to light the world?

I think my faith journey often resembles that little ball. On days when I am able to focus on God and God's presence — through prayer,

time reading the Bible, acts of service — I can almost feel a glow from within. And like the ball, the brightness of my shining is dependent on regular contact with a greater source of light.

Jesus has called us to be his light to the world. I believe those who shine are meant to move out into the night. Just as objects that glow are most useful in the dark, so our simple loving presence in a troubled world has great value.

Still, we all face days when we don't feel all that shiny and bright. During those times, it helps me to think about tiny light sources like a match, a small flashlight, or my childhood super ball. When we step out to help others, even our faintest glow can serve as a beacon of God's love.

Prayer: Dear God, fill us with your light and love. Guide us into opportunities today and every day where we can brighten the lives of others. Amen.

Patrick Klingaman (Maine, USA)

Prayer Focus: FOR WAYS MY LIFE CAN SHINE MORE BRIGHTLY

12

BEYOND ALL IMAGINING

READ Philippians 4:4-7

God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being.

— 1 Corinthians 2:9 (CEB)

Throughout my career as a journalist I have held important jobs with a good salary to match. However, in 2016 I was dismissed from one of the most prominent television stations in Colombia. That same year, my husband's business ventures began to slow down. We became deeply concerned, so we made some changes. We sold our car and moved into a smaller house. Then, because we had not been able to pay down our credit card debt, we had to leave that house too. But no real estate agency was willing to lease a house to us. The outlook was bleak.

One evening, I began to pray in earnest and delve into the word of God. Today's verse spoke to me. As I read this, I cried and asked God for a miracle. That evening while walking around the neighborhood, I saw a "For Lease" sign posted in front of a house nearby. I knocked on the door. The owner greeted me and told me she had been praying that God would send someone to whom she could lease her house. She had to move precisely at the time we had to move out of our own house.

That night as I prayed, I gave thanks to God for possibilities and opportunities that were far beyond what I could have imagined.

Prayer: God of hope, thank you for hearing our prayers. Strengthen our faith to see your higher purpose for us. Amen.

Jimena Cortes (Colombia)

Prayer Focus: PEOPLE FACING EVICTION

13

TUES
JAN 7
2020

WED
JAN 8
2020

CHILDREN OF GOD

READ Romans 8:12-17

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

— Galatians 3:26-27 (NIV)

On the first day of each community-college art class I taught, I would ask the students to write a brief answer to the question, “Who are you?” Later, I was eager to read their responses. One of the answers I’ve never forgotten was, “I am a child of God.” This young woman’s response left me in awe

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
My identity rests in God.

that she was so grounded in her faith. It also led me to question myself: *Is my faith so strong that I would have replied in this way?* I probably would have listed

my education and work accomplishments. But now I realize that the growth I should always be most willing to share with others is my deepening relationship with my heavenly Father.

God gives me grace and has been with me all the days of my life. God is with me during good times and bad. I especially remember how God comforted me when my husband died. God loves me unconditionally, answers my prayers, and guides me.

Years ago, that student enriched my life by helping me become more aware of my faith. I have learned that I am a child of a merciful God who asks me to encourage my sisters and brothers. God rejoices when I reach out to others, encouraging them to join the family of the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us live in unity and serve you as we reach out to others and share with them your message of hope and love. Amen.

Lois E. Wilson (Ohio, USA)

THE WATER OF LIFE

READ John 4:7-15

Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”

— John 3:5 (NRSV)

I was part of a construction crew that worked on new housing developments. Our job was to connect houses to the water system. The work was not always easy, but it was worth the effort. When we turned on the water, a once-quiet house suddenly seemed alive — we knew it was only a matter of time before that house would become a home. It amazed me that the house could transform so quickly just by someone turning on a valve.

There was a time in my life when I felt a lot like one of those empty houses. Growing up, I didn’t have the Lord in my life. When I started going to church and spending time reading the Bible daily, I began to experience the living water of God’s presence in my life.

Like those houses, when I finally connected with God’s word and began living God’s ways, I felt my spirit filled with new life. I know that

I won’t be empty anymore. I have a relationship with God that I once thought I would never have with anyone. Like the empty houses, I have been transformed forever by God’s living water.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to remember that you are the living water. Thank you for transforming our emptiness into abundant life. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God’s love can always give me life.

Mark A. Carter (Oregon, USA)

FRI
JAN 10
2020

FROM FEAR TO HOPE

READ Ephesians 6:10-17

God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

— 2 Timothy 1:7 (KJV)

Depression has afflicted my life in different ways over the years. One constant was fear — the persistent catch in my chest that made it difficult to ever be completely at ease. It felt as if everything had the potential to fill me with fear. Often I would awake in a cold sweat, in the grip of the terror and dread of a panic attack. I would lie trembling in my bed, too terrified to get up and switch on the light.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
With God’s word to encourage me, I can stand firm.

For me, the greatest revelation in the verse quoted above was that God did not give me a spirit of fear but rather a spirit of a sound mind. One of the counselors at church advised me to rely on this verse; but to be honest, I did not believe this would help in any way. Still, the next time the terror came, I recited the verse and continued to repeat it — mostly because I did not know what else to do.

It became my nightly declaration. Then, many weeks later, I realized that the fear had lessened. The repetition of this truth from God’s word had helped reduce my fear. God’s word is powerful enough to enable me to stand firm and courageous.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your word. Help us to rely on it with the sure knowledge that you will always give us strength. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Teresa Naidoo (KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa)

FOUND!

READ Luke 15:1-10

Jesus said, “I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

— Luke 15:10 (NIV)

When I was a child, the tropical outdoors of Nigeria where I lived beckoned to me. In grass, rocks, dirt, mud, cement patio — whatever the setting — I found a toy that would keep me happily playing for countless hours. Sometimes, other children would join in, each adding another wellspring of imagination. Now and then, toys would be lost — sometimes for good.

One time a toy was washed away in the rainy season only to appear in a different area. When I later found the toy, I was delighted. It didn’t even matter that by this time the toy had begun to show signs of rust and discoloration or that the wheels didn’t roll well anymore. My toy that once was lost had been found!

Today’s passage speaks of other treasured things being lost and then found — a sheep found by a shepherd and a woman’s lost coin.

For me, it was a beloved toy. All of these situations help us to understand the delight God feels when a lost sinner is found.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can rejoice with God and the angels in heaven when a lost one is found.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that we were all once lost. Thank you for loving us enough to send your Son to save us. In his name we pray. Amen.

Ron Wasson (Texas, USA)

SUN
JAN 12
2020

A REMARKABLE OPPORTUNITY

READ Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea.

— Matthew 3:1 (NIV)

In the 1970s, one winter afternoon after classes, I hurried to Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery to study a painting entitled *Appearance of Christ to the People* by Alexander Ivanov. My plan was to sit alone and reflect on the life-sized masterpiece, but a young stranger soon joined me on the bench.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Interruptions are often opportunities from God.

"Can you explain it?" he asked.

"The setting is 2000 years ago," I began. I went on to point out the Roman soldiers on horses and John the

Baptist holding a staff near the Jordan River. I explained that John was calling people to repent because God was sending a Messiah to save them. "In the distance we see Jesus Christ approaching. Though he never sinned, he will persuade John to baptize him. The story is in the Bible."

"Have you ever seen a Bible?" the young man asked. I pulled a small Russian Bible from my handbag, opened it to Matthew 3, and with a silent prayer watched him read.

Filled with wonder, I realized that God offers us opportunities in our daily encounters to meet people who need to hear about Jesus.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to share your word with people who cross our path every day. Amen.

M. J. George (Indiana, USA)

MY RIGHT PLACE

READ Romans 12:4-8

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

— 1 Corinthians 12:12 (NRSV)

The most beautiful plant in our home is in our bathroom. It is a November cactus, and it amazes with its beautiful flowering, even in conditions where other flowers fight for their existence, like in the short winter days. In the bathroom, it has found its right environment to blossom.

In the same way, it is vital that we as humans find our right environment so that we can blossom. Each of us is original and valuable — just as we are.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today, I will seek the places where I can best use my talents to serve the Lord.

The November cactus does not need much light, so it does well in the shade. Similarly, not all Christians require being in the spotlight to make life meaningful. The important thing is that we find our right environment, our right place, so that in those conditions and with the gifts God has given us, we can bring hope and share in God's kingdom. The potential to blossom exists within each of us to serve among people in our community, in our country, and in our world.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to discover the gifts we have received, and make us willing to use them for you so that our lives can flourish to your glory. Amen.

Nils-Åke Nilsson (Sweden)

TUES
JAN 14
2020

LAVISHLY LOVED

READ Psalm 139:1-6

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us,
that we should be called children of God!*

— 1 John 3:1 (NIV)

My patient has dementia, and her husband of 50 years is doing everything he can to care for her. He washes her soiled linens, provides her meals, and arranges all the doctor appointments. Several times a day, he patiently explains to her why her brother is in the hospital, even though he's already told her many times before.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God's love can never be taken from me.

As I sat there watching them, I was overcome by their genuine love. Theirs is

sacrificial and committed — a love that knows every intimate detail and doesn't quit. In that moment, I remembered that Christ's love for each of us runs so much deeper than even my patient and her husband have experienced in their marriage. What other love would cause someone to lay down his life for a sinner like me?

Out of great love, God is concerned with every detail of our lives. God knows our thoughts, actions, and ways — the words we speak even before we can voice them. God is ever-present and not far away. God has molded us into who we are. How can we feel anything but loved?

Prayer: God who is love, help us to remember that you love us despite our many imperfections. Guide us to love others in that same way. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Alisha Ritchie (North Carolina, USA)

WATCH AND PRAY

READ Matthew 26:36-41

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

— James 5:16 (NIV)

At the beach one Saturday, I was doing some fishing while watching the sun rise. The brilliant colors seemed to pop out. This awesome sight caused me to pause to thank God for another day in this beautiful creation — to enjoy the waves, the breeze, the birds, and the fish I was expecting to catch. As I finished giving thanks for the many blessings of the morning, a fishing buddy showed up and we spent time talking about prayer. He admitted that he found it hard to find time for consistent prayer because of his busy schedule. He asked me how I found the time.

I explained that a long time ago I discovered an easy method after reading Jesus' instruction to the disciples to watch and pray.

I decided that every time I looked at my watch to see what time it was, the time was right for me to pray. I made it a habit to pray for whatever was on my mind or what was going on at that time. Soon I was praying at least 10 times a day. My buddy tried it and found that he had more time to pray than he had realized.

Other methods could be to pray during commercials while watching a TV program or on our morning commute. With some creativity and intention, we can always find time to pray.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the opportunity to share our petitions with you anytime, anyplace, and for anything. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Edward Mitchell Jr. (Florida, USA)

WED
JAN 15
2020

THUR
JAN 16
2020

ISN'T IT GLORIOUS?

READ Revelation 21:1-7

[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

— Revelation 21:4 (NIV)

I teach creative writing to adults, including many older adults. Recently I learned that one of my students had died after a short, intense illness. It wasn't easy sharing this news with the other students, but we took time to remember our friend. My favorite memory is of her breezing into class on a

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
My hope in God is for today
and for eternity.

wet, wild, gray winter's day and proclaiming, "Isn't it glorious!" I thought she was joking at first. "Oh, no," she said. "I absolutely love this weather. My dog and I had a

wonderful walk on the beach. It makes you feel alive!"

I always appreciated her upbeat outlook, and I knew she had been a strong Christian. I'm certain that her pain is gone and now she is feeling more alive than ever.

Today's reading from Revelation reminds us that our present sufferings are only temporary. God will make us whole once again — more whole than we've ever been. And as we enjoy our life here on earth, we can remember God's home is now among us. God alongside us and God to look forward to: Isn't it glorious?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we praise you for our eternal hope and for your presence alongside us. Amen.

Caroline Greville (England, United Kingdom)

ON THE TEAM

READ 1 Corinthians 12:8-27

You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

— 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV)

As a young boy, I fantasized that my first day on the baseball team was the beginning of a major-league career. However, my father's war injury had prevented him from teaching me how to play baseball so my inability to catch, throw, or hit relegated me to being a benchwarmer. What hurt the most were the coaches ignoring me in order to focus on the more promising team members. The next year we moved to a town with a YMCA. In their baseball program, everyone got to play, regardless of talent or experience. Friendly coaches worked with me to improve my basic baseball skills. They emphasized self-improvement, goal setting, and teamwork. The Christlike attitude I witnessed at the YMCA led me to a deeper life of faith.

The church is the body of Christ, and Jesus wants everyone to play on his team. He does not want anyone to be ignored or to be a benchwarmer. In the body of Christ, everyone can find opportunities to grow spiritually through worship, study, and service.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I will encourage someone to
become an active part of
the body of Christ.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for making us a part of your church. May we help to lead others to a life of faithful service. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Leland P. Gamson (Arizona, USA)

SAT
JAN 18
2020

GOD IN THE SMALL THINGS

READ 1 Kings 18:41-45

The seventh time [Elijah's] assistant said, "I see a small cloud the size of a human hand coming up from the sea."

— 1 Kings 18:44 (CEB)

One of my nephews called to tell me that he had lost the bracelet I gave him for his birthday and wanted to know where I had bought it. I remembered the day I bought it for him. I didn't have a lot of money but just wanted to send him a token of love on his birthday. Even though it was not a big, expensive gift, God had used it to encourage my nephew. From that experience I have learned to look for God in the small things.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What small sign of God's presence have I seen today?

That reminds me of our reading today. The prophet Elijah began to pray for relief from a drought that had lasted three-and-a-half years. He sent his assistant to look for a sign that rain was on the way. The servant went back seven times before he saw it: a cloud as small as a human hand. That was all the evidence they needed to know that God was about to move in a big way.

We can look for God in all situations. The problems we have may not go away overnight, but often we can find something to be grateful for. And a grateful heart can change our outlook.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the assurance of your love and presence with us. Help us to see you in every situation in our lives. Amen.

Toni Savage (Alabama, USA)

IN HIS NAME

READ John 14:1-14

Jesus said, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."

— John 14:14 (NIV)

I was born into a Christian family, but I married a non-believer. After 25 years of marriage, my husband was hospitalized. The doctor said that the infection in his blood would continue to cause him muscular aches and pains and headaches as his body became thinner and weaker.

I decided to encourage my husband to believe in God by telling him that I trust God in every circumstance, whether through times of health or of illness. The doctor did not yet know the cause of this illness, but I knew that my Lord was aware and ready to help. At that time, I gave my husband scriptures to read so that he would join me in praying for God to be with us.

Over the course of two weeks, we petitioned God in the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, my husband decided to accept Jesus Christ and devote all his life to him. Our two Christian children and I rejoiced that he had joined us in Christ, and together we trusted in God while he received treatment in the hospital and eventually was healed.

Prayer: God of mercy, teach us to believe and trust in you. Help us to be examples of faith in all that we do. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pratoom Pongjai (Phrae, Thailand)

SUN
JAN 19
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Every day I will pray for those who do not know Christ.

MON
JAN 20
2020

INNER STRENGTH

READ Ephesians 3:16-21

Paul wrote, *“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.”*

— Ephesians 3:16 (NIV)

On my first trip to New York City, I was greatly impressed by the tall skyscrapers that form the Manhattan skyline. However, the exteriors of these structures conceal much more than they reveal. The buildings can reach so high only because of what is inside them. They are fortified inside with steel, concrete, and wire mesh. This reinforcement allows the building to rise upward and remain stable and strong, even when storms come and winds blow. Each structure is a marvel of engineering and construction — on both the outside and the inside.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Christ is my inner strength.

Our Christian lives resemble these tall buildings more than we realize. Only when we look to God — the ultimate architect and engineer — are we best equipped to weather the storms of life. God is our inner strength when this world throws difficult and demanding situations at us. Prayer, Bible study, and worship are to our Christian lives what concrete and steel are to tall buildings. We can remain strong and stable with the assurance that God will always give us inner strength to meet whatever challenges come our way.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to seek the power of your unfailing strength in our lives. Lead us and guide us safely through the storms of life. Amen.

James Townsend (Mississippi, USA)

THE BLESSING OF FORGETTING

TUES
JAN 21
2020

READ Psalm 103:8-14

Paul wrote, *“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

— Philippians 3:13-14 (NRSV)

It happened again! I simply could not remember the name of a friend — someone I had known for ages. Her name had totally slipped my mind. When it finally came back to me, I dismissed my forgetfulness as another “senior moment.”

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God forgives and forgets my sins.

I began to think about how terrible and sometimes embarrassing it can be to be forgetful. And then I thought of one kind of forgetfulness that I am certainly thankful for — that my sins are removed and forgotten by God. As Jeremiah 31:34 states, “I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins” (NRSV). I am forever grateful that God forgets my sins. I began thanking God for forgiving my sins and also for helping me to forget as I forgive others who have hurt me over the years. Like Paul, I also strive to forget all that lies behind me — including my disappointments and past mistakes. Forgetting these helps me to forgive myself and to look to the future with hope.

I have often heard others state, “I have forgiven, but I can’t forget.” For humans that is very probable. But praise God for not only forgiving but forgetting as well!

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for forgiving and forgetting our sins when we confess them to you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Rebecca Seaton (Tennessee, USA)

WED
JAN 22
2020

BEFRIENDING GOD

READ Psalm 21:1-7

You bestow on him blessings forever; you make him glad with the joy of your presence.

— Psalm 21:6 (NRSV)

Being the last born in my family, I had no siblings to carry or play with. In search of something to care for and to befriend, I picked out a little lamb from my father's flock that became my friend. I carried it around all the time. When it grew into a sheep, I could not carry it any longer; but the

closeness remained and it followed me everywhere.

My relationship with that lamb helped me to understand that God longs to have just such a relationship with

us. When we allow God to carry us, we begin to grow closer and to know God more deeply. Then as we grow in our faith, we will follow God more closely.

I experienced this some months ago when I made a decision to have a closer relationship with God, and I started spending more time reading the Bible each day. As I kept doing this, my desire to follow and obey God intensified. I experienced joy and fulfillment in God's presence that I had never known before — it changed my life. To this day, I have a desire to stay in God's presence daily because I have tasted the sweetness it brings. We have everything to gain by spending time with God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give us a desire to spend time in your presence day by day. As we read your word, give us the fullness of joy that comes from a relationship with you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Enid Adah Nyinomujuni (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

FREE UP SPACE

READ Matthew 11:28-30

[The LORD] lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters.

— Psalm 23:2 (CEB)

During the Sunday morning worship time at my last youth retreat, I asked three people from the audience to stand in the front. I then asked them to arrange themselves from the busiest to the least busy person. The busiest person had to hold two giant boxes. The next held a stack of books, and the last held nothing. I then told them they had to catch a ball that I would toss them. I tossed the ball to each person, and only two out of the three caught it. I explained that the ball represented opportunities from God and that if we are too busy, then we won't be able to catch what God is tossing to us.

That afternoon, when I got home after the retreat, I realized how busy I was myself. Between school, Boy Scouts, band, choir, friends, and church, my arms were pretty full. We have control over much of the busyness of our lives. When we free up some space, we allow God to give us rest and are able to gladly receive the opportunities for loving service that God sends our way.

Prayer: God of rest, teach us to lay down our burdens and find rest in you so that we won't miss the opportunities you send us. Amen.

Timothy Sandridge (Virginia, USA)

THUR
JAN 23
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The time I spend reading the Bible is never wasted.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What can I give up in order to act on the opportunities that God is giving me?

FRI
JAN 24
2020

WRESTLING WITH GOD

READ Genesis 32:22-30

Consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

— James 1:2-3 (NIV)

After Jacob wrestled with a stranger, this stranger gave him a new name. The man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (Gen. 32:28, NIV). Through

his struggle, Jacob changed. He was not the same person as before.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

In the midst of my struggles, God is working to make me mature and complete.

Perhaps at one time or another, all believers have felt as if they have been

wrestling with God. I feel this way when I’m searching for a new job. For some people, this task may not be particularly stressful; but at times in a job search I have felt as if I were in a push and pull with God and with the people involved. I struggle to deal with one rejection after another, to pray, to send out more resumes, and to make more phone calls — in what at times feels like a losing battle to prove myself. All the while I try to be content that my task is to trust the Lord while I search. Like Jacob, after an encounter with God I am not the same person as before.

I have learned that when we are faithful, our wrestling is not in vain. In whatever we are struggling with today, we can find courage — believing that staying in what seems like a fight may result in a blessing because God is at work.

Prayer: Dear God, remind us that through our suffering we can learn perseverance and wisdom. Amen.

Rosie DiBianca (California, USA)

32 *Prayer Focus:* SOMEONE SEARCHING FOR EMPLOYMENT

PRAISE GOD!

READ Psalm 150:1-6

*I will praise you, LORD, among the nations;
I will sing the praises of your name.*

— 2 Samuel 22:50 (NIV)

I was a senior in high school, and it was my turn to preach at one of our worship services. I was grateful and eager for the opportunity to proclaim God’s word. As I was planning to order the service in the usual way — first a time of praise, followed by the message — God helped me realize that praise isn’t confined to the opening part of worship. Praise never ends.

In our daily walk of faith, every loving action we undertake, every service we render, is an act of praise to God. So following the time of music and praise, I began my message proclaiming God’s love and faithfulness and spoke of my gratitude for the Almighty. The students and teachers listening to the message were also praising God because they opened their hearts and set aside time to purposefully commune with God.

In all that we do, wherever we are, we can offer praise to God. All we need is a willing spirit and a desire to praise our marvelous Creator.

Prayer: Holy God, you are worthy of all praise. Help us to praise you continuously in all circumstances. Amen.

Daniel E. Mejía Fuentes (Francisco Morazan, Honduras)

Prayer Focus: YOUNG CHRISTIANS SHARING GOD’S LOVE 33

SAT
JAN 25
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Every act of love is an act of praise.

SUN
JAN 26
2020

NO INSIGNIFICANT PRAYER

READ James 5:13-18

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

— Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

The time had come for corn bread baking in my 4-H club. Yet after weeks of preparation, I still didn't know if my muffins would come out of the oven competition-ready. The Sunday before the contest, I entered my Sunday school classroom

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today, in any struggle — large or small — I will pray.

slightly discouraged. After our lesson my teacher, Mr. Jean, asked for prayer requests. When no one responded, I meekly raised my hand. "This probably isn't important, but I'm going to say it anyway. My 4-H corn bread baking contest is tomorrow, and I'd like to ask God to put a nice hump on my muffins," I said, gaining confidence as I spoke. Mr. Jean chuckled before informing me that no prayer is too insignificant for God.

Whenever I feel as if my prayers are a burden to the Lord, I think of the verse quoted above and that day when I was taught a lesson I shall never forget. With infinite time, and the ability to be with all of us at once, God listens to every prayer and answers. I have learned that prayer is a conversation, a beautiful connection between us and God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to bring all our burdens to you and, with every prayer, grow closer to you. Amen.

Eliza Smith (Tennessee, USA)

SUSTAINED BY GOD

READ 1 Peter 5:6-11

Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.

— Psalm 55:22 (KJV)

As I was reading my *Upper Room* devotion one day, I ran across today's quoted verse. Next to it in my Bible, I had written: "won't remove the burden but 'He shall sustain thee.'" I had written that note long before I lost my beloved husband after nearly 48 years in a very happy marriage. But as I read that scripture and my note, they seemed to explain how the Lord has been working in my life.

At times I think I just can't go on living without my husband. But every time I feel that way, along comes a visit, or a note, or a call from a friend or family member. Sometimes I am encouraged by a devotional message that seems to be directed specifically to my situation or a verse that becomes a balm to soothe my broken heart. Other times, when I feel led to help someone else during a time of struggle, it reminds me of how blessed I have been. Helping them helps me too.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In the midst of my suffering, God will help me to help others.

The burden of losing my husband hasn't disappeared; but clearly the Lord has put a shoulder under my burden, and I know God will sustain me. I shall not be moved!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for faithfully sustaining us through all the grief and trials that we face. Amen.

Margie Lank (New Hampshire, USA)

TUES
JAN 28
2020

SHARING OUR STORIES

READ Mark 16:9-20

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did."

— John 4:39 (NIV)

I recently met a young woman who shared with me what God had done in her life and how she was determined to remain committed in her relationship with God. It was clear to me that she had not planned to share her story; neither was I expecting to hear any testimony from someone on that particular day. She expressed her confidence and trust in God and her desire to faithfully respond to God's call.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How will I share my faith in God today?

Her testimony has totally revived and strengthened my Christian faith. After that encounter, my life hasn't been the same. That conversation has convinced

me of how important it is for us to share our stories and testimonies whenever we have the chance. So many people out there need our stories and testimonies in order to experience new life in Christ.

Prayer: Loving God, open our hearts, minds, and mouths that we may tell the world about you. We pray as Jesus taught us saying, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" (Luke 11:2-4, KJV). Amen.

Mavula Sabbath Kefas (Baden-Württemberg, Germany)

INTERPRETERS

READ Acts 8:26-39

Philip . . . heard the [Ethiopian eunuch] reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?"

— Acts 8:30-31 (NIV)

I enjoy the art on the covers of *The Upper Room* but sometimes do not fully understand the intention of the artist. So I appreciate that on the second page of each issue, an art interpretation gives me insights into the work of the artist. Without this help, I would miss many of the amazing qualities of the painting.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today I will listen to others' perspectives to learn about God's word.

This makes me think of the many times that we miss the opportunity to understand the plan that God has laid out for our lives. But we may not have an interpreter such as Joseph (see Gen. 40:1-22) or Daniel (see Dan. 2:1-23) when we are overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy as to how to solve a problem. But we do have access to God at any time of day or night.

We can find many interpreters to help us. The most accessible ones are pastors, the Bible, Christian books, Bible study groups, and our Christian friends, to name a few. God has provided us with these helpers so that we, in turn, can help others.

Prayer: Dear God, as we study the Bible to understand it better, help us to use this understanding to share with those around us who are seeking the truth in your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Janet Gilchrist (Iowa, USA)

THUR
JAN 30
2020

CHIMES OF GOD'S GRACE

READ 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NRSV)

One very hot day, my lawn mower was not cooperating, so I went into the house to rest. My two young daughters were visiting grandparents, and I was lonely and grieving my wife's recent death from cancer. While I was walking through the carport, a gentle breeze blew through the wind chimes. For a brief moment, it was as though I was hearing the first few notes of an old hymn. I felt encouraged that I was not alone, that God's Spirit and grace were with me.

I have often relearned the message of Paul's experience with his "thorn in the flesh." We do not know what his thorn was, but we do know that thorns bring pain. Three times

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Even in the midst of tragedy and grief, God's grace is sufficient for me.

Paul asked the Lord for the thorn to be removed, but the reply was: "My grace is sufficient for you." I have learned the truth of Paul's statement from my own life

experiences. God's grace is always sufficient. When we trust in God's love for us, God brings unending blessings.

In life, sometimes "thorns" are removed and sometimes they remain. No matter what, through God's love, we can endure the thorns and still rejoice in God's amazing grace.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to trust you as we experience the struggles of life and come to know that your grace is always sufficient. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Stephen T. Johnson (North Carolina, USA)

FIRST RAINBOW

READ Psalm 33:6-9

God said, "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures."

— Genesis 9:16 (NIV)

Last summer, my younger grandson and I went for a weeklong holiday to my country's beautiful Rila Mountains. The weather was changing all the time there. In one day, we experienced sun, rain, and even hail. After the storm, a beautiful rainbow appeared in the sky. This was the first time my grandson ever touched hailstones or saw a rainbow. He was so happy!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The beauty of creation reminds me of God's love and glory.

I am thankful to the Lord for the time I spent with my grandson and for the beautiful elements of nature he saw. He will have good memories to hold on to in the faraway country where he lives and where rain is rare.

Psalm 24:1-2 tells us: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters." When we are surrounded by nature, it is easy to look around and see the beauty of it. But we can also look beyond that — to its Creator.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember that all you have created is a gift of your love. Amen.

Volya Koruderlieva (Varna, Bulgaria)

Casting Our Nets

Anyone who knows me can attest to the fact that I am set in my ways. While we are all creatures of habit to some extent, I am more routine-oriented than many. When I stop to think about all the things I do over and over each day — at the same time each day — I am a little shocked and confounded. I do not like to deviate from my routine, and even a minor disruption can leave me a little disoriented on some days and decidedly irritable on others.

Routines can be good, but sometimes they can curdle into ruts that prevent me from living fully the life that God desires for me. A rut includes anything from a bad habit to neglect. Speaking from my own experience, a routine becomes a rut when I can imagine no other possible way of doing something — no other way to start or end my day, no other way to respond to a specific situation, no other way to cope with some challenge or difficulty.

As I think about the ruts that I would like to find my way out of, my mind goes to the story of Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, and two other disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee in John 21. Scripture says, “They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing” (v. 3, NIV). Standing on the shore, Jesus asked them whether they’d caught anything. They said no. Jesus then told them to cast their net on the right side of the boat, and “when they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish” (v. 6). I can only wonder what the disciples made of this experience and what they learned from it. I would like to think that the next time they found themselves in a similar predicament — doing the same thing over and over without getting any results — they thought back to that night on the Sea of Galilee and how one small change made a dramatic difference.

Breaking away from old habits and worn-out routines can be extremely difficult, scary, and anxiety-filled. It often involves letting go of something that we fear we cannot survive without. Yet at the end of the day if we remain in our ruts, we turn up empty-handed just like the disciples.

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I have decided that this year when I find myself in a rut, I will imagine Jesus standing on the shore inviting me to cast my net on the other side of the boat. My promise to myself is that I will then accept Jesus’ invitation to try something different. Who knows what good might come from it?

What better time than the beginning of the year to start a new, life-giving routine or break away from a habit that is holding us back? What better time to let go of the old so that we can welcome all the new opportunities God wants to send our way? There’s no better time than right now to cast our nets on the other side of the boat.

Several meditations in this issue address letting go of what holds us back and welcoming the opportunities God wants to send our way. You may want to read again the meditations for January 4, 7, 9, 15, 23 and February 1, 13, 18, 23, 29 before responding to the reflection questions below.

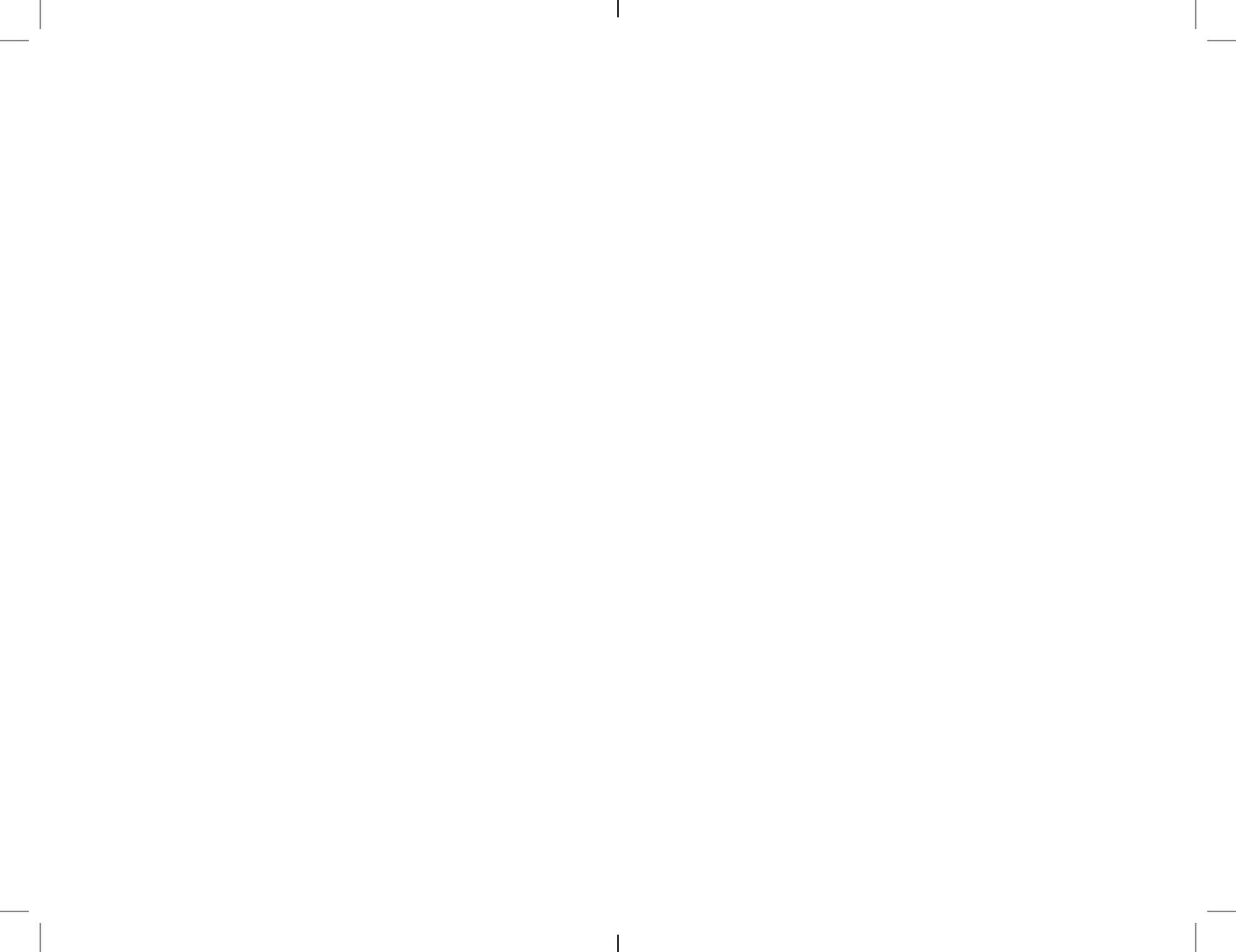
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. What old habit or routine would you like to break away from in the coming year? What new one would you like to adopt?
2. Would you describe yourself as a routine-oriented person or not? In what ways can routines and habits be helpful? In what ways can they be unhelpful?
3. When in your life have you “cast your net on the other side”? What happened? What did this experience teach you?



— Andrew Garland Breedon
Acquisitions Editor

41



SAT
FEB 1
2020

ROAD TRIP

READ Exodus 13:17-22

*People plan their path, but the LORD
secures their steps.*

— Proverbs 16:9 (CEB)

Recently, my wife and I set out on a trip to visit one of our daughters for parents' weekend at her university. Thirty minutes into the trip the brake indicator light began flashing on the dashboard. We made a quick decision to return home and change cars before dropping the first car at the service station on our way out. It turned out that the brakes were fine; however, there was a larger issue with the car that would likely have gotten worse and caused much further damage

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Whether or not the path
makes sense to me, I
will follow God.

— possibly even leaving us stranded. I'm not sure why that indicator light came on, but I am glad that it appeared.

Sometimes God gives us "warning lights." They can come in the form of comments from a friend or a conversation with a stranger or something we hear on the radio or read in a book. It's good to know that God is with us and guiding us. And if we heed God's signs, God will lead us on the right path.

Prayer: God of all our steps, thank you for lighting our path and for your presence in our lives. Amen.

Brian Foster (North Carolina, USA)

GATHERING TOGETHER

READ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

*Where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them.*

— Matthew 18:20 (NRSV)

I remember playing church as a child. Neighborhood children, school friends, family members, dolls, stuffed animals, and occasionally one of our family pets made up the congregation. We took turns preaching, teaching, serving Communion, singing, and taking an offering. Our services were never very long, but we had a good time.

Recently, on a cold, winter Sunday morning, I remembered those small childhood gatherings when only three church members in addition to the worship leader, organist, and the pastor entered the sanctuary for worship. No one else braved the cold to join us. Choosing not to be discouraged, we worshiped together.

During a teaching on discipleship, Jesus reminded his followers that where two or three gathered together in his name, he was there with them. I did not realize it at the time, but Christ was with us when we played church as children, just as he was with those of us who gathered in his name on that cold Sunday morning.

Prayer: Lord God, no matter how many come together, may we always worship you in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Patricia Patton (Texas, USA)

SUN
FEB 2
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
No matter how many people
I'm with, God meets me in
worship.

MON
FEB 3
2020

HEAVENLY VIEW

READ Psalm 19:1-6

*Set your minds on things above,
not on earthly things.*

— Colossians 3:2 (NIV)

The old birch tree that used to grow in front of my bedroom window had a huge crown of branches and leaves. I loved watching it as the seasons changed each year. Recently an accident caused my birch tree to die. First I was sad because the view of the outside from my window looked so

empty and desolate. Then I noticed while lying in my bed that for the first time I was able to see the sky from my window. Now I enjoy the many colors of the sky

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What distracts me from spending time with God?

— white clouds and bright blue by day and stars and moon by night. During my quiet time with God, I have a view of the heavens that fills my heart with joy.

However, at times our Nordic sky is low and gray, making it difficult to see the sun and the night's stars. Similarly, in our spiritual lives, our mistakes and difficulties can sometimes distract us from fellowship with God, even though God's mercy never changes. Rather than focusing on what distracts us, we can decide to focus on our relationship with God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give us the wisdom to focus on your constant presence rather than our difficulties. Amen.

Maire Simm (Tallinn, Estonia)

IN GOD'S TIME

READ Isaiah 49:8-10

*"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD,
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
plans to give you hope and a future."*

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

During a particularly dark moment, after nearly two years of chronic depression I decided to take my own life. I could not find a reason to move forward. I had lost hope, even moving away from God. As I tried to carry out my plan for suicide, a song of worship from long ago began to run through my head; I knew then I could not follow through with my plan. I returned to my car and found a Bible in the back seat. I prayed and cracked it open randomly, and my eyes fell upon Isaiah 49:8: "In the time of my favor I will answer you . . . I will help you" (NIV). I began to cry when I realized all God had done for me and that God was at work even in this painful time.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I am of infinite value because God loves me.

I saw in that moment that I can praise God no matter what I am going through. I may not understand why or where this is all headed. But knowing God loves me, hears and answers my cries, and restores me, helps me to live with hope. Now I take time to reflect on all the good in my life and look for God's blessings even in the darkness.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for always being with us and for loving us. Help us to encourage one another and to look for opportunities to share hope with those who suffer. Amen.

H. Matthew Francis (Maine, USA)

WED
FEB 5
2020

“I’VE BEEN THERE”

READ Luke 10:25-37

Praise be to . . . the Father of compassion . . . who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)

Just before Christmas, a woman with whom I was falling in love informed me that she was dating someone else. I was crushed and shed many tears. At some point, however, I thought to seek out people also dealing with loss. Within a month, I was able to aid a woman whose father had died,

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God wants me to share the comfort I have received with others.

another sister in Christ who had lost a son to suicide, and also a couple whose oldest daughter was rebelling against God.

I believe that many people miss one of the points in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In my mind, it’s likely that the priest and Levite who passed by the wounded traveler didn’t fully understand what the man was facing in that moment. But the Samaritan, as part of a despised race, understood — likely from personal experience. The Samaritan truly identified with the wounded man’s trials; he was able to say, “I’ve been there.”

When we are struggling with difficult situations, Jesus calls us to identify with people who are also suffering, who at that point are more our “neighbors” than others may be. Then we can comfort them with the comfort that we have received from God. In exercising such compassion, we imitate Christ and thereby draw closer to God and closer to those around us.

Prayer: Dear Father, in our hurt, give us courage to feel the hurts of others and a desire to share your comfort with them. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Rick Nowlin (Pennsylvania, USA)

MY SOLITARY PLACE

READ Matthew 26:36-44

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

— Mark 1:35 (NIV)

When we push our bodies to work without adequate rest or nutrition, we get sick. The same is true of our spiritual lives. During challenging times we may become pessimistic, indifferent to our calling as believers, or filled with worry and fear. But Jesus shows us the way to feed our spirituality, even in challenging times. No matter how busy his days were, Jesus always sought out a solitary place and took time to pray and fellowship with his Father. (See Luke 6:12.) When Jesus faced difficulties, he always prepared himself by praying.

I have also found that when I am in a solitary place, I can pray openly before God. I kneel and pray in the corner of my bedroom. While my children and my spouse are still asleep, I go to that solitary space to prepare myself for the day through prayer and cry if I need to. After encountering God, I gain new strength — peace in my heart and mind that I cannot get from anywhere else. Not only is my spirit recharged, but my passion for living and walking with God is resurrected. Joy fills my heart and mind despite any obstacles ahead of me.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Where is my solitary place to meet God?

Prayer: Dear Lord, please give us honest and humble hearts so that we may find joy and renewed energy to face the day ahead. Amen.

Linda Chandra (Banten, Indonesia)

FRI
FEB 7
2020

LOYAL LOVE

READ Psalm 89:1-4

Speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts.

— Ephesians 5:19 (CEB)

One of my earliest memories from church was singing hymns while standing next to my father. As we sang, he would point to the words, which gave me confidence to sing along. Because of those memories, music and singing have been important comforters and companions to me. Whether singing while working in the yard or humming a tune at the office, singing is a way to connect to the Creator's amazing

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What song will help me proclaim the faithfulness of God today?

gift of life and to express my thanks and devotion for God's faithful love.

Just as my earthly father guided me along in the hymnbook and later taught

me lessons that shaped me, our Creator's everlasting love serves as a guide along life's path. Even in the dark times, our singing provides a connection to God. Whether they are songs of joy or songs of lament, when we sing it is our testimony and recognition of God's faithful, loyal love for us.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember that your love is with us forever. May songs of praise be ever on our lips and in our hearts. Amen.

John Horany (Texas, USA)

PIONEERS OF FAITH

READ Psalm 78:1-7

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

— Psalm 90:1 (NIV)

While researching county records, I found a memoir by a family of pioneers who homesteaded in the same region where my family lived in the 1800s. I was thrilled to discover that this family and mine together built sod houses, planted crops, raised families, and established a house of worship amid the prairie's cold, bitter winters and sweltering hot summers. In fact, it was noted that during one particular crisis my great-great-grandfather reminded this close-knit community that God would work things together for their good, as promised in Romans 8:28. It spoke volumes to me that God was his dwelling place, his refuge.

I feel fortunate that over a century ago, my family was trusting in the God whom I worship and trust. I have a legacy of faith, an inheritance of belief — carried down through generations.

The words of Psalm 90 resonate now more than ever. As parents, grandparents, or friends, we all have an opportunity to influence the generations that follow. Let us resolve, along with the psalmist, to “tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (Ps. 78:4, NIV).

Prayer: Dear God, help our lives and words to reflect our trust in your amazing power, love, and strength. Amen.

Beverly Taylor (Arizona, USA)

SAT
FEB 8
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How am I passing on a legacy of faith to those who come after me?

SUN
FEB 9
2020

FAITH LIKE A FIRE

READ 1 John 4:7-12

If we walk in the light, as [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

— 1 John 1:7 (NIV)

Even though the memory is over 50 years old, I can recall one particular youth retreat at any time. While I do not remember everything — what songs we sang or who was there — I do remember the surroundings and a certain evening.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
My faith shines brighter when I am in community with God and others.

A group of us were sitting on a rock that stretched out into the water in Misterhult's archipelago. It was dusk on a cool summer night at

the end of an intense day. A campfire was burning under a crisscross of logs. Without saying anything, one of the leaders removed a log from the fire. After a while, we could see that the log lost its flame while the others still in the fire burned to the fullest. A moment later, someone said, "We need each other so we can burn bright." When the log was returned to the campfire, it quickly took the flame again.

This was the message of the preaching that summer — perhaps the most important preaching of my entire youth. Our faith is like a fire; it burns brightly when stoked with love and community with God and others. God has given us community with one another so that we may give our attention, love, and energy to those whose lives intersect with ours.

Prayer: Dear God, help our love to burn brightly for one another. Amen.

Tomas Boström (Gotland, Sweden)

DON'T YOU CARE?

READ Mark 4:35-41

The disciples woke [Jesus] and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?"

— Mark 4:38 (NIV)

At first, when Jesus and his disciples were at sea during a terrible storm, Jesus was sound asleep. The waves were threatening all of their lives. "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" Those words cut. I'd heard this passage in Mark before, but that day it expressed exactly the doubts I was having about Jesus' caring for me. In the passage, the fearful disciples had snapped. I felt as if I too were snapping. Work, family, and financial storms had me feeling battered and disregarded. I was losing hope that Jesus could handle my circumstances.

Although the disciples had been full of fear, the storm did not disturb Jesus. Once awake, Jesus called the storm into calm submission. The disciples became even more afraid because Jesus had power over the storm. In that moment he had revealed himself to be the Almighty whom all of creation submits to. While he may have been in the storm, he was not subject to it.

I had been feeling as if Jesus were asleep. This story compelled me to confront Jesus with my doubts. Storms don't rattle him. While we are afraid and swamped, he is calm and invites us into his care. He calls us to take courage in knowing that everything submits to him at his command.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help us in our storms to stop and see your almighty power. We know that you will deliver us as we trust in you. Amen.

Randi Perez Helm (Michigan, USA)

MON
FEB 10
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Jesus invites me into his rest and care.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

READ Psalm 23:1-6

[The LORD] tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

— Isaiah 40:11 (NIV)

While chatting with my cousin I recalled a visit to his farm in Tulbagh, South Africa. Sensing a lamb was in distress, my uncle had invited me to go with him into the fields. Dusk was falling as we headed in the direction of a faint sound. We found a lamb that had fallen into a ditch and was trapped.

We were both awed by the prompting that led to the rescue of one lamb.

That memory reinforces my faith in the love of the Good Shepherd, and I

reflect on how God has been with me on my 30-year journey with multiple sclerosis. At a very low point in my life, I attended a healing service where hands were laid on my head and prayers were offered. Then I heard these softly spoken words: “God has a special name for you. He calls you his little lamb, and he will pick you up and carry you.”

God knows each of us by name, and Jesus’ words from the Gospel of John reveal that truth: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14, NIV).

Prayer: Loving Shepherd, we give you thanks and praise for rescuing and protecting us. Help us to listen for your voice and follow you. Amen.

Clare Drew* (Gauteng, South Africa)

*The author passed away before production of this issue was complete.

A RICH HERITAGE

READ Joshua 4:1-9

I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

— Psalm 77:11 (NIV)

Ever since he was young, my son has exhibited a strong sense of curiosity. He regularly asks questions of his mother and me, and other family members. He wants to know about various family rituals and why we observe certain traditions. We enjoy answering his questions because it gives us the opportunity to share our experiences and history as well as key events that have shaped our lives. Discussing and sharing this information with him often brings us closer to one another and helps him establish his identity within the family.

In the same way, we can take an interest in our church rituals and traditions. Understanding the history of the church, certain events that have shaped it, and the story behind rituals and traditions can help us understand the values of our church and the rich heritage that surrounds the community of believers. Sometimes we may even find traditions that transcend denominational boundaries and connect us to the universal church of Christ, bringing us together as one big family sharing a common Savior and God.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, thank you for sending us your Son, Jesus Christ, to connect us with you. May our traditions and rituals continually remind us of your great love and provide hope for our lives. Amen.

Daniel C. M. Tan (Selangor, Malaysia)

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The traditions of my faith give me vision for the future.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The Good Shepherd knows me by name.

THUR
FEB 13
2020

PATIENCE

READ Psalm 37:3-6

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

— Romans 8:28 (NIV)

As a dance major at my arts school, I was at the peak of my dance career — training at a studio and winning competitions. Then, during class one day, I felt my back twinge. I tried my best to ignore it, but my day ended in the hospital. After multiple X-rays, the doctor told my parents and me that

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

My relationship with God gives me a fulfilling life.

I would need to choose either to have surgery or to quit dance. I agreed to stop dancing. It was the most difficult decision I had made up to that point in my life.

Somehow, I still had a peace about it. The months to follow were full of trials, emotionally and physically. As I sought other pastimes, other passions to replace dance, I found a new love for my relationship with Christ. This was the most fulfilling result that could have happened. I realized that the joy that filled me was not from my ability to dance but from God. I never could've imagined that the Lord would take such a painful loss and turn it into so many blessings.

Every day, I still see blessings that might never have happened if I had chosen differently all those years ago. Of course I miss dancing, but ultimately the passion that I am able to give my relationship with God has been rewarding beyond measure.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for everything that you have given us. Help us to wait patiently for what you have in store for us. Amen.

Rylee Goetzinger (Oklahoma, USA)

CHOOSING MERCY

READ Colossians 3:12-17

What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

— Micah 6:8 (NIV)

I think often about the meaning of Micah 6:8. I love justice, but if justice were up to me, few people would get a second chance. When criminals are pardoned from a hearing because of their declining health, I want them to go to the hearing anyway — if they made someone suffer then I want them to suffer the consequences. In those moments, I realize that my love of justice is more like a love of retribution. But when I long to see someone punished, am I loving mercy as God calls me to do? When we love mercy, we can rest secure in knowing that God is the perfect judge who will make things right.

As Christians, we can show God's love and grace to the world by being in the business of second chances. Loving mercy, even when it's painfully difficult to do so, is an opportunity to show someone else God's love for us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I reflect God's gracious love when I show mercy.

Prayer: Dear God, we thank you that you are a God who gives second chances. We pray that you will strengthen us to do the same for others. Amen.

Melissa Ramoo (New South Wales, Australia)

SAT
FEB 15
2020

“I’M RIGHT HERE”

READ Deuteronomy 31:1-8

The LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

— Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)

On our trips to the beach, my wife, daughter, and I like to watch the sun set. One evening while our daughter, Victoria, was sitting in the sand, my wife and I sat on a bench several yards behind her. She was unaware that we had moved some distance away from her. We sat in silence as the red glow of the sun disappeared.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God continually says to me,
“I’m right here.”

As it became dark, my daughter realized that we were not near her. She called out for us with fear in her voice. When we spoke

to her from our bench, she replied, “I thought you’d left me!” My wife answered, “We’re right here; we’d never leave you!”

That conversation reminded me of how often in life we end up in the darkness, thinking we are alone and feeling afraid. When we call out for God’s help, it is comforting to know that God will always reply, “I’m right here; I’ll never leave you!”

Prayer: Eternal God, thank you for your faithfulness to us. Strengthen our resolve never to wander away from you. Amen.

Jeff Wansley (Georgia, USA)

GOD’S REASSURANCE

READ Psalm 33:1-5

The word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

— Psalm 33:4 (NIV)

Most of his life, my 85-year-old husband had been an accomplished musician. He had played the organ, piano, trombone, and tuba. But for his last few years he could play none of these. A blood clot on his brain, together with a stroke and a heart attack, had robbed him of these abilities. After Henry died, I mourned the loss of my faithful husband of nearly 64 years, but I also sighed with relief that he no longer struggled to breathe.

About two months after his passing, I dreamed that he was scheduled to play a solo in a concert. Backstage, he kept saying, “I don’t think I can do it.” But when the time came, he stepped onstage and played the most beautiful music he had ever played.

I woke up feeling my grief turned to joy. I remembered that in the Bible God often spoke through dreams, from

Abimalech (Gen. 20:3) to the apostle Paul (Acts 18:9-10). In my dream, I felt God was reassuring me that Henry no longer has any physical restraints. In heaven, he is hearing the most magnificent music he has ever heard. And he’s helping to provide it in joyful praise to God.

Prayer: Author of our dreams, may we know the comfort and joy that comes with praising you. Amen.

Virginia Horst Loewen (Pennsylvania, USA)

SUN
FEB 16
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In heaven, all my earthly sorrows will be gone.

MON
FEB 17
2020

PERSEVERANCE IN FAITH

READ Luke 2:25-35

[Simeon] was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

— Luke 2:25 (NRSV)

I find I often lack perseverance and patience in my faith, but I am inspired by the example of my grandparents. They lived through the terror of a Communist regime, but they were not broken by the disappointments of the world. My grandparents prepared to wait a long time and kept their faith strong. They were constant in their expectation and didn't let their love for God cool. With unwavering hope, they waited for God's timing.

My grandparents persevered in waiting for God because they loved God. Although they were let down by people,

God never let them down. Like Simeon who faithfully waited for the Messiah's coming, my grandparents remained resolute.

We can teach our children and grandchildren the virtue of perseverance. I pray that we may be examples of perseverance for the next generation so they can learn what it means to wait for the coming of the Christ quietly and full of joy.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to await your coming with perseverance and strong faith. Amen.

Daniel Topalski (Varna, Bulgaria)

60 *Prayer Focus:* THOSE LIVING IN POLITICAL UNREST

ANSWERED PRAYER

READ 2 Corinthians 9:8-15

[The Lord's] divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

— 2 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

As I dropped off my daughter at the nursery before Bible study, I chatted with an acquaintance about having to find childcare so I could attend the group's upcoming special luncheon. The acquaintance replied that a friend of hers also needed childcare for a different event. I offered my phone number for her friend, saying that I could probably help. My acquaintance grabbed my hand, "She has been praying to find a way to attend the event, and maybe you are her answer."

At the Bible study, I mentioned casually that my husband was on an extended job three time zones away from home. A woman responded that she knew someone whose husband was in the same situation and traveling to the same location. After giving her my phone number, I received an emotional call from the woman, who said, "I have been praying that my husband would find a Christian friend in that city." I was so excited to think that our husbands would be able to encourage each other in a faraway place.

Usually I'm focused on the way God might answer *my* prayers. Now I understand that I can be God's answer to help or encourage someone else.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to be sensitive to the needs of others so that we can serve as your answers to the prayers of those around us. Amen.

Susan H. Aaron (Florida, USA)

Prayer Focus: ATTENTIVENESS TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS 61

TUES
FEB 18
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I will be ready and alert
so that I can act when
God needs me.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Who has inspired me to
persevere in faith?

WED
FEB 19
2020

THE RIGHT QUESTION

READ 1 Corinthians 3:6-11

The LORD declares, "[My word] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

— Isaiah 55:11 (NRSV)

While returning home from a night out, my wife noticed a large sign posted on the corner of an intersection. It read, "Jesus is the only way to heaven. Where are you going?" My wife asked if I thought such signs were effective. My immediate thought was, *No, it isn't effective*. Yet, even as this negative thought came to mind, I realized that we were asking the

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How will I get involved in spreading the gospel?

wrong question. I felt the Spirit asking me, "When was the last time you shared your faith?" I needed to begin by questioning myself.

Our Lord's final direction to his disciples was, "Go!" Jesus wants us to participate in the process of making disciples. Instead of criticizing someone else's efforts, I should be focused on making efforts of my own.

Each of us is called to share our faith in unique ways. Regardless of our method, Jesus is more than capable of turning our efforts into glorious results. We can trust that Christ's power is at work in the activities of his people. The right question focuses on action, and the results are up to God. We need only to be willing.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please guide us to participate in making disciples for you. Show us the people you have placed in our lives with whom we can share your love. Amen.

Stephen Johnson (California, USA)

Prayer Focus: TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE EFFORTS OF OTHERS

GOD THE QUILTER

READ Nehemiah 9:10-17

The one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 1:6 (CEB)

As a quilter for the last 30 years, I have started many projects. Most I have finished, but some that I started with great gusto and magnificent intentions now sit in my sewing corner — untouched and gathering dust. Either I had lost interest, they became too difficult to finish, or some other project became more important. The once-cherished projects were set aside, forgotten.

Thankfully, God, the Quilter of our lives, never responds this way. Unlike us, our Creator "who started a good work" in us will "complete the job." No matter how uninteresting we are or how difficult we become, God will not leave us in a corner to gather dust. God never loses interest in us. Instead, with great and gracious care, God will keep stitching our lives into a dazzling completed work.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God stitches my life into a heavenly creation.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for not setting us aside. Help us to trust that you will finish what you have started as we pray, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matt. 6:9-13, KJV).

Jennifer Lanane (North Carolina, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE WHO PROCRASTINATE

FRI
FEB 21
2020

IN GOD'S LOVING ARMS

READ Psalm 103:1-8

You teach me the way of life. In your presence is total celebration. Beautiful things are always in your right hand.

— Psalm 16:11 (CEB)

In my yoga class we practice a self-hug technique: crossed arms placed on the chest, hands on the shoulders to “shelter” the heart. One Saturday morning I started with that posture and had a moment of silent prayer. I felt close to Jesus in that moment of calm.

A few hours later, my husband suffered a stroke. I had the presence of mind to get the medical attention he needed quickly. An hour later he underwent an angioplasty procedure. God’s grace along with medical technology began working to save his life.

Sitting in the waiting room of the hospital, I repeated my morning yoga exercise: self-hug, moment of prayer, close embrace with God. A half hour before the end of the procedure, I felt that my husband was out of danger. During that moment of prayer and meditation I received a great sense of relief and a deep peace. God’s love was far superior to my fear and pain.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Holding God’s love in my heart can bring peace to my day.

That experience was so strong that ever since then, after my devotional time,

I take a few moments to remain in that warm embrace — thanking God and holding God’s love in my heart.

Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for your infinite love that moves us deeply and shelters us during our most difficult times. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Haydée Meloni (Buenos Aires, Argentina)

LOOKING TO HEAVEN

READ 1 Corinthians 2:1-10

The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

— Romans 8:18 (NRSV)

I tend not to spend much time thinking about heaven but focus instead on enjoying the benefits of this world, like watching movies, eating, and fishing. However, God directs us to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2).

One exercise that has helped me shift my focus is to read the descriptions of heaven in the Bible and then trust the Holy Spirit to motivate my imagination to picture myself being there. One day, my picture of heaven involved a castle, acres of fall foliage, fellowship with friends, and personal time with Jesus. I came away from the exercise more excited and looking forward to heaven. Of course, heaven will be much better than anything I can possibly imagine.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Thinking of heaven makes me more joyful about salvation in Christ.

I have found that looking forward to heaven this way has helped me to see that my hardships here are nothing compared to the glory I will experience in heaven. If we can always keep the joys and pleasures of our destination in mind, then our journey will be full of joy.

Prayer: Help us, God, to be thankful every day for Christ’s sacrifice until we find our home in heaven with you. Amen.

Richard Kehoe (California, USA)

SUN
FEB 23
2020

CONFIDENCE FOR THE FUTURE

READ Matthew 6:25-34

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

— Matthew 6:34 (NIV)

As I sit in my chair for morning devotions and look out my upstairs window, the woods at the back of my house seem dark and forbidding. The leafless trees form ghostly, black silhouettes, much like my thoughts concerning what lies ahead as the years creep by. *Will my health fail? Will I be able to*

meet financial responsibilities? Aging can be scary.

But as I continue my daily appointment with God, I see the first tint of morning sun pierce the horizon. In

moments the sky is awash with a pink glow, illuminating the world with glorious new beauty. As I gaze at God's handiwork, I remember that God cares for even the tiniest of creatures — and peace slowly fills my heart.

In Matthew 6:25 Jesus tells us not to worry. Jesus knows the ill effects of worry. It can consume our thoughts, steal our productivity, and negatively affect our health. But most importantly, it reduces our ability to trust God. Jesus continues by telling us to seek first God's kingdom by turning to God for help. While planning for tomorrow is time well spent, worrying about what the future holds is just wasted time. We may not know what the future holds, but we can trust the One who holds our hands and walks with us through every dark valley.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to trust you and not be fearful of what the future may hold, for you have promised never to leave us. Amen.

Jeannine Brenner (Pennsylvania, USA)

SERVICE AND SHOELACES

READ Luke 22:24-30

The one who is greatest among you will be your servant. All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up.

— Matthew 23:11-12 (CEB)

As I returned to my hotel room soaked from the rain, I passed two members of the housekeeping staff in the corridor. One of them stopped me and pointed at my untied shoelace. I thanked her but didn't stop to tie it. After all, I was only a short distance from my room. But she stopped me and bent down to tie my shoe.

Although the conference I was attending featured a wonderful speaker and great music, the most powerful lesson I learned that weekend came from this moment of servanthood. Jesus tried to explain to his disciples that God's kingdom was about showing love through seeing and meeting the needs of others. This woman saw a need — which meant that she was paying attention to someone besides herself. Then she unhesitatingly and unselfishly acted to meet it, even though I was a complete stranger. That simple moment in a hotel corridor has motivated me to be more observant, more humble, and more willing to meet the needs of those around me.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to see and respond to the needs of others and to fully appreciate the kindnesses shown to us by friends, family, or even strangers. Amen.

John I. Carney (Tennessee, USA)

MON
FEB 24
2020

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
If I want to show God's love,
I will first be a servant.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God will supply all my needs.
(See Phil. 4:19.)

TUES
FEB 25
2020

“I STILL LOVE YOU”

READ Titus 3:1-7

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

— 1 John 4:10 (NIV)

“I don’t love you anymore, Gran!” My four-year-old grandson Tim was angrily folding his arms and glaring at me after I’d scolded him for something.

“Oh, but I still love you,” I replied, “and always will.” Still mad, Tim turned and walked away. But within seconds he was back with a big smile, saying that he was sorry. Of course, I would always love him. He may go astray at times, but we always pray for our children and never

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God loves me more than
I can imagine.

let them out of our hearts. We never stop loving them.

Through Christ Jesus, I am God’s child. God loves me and calls me even when in my desperate need I am very far from returning that love. God shows love for me in many ways, including necessary discipline, and is always there for me — even when I don’t deserve it.

Verse five of our reading assures me that in mercy God has taken the first steps, and that the Holy Spirit renews our hearts so that we can have the hope of eternal life.

Prayer: Father God, today help us to rest in your unending love, surrender to your loving discipline, and show kindness to all. Amen.

Marion Turnbull (England, United Kingdom)

TRASH TO TREASURE

READ Psalm 34:17-22

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

— Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

Along the coast of Maine, artisans were selling jewelry made from sea glass, which begins as bottles or glass left on the shore as trash. Over time, they are broken into pieces and tumbled by the ocean until sharp edges and shiny surfaces become softened, frosted gems that are then reclaimed by artisans. Each piece of the glass is one of a kind, just like each person uniquely created by God.

After talking to an artist about sea glass, I realized that if broken pieces of glass can be transformed into prized treasures, God can do even more for any of us who feel broken, lost, or crushed in spirit. No matter how broken we might be, God sees the good in each of us. When we are willing, God can soften sharp edges and sand away our flaws so that we become works of art, shining forth the beauty God created in us.

If a discarded piece of trash from the sea can be transformed into something of value, think how much more value God places on rescuing each of us — God’s children!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God can transform
my brokenness into
something beautiful.

Prayer: Dear God, through the power of your presence, transform us to new life now and forever. Amen.

Robert K. Abel (Maryland, USA)

THUR
FEB 27
2020

WITHOUT FAIL

READ 1 John 5:13-15

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

— 1 John 5:14 (NIV)

When I was a young girl I loved to visit my grandmother, who lived about 200 miles away. She was always very busy — cooking, canning, washing, ironing, gardening, and sewing. Every time we visited, she had treats for us to eat, toys for us to play with, and games to keep us entertained on rainy days. Each afternoon she devoted time to reading her Bible and then listening to The Gospel Hour on the radio while doing some mending or shelling peas.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I always have God's full attention.

One special thing about my grandmother was that she found time, without fail, to listen to others — even to us kids. When I'd come to her with a thought or question, she would stop what she was doing and give me her full attention. I can see her face now, smiling and welcoming me.

Years later, when I was having some problems and trying to pray, I kept wondering if God had time to listen to all my seemingly childish thoughts and prayers. Then, the verses above from 1 John reminded me that my grandmother was reflecting the love of God — who is also very busy and yet always welcomes us.

Prayer: Caring God, we know that when we reveal our thoughts and desires, you are there to listen, care for, and respond to us. Help us always to make time for you. Amen.

Linda Birchall (Georgia, USA)

GOD IS MERCIFUL

READ Proverbs 3:1-10

Jeremiah wrote, "Heal me, LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved."

— Jeremiah 17:14 (NIV)

In the winter of 2016, the doctor gave the results to my wife and me: the lesions in my bones indicated multiple myeloma. Yet, no fear came over me. Instead, I was filled with the certainty that I was in God's hands and that God had a plan. For the 40 years of my Christian life, I had lived by these words from the Bible: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Prov. 3:5-6, NIV). This was the time I would need those verses the most.

After two stem-cell transplants in six months, I was in remission and facing eight months of chemotherapy maintenance. Through this battle, God has done amazing things — including reaching people around the world online through two blogs which I update daily, and 1000 poems and songs. My body is strong and getting stronger. God has been very merciful to me.

When facing trials that we do not understand, we can lean on a God who understands, whom we can trust in everything that comes our way. We can acknowledge God's power and strength through the good things and the bad. Our merciful God can walk us through anything.

Prayer: Dear God, help us always to see your mercy that surrounds us each day. When we are afraid, help us to lean on you and trust you to do your work in us. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God has been merciful to me.

Peter T. Gardner (Iowa, USA)

SAT
FEB 29
2020

ALWAYS GRATEFUL

READ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NIV)

One day during our fellowship meeting, our leader spoke about gratitude. After that, he challenged us not to complain about anything for 30 days and to find at least one thing that we could be grateful for each day and write it down.

Our leader said, "Gratitude is a life-changing attitude. When we open our eyes to God's blessings every day, we will find many things for which we can be grateful." When I thought about my blessings, I found many things that I could be grateful for — the food I eat every day, my healthy body,

my happy family, the birds that sing each morning, answered prayers, God's protection, and much more.

As we read in the scripture quoted above, God

wants us to be grateful in all things. Being grateful is a choice. Choosing to be grateful in every situation can keep our hearts filled with joy even during difficult times. Having a grateful heart opens us up to God's blessings in our lives.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your abundant blessings. Help us to give thanks for your grace and goodness in our lives. Amen.

Meliana Santoso (East Java, Indonesia)

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

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

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

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

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

JANUARY 1: *Time Flows Away*

1. What New Year's traditions does your family observe? What do these traditions mean to you, and how do they shape your view of this time of year?
2. Describe a time recently when you were reminded of your human mortality. What gives you consolation when you consider your own mortality?
3. What signs of God's grace come to mind when you think about your life? What spiritual practices make you more aware of God's grace in your life? What new practice would you like to try this year to help you recognize God's grace?

4. What scripture passage most reminds you of the passing of time? Does the scripture passage bring you comfort or cause you to worry? Why do you think you respond to it this way?
5. Today's writer expresses gratitude for his lively Christian congregation. What qualities of your faith community are you most thankful for?

JANUARY 8: *Children of God*

1. How would you respond to the question, "Who are you?" Do you find that you are often quick to share your identity as a child of God? Why or why not?
2. Describe a time when someone enriched your faith like the student in today's meditation enriched the writer's faith. What kind of lasting impact has that made on your life? Name some ways you can enrich the faith of others.
3. Does knowing that you are a child of God affect your relationship with God? Why or why not? How do you strengthen and deepen your relationship with God?
4. What practices help you to be more aware of your faith? What do you do to encourage others to join the family of God?
5. How does your church help you to remain grounded in your identity as a child of God? What changes would you like to see in how your church emphasizes this identity?

JANUARY 15: *Watch and Pray*

1. Do you find it hard to make time for prayer? Have you tried a method similar to the one today's writer uses, or do you have another method you prefer? Describe your experience with making more time to pray.
2. What scriptures help you understand the importance of prayer? What scripture passages have inspired you to try a new form of prayer?
3. Does being in nature inspire you to pray? What other times, events, or locations most inspire you to pray? Why?
4. Today's writer encouraged his friend to make time for prayer. Describe a time when you have encouraged someone to strengthen their spiritual life. How did that experience affect you and the person you encouraged?

5. How does your church pray? Is prayer reserved for worship? How do you think your church community would be different if everyone made more time for prayer?

JANUARY 22: *Befriending God*

1. When have you felt closest to God? What led to that feeling of closeness? Do you think spending more time with God and reading the Bible brings us closer to God? Why or why not?
2. Describe someone who you think spends a significant amount of time with God each day. What do they do? How does their faith inspire you in your own spiritual practice?
3. What does it mean to you to let God carry you? Describe a time when you allowed God to carry you. How has that experience increased your reliance on God?
4. The writer talks about the importance of allowing God to carry us. When has someone in your church community carried you? How does it look different to allow God to carry us rather than other Christians?
5. What kinds of community outreach does your church engage in? In what ways do these ministries bring people closer to God? In what other ways can you provide care for those in your community and show them God's love?

JANUARY 29: *Interpreters*

1. When you feel overwhelmed, what kind of help do you most often wish for? How does knowing you have constant access to God bring you comfort in those times?
2. Who and what in your life helps you to interpret God's word? In what ways can you help others interpret God's word?
3. What do you do when you disagree with another Christian on your interpretation of the Bible? How are you able to make peace with those who hold different opinions than you do?
4. Today's writer describes how the cover art interpretations help her to better appreciate the art. Besides the Bible, what do you sometimes need help interpreting? Who or what helps you?
5. Recall a time when you benefited from listening to others.

How might your church get better at listening to other perspectives? How can the world?

FEBRUARY 5: *“I’ve Been There”*

1. Describe a time when you experienced a loss. How did others who were suffering help you? What difference did it make?
2. Have you ever thought about the Parable of the Good Samaritan from the same perspective as today’s writer? If not, does his perspective make you react differently to the parable? Describe how the parable reminds and encourages you to show love to others.
3. Who are your “neighbors” today? What are the most effective ways you can show them love?
4. Today’s writer says that showing compassion is one way we imitate Christ. In what other ways do you think we can imitate Christ and draw closer to God and those around us?
5. Where do you see your community reaching out in compassion to others? Do you participate? If so, what have you learned from your experience? If not, how can you get involved?

FEBRUARY 12: *A Rich Heritage*

1. Would you describe yourself as a curious person? Who is the most curious person you know? What are some of the benefits of being curious? In what areas would you like to cultivate your sense of curiosity?
2. What role does your history play in who you are today? How do you honor your history and the traditions of your family?
3. What traditions do you hope to continue to pass down in your family? In your community? Globally? Why are these traditions important to you?
4. Have you taken time to study the history of the church and its traditions? If so, in what ways does that information change the way you view the church? If not, what are some ways you can learn more about your church tradition?
5. What church traditions do you think transcend denominational boundaries? How do traditions bring us closer together?

FEBRUARY 19: *The Right Question*

1. How do you focus on sharing your faith with others? What scriptures remind you of the importance of sharing your faith?
2. When have you criticized someone or dismissed their efforts? How did they respond? What practices help you to avoid criticizing others?
3. Describe a time when you witnessed God working through human efforts to reach others. What was the outcome? How does this situation encourage you in your own efforts?
4. Do you sometimes question the efficacy of other people’s methods of evangelizing? Do you think it is okay to question others in this way? Why or why not?
5. Is it easy or difficult for you to remain open to the ways God has called you to share your faith? How do you remain willing to follow the call? What do you do if you don’t like what you are called to do?

FEBRUARY 26: *Trash to Treasure*

1. Have you ever thought about sea glass in the same way as today’s writer? What other things remind you that God sees value in all of us? How do these reminders bring you comfort?
2. Describe a time when you felt discarded, broken, or unworthy of God’s love. How did you remember your value? What people, prayers, spiritual practices, scripture passages, or objects helped you to remember?
3. How can we remain open to God’s transformation in us? Do you think we are ever done being transformed, or is God continually working on us? Give some examples.
4. Name someone you know who doesn’t seem to realize their value. What will you do to help them and show them God’s love?
5. Describe what you see when you think of the church as a whole. Is it a colorful mosaic of sea glass, or do you see something else? How does the way you envision the church as a whole affect the way you feel about it?

