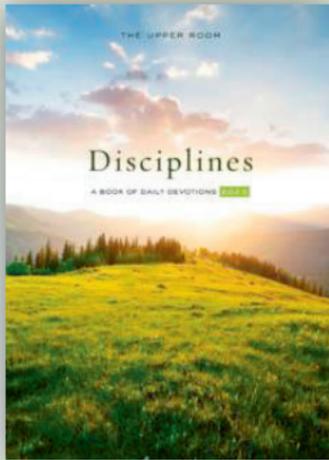


JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2023

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DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



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THE UPPER ROOM®

DAILY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

JANUARY – FEBRUARY 2023

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Caring for Our Gifts

When [the magi] saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

– Matthew 2:10-11 (NRSV)

The climactic scene of the magi story is when the travellers kneel before Jesus in worship and present their gifts. Many sermons have been preached and many texts have been written on the identity of the magi and the possible meanings of the gifts. But I want to invite us to focus on the simple fact that the gifts made it to the little house in Bethlehem whole and intact. This feat wasn't an accident. It surely took planning and care to protect the valuable gifts throughout the long journey.

During the season of Epiphany, we celebrate not only the gifts of the magi but also the gifts of the Holy Spirit among the people of God. These are gifts for the building up of the body of Christ and for the gospel work of restoration and reconciliation in our world. Every follower of Christ has been endowed with gifts and abilities that we are called to nurture, protect, and use as we present ourselves as living sacrifices to God (see Romans 12:1). During this season may God “fully satisfy every need of yours according to [God’s] riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

– Kimberly Orr

World Editor and Publisher, The Upper Room

Where the World Meets to Pray

Writers featured in this issue of *The Upper Room*:

Festus Muinde (Kenya)

Adhiambo E. Ochien'g (Kenya)

Oluwaseun Ajia (Nigeria)

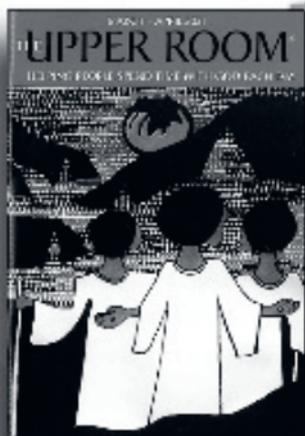
Zeph Dim (Nigeria)

Irene Robinson (South Africa)

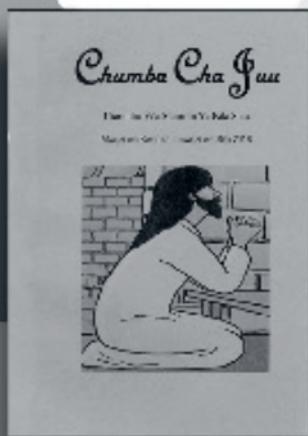
R. J. (Tanzania)

Enid Adah Nyinomujuni (Tanzania)

Audrey Tafadzwa Chidavaenzi (Zimbabwe)



Africa-English edition



Kiswahili edition

Growing in God

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

1 Corinthians 3:7 (NIV)

For some, the New Year has begun on a joyful note; for others, the year ahead seems to hold little that is encouraging. We recently celebrated again the wondrous entry of Jesus, and all that his birth promised, into an uncertain and often cruel world.

We share the frustrations of thousands when we consider all that is happening around the world and in particular, our own country. Let us also, though, reflect on so much good that is being done, yet not reported in the mainstream media – neighbour helping neighbour, myriad acts of kindness shown to all, known and unknown; giving unselfishly to others.

We begin our Lenten journey with a cross of ashes – made from the previous Palm Sunday palms – and learn anew what it means to be a Christ follower. As we enter this holy season of penitence, may we allow our faithful God to transform us. May we not simply go through the motions of the Lenten season, but allow God to help us grow as true followers of Christ, becoming salt and light wherever we are (see Matthew 5:13-16).

Shalom.

Beatrice Smith



Africa Editor (English)

Cover Art Interpretation

Flight into Egypt

Artist: The Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey (United Kingdom, Contemporary)

Interpreter: Erin Pearce

The Benedictine Sisters of Turvey Abbey capture a moment in time when the Holy Family is in a vulnerable position. An angel has appeared to Joseph, warning him to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath (see Matthew 2:13). Joseph and Mary begin the journey to Egypt where there is no guarantee that life will be easy.

The Benedictine Sisters use colour and light to draw our eyes to baby Jesus, wrapped in white cloth and surrounded by a circle of light. The light touches Mary and Joseph, connecting them all. Jesus sleeps peacefully – a stark contrast to the chaos of the world he has been born into. The colours in the painting become darker around the edges, a reminder that “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5, NRSV).

Mary's red garment could symbolise passion or devotion. It could also foreshadow the sacrificial love of Christ. Her eyes are closed. Maybe in prayer? Maybe in rest? Perhaps both. Her priority is Jesus' safety and well-being, and she is likely weary from caring for an infant. The green of Joseph's cloak – representing hope, freedom and new life – emphasises the new life Jesus' birth makes possible for him and his family and for the world. Joseph gazes upward in hope as he looks toward the future.

As we look to another year with expectation, what do you hope the future holds for you, your loved ones, your community and the world? What do you want to leave behind? What invitation for new life is Jesus offering you?

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AFRICA UPPER ROOM MINISTRIES – HERE TO SERVE

Our Mission

Offering every soul the opportunity to grow holistically through spending time with God every day.

*"So, faith comes from listening, but it's listening by means of Christ's message."
Romans 10:17 (CEB)*



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- New ecumenical board appointed in 2018
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SUNDAY, JANUARY 1, 2023

Change

READ: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11*

There is a time for everything. – Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV)

You know what I like about autumn? It is the season of change. The hot season starts cooling, and we can feel a change in ourselves as well. Sometimes the change is physical or mental, and sometimes we change spiritually.

This past week the weather couldn't seem to make up its mind. On a cool Friday afternoon, I was riding home from junior high school, and I found myself looking out of the window. I was thinking how much the trees and nature had changed and how beautiful the changes were. And then I thought about how much I had changed, how my family and my friends had changed, and how beautiful those changes are too. And God is working in these transitions to make our lives even more beautiful.

Change happens around us, within us, and sometimes right in front of us. Sometimes things change in strange ways, but in the end, the change reveals God's work in the world.

Prayer: God, thank you for all that you have done for us and in us. We pray that you keep changing the world, the future and our lives for the better. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I can choose to embrace change as a gift from God.

(Mr.) Asher Broome (Georgia, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: YOUNG WRITERS

MONDAY, JANUARY 2, 2023

Our Refuge

READ: Psalm 34:1-7

This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. – Psalm 34:6 (NIV)

I was going through a difficult time in my life which often made me feel hopeless and afraid. I was ashamed of my feelings because I thought that as a Christian, I should have a better response to my problems. Amid my hopelessness and fear, I was reminded of the words of David and the other authors of the psalms. Their words are honest and heartfelt, and meditating on the Psalms has helped me to be more honest with God about my feelings.

God desires a deeper relationship with us, and through our relationship with God we are comforted and encouraged to keep going. God is our refuge.

Though our problems may be overwhelming and beyond our control, we can rest assured that the God of Jacob is with us. As we read in Psalm 46, we need only to be still and acknowledge God's power and presence.

Prayer: Lord God, you know the problems we are going through. Help us to share our feelings honestly with you, our safe place. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I can find comfort in God when I honestly share my feelings.

(Mrs.) Deborah Priyali (Telangana, India)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE FACING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

TUESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2023

Accessible to All

READ: 1 John 3:11-16

As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. – Ephesians 2:20 (CEB)

In 2016 I planned a visit to Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I wanted to go to this church to be in solidarity with the congregation who had suffered a horrendous attack the previous year.

A few weeks before my visit, I realised that as a historic structure, the church building might be inaccessible to me because I use a wheelchair. In a panic, I found the church's website, saw the mention of plans for wheelchair access, and dialled the number provided. The person who answered the phone explained that when donations arrived after the tragic event of the previous year, the church decided to complete an exterior elevator that connects the building's levels. She assured me of access and a welcome.

When I arrived at the church, a woman warmly invited me to sit next to where she sat in the pew. After the service, she took my hands in hers and had me promise to come to the church every time I visited Charleston. Now each time Communion is served, I think not only of Jesus but of how Emanuel A.M.E. welcomed me without hesitation. Even after the unjust deaths of nine church members, the congregation continued to open their doors and make their sanctuary accessible to all.

Prayer: God of mercy, we give thanks for your abiding love. Give us courage to open our doors and our hearts to the world. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Even in the midst of tragedy, God can inspire hearts to open.

(Ms.) Rachel Cywinski (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: VICTIMS OF HATE CRIMES

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 4, 2023

Setting the Tone

READ: James 2:14-26

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? – James 2:14 (CEB)

During my teenage years, I was looking for meaning in life. I had recently moved from a small town to a big city, and I didn't know many people. I started attending a church where I met a woman almost 50 years my senior. She invited me to dinner and showed me how to become a believer in Jesus Christ. For the next three years, she and her husband made me a part of their family. I enjoyed many meals and activities with them, cared for their house when they went on holiday, and took trips with them. During that time I was also part of a weekly Bible study group for young adults.

Those first three years of my Christian life set the tone for how I would live out my Christian faith. Eventually I had to leave that church to attend school in another town. I asked my dear friend, "How can I ever thank you for all you have done for me?" She answered, "Do it for someone else." And that's what I have sought to do.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us not only to tell others about our faith but also to show them what it looks like. Amen.

Thought for the Day

How can I show someone I meet today what a genuine Christian life looks like?

(Ms.) Irene Robinson (Gauteng, South Africa)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE NEW TO MY TOWN

THURSDAY, JANUARY 5, 2023

Let Your Light Shine

READ: Exodus 34:28-32

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.

– Exodus 34:29 (NIV)

Life with young children is a blessing, but it can also be challenging. My wife and I have worked diligently over the years to manage our busy schedule while making sure to incorporate plenty of time with our children in the process.

One of our family activities is grocery shopping. Every other Saturday we drive to a bustling market where the aisles seem more like highway traffic jams. With the girls in the cart, we go up and down the aisles, dodging other shoppers while my wife grabs our items and marks them off the list.

A few weeks ago, as we were shopping, a man stopped me to compliment my beautiful family. He noticed our playful nature as we sped up and down the busy aisles of the market. His words sank directly into my heart, and I knew God was to thank for them.

When we spend time with God regularly, we will radiate God's goodness, just as Moses did. The joy this man noticed in our family was a result of our time spent in fellowship with God. Despite our busyness, we can allow God to fill our lives with divine radiance. Just as Moses discovered, we can find great joy in spending time with the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to radiate your love to others, wherever we are and wherever we go. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I will carry God's light with me everywhere I go.

(Mr.) Zach Schaar (Ohio, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: FAMILIES WITH SMALL CHILDREN

FRIDAY, JANUARY 6, 2023

Can You Hear It?

READ: 1 Kings 19:11-18

After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. – 1 Kings 19:12-13 (NIV)

I enjoy eating yogurt in the morning. My cat, Cali, also loves it, but she is often curled up in the sun in another part of the house when I am ready to eat. No matter where she is, she comes running whenever she hears the small sound of my peeling back the cover of the yogurt tub.

Over the years I have wondered how to hear God's voice and call in my life. I tune into God's loving presence by reading the Bible and *The Upper Room*, journaling, spending time in community with my church family, talking and sharing with friends, and praying. And Cali's response to my small sound each morning makes me realise that when I pay attention I can "hear" God's voice.

I hear God in a Bible verse or a devotion that resonates or a journal note that reveals a hidden truth. God's voice is in a phrase from a sermon that stays in my heart and in conversations that suddenly create a deeper spiritual connection to God. When I am in prayer or even just silent and listening, I hear the still small voice of God. And if I respond to God's voice, I know good things are waiting for me.

Prayer: Dear God, your voice is everywhere and in everything. Help us to listen carefully and respond faithfully. Amen.

Thought for the Day

What helps me to listen for God's voice?

(Ms.) Patricia Kinner Kelly (Florida, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE WHO LONG TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE

SATURDAY, JANUARY 7, 2023

In Community

READ: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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)

When I was invited by my husband to go shopping for building materials at a hardware store, I saw the many different types of materials used to make buildings. I realised how many materials are required to build a house, including sand, cement, bricks, nails, tiles and paint, to name just a few.

Indeed, the materials we bought do not look like they will form a building. But in the hands of skilled builders, the raw materials come together to form a beautiful house.

Likewise, it seems that as Christians our purpose may be difficult to determine alone. But if we join with other Christians in community, our purpose becomes clearer. Christians need one another. Some lead worship, some play music, some share God's word, among other sacred tasks. This wonderful unity strengthens us. It is beautiful when Christians build each other up and work together to serve God.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the fellowship of other Christians. Help us to build each other up and find unity in our faith communities. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I am best able to serve God when I spend time in faithful community.

(Ms.) Ruth Sri Ningsih (East Java, Indonesia)

PRAYER FOCUS: FOR UNITY IN MY CHURCH

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023

Setbacks

READ: Romans 5:1-5

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character ... because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. – Romans 5:3-5 (NRSV)

As I stood near the top of a mountain near Lake Tahoe, California, my hands were shaking. My fingers felt numb and my teeth began to chatter. At the 35 kilometre mark, I was submerged underwater as part of a 48 kilometre obstacle course race, and the wind blowing into my face caused my wet hair to freeze.

My mind was spinning. *I can't do this. I need to quit.* Others were feeling the same effects, but they kept pushing forward. Up ahead I could see an emergency vehicle. Though continuing might mean a fulfilling accomplishment, I had to quit. The comfort of the medical tent felt amazing. But that feeling was quickly replaced with shame, embarrassment and frustration.

Jesus knows our challenges and can help us use our setbacks to reshape the course of our life. He allows our most disappointing times to serve as catalysts for future successes in our lives.

I was faced with a critical decision on that mountain. Would this be my last race, or would I learn from my failure to properly prepare my body and mind for the next? Choosing the latter allowed me the opportunity for redemption. Crossing the finish line the following year was an incredible feeling and taught me a great lesson – all to God's glory!

Prayer: Dear God, help us to embrace the challenges that come our way and to see them as opportunities to place our faith and trust in you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Disappointments are opportunities to trust God.

(Mr.) Stuart Stein (South Dakota, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: RUNNERS

MONDAY, JANUARY 9, 2023

Small Steps of Faith

READ: Joshua 1:3-9

Commit your way to the LORD. Trust him! – Psalm 37:5 (CEB)

I love to plan for what is going to happen in the coming weeks or months. I also tend to get stuck in a rut doing the same ministry with people I already know. But recently I felt God leading me to try something new.

God wanted me to take a small step of faith. Even though I knew I would be out of my comfort zone, I trusted that God would give me the strength and guidance to complete whatever was asked of me. That day my step of faith was to visit someone I didn't know very well. I was very nervous, but I trusted God and went. I found the older woman was personable but very lonely. We had a wonderful chat. I was thankful that I visited her. I felt blessed by our conversation, and I hope she felt the same. That visit was the first step of many more small steps of faith.

When we allow God to lead us in new directions, God will show us small steps of faith that can make a world of difference.

Prayer: Almighty Father, lead us in new steps of faith, and give us courage as we step out of our comfort zones to serve you. We pray as your Son taught us, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:2-4, NIV). Amen.

Thought for the Day

With small steps of faith, I can make a difference in another's life.

(Miss) Kathleen R. Brewer (New Brunswick, Canada)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE WHO IS LONELY

TUESDAY, JANUARY 10, 2023

Willing to Learn

READ: Leviticus 19:1-15

*Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind.
– Leviticus 19:14 (NIV)*

Until several people who are visually impaired joined our church, I had never given Leviticus 19:14 much thought. But when these dear friends joined our fellowship, they suggested ways to make our church more accessible. They helped us realise that while we had never intentionally put an object in a blind person's path, some of our usual ways could cause difficulties for our members who had poor vision.

Thankfully, our friends have patiently coached us as we have learned how to assist them while still respecting their independence. One member named Thom told me, "Be my eyes, not my brain." With this in mind, I have learned to describe food choices as we move through the buffet line instead of making decisions for him. I now include a description on my social media posts instead of only a picture. And I ask others how they would like to help during church events instead of assuming they can't participate.

Every member is significant in the body of Christ. God provides guidance to help us learn from one another as we worship and serve God together.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to learn from one another as we join together to serve and worship you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

How am I a stumbling block in the body of Christ?

(Mrs.) Lori Hatcher (South Carolina, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: FOR AWARENESS OF OTHERS' NEEDS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2023

Unexpected Ways

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:31–33

Paul wrote, “I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.” – 1 Corinthians 10:33 (NIV)

I was feeling lost and out of place. I was sure that I had chosen the wrong place to go to university and spent hours trying to convince my mom that I needed to transfer or come home for a year. My daily prayer was for a sign to tell me to leave.

However, I decided to stay one more semester, and I moved in with a new roommate. During the first week of classes, my roommate began opening up to me. She told me that she had been struggling with her faith and that she had noticed my strong faith in Christ. She believed God had placed me in her life so that she would seek her own relationship with Christ.

When we pray, we often expect God to grant our requests in just the way we ask. But in that moment I found that while I was praying and asking God to give me a new start, to give me what I thought I needed, God was doing just that but in a different way than I had imagined. I had been so worried about finding contentment in my surroundings I had forgotten that joy can only be found in Christ. As a Christian, no matter where I am, my purpose is to lead others to Jesus.

Prayer: Dear God, set our hearts on you so that everything we do may be in your name and for your glory. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God's answers to my prayers may be different from what I expect.

(Miss) Savannah Ashley Smith (North Carolina, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: NEW COLLEGE STUDENTS

THURSDAY, JANUARY 12, 2023

Trusting God

READ: Luke 1:26-45

Nothing will be impossible with God. – Luke 1:37 (NRSV)

A brilliant shock of lightning flashed across the pitch-dark sky. A deafening thunderclap followed. I trembled, feeling exposed and vulnerable as the light flashed through the cracks of the grass-thatched mud house where we slept. I wedged myself into a corner to evade the raindrops of the heavy downpour. I momentarily forgot about my hunger, even though I had eaten only porridge for dinner. Sleeping on an empty stomach was common in our family. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of hopelessness.

“Musee,” my prayerful grandmother mumbled, “don’t worry about our current state; trust God who created you, for nothing is impossible with God. You will own a decent shelter and eat your fill.” Our devout grandmother Kiima advised us to work hard and to trust in God. She said God would deliver us. “But how? When?” I asked. Nonetheless, I believed her; I trusted God, and I worked hard.

God has been faithful. Despite hardships, I passed my school examinations. I enrolled in a renowned university and graduated with a first-class honours degree. Our family now lives decently, and I am writing a thesis for my master’s degree in communication studies. What a testament to God’s power! Even when life seems hopeless, we can have faith that nothing is impossible with God.

Prayer: O God, help us to believe in your saving power. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Even when life seems hopeless, I will trust God’s power.

(Mr.) Festus Muinde (Nairobi, Kenya)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE WHO GO TO SLEEP HUNGRY

FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 2023

Eternal Life

READ: John 11:17-27

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." – John 11:25-26 (NIV)

My husband was discouraged and depressed. After treating him for breathing problems for several months, the doctors still could not make a diagnosis and weren't sure what the future held for him.

As a pastor, my husband had dedicated his life to serving others and walking with them through their challenges. Now he seemed lost and confused. I struggled to find ways to comfort him. But even reminiscing about family camping adventures we enjoyed over the years brought only temporary relief.

One day not long before he died, I walked into his hospital room and felt a peace not of this world. With a faint smile on his face, my husband turned to me and asked, "Are you ready for the next great adventure?" He had accepted the reality of eternal life promised by Jesus when he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

I now know in my heart what comfort that promise can give to those who struggle with the reality of their own approaching death, as well as to those left behind. The death of our earthly bodies is not the end. When we accept Jesus as our saviour, a whole new great adventure awaits.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for your promise that we will remain with you even after our earthly life is over. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Jesus' resurrection offers me the greatest sense of peace.

(Ms.) Nancy J. Clark (Michigan, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE FACING IMMINENT DEATH

SATURDAY, JANUARY 14, 2023

How long?

READ: Psalm 13:1-6

I trust in your unfailing love. – Psalm 13:5 (NIV)

Last autumn I planted four amaryllis bulbs (genus *Hippeastrum*). Three began to grow almost immediately, developing strong stems and sturdy buds, and I was able to give them to friends as Christmas gifts. The fourth bulb, however, sat in its pot and did nothing. Weeks went by with no sign of growth. I anxiously checked the soil and prodded the bulb. Still nothing. *Should I throw it away?* I wondered. I decided to wait. Then one day in mid-January, after all the other amaryllis flowers had bloomed and withered, a green tip appeared on the fourth bulb. After that day, the new shoot seemed to leap upward in its eagerness to grow.

We can't always see what God is doing. Sometimes we don't know whether God's doing anything at all, and that can be difficult. Through the centuries, people of faith have cried out in times of darkness, "How long must we wait for help? Where is God? Has God heard my prayers? Does God care?"

The late-blooming amaryllis gives me hope. God *does* care. God *is* listening. Although we may not see it, life may be stirring deep down in hidden places. We can fret about our circumstances, or we can cry out to God whose love is unfailing. Then we wait to see that first glimpse of a green shoot, of something new happening in our lives.

Prayer: Father God, help us to remember that you are always with us, even in our waiting. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Even when I can't see it, God is at work.

(Mrs.) April McIntyre (England, United Kingdom)

PRAYER FOCUS: PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2023

Laying Down My Life

READ: Ephesians 5:1-2

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. – John 15:13 (NIV)

Since 2012, I have regularly donated blood. I started donating blood as a way to overcome my fear of needles, but since then God has helped me to see my blood donations as a way to practise laying down my life for others.

John 15:13 says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” I may never need to die for someone, but God gives us opportunities to offer a part of our lives in loving service to others. Giving blood is my way of doing this. Spending an hour of my time in this way has given me the opportunity to trust God to work in the lives of those in need. Although I don’t know where the donated blood is used, I have faith that God has provided a life-saving gift through my willingness to offer just an hour of my life for the benefit of another person.

God calls each of us to show our love for others by offering ourselves in service. What gifts or talents do we have that could make a difference in someone’s life? In whatever way we choose to answer God’s call, we walk in obedience and trust that God will work through our living sacrifice.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust and obey when you call us to sacrificial service for someone in need. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Today I will joyfully lay down my life in service to God.

(Mr.) Michael Kimmel (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: BLOOD-DONATION PERSONNEL

MONDAY, JANUARY 16, 2023

No Dead Ends

READ: Matthew 7:7-12

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. – Revelation 3:7 (NIV)

As I walked one morning, I pondered a seemingly impossible situation that my young grandson was facing at school. Up ahead I saw a “Dead End” street sign and a concrete wall. As I got closer, I noticed a metal door built into the wall and could hear the sound of heavy traffic. Opening the door, I saw that it led to the sidewalk of a main thoroughfare. The street was a dead end for cars, but on foot I could reach anywhere in town. I knew then that God could make a way through even though there seemed to be no way. I was reassured that God had an answer to my grandson’s situation.

We often experience situations that appear to be dead ends. We may slow our pace or turn around, fearful of what will happen when we reach the end. But with God, there are no dead ends. When we have courage and keep walking, God will show us the way through our difficulty.

Prayer: Dear God, give us the courage to keep walking until we see the door you have opened for us. Amen.

Thought for the Day

With God as my guide, every dead end leads to possibility.

(Mrs.) Karen Dorsey (Oregon, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: ROAD CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

TUESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2023

Immanuel

READ: Luke 24:13-35

When I look up at your skies, at what your fingers made – the moon and the stars ... what are human beings that you pay attention to them? – Psalm 8:3-4 (CEB)

One night as I brushed my hair before going to bed, I saw a reflection of the full moon in the mirror. Remembering Psalm 8, I felt a sense of well-being and peace. I went to the window to admire the moon but saw only the tree in my garden, its branches and leaves blocking the moonlight. I turned toward the mirror and the radiant reflection was still there. Looking out of the window again, I searched intently to pinpoint the exact opening or space where the moonlight was coming through. Only darkness filled the garden. I could not see the moon even though I was sure I was looking in the right direction.

I thought about the story found in the Gospel of Luke about the two disciples and their encounter on the Emmaus road. Wrapped up in their grief, they did not recognise the stranger who joined them. Just as I could not see the moon directly but saw its reflection, sometimes I forget that God is always there. Even when our circumstances cloud our vision, God will be there to walk beside us.

Prayer: Living God, open our eyes and grant us the wisdom to discern your presence. Thank you for never leaving us alone. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God may not be visible, but God is always with me.

(Ms.) Aris A. Román Silva (Puerto Rico)

PRAYER FOCUS: ASTRONOMERS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 18, 2023

A Special Place

READ: Psalm 145:9-20

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. – Philipians 4:7 (KJV)

Needing to find a quiet place to think and find direction and peace, I had driven to one of my favourite spots. On a warm, breezy morning in southern New Jersey, USA, I sat on a wooden bridge in the middle of the marshland, seeking an answer from God for a tough decision I had to make – a decision that could significantly affect the rest of my life. I prayed aloud, “Lord, I need peace; please speak to me.” Though I have never heard an audible voice from God, there have been times that I have had a distinct impression or have had some evidence that I have interpreted as that “still small voice of God” (see 1 Kings 19:12).

Shortly thereafter, a seagull landed in the stream which flowed under the bridge. It just sat there, peacefully looking at me as it floated in the water. Again I asked the Lord to speak. Looking around, I said, “Oh, I see now. You *are* speaking. I’m just not listening!” All about me *was* peace. In the solitude, I sensed the Lord’s voice and felt the beginning of peace in my mind and heart.

It’s good to have a special place where we feel closest to the Lord. It is also always a good idea to pause and allow time for God to speak to us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we know that you are always here for us. Help us make time not only to talk with you but to listen for your still small voice of comfort. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God is always willing to talk with me. Am I willing to listen?

(Mr.) Sam Siligato (New Jersey, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE LOOKING FOR A “SPECIAL PLACE”

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19, 2023

Striving for Humility

READ: Matthew 23:1-12

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. – Matthew 23:12 (NRSV)

Last week, my friend and I had a heated disagreement. At first I didn't feel I needed to apologise for anything, but I was willing to let it go if my friend apologised. However, as I prayed about the situation, I realised that God was calling *me* to humble *myself* and tell my friend that I was sorry. But before I could call her, my friend called and apologised first. Unsettled feelings faded away and our friendship was restored.

In Matthew 23, Jesus criticised the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for acting for the sake of appearance. Jesus calls his followers to be humble.

It can be hard to know what humility looks like in different contexts. Humility is being willing to apologise; it is quietly doing good deeds without expectation of compensation; it is listening to others with an open heart and mind, knowing there is always more to learn. Let us not exalt ourselves and try to appear better than others. May we instead strive for humility. Only then can we truly love others, and act as the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to humble ourselves so that we may better serve you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

How is God calling me to demonstrate humility today?

(Mrs.) Becca Wierwille (Pennsylvania, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: FRIENDS EXPERIENCING CONFLICT

FRIDAY, JANUARY 20, 2023

How to Pray

READ: Luke 18:15-17

Train children in the way they should go; when they grow old, they won't depart from it. – Proverbs 22:6 (CEB)

The six-year-old daughter of a church member once asked me three questions. *Who taught you how to pray? Who teaches pastors how to pray? Can you teach me how to pray?* I decided to teach her the two prayers my parents taught me when I was a child.

My parents thought it was important that my siblings and I learn two prayers that would become models for us to use even in our adult years – a prayer of gratitude before meals and the Lord's Prayer. I memorised these prayers as a child without fully understanding them. But as I grew older, the Lord's Prayer became a lifeline for me.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he taught them a model prayer that also provided them with guidance for how to live. And although Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer 2000 years ago, it is still part of faithful practice in homes and churches around the world today. I have passed these model prayers on to my children and grandchildren, and I'm sure they will pass them to the next generations.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for children. Help us to nurture them with your word so that they may feel your presence in their life. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Today I will try to live by the words of the Lord's Prayer.

(Mrs.) Navamani Peter (Karnataka, India)

PRAYER FOCUS: CHILDREN LEARNING TO PRAY

SATURDAY, JANUARY 21, 2023

Finding the Light

READ: Psalm 18:25-36

Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light. – Micah 7:8 (NIV)

Several months after my university graduation, a few lumps formed in my neck. I had been sick and assumed my illness had caused my lymph nodes to swell, which is fairly common. But one day I woke up with a high fever, and my dad took me to the hospital. After days of waiting and praying, I received a cancer diagnosis at the age of 24. My faith was shaken and I felt shrouded in darkness.

Even though my heart wasn't in it, I went to church each Sunday, knelt at the altar and cried out to God. The more I listened to sermons, Bible studies, and participated in prayer groups, the more I saw God in everything and found meaning in God's words.

It is easy to trust God when everything is going well. But when something terrible happens, it is easier to turn away from God. Often when we experience grief and pain, we get lost in the struggle and cannot see God's guiding light. We may even fall away from our walk with God. But sometimes it is in those dark times that we can more clearly see the light of God shining through.

Prayer: Dear God, give us the strength to see your guiding light through our darkest moments. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Faithful practice helps me find the light of God.

(Mrs.) Jenn Bailey (West Virginia, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TO SEE GOD IN ANY CIRCUMSTANCE

SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2023

Two Types of People

READ: Mark 2:1-5

They couldn't carry him through the crowd, so they tore off part of the roof above where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they lowered the mat on which the paralysed man was lying.

– Mark 2:4 (CEB)

Early in Jesus' ministry, he was preaching at a home. A large crowd gathered to hear him, many of whom had been healed of sickness by Jesus in the weeks before. Now they and many others returned to hear the Messiah preach. It was so crowded that a group of people who brought a friend to be healed could not get anywhere near Jesus. So they climbed up to the roof of the house, cut a hole in it, and lowered their friend down to Jesus.

As I considered the story, it seemed to me that there were two types of people in the story. People who wouldn't get out of the way so a man who needed Jesus could get to him and people who would do anything to get their friend to Jesus. *Which one am I?* I wondered. I thought of the times I noticed people that needed Jesus – at work, on the street, friends, family. God doesn't always ask us to cut a hole in the roof. Maybe we are called to offer a kind word, a meal, a listening ear, or sometimes simply to get out of the way. Now when I come upon a need, I ask Jesus to open my eyes and my heart so that I am helping and not standing in the way.

Prayer: Dear God, open our eyes to those in need around us so that we can offer help in your name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

With God's help, I will not hesitate to help those in need.

(Mr.) Jim Weems (Mississippi, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TO KNOW WHEN TO GET OUT OF THE WAY

MONDAY, JANUARY 23, 2023

Source of Strength

READ: 1 John 5:1-5

Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.

– 1 John 5:4 (KJV)

A friend and I were having a chat recently, and she asked, “Is it wrong for a Christian to question God when things are hard and not making sense?” We all face tough times and ask, *why?*

I have certainly had moments when I have questioned God, not because I don’t believe but because the situation just seems unbearable. I do not believe it’s wrong to question God. The first disciples did, and so did many others throughout the Christian scriptures.

The past few years have been challenging for us all. We have been tested, frustrated and angry at our circumstances. But our reading from 1 John tells us who we are in Christ Jesus; we are “overcomers.” And this truth will never change, even when things are bad. Because we are born of God, our source of strength lies in God. Knowing this doesn’t always solve our immediate struggles, but it puts our minds at peace and enables us to continue to receive guidance from the Spirit of God. So “in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Prayer: Help us, O God, when we are at the crossroads of doubt and faith. May your word always shine as a beacon of light to us in our times of uncertainty. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

We are born of God, and therefore we can overcome.

Oluwaseun Ajia (Lagos, Nigeria)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE FEELING GUILTY FOR QUESTIONING GOD

TUESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2023

Continuing Education

READ: Deuteronomy 17:14-20

*[God] guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.
– Psalm 25:9 (NIV)*

I was a health-care worker for 40 years. To maintain my credentials and remain in good standing, I had to provide my clinical board with annual proficiency reports and continuing-education units. This was achieved by attending meetings, reading current articles, teaching or writing articles.

All of this ensures that practitioners are aware of the ever-changing field of medicine. We should never stop learning, growing, and giving back to the profession.

I have discovered our faith walk is similar. We cannot rest on our laurels or think we are finished with learning and training. The words of the Bible do not change, but I have found that with each reading, the meaning applies in new ways to my ever-changing life. Growing our faith can happen in many ways – attending church and getting more involved, reading the Bible and devotionals, joining small groups, serving others. All of these are vital to the Christian walk. It is exciting to know that as we practise our faith, we continually deepen our relationship with God.

Prayer: Sovereign God, thank you for your loving instructions in the Bible. Help us to learn from your word each time we read. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

There is always something new to learn in the life of faith.

(Mr.) Victor Carcioppolo (Ohio, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: HEALTH-CARE PROVIDERS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 25, 2023

Connections

READ: 2 Corinthians 5:1-7

We live by faith, not by sight. – 2 Corinthians 5:7 (NIV)

Making connections with students while teaching online is hard. I can't pat them on the back or easily whisper words of encouragement when they struggle. I can't celebrate with them when they succeed. Instead, I try to get to know my students when they share a project or when we eat lunch together online. Still, it's hard not to feel disconnected.

One day after a reading lesson on character traits, I presented a slide with a picture of my face and asked my students to list some of my traits. Waiting anxiously, I wondered, *will they be kind or brutally honest?* A quiet third-grade boy melted my heart by writing these words: "She loves me." Yes, child! I most certainly do. If I do nothing else right, I have shown one child that I love him.

Just as I work hard to connect with my students in a virtual setting, God is always calling to us and reaching out to draw us into relationship. It can be difficult to feel God's pats on the back or hear God's whispers of encouragement. But when we take time to know God's character through reading scripture and observing creation, we grow closer to God. What joy it must bring God to hear us say, "God loves me!"

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for calling us into deeper relationship with you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God loves me!

(Mrs.) Kami K. Preston (Tennessee, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TEACHERS WORKING VIRTUALLY

THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 2023

Promise Fulfilled

READ: Matthew 28:16-20

*Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
– Matthew 28:20 (NIV)*

When my husband and I received an urgent message that my father was not well, we immediately bought plane tickets and flew to Buenos Aires. Two cousins met us upon arrival. I asked them which hospital my father was in, only to be told that he had died. As I tried to grasp the situation, the despair made it difficult to breathe. I thought, *my father is gone! I have no idea how I will live without him.*

I was with my mother when we arrived at the church for my father's funeral service. As we walked in, I felt the warm touch of someone's hand on my arm. I turned, thinking it was my husband, but no one was there. I believe in my heart that it was Jesus Christ taking me by the arm, giving me strength for the coming days. I don't remember the rest of the time during the visitation, only that warm touch and the feeling of comfort, love and support it gave me.

Each time I remember that moment, I acknowledge the reality of today's scripture. The Lord fulfilled that promise to me and never left my side.

Prayer: Merciful God, when our spirits are crushed, remain with us and sustain us. Thank you for the constancy of your love. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God is with us always – in seasons of grief and in times of joy.

(Mrs.) Neri Ruth Gattinoni (Chubut, Argentina)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A PARENT

FRIDAY, JANUARY 27, 2023

Beautiful Melodies

READ: Psalm 96:1-3

No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.

No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. – Mark 2:22 (NIV)

I have been playing the guitar for more than 50 years. I especially enjoy playing alone on a Sunday afternoon. It is almost like praying with my fingers. But every three months or so, no matter how much I tune them, the strings begin to sound tired and flat. Then I must do one of my least favourite tasks: change the guitar strings. I slowly unwind and throw away the old strings. I painstakingly tighten the new ones to their proper tension, adjusting them until they are properly tuned. It's a lot of work, but with new strings even the plainest melody rings with beauty.

I have discovered that sometimes God works in me the same way. When my life is out of tune, God sits me down and starts changing my strings. God unwinds my attitudes and goals that have a selfish sharp sound and gently leads me to repentance. Next, God puts on the new strings, tightening them until the grace notes of Jesus Christ can be heard again in my heart. When the Great Musician sits down to play the beautiful melodies of life in me again – oh, what joy!

Prayer: Father God, forgive us when our decisions do not follow your will. Tune our hearts to sing the songs of heaven today. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Today I will sing a new song to the Lord.

(Mr.) Peter Caligiuri (Florida, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: MUSICIANS

SATURDAY, JANUARY 28, 2023

My Focus

READ: Philippians 4:4-9

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. – Philippians 4:8 (NRSV)

Some days everything seems wrong, and everywhere I go appears dismal. I notice dirt on the floor, smudges on the windowpanes, a new grey hair, and an endless list of things causing stress. While driving, traffic lights take too long to change, drivers are aggressive, and I have to avoid potholes in the road.

When I meditate on today's scripture verse, I realise that the real problem may be my focus. If I focus on what's wrong, that's what I'll see. But if I focus on what is lovely, pure and just, that's what I'll find. The world is full of both good and bad, and God tells us to meditate on and fill our hearts and minds with the good. In this way we can exhibit the peace that draws others to Christ.

When we change our focus, we are sure to find God in every part of creation. When I notice the amazing aroma of coffee, the birdsong outside my window, or the stunning colours of a sunrise, my problems fade into the background. When my day is interrupted, I can pause to enjoy a few deep breaths and remind myself of my blessings. May we focus on what is lovely, pure and pleasing as we observe the world around us today.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to shift our focus away from what is stressful to see what is lovely in the world you have created. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Today I will seek God's presence everywhere I go.

(Mrs.) Melanie Sue Fretz (Pennsylvania, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TO NOTICE GOD IN MY SURROUNDINGS

SUNDAY, JANUARY 29, 2023

Joy in Sacrifice

READ: Matthew 19:23–30

Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. – Matthew 19:29 (NRSV)

In the summer of 2011, I was in Singapore for what I thought would be a short trip to renew my visa before returning to my mission field in northern India. I was excited to email my sponsoring church and report on my first few months' work, but I was distraught to learn they would not be sending the funds necessary for me to continue missionary service. I came to the painful conclusion that my missionary dreams in India were over.

I had left a large suitcase in India filled with everything I owned. Now, all my earthly possessions fit in a school bag. I left mission work and went to Korea, feeling dejected. I was just trying to serve God. Why didn't God provide?

From today's scripture, we learn that serving God can come with the loss of comfort, security, and even future prospects. At the same time, I have learned much from my many and varied experiences. I have gained friends and family; I've lived in several countries without ever lacking shelter, food, or the sweet fellowship of God's people.

When we make sacrifices for God, we gain more than we can imagine, both in this life and most certainly in the life to come.

Prayer: Dear God, give us courage to risk our own comfort so that we can lead others to know the joy that you alone can give. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Making sacrifices allows me to serve God more fully.

(Mr.) Dennis Oh (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)

PRAYER FOCUS: INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARIES

MONDAY, JANUARY 30, 2023

Free from Fear

READ: John 8:31–32

You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

– John 8:32 (NRSV)

I cried for the first five years of my daughter's life. She had been alive for only eight months when she was diagnosed with Williams Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder characterised by growth delays. Though not life-threatening, the disorder can manifest in a spectrum of symptoms that range in severity. Her unknown future was extremely frightening for me.

At first, I let my fears overwhelm me. Lies and assumptions took root in my mind and grew ferociously. Our new reality was distressing, even though I claimed to trust God. Finally, a Bible study at church showed me how to counteract my fears with the truth of God's word. I listed all the lies I had been listening to and then replaced them with the truth. For example, when I wrote, "The future is too overwhelming to think about," God led me to Jeremiah 29:11. Or when I worried that I wouldn't be able to be a good enough parent, this fear was answered by 2 Corinthians 12:9.

As I meditated on these truths my fears diminished. As I continued to study more of the Bible, God's word gave me not only freedom from fear but also perspective and hope. We don't have to let fear consume us. When we put our fears into words, God's word answers us with truth and hope.

Prayer: Dear God, by your grace open our eyes to what is true. Give us hope as we look to the future. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God's truth can free me from fear.

(Mrs.) Cheryl Esper Balcom (Michigan, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: CHILDREN WITH RARE GENETIC DISORDERS

TUESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2023

Follow in His Footsteps

READ: Matthew 4:18-22

“Come, follow me,” [Jesus] said. – Matthew 4:19 (CEB)

I live near the ocean, and I love to walk on the beach. Experiencing the changing seasons and feeling the sand go from frozen and snowy to scorching hot causes me to reflect on the seasons of life.

When my granddaughter, Kacey, visits on summer weekends, we often go to the beach. We load our items into a beach cart and eagerly begin our journey. Pulling the cart downhill to the water is no problem for Kacey. But on the way back, the cart feels heavier, and the sun and sand seem hotter. She struggles to walk in the shifting sand and pull the cart uphill. I advise her to step in the existing footprints in the sand because someone has previously walked there and created a foundation for her to follow.

Just as Jesus called his disciples as he walked along the beach, he also calls us to follow in his footsteps. Jesus guides us through challenges and situations because he has already been there. He knows what we're experiencing and wants to lighten our burden. Even when we don't know exactly where we're going or how we'll get there, we can trust that Jesus knows and will love us every step of the way.

Prayer: Loving Saviour, thank you for leading us through life's challenges and for loving and empowering us each step of the way. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Jesus guides my way when I prayerfully trust his guidance.

(Mrs.) Connie Paulson (Delaware, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE LACKING DIRECTION IN LIFE

Breaking with Routine

When I was four years old, my family went on vacation to the beach. We arrived, ate lunch, and then headed out to play in the ocean. That evening, we gathered around the table for dinner. As we finished blessing the food, my mother looked at me only to see tears rolling down my cheeks. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Daddy is sitting in *my* seat!” I wailed. Sitting in a different chair for dinner was an unwelcome change. Our one previous meal had created a routine that, even as a young child, I expected and craved. There are still times, decades later, that I resonate strongly with my four-year-old self. I want to know what to expect, what is expected of me and, most important, I want to feel prepared, especially if change is involved.

Creating and following a routine is one way I find security and comfort when parts of life feel out of control. My routines give me a place to start when the day feels overwhelming or the tasks ahead of me appear daunting. Routines can be life-giving. Daily Bible reading, meditation and prayer connect us with God and provide depth to our spiritual life. And my regular walks around the neighbourhood help me care for my body and offer me space to quieten my mind. But even good routines, if we never inspect them or break from them, may lose their purpose. And sometimes when we rely too heavily on a particular routine, we risk losing opportunities for surprise and wonder or we may miss out on the unexpected and unplanned ways that God is working in our lives.

In John 5, Jesus meets a man who has been ill for 38 years and has tried all that time to get to the freshly stirred, healing waters of the pool called Bethesda. Each time the waters are stirred and the man moves toward them, someone else reaches them first. He has tried for nearly four decades, doing the same thing over and over. Finally, Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6, NRSV) The man replies, “I have no one to put me into the pool,” (John. 5:7). This suggests to

me that perhaps the man's routine of trying to get to the water had become all-consuming, that he had lost sight of the real goal of being made well. Jesus' question interrupts his routine and points to the heart of the matter – healing. And at Jesus' instruction the man takes up his mat and walks.

Like the man in this story, my routines can become all-consuming. Marking items off my to-do list feels comforting and satisfies my need for stability. But following a routine for the sake of a routine offers nothing in the way of healing or life-giving energy. God is always at work – but sometimes not in ways we expect or in ways we have planned for. When Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to be made well?” I imagine him thinking, *of course! Can't you see how I have spent years trying to get to the healing waters?* Instead of helping him to the water, however, Jesus interrupts his routine and tells him to “stand up, take your mat and walk.” And scripture says, “At once the man was made well” (John 5:8-9). The routine was not the answer. Jesus invites the man to break from his routine and to be open to a different path to the miracle that he wanted.

What miracles – large and small – do we miss because we are committed to a routine that numbs our awareness of other possibilities? I pray that Jesus will interrupt our routines when they are stale and no longer life-giving and invite us in a new direction. As we begin a new year, let us step out of the routines that limit our expectations of what God can do in our lives and in the world so that we may live abundantly.

Questions for Reflection

1. Recall a time when a disruption gave you a clearer awareness of God's presence. What was the disruption? What did you learn about God from that experience?
2. Which of your routines have become more important than the purpose they were intended to serve?
3. How will you disrupt one of your routines to make room for the Holy Spirit to push you in a new direction?

*Lindsay L. Gray,
Editorial Director, The Upper Room*

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2023

Remembering Promises

READ: Hosea 6:1-3

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. – Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)

I graduated from high school in June 2019 with nearly perfect grades. I hoped to attend law school at a prestigious university in Zimbabwe, but that didn't happen. I applied to two universities. One declined my application and I was told by the other that I would only be accepted if I stopped my application to law school. I was devastated and asked, *why me?* Suddenly, all my wrongdoings and sins rushed into my mind. I told myself I was being punished.

I was mad at myself and at God. I asked, "Aren't you supposed to be forgiving?" and "Couldn't you punish me in any other way?" It took seven months before I was able to pray or open the Bible to seek answers. But when I did, God was there, telling me to trust and that everything would be okay.

My story does not have a miraculous ending right now, but it has a beautiful reunion between me and God as I remember that God's word has never failed, and God's promises remain the same. I want to tell everyone who has separated or distanced themselves from God that when they return to God's presence and promises, they will find understanding and peace.

Prayer: Faithful God, thank you for loving us even when we distance ourselves from you. Remind us that no matter our circumstances, we can find peace in your presence. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Even when my life does not go as I had hoped, God's promises remain true.

(Miss) Audrey Tafadzwa Chidavaenzi (Midlands, Zimbabwe)

PRAYER FOCUS: RECENT GRADUATES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Source of Light

READ: Job 9:1-10

In the same way, 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)

On a clear night I took our dog outside. The sky was beautiful. I often feel a sense of awe for God's creation, particularly when many stars and planets are visible in the night sky. How vast it is! I also feel a connection with Job who marvelled at the constellations of Orion and the Great Bear, all of which I can see thousands of years after Job did.

Another feature of the night sky that amazes me is that the objects that appear the brightest, the moon and some of the planets like Venus and Jupiter, do not produce their own light. Unlike the numerous stars that generate their own light, the moon and visible planets have no intrinsic light of their own. Instead they reflect light from the sun.

In a similar manner, we shine the brightest when we reflect the light of God. If we will allow the Holy Spirit to help us stay attuned to God and to Jesus Christ, we will be better able to reflect that light to others. Even when things all around us seem dark, God and God's Son are an incredible source of light for humankind.

Prayer: Creator of our vast universe, help us to remember that you are the source of light for our lives. Amen.

Thought for the Day

The light of Jesus is brighter than any light of my own.

(Mr.) Douglas "Rusty" Brown (South Carolina, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE EXPLORING OUR UNIVERSE

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2023

Rod and Staff

READ: Psalm 23:1-6

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

– Psalm 23:4 (NIV)

Despite experiencing severe vision loss in childhood, I enjoyed hiking in the Southern Rockies – a large mountain range in the United States - with my family. Some parts of the trail were scary because I couldn't judge drop-off distances when climbing over rocky outcroppings or see the thorny bushes along the trail. So my uncle devised a plan to help me. He and I held opposite ends of his walking stick while he walked in front, giving verbal descriptions of what was coming. As we hiked, the dip and sway of the stick alerted me to the obstacles ahead.

Scripture promises us that God's rod and staff will give us comfort and courage. A shepherd would use a rod and staff to protect and guide the sheep through any dangers along their path. Likewise, God walks with us, protecting us from unseen dangers and guiding us through whatever we encounter.

Just as I was able to relax on my hikes because of my uncle's walking stick, we can confidently manoeuvre through life without fear, reassured that God leads the way and will never abandon us. As long as we hold on to God, we will find assurance of God's presence, power and protection.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the comfort of your constant presence. Guide us through any obstacles we encounter. Amen.

Thought for the Day

No matter how rocky the path, I can find comfort by holding on to God.

(Mrs.) Karen Wingate (Arizona, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: HIKERS

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2023

Carrying a Heavy Load

READ: Colossians 3:12-17

*Jesus said, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
– Matthew 11:30 (NRSV)*

I phoned a friend whose husband suffers from multiple sclerosis. She herself does not enjoy the best of health. "How are you today?" I asked. "Well," she replied, "it's like I'm carrying a heavy suitcase around with me everywhere today." We talked for a while, and at the end of our conversation she told me that she was feeling better. Being able to share her troubles with a friend had helped.

There are times when we all feel overburdened and would like to share that weight with someone. As Christians, we do indeed have someone: Jesus is only a prayer away! Jesus has assured us that we can bring our heavy burdens to him and find rest. As Christians, we can reach out to others with the love of Christ, sharing their burdens and lightening the load even as Christ does this for us. When we walk together with Christ, our burden is light.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when we feel overburdened, help us to remember that you are only a prayer away. Remind us to share this knowledge with others. We pray as Jesus taught us, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:9-13, NIV). Amen.

Thought for the Day

How is God calling me to help lighten someone's burden today?

(Mr.) Bill Findlay (Scotland, United Kingdom)

PRAYER FOCUS: MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SUFFERERS AND THEIR CAREGIVERS

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2023

Carefully Shaped

READ: Jeremiah 18:1-10

I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. – Jeremiah 18:3-4 (NIV)

My neighbour has a beautiful tree, a spreading green canopy with a gentle shape. Its loveliness is no surprise because my neighbour is fully dedicated to caring for and shaping her tree. I have watched her gently clip any wayward tangled leaf or stem, choosing what cut will make the best shape. After a battering storm she vigorously prunes the broken or damaged branches. Watching this process for several years, I have realised it holds a significant spiritual lesson: God shapes our imperfect lives.

Just as my neighbour shapes her tree, God is moulding me through everyday circumstances. God can use even shattering storms to do good work in me. I have experienced deep, devastating sorrow that ripped everything from me until all I could cling to was the simple belief that “Jesus loves me, this I know!” Through these crushing times I often wondered, *how could all these difficult things possibly be working together for my good?*

I am learning to trust that God is dedicated to forming me into a better version of myself. My neighbour's tree is a beautiful reminder that God is carefully shaping me.

Prayer: Thank you, Creator, for knowing just where we need your love to reshape our lives. Make us ready to do your work in the world. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God is reshaping my life day by day.

(Ms.) Beverly Taylor (Arizona, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: MY NEIGHBOURS

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2023

Healing Work

READ: Revelation 21:1-5

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. – Philippians 3:20-21 (NIV)

In 2020, I had cancer cells surgically removed from my face. To shrink and flatten the visible scar, I had to massage it several times a day. I also had to wear a medical silicone sheet over the scar for 23 hours a day. In other words, removing the scar required effort from me.

This experience led me to think about the varied scars we have in our lives. Some scars are visible, but most I believe are not – scars from abandonment, abuse, regrets from poor choices, or disobedience to God's word. I'm thankful for doctors who can remove bad cells or counsellors who can help us uncover pain deep inside us. But I am most thankful that our Lord has already done the work of healing scars of spiritual separation. I can't work hard or long enough to heal myself or to earn my way into God's presence. Jesus, thankfully, did that work on the cross, offering forgiveness for our sins and healing our scars.

Some scars will always be part of us. But God promises that those who love and believe in Christ will receive a new body in heaven – where our scars, be they visible or invisible, will be no more (see Revelation 21:4). What an amazing promise!

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us cast our cares and fears on you. We trust you to sustain us until the day we are in your eternal presence. Amen.

Thought for the Day

That which cannot be healed on earth will be forever healed in heaven.

(Mr.) Larry Scanlan (Maryland, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELLORS

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2023

Waiting Faithfully

READ: Proverbs 3:5-8

Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the LORD. – Psalm 27:14 (KJV)

A heavy rain began to fall while I was on my way to work. I took cover and watched other people moving hurriedly down the street, trying unsuccessfully to keep dry.

While I waited, I thought how we are often like those people rushing through the rain. Impatient and desiring quick solutions, we ask God for help but often do not wait for an answer. We continue in the rain and feel frustrated about getting wet.

Soon the rain stopped, and I was able to go calmly on my way. In the same spirit, may we learn to wait in faith for the rain to pass. Putting our trust in God sometimes means waiting when we would rather take action. But waiting for God's guidance and help allows us to take shelter until the path ahead is clear.

Prayer: Even when we are in a hurry, beloved Father, give us the patience to wait for your answer. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thought for the Day

If I wait, God will answer.

(Ms.) Denise Leite (São Paulo, Brazil)

PRAYER FOCUS: PEDESTRIANS

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2023

My True Identity

READ: Colossians 3:1-4

Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

– Galatians 2:20 (NIV)

One of my biggest struggles in my teenage years was comparing myself to others and trying to meet the world's standards for beauty, knowledge and skill. I thought my identity was in my looks, what others thought of me, how many friends I had, and my achievements.

It is easy to fall into a cycle of comparison and insecurity. But as I got older and grew in my faith, I realised that those worldly standards don't have eternal meaning. Being brought up in a Christ-centred atmosphere, I was constantly reminded that as God's daughter, I don't need to try to be anyone else. I am amazing as I am.

I am now entering a new chapter of my life and beginning studies at university. I still struggle with comparing myself to others and worrying what people think of me, but I remind myself that it only matters what God thinks of me. Growing in my relationship with Jesus Christ and sharing Christ's love with others is what truly matters.

Prayer: Dear God, help each of us to find our identity in you and keep our minds focused on things above. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I am amazing because I am God's beautiful handiwork.

(Miss) Emily Morren (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TEENAGERS WITH LOW SELF-ESTEEM

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2023

Light from a Cross

READ: John 8:12-19

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” – John 8:12 (NIV)

It is Christmas Day, 2020, and I’m sitting in my friend’s living room in Tønsberg, Norway, looking at the old watchtower on top of Fortress Hill. Churches are closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I have not seen my children and grandchildren since March, and I feel lonely and sorry for myself – in spite of being with my friend.

To my surprise, I notice that on top of the tower is a large cross spreading its light over all the town. I sense new feelings within me, as if my gloomy thoughts and self-pity must yield to the light from the cross.

Jesus told us he is the light of the world. And in this moment it is as if Jesus is assuring me, “You are never alone as long as I am with you, and I have not and will never forsake you. Darkness will give way to dawn. Wait and see.” I rest my eyes on the cross that shines not only over the town but in my heart as well – and I am comforted.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your light in the world and in our lives. Thank you for your love that never leaves us alone. Amen.

Thought for the Day

The light of Christ is stronger than my loneliness.

(Mr.) Øystein Brinch (Oslo, Norway)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE ISOLATED FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2023

The Gift

READ: Ephesians 2:1-10

By grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. – Ephesians 2:8 (NIV)

The pink clutch bag with plastic embossed flowers was one of the prettiest things my eight-year-old eyes had ever seen. The sales assistant told me it cost one dollar, so I decided to work until I could buy it.

I did jobs at home and for neighbours until I finally had enough money. At the checkout counter, the cashier said, “That will be one dollar and ten cents.” I asked her why it cost an extra ten cents, and she explained that it was tax. I didn’t have enough money.

As I turned around to put the bag back, a man standing behind me placed change on the counter. “I’ll pay the ten cents for her,” he said. I looked up and thanked him for this gift. I cherished the little bag for years, and every time I think of it, I also think of the man who paid the tax for me.

Much like I worked to earn money for the bag, we often try to do everything God asks in an effort to obtain salvation for ourselves. But it takes the gift of God’s grace and forgiveness for us to receive salvation. Our works will never be enough, but Jesus has paid the full price for us and our salvation.

Prayer: Dear God, help us understand that there is nothing we can do to buy or earn salvation. Thank you for making it available to us as a gift. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Jesus has paid the full price for me.

(Mrs.) Marsha Howard (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: GRATITUDE FOR GOD’S GIFT OF ETERNAL LIFE

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2023

Psalms

READ: Psalm 3:1-8

I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. – Psalm 13:5 (CEB)

Often I do not know how to pray. Usually my prayers are lists of requests delivered in a steady, unemotional manner. The psalms show a different way of praying that is eloquent, raw and emotional. They pull us in deeply to what the writer was thinking or feeling. In many of the psalms the author shares feelings – good and bad, uplifting and disturbing, but always honest.

Though about one third of the psalms are laments, almost every one ends on a positive note. This encourages me always to try to end my prayers on a positive note. But if I cannot, if I am feeling too broken, confused or crushed, then it is okay to end where I am. I am confident that God would rather hear an honest prayer that does not end on a high note than one that is falsely hopeful.

The psalms teach us how to talk to God – to give God not only our requests but also our emotions. Prayers do not have to be as eloquent as the psalms. They just have to be honest and heartfelt.

Prayer: O God, we offer our whole hearts to you. Thank you for loving us just as we are. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Today I will pour out my heart to God.

(Mr.) Bob LaForge (New Jersey, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: TO BE MORE HONEST WITH GOD

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2023

By Grace

READ: Colossians 1:9-14

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way. – Colossians 1:9-10 (NIV)

In 2019, I had the opportunity to teach a creative writing course for a group of accomplished expatriates who wanted to write about their experiences living in a foreign land. I didn't know about the course until a few weeks before the start date, and I had not applied for the position. However, the programme director called and asked me if I was interested in teaching the course. He and I had previously worked together, and he trusted my ability. He hoped I would accept the opportunity.

At first, I felt unfit and undeserving of the job. Was I qualified? Would I be able to stand before these important people? But it was a privilege to have been specially chosen, and that meant I had as much right to teach the course as anyone.

This reminds me of what God, through Jesus, has done for us. We are not worthy of God's grace or forgiveness. God chooses us, freely gives us the gift of grace, and offers us the right to be children of God! Let us remain assured that by grace we are worthy of all that God has called us to do.

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes we feel small, weak and unworthy. Help us to remember that through your Son, Jesus, we are worthy. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Because God has called me, I am worthy.

(Miss) Adhiambo E. Ochien'g (Nairobi, Kenya)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE STARTING A NEW JOB

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2023

God of All Comfort

READ: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.

– 2 Corinthians 1:3 (NIV)

My first chemotherapy session took 10 hours in a room with about 20 other patients. In addition to the comfort my faith gave me, the kindness the other patients showed me on that first day was a real lesson in the fruit of the Spirit.

One woman, Linda, had been fighting cancer for a long time. When a nurse came to explain that her therapy had not been approved for that day and she would have to come back another time, Linda gave the nurse an exhausted smile. With kindness and patience Linda said, “I understand. Things happen.” Linda gathered her blanket and walking stick, preparing to leave. As she passed me, something – maybe the fear on my face – led her to come over and give me the bracelet she was wearing. She said, “I hope these two verses, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, comfort you as they have me.”

While spending time in the hospital, doctors’ offices, treatment centres, operating rooms and my home, I could look back and see Linda’s face as she gifted me with scripture. Though she had surely suffered much, she took the time to reach out and comfort me. I never saw Linda again, but I felt the need to share her story and the gift of comfort God gave me through her.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the people you send to us in our times of need and for the comfort they offer. May we, in turn, be faithful to comfort others. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Because God comforts me, I can comfort others.

(Mrs.) Martha J. Morris (Tennessee, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE UNDERGOING CHEMOTHERAPY

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2023

Love Brings Freedom

READ: Psalm 103:1-5

*But I, [LORD] by your great love, can come into your house.
– Psalm 5:7 (NIV)*

I am a singer and songwriter and have written and performed many songs over the years. I wrote my most recent song for my wife, and it opens with the lyric, “When you told me that you loved me, you set my heart free.” I have always said that I was not fully myself until I met the woman who was to become my wife. Loving her set me free from the longing and loneliness I had felt for years.

Now I realise that this is also true about my relationship with God. I tend to be keenly aware of my failures and feeling that I am somehow not worthy of love. But God’s love is unconditional and complete. God knows all my failures, and God loves me truly and completely in spite of myself. This knowledge has set me free to love and to be loved in Christ. I am no longer focused on my failures but on the redeeming power of God’s love for us all. My love for my wife has helped me understand God’s love for us. And love has given me the freedom to live fully in the grace of God. God’s desire for us is to live abundantly joyful lives.

Prayer: Holy and loving God, free us to live as your beloved children, eager to do your will. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God’s love sets me free.

(Mr.) Michael Albanese (New York, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: MARRIED COUPLES

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2023

Falling Leaves

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)

For years I lived in a second-floor apartment. When I moved into a house, I began the daily task of sweeping leaves in front of the house and the back patio. It seemed a never-ending task! There were always leaves on the ground the following day. At first I tried shaking the tree branches to make more leaves drop, hoping there would be fewer or none to sweep up the next day. But there were always leaves on the ground.

Much like this task of sweeping up the leaves, when I face difficult tasks or physical challenges, I want to deal with them all at once and free myself of the aggravation and stress. But, like the leaves, no matter how much I want to resolve situations in one fell swoop, each day brings its own set of worries. This reality has led me to depend more on the Lord.

Each day leaves will fall, and worries will come. Now, instead of complaining about sweeping up leaves or being consumed with worries, I seek joy in the spiritual practice of discernment, trusting God to be my guiding light in all circumstances.

Prayer: Creator God, help us to learn to depend on you each day, knowing that you will guard our going out and coming in. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thought for the Day

“Do not fear, [the LORD] will help you” (Isaiah 41:13, NRSV).

(Ms.) Yessenia Rosalia Acosta de Beard (Dominican Republic)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE FRUSTRATED BY ONGOING PROBLEMS

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2023

Every Step of the Way

READ: Romans 8:38-39

Be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” – Hebrews 13:5 (NIV)

After a long, hot summer, my family took a trip to the mountains to hike in the cool weather. My son planned our first hike, one that promised an amazing panoramic view at the top. Halfway up the trail, we stopped at a lovely lookout spot. As we ate our lunch, we enjoyed speaking with the hikers who passed us. Many remarked on the beautiful view at the top. After lunch we continued up the trail. But when we were closer to the summit, the rain came pouring down. My son suggested we keep climbing through the dense rain. But even if we reached the top, I gently explained, there would be nothing to see. The mountaintop was covered in clouds, and the view was gone. So we made our way back to our car. Though we did not reach the summit, we agreed that we had experienced an exciting adventure and had enjoyed meeting many travellers.

I compare this story to my own faith journey. I always strive to be at the top of the mountain. While I often fall very short of this aim, I have learned that God is always with me, and this inspires me to continue the journey. Despite setbacks, God’s abiding love surrounds us. Even if we don’t always get to the top, God walks with us every step of the way.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to remember that wherever our path may take us, you walk beside us and guide us every step of the way. Amen.

Thought for the Day

How can I walk with God today?

(Ms.) Gretchen Nelson (Florida, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: FAMILIES WHO ARE TRAVELLING

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2023

A Way Through

READ: Exodus 14:19-31

Give thanks to the LORD . . . who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever. – Psalm 136:1, 13 (NRSV)

As the Israelites made their way to the Promised Land, they faced an obstacle at the Red Sea. But because of God's love and mercy for the Israelites, God parted the waters and made a way for them. They then courageously continued their journey.

I remember when I had a "Red Sea" before me. God had led me to my work, which I was doing in a rented space. I worked there for many years, but then I faced financial challenges and struggled to pay the rent. Although I desired to continue the work, I thought of giving up because of my financial situation, but God made a way for me. Unexpectedly, I met a woman who had an interest in the kind of work I was doing, and she offered me premises free of charge to continue. God parted the sea before me, and I am continuing with the work I am called to do.

As we seek to follow our callings, we all face obstacles – financial struggles, marital issues, illness, job stresses and more. When we encounter a challenge, we can call on our merciful God who can make a way for us and help us to the other side.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when we cannot see a way past our difficulties, help us to trust in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

When I don't know how I will get through, God makes a way.

(Miss) Enid Adah Nyinomujuni (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE STRUGGLING TO PAY FOR HOUSING

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2023

A Little Tornado

READ: Psalm 139:1-6

Paul wrote, "I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers." – Ephesians 3:17-18 (CEB)

“He’s a little tornado.” I seem to say that every time our two-year-old grandson comes over. He grabs things out of drawers, pulls things off of shelves, and throws almost everything he touches. The house is a wreck after each visit. But a broken trinket and a messy house are a small price to pay for the sheer joy of having this bundle of love around. I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.

I can’t help but think that’s how God loves me – despite all the times I’ve done things I know God would not be pleased with. After all the times I’ve failed to listen to God, and even after I’ve missed opportunities to show love to others, God still draws me close and tells me how much I am loved. That love is unconditional. As hard as it is for me to understand or believe, I know God wouldn’t trade me for anything in the world. If it’s true for me, then it’s certainly true for all God’s children.

Prayer: Father God, we know that the best way to show our love for you is to love others. Help us see people as you see them and to show them the same compassion, love and mercy that you pour upon us every day. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God loves me completely.

(Mr.) Glenn Way (Tennessee, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDCHILDREN

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2023

Invitation to Rest

READ: Mark 6:30-34

If an axe is dull and one doesn't sharpen it first, then one must exert more force. It's profitable to be skilful and wise.

– Ecclesiastes 10:10 (CEB)

For 28 years, I was consumed by my career as a lecturer and department chair at a local university. As with most educators, my job didn't end when I left campus for the day. Although my husband encouraged me to take time for rest and renewal, I often worked late into the evening to prepare for the next day.

But at the start of my 29th year at the university, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Rest was no longer optional. To ensure I had adequate strength to continue serving my students and colleagues, I became more intentional about setting aside time every day to engage in restful activities, including prayer and reading scripture. I found the daily act of resting in God's presence to be especially helpful in calming my mind, body and soul so that I could face the next challenge.

I imagine my experience with rest is similar to what the apostles must have experienced when Jesus invited them to rest after they returned from their travels. Sometimes we do not prioritise resting in God's presence until we experience a stressful life event. As painful as my cancer diagnosis was, it saved my life by teaching me how to rest.

Prayer: Father God, thank you for calling us to rest in your presence, strengthening our minds, bodies and souls for all you would have us do. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Learning to rest prepares me to serve God well.

(Mrs.) Jennifer Hegeman (Missouri, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE WHO NEEDS REST

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2023

Try Again

READ: Luke 18:1-8

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. – Psalm 73:26 (NIV)

My son, David, was learning to walk. As he stood holding on to a chair, his mother walked past him onto the balcony. David let go of the chair and started walking toward her. He took two steps, but he fell on the third. He waited a moment, looking for someone to help him. When no one came, he stood up and took a few more steps before he fell again and began screaming. This time, his mother rushed over to pick him up.

This got me thinking: if babies were to stop trying again after they fell, nobody would ever learn to walk. This in turn brought to mind the parable of the persistent widow. Though she was denied justice several times, she refused to give up and ultimately got what she desired.

In my journey of faith, I have fallen many times and become weary. But by God's grace, I stood up and continued. Persisting in faith despite difficulties is always worthwhile. No matter how often you fall, take courage, stand up and take another step.

Prayer: Loving God, no matter the challenges we face, give us the strength to rise up again and persist in faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Thought for the Day

When I want to give up, God gives me the strength to persist.

(Mr.) Zeph Dim (Lagos, Nigeria)

PRAYER FOCUS: FOR PERSISTENCE IN ADVERSITY

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2023

Giants in the Land

READ: Numbers 13:26-33

Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”

– Numbers 13:30 (NIV)

As I reflected on today’s scripture reading, I realised that we can approach our problems in two ways: we can either compare ourselves to the problem or compare the problem to God. In the reading, 12 leaders of the Israelite community were sent to explore the land of Canaan that God had promised the Israelites. On their return, the Israelite spies described the giants they found in the land that flows with milk and honey. Ten of the spies said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are” (Numbers 13:31). Assessing their chance at victory, they relied on human logic and strength rather than having faith in God’s promise. When they compared themselves to giants, they were sure they would lose. Instead, Caleb and Joshua trusted God. Caleb said, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.” They measured the giants against God.

We face many giants – problems, temptations and tests that are too big for us to defeat on our own. But even the biggest giants are puny when we measure them against God. This knowledge fills me with hope and encourages me to trust in God because I know God will prevail.

Prayer: Dear God, we put our trust in you. Remind us that nothing we experience in this life is too big for you to handle. Amen.

Thought for the Day

God is bigger than any problem I face.

(Mr.) George T. Wilkerson (North Carolina, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE FACING GIANT OBSTACLES

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

Ash Wednesday

READ: John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." – John 10:28-30 (NIV)

A friend of mine moved to another city, and I had not seen him in a long time. I learned from another friend that he was sick. So I sent him a Bible with John 10:28-30 written on the bookmark I slid inside.

Two weeks after I sent the gift, I received a reply: "The Bible verses you sent made me cry. I have been living far from God for a long time, and my life has become a mess. But it turns out that God's hand was always open to me. I am the one who moved away from God. I want to go back to holding on to God's hand."

I trust that God never leaves us even though we often turn away from God. Our world is uncertain. Riots, chaos, natural disasters, failure, bankruptcy and illness mean we have no guarantee of safety. But God's loving presence remains steadfast, and God's promise of salvation is unshakable. No matter how far we feel we are from God, we can trust that God is always ready to take our hand and offer us new life.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for always extending your hand to us. Give us courage to return to you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

The world may change, but God's love never does.

(Mrs.) Linda Chandra (Banten, Indonesia)

PRAYER FOCUS: FRIENDS WHO LIVE FAR AWAY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2023

Community

READ: Matthew 5:13-16

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. – Matthew 5:13 (NIV)

Growing up, I attended a large church that seemed like a thriving community with many opportunities. I had good friends at church and enjoyed the worship, but I was not maturing in my faith. I thought that my relationship with God was strong because I attended church and took notes on the sermons, but I was just going through the motions. My heart was not in it.

Close to my final year of high school, my parents decided to join a new church that was growing in our city. Since I was nearing the end of high school, they let me choose whether I wanted to join them. I prayed about it and joined the new church even though I knew no one there except my parents. I had no idea that the people in this church would become my best friends and help me grow significantly in my faith.

I was also challenged in many ways – in my faith, in making new friends, and sharing the gospel with people around me. I found a community that was serious about their faith and lived it boldly. Leaving the comfort of my childhood church allowed me opportunities to deepen my relationship with God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us not to become complacent in our faith but to strive for a better relationship with you always. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Living in community with other believers helps me grow in my faith.

(Miss) Mary Anneliese Hill (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE JOINING A NEW CHURCH

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2023

Speak through Me

READ: Hebrews 12:1-3

Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and don't return there without watering the earth . . . so is my word that comes from my mouth; it does not return to me empty. Instead, it does what I want, and accomplishes what I intend.

– Isaiah 55:10-11 (CEB)

This is the sixth devotional I have written for *The Upper Room*. The first three were rejected. It was not until the fourth that I received the much anticipated email saying, “Your meditation is being held for further consideration,” meaning it might actually be published. Some might ask why I continued to write and submit after three rejections. The answer is prayer and perseverance.

In order to write and submit a devotional I must pray, study and read scripture. After my initial rejections, I still felt led to write more after I prayed about it. It came to me that sometimes God may be talking only to me as I write, and sometimes God may be trying to reach someone else through my writing. Whether God uses what I write to speak just to me or to speak through me to someone else, those words accomplish what God intends (Isaiah 55:11). I must continue to run each race set out before me; I must not be discouraged, and I must not give up (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Prayer, study, and reading scripture are important every day in our lives. It is how God can communicate not only with us but also through us.

Prayer: Dear Father, guide us so that we can be your face, hands and feet to others. Help us to finish each race set before us. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Time spent with God is always well spent.

(Mr.) Kim Koratsky (Tennessee, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE DISCOURAGED BY REJECTION

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2023

The Making of a Pearl

READ: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

– 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)

I recently saw a news story reporting the discovery of the world's largest pearl. For a pearl to form, an irritant – a parasite, fish scale, or some other bit of rubbish – makes its way inside a mollusc's shell. The mollusc then secretes a substance that covers the irritant, layer after layer. These layers, which protect the mollusc from the irritant, eventually become hard and lustrous pearls. The enormous pearl I saw on the news must have thousands upon thousands of glistening layers.

Rubbish can enter our lives through dangerous habits, unhealthy relationships, self-doubt, or complacency. We may even come to believe that these irritants define us – that it is impossible to change. As God's transforming love covers us in layer upon layer of mercy and grace, we are protected and renewed, and our lives are made beautiful.

Prayer: Recreating God, help us to trust your transforming love to shape the pieces of our lives into something beautiful. As Jesus taught us, 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" (Matthew 6:9-13, KJV). Amen.

Thought for the Day

God's mercy, grace and love transform me.

(Mrs.) Lu Fullilove (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE IN AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2023

1st Sunday in Lent

READ: Matthew 11:25-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

– Matthew 11:28-29 (NIV)

In many overwhelming times of my life, I held on to this scripture. Each season was challenging in its own way, but the major reason I clung to this scripture was my past – the life I had lived, what I had done, what I had said, how I had hurt my loved ones.

Every time I was in a situation that reminded me of everything I had done in the past, I fell to my knees with tears flowing down. I called upon Jesus, and every single time he reminded me of his love and that he died for me not because I was perfect but because I needed a saviour.

During the season of Lent we remind ourselves of everything Jesus has done for us. We all have different burdens that take away our strength and make us weary. But when that burden brings us to our knees, we can release it at the feet of Jesus and be at rest.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank you for your unending love for us. Help us to trust your love so that we can release our burdens and live abundantly with you. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I will allow Christ to take my burden so that I can find rest.

(Miss) R. J. (Mwanza, Tanzania)

PRAYER FOCUS: SOMEONE BURDENED BY THE PAST

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2023

Jesus, Our Coach

READ: John 10:1-5, 22-28

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." – John 10:27 (NRSV)

“Go team! . . . Set up! . . . Slow down! . . . Rebound! . . . Good job!” This is the voice of coaches on basketball courts around the world. For the past few years, my son has coached a primary school basketball team. As he coaches, he constantly guides his team from the sidelines. When the players come off the court for breaks, my son draws them into a circle to give instructions. When they return to the court, my son’s voice can be heard clearly offering instruction and encouragement. As I watch, I am struck by how the team can distinguish his voice from the many other voices in the gymnasium. This reminds me of today’s scripture reading.

There is so much noise and distraction in our world. How can we distinguish Jesus’ voice from everything else? As Christ’s disciples, we can come to know his voice in many ways: through stillness, prayer and Bible study; by listening to our conscience and the words of other faithful people; and through worship experiences, music and gratitude. With persistence and perseverance, we can discern Christ’s voice from the noise of the world.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your guiding voice. Help us discern from all the noise which voice is yours. Amen.

Thought for the Day

I will listen for the voice of my Shepherd amid the noise of the crowd.

(Ms.) Eugenia French Shaver (Texas, USA)

PRAYER FOCUS: COACHES

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2023

Gratitude

READ: Luke 17:12-19

He fell on his face at Jesus' feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. – Luke 17:16 (CEB)

In today's scripture reading, ten men with a skin disease stood at a distance and "raised their voices" to Jesus, crying out for mercy. At that time these people would have been made to live on the outskirts of the city because of their disease. When they heard the news that Jesus could heal the sick, they came to him. Jesus asked them to show themselves to the priests. On their way to the temple, all ten men were healed. But one man came back to thank Jesus. He fell at Jesus' feet, expressing his gratitude and praising God.

Inspired by this man who expressed gratitude, I try to give thanks to God for every blessing I have received – even the smallest ones. When I travel by bus from university back to my hostel, I start thanking God. There are times when I forget to give thanks, like the days when I fall sick or when I have examinations, yet those days never feel complete.

So often we are ready to do what God says, but we cannot hear God's word because we are far away. We fail to see the distance that is created by our lack of gratitude. To reduce the distance between God and us, we can start giving thanks. The more we give thanks the closer we get to God.

Prayer: Dear God, we give thanks for each blessing you bestow. Help us to draw closer to you through expressions of gratitude. Amen.

Thought for the Day

Gratitude brings me closer to God.

(Mrs.) Reshmisadhana Y. R. (Tamil Nadu, India)

PRAYER FOCUS: THOSE STRUGGLING TO SHOW GRATITUDE

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 afterwards. 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/devotional/smallgroup.asp.

Wednesday Discussion Questions

January 4: *Setting the Tone*

1. Recall a time when you were looking for purpose in life. Did you find it? How did your relationship with Christ develop during that time?
2. In what ways did the early years of your Christian life influence how you would live out your Christian faith? Has the way you live your faith changed over time? Share with your group.
3. Do you find it easier to tell others about your faith or show it by the way you live your life? What spiritual practices help you to share your faith in both words and actions?
4. Think of someone in your life with whom you can share your faith. How will you show that person what it means to be a Christian? How can you encourage them to live a life of faith?

January 11: *Unexpected Ways*

1. When have you felt lost and out of place? Who or what helped you overcome those feelings?
2. Has anyone ever told you that they've noticed your faith in Christ? If so, what did they notice? When have you noticed someone else's faith? How did their faith strengthen yours?
3. When have you prayed for something and received a different answer than what you expected from God? Was the answer what you truly needed, or did it leave you feeling unsatisfied? Share if you can, how you respond to unexpected answers to prayer.
4. How are you encouraged by the idea that what you do in God's name can bring God glory? What daily practices help you focus on God and glorify God through your actions?

January 18: *A Special Place*

1. Where do you feel closest to God and best able to clear your mind? Why do you think that location helps you connect with God? Describe how it feels to be in a sacred place.
2. Why do you think solitude can help people feel closer to God? Do you find it easier to connect with God when you're alone or with others? Share your thoughts with your group.
3. Have you ever heard an audible voice from God? If so, describe the experience. If not, in what ways do you notice God communicating with you?
4. How do you make time to talk with God and to listen for God's answers? What helps you pause and remain quiet so that you can hear God's response?

January 25: *Connections*

1. Why do you think communicating with someone virtually is so different from being with them in person? In what ways do you intentionally strengthen your connections with others, both in person and virtually?
2. What character traits do you think others see in you? What do you hope they can see in you? In what ways do you strive to represent Christ?
3. When have you felt God's encouragement? How did you experience it? How does reading scripture and observing creation help you feel more connected to God when it seems like God is not responding to you?
4. How do you show those around you that you love them and when do you most clearly feel the love of those around you? How do you show your love for God? How does God's love encourage you to deepen your relationship with God?

February 1: *Remembering Promises*

1. Describe a time when you had high hopes that did not come to fruition. Did that situation change your relationship with God? Share your experience.
2. Have you ever felt that God was punishing you when your life was not going well? Why or why not? What scripture passages help you trust that God is present in your situation and working for good?
3. Today's writer spent seven months feeling distant from God. Have you ever been distant from God? What brought you back to God? What did you learn from that experience?
4. Name your favourite Bible story in which someone reunites with God. Why do you like this story? In what ways does it remind you of how important it is to return to God, no matter how distant you might feel?

February 8: *My True Identity*

1. Perhaps you struggle with comparing yourself to others or finding your identity in your accomplishments. Why do you think it is easy to want to compare ourselves to others? How do you remain focused on what truly matters?
2. In what ways does your faith community remind you that you are a child of God? How does remembering that you are God's child keep you focused on what is eternally significant?
3. In what ways do you invest in your relationship with Christ? When you are actively working on strengthening that relationship, what changes do you notice in yourself and the way you view others?
4. How might you encourage the people in your life who seem to be struggling with low self-esteem? Name specific ways you can remind them of their identity in Christ.

February 15: *Falling Leaves*

1. What task seems never-ending for you? In what ways do you try to work around it or try to make it easier next time?
2. New worries come to us each day. Does this encourage you to rely more heavily on God? What scripture passages bring you peace as you face each new struggle?
3. In what ways have you found joy in the spiritual practice of discernment? Consider spiritual practices that might best help you remain joyful and at peace amid life's challenges.
4. How do you remind yourself to depend on God each day? In what ways do you lean on your faith community in difficult times? Where else do you find support and comfort?

February 22: *God's Hand*

1. When you have not seen someone in a long time, do you take the trouble to reach out to him/her? In what ways do you and your loved ones encourage one another in your faith walks, even from a distance?
2. What scripture passages remind you that God's hand is always open to you? How does reading scripture regularly call you back to God's presence?
3. When you feel overwhelmed by the chaos and uncertainty in the world, what brings you peace? Where and when do you most strongly feel God's presence?
4. What does it mean to you that God is always ready to take your hand and offer you new life? What does new life in God look like? Share some thoughts with your group.

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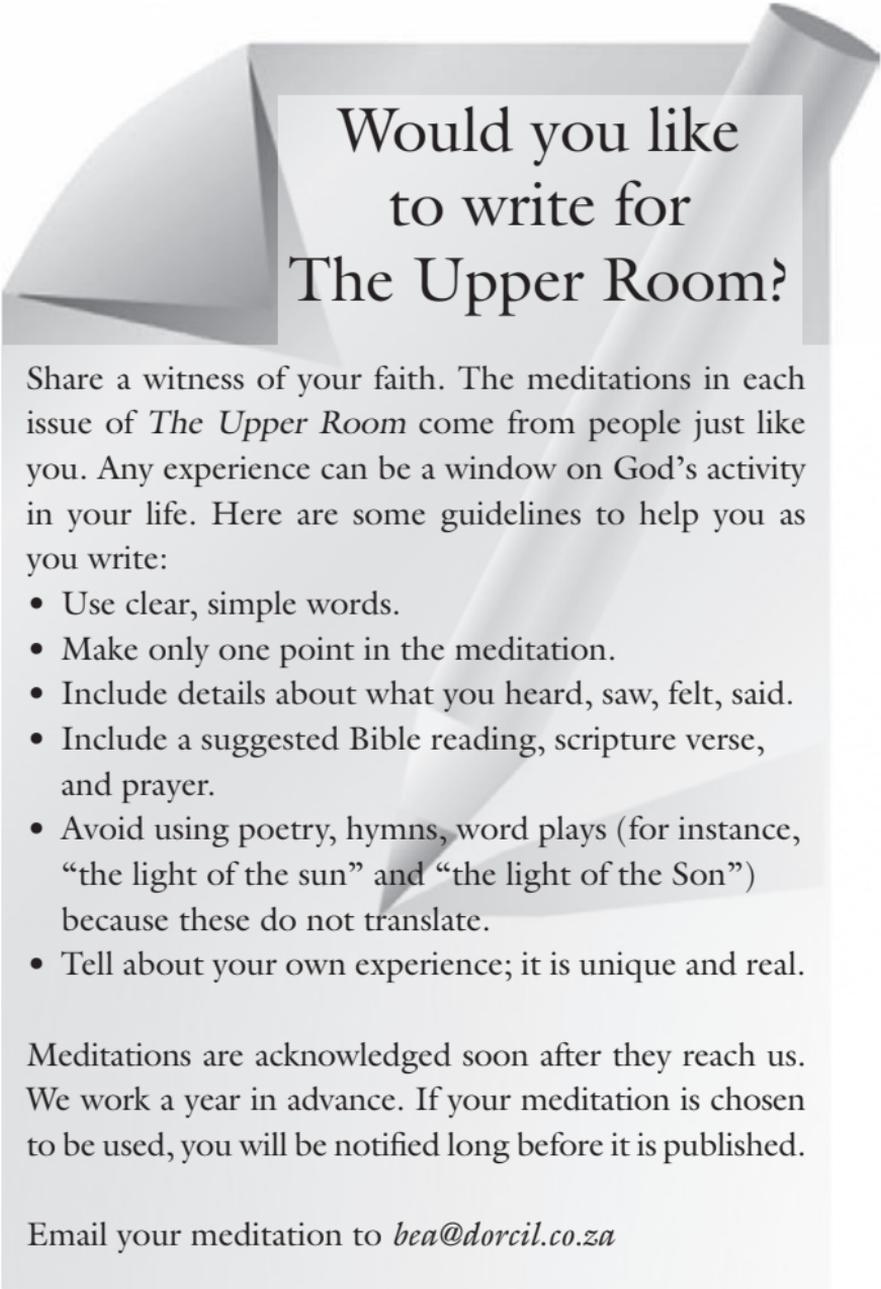
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Share a witness of your faith. The meditations in each issue of *The Upper Room* come from people just like you. Any experience can be a window on God's activity in your life. Here are some guidelines to help you as you write:

- Use clear, simple words.
- Make only one point in the meditation.
- Include details about what you heard, saw, felt, said.
- Include a suggested Bible reading, scripture verse, and prayer.
- Avoid using poetry, hymns, word plays (for instance, “the light of the sun” and “the light of the Son”) because these do not translate.
- Tell about your own experience; it is unique and real.

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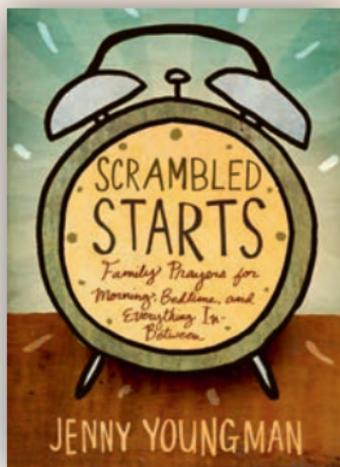
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