

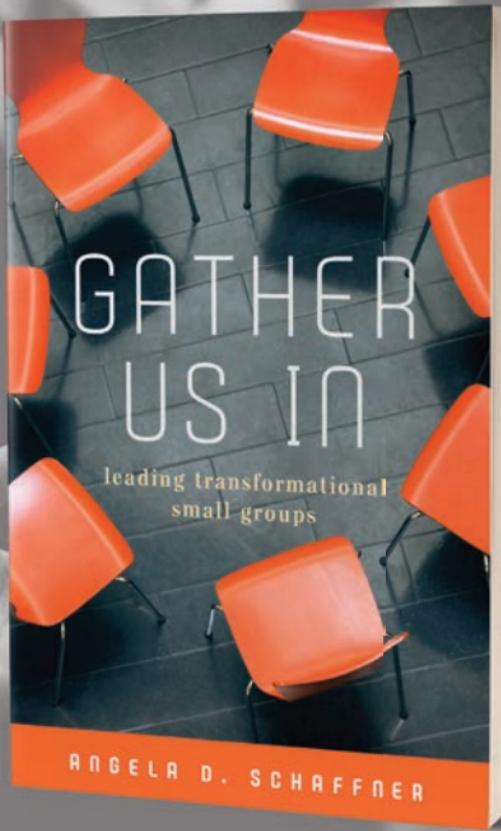
JULY-AUGUST 2020

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COVER ART INTERPRETATION

Jesus at the Pool of Bethesda



Artist: Jeff Preston
(USA, Contemporary)

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

The cover art for this issue is an illustration — art created to tell a story. Artist Jeff Preston created this illustration digitally using a handheld computer pen. The clean, sharp lines and shades of color create the look of a photograph.

John 5:1-9 tells the story of Jesus going to the pool of Bethesda near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Persons suffering all types of afflictions gathered around the pool waiting for the calm waters to be stirred. They believed that a divine spirit stirred the waters and that the first person to enter the pool would be healed.

In the story, Jesus approached a man known to have lain there for many years. The artist places the man between the columns of one of the pool's porticoes, propped up on his right elbow. The man strokes his beard and looks pensively at Jesus. Jesus is focused entirely on the man, and his robe touches the man's arm. Jesus' right hand reaches toward him asking, "Do you want to be made well?" (v. 6, NRSV). The man responds to Jesus' question with excuses. It makes me wonder why he doesn't immediately say, "Yes, I want to be healed!" But then I imagine lying there for years with no one to help me into the pool. If a stranger had come along and spoken to me directly, the encounter would be so unexpected that I too might have given excuses!

When Jesus invites the man to "stand up, take your mat and walk," he accepts Jesus' invitation. And look at the difference it made in the man's life. Today, Jesus might be extending to us an invitation unique to our circumstances and experiences. How will we respond?

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The image shows a laptop screen with a Gmail inbox open. The inbox list includes 'Inbox' (14), 'Starred', 'Snoozed', 'Sent', 'Drafts', and 'More'. A profile for 'Dylan' is visible. The sidebar on the left shows 'No recent chats' and a 'Start a new one' button. At the bottom, there are links for 'Advertising', 'Business', and 'How Search works'. To the right of the inbox, a promotional image for 'THE UPPER ROOM Recommends' is displayed. The image features a book titled 'beach calling' with a starfish on it, and a quote from Adam: 'Intertwining scripture, reflections, and questions with an emphasis on appreciating rather than dreading our middle years and this journal will inspire and bless you.'

Persistence

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 3:14 (NRSV)

Following Christ is not for the fainthearted. This issue is full of stories of people who have demonstrated or witnessed persistence and perseverance in faith. Our writers describe finding joy in their circumstances despite their suffering, looking for God when God seems far away, and continuing to follow God's call even when it is not their original plan or desire. These stories of persistence inspire me to consider what helps us to persevere in faith when we are discouraged or feel far from God.

For Moses and the Hebrew people, the hope of freedom in a new home kept them moving forward through 40 years in the wilderness. For the disciples who had been fishing all night without catching anything, the hope of a reward for their labor encouraged them to cast their net one more time on the other side of the boat. For Paul, the hope of salvation through Christ helped him to push on through adversity.

In my experience, persistence in faith pays off in many ways. The more I look for God, the more likely I am to see signs of God at work in my life and in the world. When I press on through adversity, God is able to use my gifts and abilities in ways I could not have foreseen or imagined. As you read this issue, I invite you to consider your own experiences of persistence, to look for signs of God's presence, and to hold on to the hope of new life in Christ.



— Lindsay L. Gray
Editorial Director

From the Archives

The following note was originally published in the July-August 1953 issue of *The Upper Room*. It continues to ring true today.

Letters of appreciation for the meditations come regularly to *The Upper Room*. They are forwarded to the authors. Most of these letters are from persons who have been blessed by the meditation for some particular day. If all the letters were compiled into a book, they would make a story of comfort and redemption that would reach beyond the imagination.

In the Bible we find the story of the ten persons who were healed by Jesus. One of them came back to say "Thank you." It may be that one tenth is the correct percentage of people who have grateful hearts. Sometimes one is led to think so; but if one is not inclined to be a skeptic, one can find many people who stop to say a word of thanks.

Perhaps you will be helped by some word in this copy of *The Upper Room*. The writer will be heartened greatly to know that [the] message has done you good. Write to him or her in care of *The Upper Room*.* To do so will help you and will bless the writer. It will also help to make our family, the family of *The Upper Room*, more nearly one.

God bless our writers and you, our readers.

— J. Manning Potts, Editor 1948-1967

*A word of thanks to writers can be sent via email to ureditorial@upperroom.org or posted in the comments section of our website, upperroom.org (below the meditation for the day).

Where the World Meets to Pray

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

- Australia
- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- Myanmar
- The Philippines
- Singapore
- Thailand

INDONESIA

The Upper Room daily devotional guide is now available in a bilingual Batak/Indonesian edition.

THAILAND

The Thai edition of *The Upper Room* is distributed to the Karen people living in the mountainous northern region of Thailand.



The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

— Psalm 19:1 (NIV)

I experience a special joy any time I pull an envelope out of my mailbox and see the handwriting of a dear friend or family member. I don't need to look at the return address to know who wrote the letter; I recognize the author by the handwriting. My college friend's handwriting is round and enthusiastic. My childhood friend's handwriting is bold and flowery. My mother has the practiced handwriting of a teacher. Their written words are concrete reflections of themselves. Because I know them so well, I can recognize their handwriting anywhere.

God's creation and work in our lives also bear an unmistakable mark. The strokes of God's hand reflect who God is. David affirms this in today's reading and quoted scripture. In Romans, Paul notes: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom. 1:20). God's signature is clear to all who look for it.

My friends' handwriting is familiar to me because I know them so well. And the better we come to know God through scripture, prayer, and daily meditation, the more we can recognize God's handiwork in the world and in our lives.

Prayer: Creator God, open our eyes to see your unmistakable mark on all that you have done so that we may understand you more fully. Amen.

Suzanne Felton (Virginia, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE SEEKING TO KNOW GOD BETTER

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

After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before.

— Job 42:10 (NIV)

Not long after I turned 40, my health started going down-hill. I experienced loss of appetite, sleeplessness, weight loss, and irrational thinking. My marriage was in trouble, and our oldest child was heading to college. I had always been able to fix most things fairly easily, but this was different. During my darkest moments my thoughts turned to Job and the suffering he endured. Job didn't rebuke God but held on to his faith.

In the end, all was restored to him.

During the depth of my suffering, Job's story gave me hope that I too would come through this

valley. Finally, after a couple of months and still suffering from weight loss and sleeplessness, I was hospitalized. The diagnosis was severe clinical depression. The pain I felt both physically and emotionally was extreme. But with the right medication and a caring medical team I started improving. My appetite returned, and I slept well. After 10 days in the hospital I was discharged.

The story of Job's suffering and restoration were key parts of my recovery. Though at times it may feel as if God has abandoned us, if we hold on to our faith, God's love will carry us through the darkest of days. It has been 30 years since my hospitalization, and every day I give thanks for the story of Job and how he never turned away from God's unending love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, through our darkest and brightest days we give thanks for your unending love for us. Amen.

Larry Dowell (North Carolina, USA)

TAKING OUT THE TRASH

READ Romans 6:1-13

FRI
JULY 3
2020

*Do not let sin reign in your mortal body
so that you obey its evil desires.*

— Romans 6:12 (NIV)

Working in the unforgiving heat of the day during our environmental cleanup campaign, approximately 70 people showed up to clean a very contaminated mangrove swamp. When we took a short break, I asked Nicolás, a young man on our team, how this experience had been for him. “At first it was just gross,” he replied. “But as I got used to the smell and surroundings, I was able to pick up even the most disgusting things. In a way, this rubbish around us is like the sin in my heart.”

His comment reminded me of how easily we become accustomed to our own sin or wrongdoing. When sin or wrongdoing make us uncomfortable, we are disgusted. However, doing nothing about it seems to lessen its impact on our conscience. In the end, we become accustomed to living with it or spend the rest of our lives complaining about it — convinced that we cannot confront it. The assessment Nicolás gave is a clear reminder that it is time to take out the trash and clutter from our hearts and to seek refuge in Christ, who can redeem us from sin and refresh our spirits.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I want to notice and repent of my sins so that I may honor God.

Prayer: God, our maker and friend, create in us a clean spirit and a willingness to attune our hearts to live in the light of your truth. Amen.

Perla Iveth Murillo Zapata (Colombia)

READ Mark 12:41-44

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.”

— Mark 12:43 (NRSV)

As a young Annapolis plebe disembarking from the USS Newport News to tour the old brick streets of Lisbon, Portugal, I saw an old man in dirty clothing begging on the curb. I did not understand Portuguese, but his gestures were clear. My heart was touched, and I wanted to give him some money. However, I realized that the recent currency conversion of my meager monthly salary had left me with bills larger than what I was willing to give. I went

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God is pleased when I give generously.

into a nearby retail shop to get change and immediately went back to that curb. The transaction could not have taken more than 15 minutes, yet the man was no longer in sight.

I felt that I had been tested and had failed. Unwilling to give abundantly, I had wanted to offer only a comfortable amount. In my mind, the man in need was an angel — not necessarily sent to test me but to teach me the true meaning of the Lord's message about giving. Sixty years later, I still remember that man and the lesson I learned. I am most thankful that even when I fail to give from the heart, the Lord still loves me and teaches me.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for your constant presence, patience, and love. Help us to give generously to people in need. Amen.

Allen Goins (Florida, USA)

Paul wrote, “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”

— **Philippians 4:19 (NIV)**

Each Friday, people flock to a farmers market near my home to buy meats, cheeses, produce, and other items. Shoppers look for different things — according to their needs.

That's just like the people who attend our churches. Some come seeking fellowship. Some seek teaching. Some come to sing; others stand mute during hymns but pray the Lord's Prayer with heartfelt emotion. Some share their gifts of teaching, leadership, or encouragement. All who serve, who speak kind words to the grieving, the broken, or the wounded, find their own hearts blessed through sharing. We are a diverse group; but no matter the reason we attend church, our needs are met by God and God's people.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
No need is so great that God cannot meet it.

None of us knows the answer to every need, but we know that God does. Maybe our job is to invite friends to church so that they can begin a relationship with God and a loving community of believers.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to value the contribution of all who attend our churches. Guide us to meet the needs of others as we seek to serve you. As Jesus taught us, we pray, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:2-4, NIV). Amen.

Shirley Brosius (Pennsylvania, USA)

Prayer Focus: VISITORS TO MY CHURCH

READ Psalm 139:7-10

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

— 1 Corinthians 13:11 (NRSV)

Psychologist Jean Piaget carried out psychological experiments in which he observed that very young babies (under six months old) would be clearly interested in a toy placed a few yards in front of them until Piaget placed a blanket over the toy. Then, the infants showed no further interest, assuming that the toy was no longer there.

Sometimes we are like those infants. We focus clearly on the Lord while in church, when at prayer, while reading the Bible, and when meditating. But when such activities cease, our focus on the Lord is often directed to other affairs.

We are not alone in concluding that God has stepped out of our lives. Jonah thought that by taking a ship going in the opposite direction to Nineveh, God would no longer be in control of his life. (See Jonah 1:1-10.)

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God is always interested in me.

However, this proved not to be true, and in the fullness of time Jonah did indeed come face-to-face with God once again.

God is still there for us, still interested in us though we may have temporarily lost interest in God. God is always with us.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to feel close to you not only during worship and prayer but at all times. Amen.

Bill Findlay (Scotland, United Kingdom)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

— James 1:2 (NIV)

I grew up braving bees, skunks, and thorns to pick wild blackberries for the promise of winter pies. Recently, I picked alone, leaning into the thorny vines as always. I knew the thorns would scratch my legs and arms and snag my clothes as I stretched out for the ripe, dark berries that less-dedicated pickers thought too risky to collect. But I didn't mind the scratches. In fact, I loved them. They were a reminder of my childhood, a mark of dedication, and a promise of good things to come. As I picked, God brought to mind the phrase "joy in the midst of suffering." I was so surprised that I stopped picking.

The Bible has much to say about suffering and how we should respond to it. By no measure have I suffered much, but I have always understood that suffering brings us closer to God, who gives us strength to endure it. Before this time I had not quite understood the concept of counting our trials as joy.

Even in minor challenges God helps increase our understanding, and so berry picking became an unlikely lesson. Scratches are not the same as persecution, disease, or death. But for me, they were a reminder. In the future I may face severe trials; but however they may sting, I can endure them with joy for the sake of the good qualities I know that God will produce in me.

Prayer: Giver of joy, comfort our souls when we face hardships. Amen.

Rachel Lulich (Indiana, USA)

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

— Matthew 7:12 (NRSV)

One day in school, I saw classmates bullying a girl in my class. They ganged up on her, saying really mean things to her. She seemed on the verge of tears. But instead of defending her, I walked away and let her fend for herself. I could have supported her, but instead I thought only of myself and decided not to get involved.

Later I thought, *If someone were saying those mean things to me, I would have been upset and hurt. Even if someone*

thought about standing up for me, it would mean nothing if he or she just thought about it!

The next time the bullies made fun of her, I walked up to them and told them to stop. Some of my friends came with me to defend her. We took the girl away from the bullies and asked if she was okay. It turns out that she was going through a really hard time, even having suicidal thoughts.

Eventually the bullies left her alone. Meanwhile, that girl became my good friend and slowly regained her self-respect. That day I learned that a small act, like standing up for someone, can make a huge difference for the person on the other end.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to stand with others during difficult times and to treat others the way we want to be treated. Amen.

Rebecca Auger (North Carolina, USA)

READ Psalm 36:5-9

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

— Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

I have always been fascinated by Kintsugi, the traditional Japanese art of mending broken pieces of pottery with liquid gold, silver, or lacquer — thus highlighting and enhancing the breaks and adding value to the broken objects.

Kintsugi reminds me of my condition. Many times in my journey of faith I have found myself defeated, wretched — having given up hope. I was ashamed to face God. I pleaded, “God, I want to give up. My brokenness and my sins mock me.” Then always God’s voice would come in reply, “I haven’t given up on you, my dear child. Why should you give up on me?” The more broken and shattered I became, the more God’s grace seemed to surround me.

My struggles have shown me that I need to trust in God’s strength because my own strength can fail me. But all along my Christian journey, God has picked up and mended my pieces. Today, I am a beautiful creation of broken pieces, mended by God’s love and grace.

At times, we all feel unloved, dejected, or lonely. But God is greater than our brokenness. Broken lives and broken hopes are precious in the sight of God, who can use even broken vessels to carry out great plans.

Prayer: Dear God, remind us not to give up on you when we are broken. Amen.

Wati Mollier (Nagaland, India)

FRI
JULY 10
2020

SURPRISE GUEST

READ Hebrews 2:5-18

The one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

— Hebrews 2:11 (NIV)

One of my earliest childhood memories is when my grandparents surprised us by arriving at our doorstep unannounced. They lived eight hours away so we were overjoyed

to see them. My grandparents had brought me a gift, but the real treat was their presence.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How can I show Christ's compassion to everyone I meet?

Rather than living as a king in a palace, Jesus lived as an ordinary person. Working as a carpenter, Jesus knew the value of hard work. During his ministry, Jesus traveled long hours without a place to lay his head.

Because of the way Jesus lived, he was able to build personal relationships with many people. He shared wisdom with tax collectors and fishermen, Jews and Gentiles, men and women. Today, when we show warmth to those around us we reflect the perfect type of love Jesus modeled.

My grandparents taught me about Jesus and the gift of his life as a human being. Jesus modeled a way for us to live as friends and family of all other humans and gives us the hope that we will one day see both Jesus and our loved ones again.

Prayer: Wonderful Counselor, thank you for coming to live among us. Help us to show warmth to everyone we meet. Amen.

Lauren Craft (Virginia, USA)

READ 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 4:7 (NRSV)

Our congregation was shocked when our pastor's wife, Susan, died unexpectedly at age 55. She had been taking care of her mother out of town, so our pastor immediately left to handle matters. I was asked on a Friday to lead the service on Sunday. I readily accepted, but I struggled with what I would say to our grieving congregation.

That Sunday morning, I went through my daily routine of reading *The Upper Room* and my Bible, then spending time in prayer. The devotion for the day was about finding peace in loss. The writer closed the devotion with a reference to Philippians 4:7 and God's promise of a peace that passes our understanding. I felt that God had arranged that devotion on that day to help me find the right message for the congregation.

During the service, I read the devotion aloud. In the days and weeks that followed, I saw our congregation respond as brothers and sisters in Christ, reaching out with love and comfort to help our pastor and his family in their time of need.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How will I be open to God's message for me today?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for providing comfort and peace to us during challenging times. Help us to do the same for others. Amen.

John D. Bown (Minnesota, USA)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH A
SUDDEN LOSS

Seek first [your heavenly Father's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

— Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

A woman whom I had supervised 35 years before was reaching her retirement and asked me to say a few words on her behalf. I happily agreed. In the presentation of her years at the workplace, she mentioned that I had been so impressed with her work that I went to the administration and requested

that she be kept on after that project was completed. I had not remembered anything about this incident. When I realized the way God had used me to meet

her needs, her retirement gathering turned out to be a blessing for me as well.

God is always with us, knows our needs, and sends others to help us by placing us in positions where we can assist them. We just have to trust that God will lead the way. Then, our job is to obey and follow God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God can bless me by giving me opportunities to serve others.

Prayer: God, our guide, thank you for caring for our needs. Help us to seek first your kingdom and your righteousness as we receive your blessings and help others. Amen.

Joan A. Brathwaite (Christ Church, Barbados)

We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

— Ephesians 2:10 (NIV)

Strip clubs aren't places you would typically expect a church group to go in search of friends. But for years, my friend Tonya and other women from her church went there regularly to cultivate relationships. With permission from club owners, the church women gave female employees free toiletries. Many of the recipients were single mothers, struggling to make ends meet, and they gladly received the gifts. After a while, the church group got opportunities to meet with the women during non-work hours. They listened, offered support, met practical needs, and shared spiritual truth about Jesus from the Bible.

It took courage and perseverance to do something so unconventional. Was it without risk? Definitely not. Was it Christlike? Absolutely.

Jesus invited all kinds of people to come into the kingdom of God. It didn't matter if onlookers misunderstood or gossiped. Everyone needs God's grace. If we're followers of Jesus, we'll look for ways to extend it — even in unconventional places.

Prayer: God of all, open our eyes and hearts to the hurting world around us. Help us to take every opportunity to share our faith with others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Terri Foster (South Carolina, USA)

TUES
JULY 14
2020

A SINGLE RED FEATHER

READ Psalm 91:1-6

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

— Psalm 17:8 (NIV)

As predicted, the severe thunderstorms had blown through our area with a vengeance; but now the sun shone more radiantly than usual. Yet I felt as broken as the tree limbs I was collecting. The weight of the world pressed on me: concerns over family health issues, finances, fractured relationships. I struggled to banish these issues from my thoughts. I tried to focus on the blessings I have received and on those yet to come.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today, I will find joy in God's creation.

The joyful trill of birds filtered through my disturbed thoughts. As I listened, a male cardinal landed on a limb directly above me. He threw back his head and serenaded me with gusto. His voice rose above all the others. Enthralled, I watched him for several minutes until a single red feather fluttered in the breeze and landed at my feet. The feather was perfect, just as God had created it.

I saved the feather and laminated it in plastic for use as a bookmark. It now marks Psalm 91 in my Bible as a reminder of God's steadfast presence in my life. To me the feather represents hope. I know I cannot expect a trouble-free life. Regardless of the trials that come my way, I am assured that God is with me and that I will always find refuge beneath God's sheltering wings.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, thank you for being our shield and protection through the trials we face. Help us to see the joy in each day. Amen.

— Jeanne C. Gore (North Carolina, USA)

Real people. Real stories. Real faith.



D. L. Ellis-Johnson (p. 59) is a Bible teacher, evangelist, and a doctoral student in a Biblical counseling program. He enjoys travel and exercise.



A writer, educator, and homemaker, Dusty Reed (p. 47) has shared her Christian witness with myriad souls over the past 40 years.



Alexander Holcomb (p. 35) is a marketing professional who enjoys Kona coffee, reading about history, and being outside (or anywhere) with his fiancée.



Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, Heidi Kupitz (p. 72) now lives in Oregon with her patient husband and three energetic children. She enjoys lounging in her hammock.



Sara Hague (p. 50) is a children's pastor, happy wife, and mother of five talented children, including one on the severe end of the autism spectrum.



Cletus L. Hull III (p. 61) has been an ordained minister and pastored churches for 32 years. He served as a chaplain at two Pennsylvania state psychiatric hospitals for 30 years.



Assistant Principal Berthille Laveist-Chittick (p. 54) has a great passion for education and culture and has been a member of her local theater company for 15 years.



Seung Jae Oh (p. 30) is a retired university mathematics professor. He and his wife have four children, ten grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

Share YOUR story today!

The people pictured on this page did.

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

The Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

Most of my religious friends seem to think that religious people should fit a particular mold. I am outgoing and inquisitive, and my friends don't think I should behave that way. Many times I have been confronted and attacked based on my personality and have come to resent who I am — even vigorously begging God to change me. I love spending time with other Christians, but I can't hide my true self to fit their idea of what I should be like.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Even when I don't love myself, God loves me just as I am.

I waited for God to remove my extrovert tendencies so that I would appear “spiritual” to my church and my religious friends. Then these words gave me perspective: God's “grace is sufficient for me.” I now see that my outgoing personality gives me opportunities to initiate conversations. Knowing who I am in God has helped me to speak to others who feel rejected, for I know God is there with me. I have now more fully experienced love from God — the One who accepts me just as I am.

What an encouragement to know that the Lord can be glorified even when we are misunderstood and misjudged. We can come to God — just as we are.

Prayer: Dear Savior, thank you for loving us as we are. Help us to make our lives reflect the truth of your word. Amen.

Timothy Olumide (Osun State, Nigeria)

A GOOD DEED

THUR
JULY 16
2020

READ 1 Peter 4:9-11

Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

— Matthew 25:35 (NIV)

Our senior ministry group has added a new line to the above verse: “We were stranded and you rescued us.” On a trip to Jackson, Georgia, our bus experienced transmission trouble. We noticed two vans in the parking lot of a nearby church. It was a long shot, but we stopped and asked if they would rent one of the vans to us for the 50-mile trip back to Atlanta. They said yes! Plus, they loaned us the van without charge or verification of our dilemma. They merely requested that we return the van that evening, which we did and with a full tank of gas. Of particular note, the church secretary warmly welcomed the 16 of us in, offered us something to drink, and did not judge us by the color of our skin.

The next Sunday several of us returned to the church to say thank you in person. We made a donation to the church and gave flowers to the secretary. The people of this church truly lived out Jesus’ teaching to welcome the stranger. We were the recipients of not just a good deed but a wonderful blessing from God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I can show God's love by trusting others and offering help.

Prayer: Gracious Father, thank you for the kindness of your children who help others stranded on the road of life. Amen.

Catherine Pettie Hart (Georgia, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE EXPERIENCING VEHICLE TROUBLE 23

Trust in the LORD with all your heart.

— Proverbs 3:5 (NRSV)

One night when my younger brother and I were kids, he had a nightmare. I gave him a hug and asked him to go back to sleep. But he said the nightmare kept coming every time he closed his eyes. I suggested that he talk to God. So he sat down, prayed, and slept in peace. He didn't even need a hug from me anymore!

I am still amazed at the sincerity of a little child's heart — the ability to simply trust God. After my brother ended his prayer, he truly believed that God had listened to him and would guard him through the night.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today I will worry less and trust God more.

As an adult, I have often recalled that moment when I have faced fear and uncertainty. In those times,

I remind myself to trust God with all my heart and to worry less — to believe that God watches over me in every situation. I have learned to let God take over what I cannot control. When I do, God grants me peace.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to have a heart like a little child, to trust that you will show us the way through any fearful situation. We pray as Jesus taught us, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" (Luke 11:2-4, KJV). Amen.

Juita Kartini (Jakarta Raya, Indonesia)

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

— Micah 6:8 (NIV)

One day while cooking yet another big meal in our family kitchen, I sighed and asked aloud, “What will others remember most about me when I’m gone — the cooking or the cleaning?” My husband jokingly suggested this inscription for my future tombstone: “She made good bread.”

This humorous exchange led me to do some serious thinking about the legacy I would leave. In Western culture, corporations, churches, families, and even individuals are often charged with composing a “mission statement,” a reason for doing what we do. An even more daring challenge is encouraging individuals to write their obituary while they are still able to do so. If we think ahead of time about what we want said about us at the end of our life, we will be motivated to live up to those words.

I know that the best words for me to live up to are found in today’s reading, which I carry around in my purse. These verses guide my daily life. They tell me how to love others and when. As followers of Christ, we can find our life’s mission statement powerfully stated in these words.

Prayer: Our loving Father, we pray that the world will see Christ in us more every day and come to know your grace and loving-kindness through us — all to your glory. Amen.

Wilma Rose Vernich (Tennessee, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE DOUBTING THE VALUE
OF THEIR EFFORTS

READ James 1:19-25

Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

— John 20:23 (NRSV)

Years ago, I taught a ninth-grade Sunday school class. One Sunday, after a particularly trying week, I walked into the classroom to find paper streamers hanging from the light fixtures, chairs on the table, and the kids grinning at me.

I began to chastise them angrily for their disregard for me and Sunday school property. I went on for a while, ignoring their hurt looks, before I realized what I was doing. I stopped and apologized. I explained that my wife was seriously ill in

the hospital, and I was so worried that I wasn't thinking straight. Yet that was no reason to treat them so badly.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How do I express my complete forgiveness of others?

We then went on with class. At the end of the session, I stood at the door to watch them leave. I was proud of the example of forgiveness I had shown them. As they left, each student gave me a hug, a pat on the shoulder, or a high five. I was happy that they had learned their lesson on forgiveness. But as I thought about it later, I realized that they were the teachers and I was the student. They had each freely expressed their forgiveness for my unfair rant; as they left the classroom talking and laughing, they carried no remnants of what had happened. That kind of forgiveness is a true gift from God.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the gift of forgiveness. Help us to forgive as completely as those young believers. Amen.

Ken Claar (Idaho, USA)

READ Numbers 6:22-27

*The LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you.*

— Numbers 6:25 (NIV)

From 4:00 to 6:00 each morning I spend time in prayer and devotion. I find it the best time to engage in conversation with God, praising and thanking God for each new day. As I was meditating one morning, I thought: *What does God’s smile look like? What can we do to make God smile?* Just then, the young man who delivers the newspaper came by. Every morning when he greets me with a warm smile and hug, I imagine God smiling upon me.

A smile can bring encouragement to someone who is sad or lonely, a way of saying to someone who is heartbroken, “Wait on the Lord. God loves you and so do I.” A good deed paired with a smile can assist the vulnerable, the aged, children without parents. It can give support to the local vendor who works diligently to supply fresh fruits and vegetables. A passing smile to those we encounter might be just enough to offer hope.

What does God’s smile look like? It looks like the smile we bestow on all those around us. It looks like the joy we bring to others in our words and deeds. When I return a smile, I know that God is smiling upon me as well.

Prayer: God of joy and blessing, thank you for your smile that we see reflected each day on the faces of all who believe in you. Amen.

Laura Cristina Quintana de Mota (Dominican Republic)

READ Ephesians 6:12-18

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

— Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

Late one evening, my husband became very ill and started bleeding. We rushed him to the hospital. After our very long wait, my husband was finally admitted for further treatment. On my way home, I found myself waiting in a line at a traffic

stop where police were checking for drunk drivers. As the line progressed, I wondered, *Why tonight? Why now?*

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Every day I will open my eyes and spirit to opportunities to pray for others.

When it was my turn, the officer asked if I had been drinking. I replied, "No, I've just come from the hospital." Hearing that, his demeanor changed, and he asked if everything was all right. I replied, "I hope so." Then he asked if he could pray for me. I immediately agreed, and he offered up a wonderful prayer. He didn't know the circumstances, but his words were just what I needed to hear. At that moment, we found ourselves linked together as two disciples sharing God's love.

The next morning, my husband was discharged from the hospital. The health challenges that followed were difficult, but we knew that we were in God's loving hands.

Prayer: Dear Father, thank you for the honor of praying for others. Help us to be aware of the needs of those around us. Amen.

Connie Downs (California, USA)

READ 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Come near to God and he will come near to you.

— James 4:8 (NIV)

I clutched my side and felt a pulsating sensation in my throat. With each labored breath, my chest heaved up and down. I had finished my first 5K run, just before my fifty-first birthday.

I had started running just one year earlier. In those early days, I jogged only when I felt like it and at a speed that felt comfortable. That approach, however, did not yield great results. Then I discovered a plan.

My strategy began with walking a few minutes, followed by running 60 seconds. The alternating walking/jogging schedule increased until after a couple of weeks I could run five minutes nonstop. Instead of feeling exhausted with limbs too heavy to move, I felt refreshed.

Distance running required disciplining my physical life. Likewise, we strengthen our spiritual lives through the disciplines of Bible study, meditation, fasting, and prayer. A Bible-reading plan and a designated time and place of prayer help me stay focused as I come near to God. Coming close to God requires directing our hearts toward God — not with a prescribed list of activities to earn God's favor but rather an outpouring of desire to spend time with God. And just as today's verse promises, God comes near to us.

Prayer: O Lord, increase our desire to know you better.
Amen.

Barbara Gordon (Missouri, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE BEGINNING A NEW
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

READ 2 Corinthians 9:6-11

They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

— Matthew 14:20 (NIV)

I retired a long time ago but have not been able to fulfill my desire to go abroad as a volunteer evangelist. In the meantime, I have chosen to support others in this work. Recently I heard from a missionary who was desperate because the church that had supplied his major funding could no longer support him. In vain, I begged several other churches to help him.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

My willingness to serve may be an answer to prayer.

send the crowds away, but Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away; you give them something to eat” (Matt. 14:16). Five loaves of bread and two fish were inadequate to feed 5,000 people just as the rod in Moses’ hand could not free the Israelites from Egypt. But in both cases, God supplied what the people needed. Yet, I had nothing that would help this missionary. Still, this passage remained with me. Then I remembered a small savings account that I had put aside years before for emergency use.

I have decided I will no longer beg money from other people or organizations for this missionary but instead will give him what I have. Just as God gave manna and quail to the Israelites in the desert (see Ex. 16), I believe that when we are willing to give to others, God will provide for us.

Prayer: God of all grace, remind us that we always have something that we can give to those in need. Amen.

Seung Jae Oh (Chungnam, South Korea)

The LORD says, “I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight.”

— Isaiah 45:2 (KJV)

When I was a young girl, my mother gave me a small box of cards containing God's promises from scripture. Each morning before school, we selected one to read. Those promises stayed with us all day and were a comfort when challenges arose. This tradition carried over into my marriage, motherhood, and divorce.

Years later, a major crisis hit my family when my adult daughter fell down the basement stairs and suffered a traumatic brain injury. Brain surgery followed. I was told that if she survived, the recovery process would take months or years of rehab and that total recovery was doubtful.

Machines pumped oxygen, fluids, and food into her body. I was at first terrified, then angry. *Why us?* I thought. During another sleepless night, I sat up in bed and began to pray. I asked God to direct me. When I finished, I glanced over to the night-stand and spotted my box of scripture promises. “Guide my hand, dear Lord,” I whispered, as I drew out a card. It read, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom. 8:28, NRSV). Immediately, God's peace began to replace my anguish. How marvelous to have the promises of a living, loving God, who guides us and gives us comfort during life's challenges!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I will keep God's promises close.

Prayer: Thank you, God, for your constant help, guidance, and healing power. Help us always to trust you. Amen.

Arlene Rains Gruber (Kansas, USA)

SAT
JULY 25
2020

A NEW BEGINNING

READ Genesis 50:15-21

*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 was born in Ryazan, Russia, in 1999. My parents were alcoholics who took me to bars when I was very young. A few days after my third birthday they lost their rights to keep me, and I was placed in an orphanage. The orphanage was full — about 40 kids, including my brother. I was too young

at the time to understand what was happening, so I just went along. When I was four, an American couple adopted me and brought me to Fort Worth, Texas, where

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I know that my future is in
God's hands.

my new life began. I grew up with three American sisters and my brother, Kole, who was also adopted from Russia. My parents put me in a good school where I received an amazing education, which eventually brought me to college where I plan to study business management.

When I was in that orphanage, I had no clue what my life was going to look like. But God knew. God sent loving parents to adopt me and raise me to be the best person I can be. I do not know what my future holds, but I know it will be used to glorify God's kingdom.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for turning our night into day — redeeming us and giving us second chances. Amen.

Alex Jordan (Texas, USA)

READ Hebrews 12:4-11

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

— Hebrews 12:11 (NIV)

I was going through a rough patch in my relationship with someone very dear to me. I felt that I had done nothing to deserve the painful words and attitudes. Angry and resentful, I knew that I could either shut this person out or lean on God. I chose to lean on God.

As I prayed, cried, and read my Bible, I experienced God's comfort. I was reassured of God's deep love for me and reminded to find my worth in God. (See 1 John 3:1.) But something else was at work in me that I wasn't prepared for. God gently helped me to see my wrong attitudes and actions toward the person who had hurt me and showed me how that had caused some of their behavior. I felt God was using this experience to prune me.

At first I was mad. How had someone's wrong treatment of me turned into a conviction for my soul? It didn't seem fair. Then I remembered what pruning does: it cuts away what is harmful, unnecessary, or growth-inhibiting. The result is healthy growth and bountiful fruit. Instead of resenting this person, I decided to be grateful that my loving God was "cutting me back" so that I could spring forward with new growth and healthier relationships.

Prayer: Dear God, give us the peace to accept pruning from your loving hands. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
How is God pruning me?

Esther MacDonald (Quebec, Canada)

As [a woman who lived a sinful life] stood behind [Jesus] at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

— Luke 7:38 (NIV)

Shortly before I retired from 40 years of teaching physical education, a young student gave me a red pipe cleaner, roughly shaped like a heart. I attached it to my clipboard as a reminder of his thoughtfulness. Several years later, it's still there.

Whenever I look at that irregularly-shaped heart, I smile.

Sometimes I wonder if God looks at our offerings of love

that way. God — the source and giver of all love — could perfectly do anything that we do for God. But I suspect that God delights in even our smallest acts of love.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God teaches me how to give
and receive love.

Throughout scripture, Jesus commands any display of love for him. Jesus praised Mary's devotion as she listened attentively at his feet. (See Luke 10:38-42.) Upon spotting Zacchaeus' determination to see him, Jesus asked to share a meal with him. (See Luke 19:1-10.) Jesus affirmed the love of the woman who kissed and anointed his feet. Jesus accepted love, no matter how it was shown.

Whether we give our love by praising God, stopping to admire creation, or helping someone in need, we can offer all we have and all we are to God and graciously respond to those who show us love in big or small ways.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for showing us how to love others. Help us to share your love with the world. Amen.

Lin Daniels (Massachusetts, USA)

READ 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

— 2 Corinthians 9:8 (NIV)

When I was in college, I worked at a beautiful summer camp far away from home. I had no time off, except for one week halfway through the summer. Like most of my fellow counselors, I planned to stay on at camp during that week so we could enjoy having the place to ourselves. One day, though, I felt the Lord urging me to visit my family; while I wrestled with it at first, I finally decided to go.

As I was trying to leave, my car broke down. Distraught because I was having to disappoint my family, I began to question why God would lead me to do something I couldn't do. Had I misheard God? When one of my fellow camp counselors offered to let me drive his car the hundreds of miles it would take me to get home and back, I was amazed at his generosity. In the midst of my surprise and joy at his offer, I remembered the way I had questioned God's faithfulness.

In that moment, I learned that if God leads us to do something, God will also provide us the means to do it. Now, whenever I start to get frustrated when life unfolds in a way I don't expect, I think of that day and watch for the way God will work within my circumstances to bring about good.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can rest in God's promise to supply whatever I need to serve.

Prayer: Dear God, calm our minds and hearts with the knowledge that you are always present with us. Amen.

Alexander Holcomb (Tennessee, USA)

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

— Psalm 34:8 (NRSV)

The pungent smell of the durian often brings back fond childhood memories for me. My late father used to lug home gunny sacks of durians from Malaysia. My mother would line the floor with newspapers, and my family of six would gather around to enjoy this delicacy. It was an important family time for me.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When I take a step of faith to follow Jesus, I will surely taste God's goodness.

In the past, it seemed a long wait until the durian season, when we could once again enjoy the fruit. These days, durians are readily

available in many places, even in supermarkets. Most people just take them for granted.

Those who have never tasted the durian may simply be put off by its unpleasant smell and its thorny appearance. Likewise, those who do not know Jesus Christ, the King of kings, or have never tasted his goodness may just turn away from him, based on limited understanding of who he is. But by opening our hearts to God's goodness revealed in Jesus we can find the joy that comes when we make a commitment to follow Jesus — wherever he may lead us.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for your love and the gift of salvation. Help us to discover your goodness as we learn to trust in you. Amen.

Florence Fong (Singapore)

Jesus told [Thomas], “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

— John 20:29 (NIV)

Our new apartment in a different part of the country abuts a small wooded ravine. One day after work, my wife asked me if I had heard the owl that morning.

“I don’t think owls live in this area,” I replied. “Are you sure it was an owl?” Although skeptical, I was willing to acknowledge that maybe owls sound different here. Two weeks later, early on a Saturday morning while sitting at the breakfast table, I heard the familiar hoot of an owl. And then a week later my wife reported seeing an owl fly about two feet from the windshield of her car. This time I believed her. She had seen the owl face-to-face, and I had heard it. I became an owl believer!

For many years I was an agnostic. I wanted more proof. I wanted to hear Jesus’ voice, see him face-to-face, or, like Thomas, to put my hand into his side. Yet after seeing the love of others who called themselves Christians and hearing the voice of the Savior through scripture, I became a believer. In this age, we walk by faith, without physical proof. Yet we do have the promise that if we will seek, we will find. (See Deut. 4:29, Matt. 7:7, Luke 11:9.) And someday — some glorious day — we will see Jesus Christ face-to-face.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to be lights to show others how to see and hear the truth of our Savior. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Mike C. Bertoglio (Georgia, USA)

READ 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient,
bearing with one another in love.*

— Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

Walking down the sidewalk toward the old, two-story school building, I heard the happy voices of students in the courtyard. A new school year was beginning, with its many

new experiences and opportunities for learning. Some of the students I would be teaching had not yet fully mastered the English language, and others had

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How can I show kindness and God's love to others today?

learning difficulties. Many challenges lay ahead.

As part of my morning devotional, I had read what is sometimes called “The Love Chapter” — 1 Corinthians 13. A Sunday school teacher once explained verses 4-7 of chapter 13 by suggesting that in place of the words *love* and *it* we substitute the word *Jesus* and read through the verses again. Because we seek to be like Jesus and show his love, she then asked us to replace the words *love* and *it* with our name and read the verses through a third time. In doing so, each of us was reminded of the type of love that God shows us. That is the type of love that God wants me to share with my students and everyone around me each day.

Prayer: Loving God, help us to show love, patience, and kindness to everyone we meet. Amen.

Pam Hickerson (Texas, USA)

READ Psalm 120:1-7

The psalmist wrote, “I'm for peace, but when I speak, they are for war.”

— Psalm 120:7 (CEB)

In Psalm 120, it seems that the psalmist was getting frustrated at not finding any peace at all in his surroundings — or even the entire world. In a state of great stress and agony, he was asking God to deliver him from the corrupt minds who do not accept peace.

In today's world, we also may feel devastated because we cannot find peace. At times it seems that some people do not want peace, and as a result peace feels impossible to achieve. The stress of constant war and conflict makes us tired and discouraged. We see some people fighting for selfish interests, some for what they believe in, and some against ideas they oppose.

The glory of God's peace is not in winning; it is about living in God's way — following the Prince of Peace who told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27, NIV).

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Even in countries torn by war,
I can find God's peace.

Prayer: God of peace, comfort those who are living in great turmoil, and rescue those who face persecution. Grant them your peace. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Aftab Yunis Hakim (Punjab, Pakistan)

Smothering the Ball

I started playing golf a few years ago. Though frustrating at times, it can also be an exceedingly rewarding sport. Each bad shot is nothing compared to the exhilarating feeling of a good one, the ball landing precisely where you had aimed. My first few times on the driving range were spent missing the ball entirely and digging up grass and dirt instead. If I was lucky enough to actually hit the ball, it was anyone's guess which direction it would go.

In an effort to improve my game, I started taking lessons. My instructor repeatedly told me that I was smothering the ball. I was trying so hard to control the ball that I would clench my muscles and contort my body in strange ways, leaving no room for the club to do its work. As a result, nine times out of ten, my shot fell flat. It was only after I learned to relax and trust the club that I started hitting better shots.

The way I approach my golf game has taught me a lot about myself. I "smother the ball" in many aspects of my life. I try so hard to control — even force — the outcome of some situations that I leave no room for God to work. And I usually end up making matters worse. I am understanding more and more that part of having a relationship with God is knowing when to let go. It's having the wisdom to leave room for God to do what God does best — work for my good.

Scripture is full of people who gave up control in order to allow God to work in their lives and in the lives of God's people: Noah, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, Jonah, Mary, the first disciples. Moses helped deliver the Israelites from captivity. Joshua led God's people across the Jordan and into Canaan. Jonah finally went to Nineveh. Each shows us the value of trust in God over our own limited abilities.

Throughout scripture we see how much God loves us and that God wants only the best for us. But this means that sometimes we have to set aside our own concerns, fears, and ideas so that God can work. Noah followed God's command to build an ark — though without a drop of water in sight surely he looked silly doing it. Hannah gave Samuel to the

LORD as she had promised, in spite of how difficult it must have been to let go of the son she loved so much. Such trust does not always come naturally to me.

One of the hardest lessons that I have had to learn — one that I am still in the process of learning — is that my ability to control many situations only goes so far. And in some cases it doesn't go far at all. In such times, letting go is easier said than done; it requires practice and discipline, not to mention obedience and confidence in God. It is hard for me to imagine the courage it must have taken for Joshua to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land or the fear Jonah must have felt in the belly of the fish. Both Joshua and Jonah, however, ultimately set aside their own concerns so that God could work. In my golf game, I have to constantly tell myself to remain calm when making a shot. I remind myself to trust the club to finish the job, and then take my shot. When I do, the outcome is much better. The same is true when I am in a challenging work situation, having a difficult relationship with a friend or colleague, or struggling to make a decision. Putting more confidence and trust in God and less in my own abilities can make all the difference.

Several meditations in this issue address trusting in God. You may want to read again the meditations for July 9, 17 and August 4, 7, 10, 15, 31 before responding to the reflection questions below.

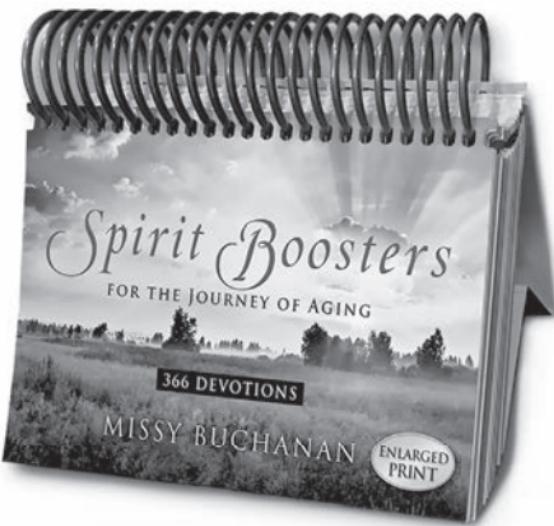
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

1. When has it been difficult for you to let go of your trust in your own strength? What were your prayers like during this time? Why can it be so hard to let go?
2. Reflect on characters in scripture who were reluctant to accept God's help. Why were they reluctant? How does their story end? In that situation, what would you have done differently?
3. Name three places in your life where you see God working for your good.



— Andrew Garland Breeden
Acquisitions Editor

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Sample Calendar Page

The late years of life offer you a unique opportunity to make a lasting impression on the lives of others. Whose lives do you most want to impact? What can you do to show God's love to them today? How can you touch them in such a way that they will want to tell the story ten years from now?

Rise up and tell [the teachings] to their children, so that they should set their hope in God.

—PSALM 78:6-7

A U G U S T 1

Celebrations

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In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

— Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV)

Seventeen years ago, my son was sentenced to life in prison. It was a time full of grief for many reasons and for so many people. As the courtroom emptied after the sentencing, a man approached me. I recognized him as the one who had carried his Bible to court every day — the victim's

father. Standing quietly, looking into his face and not knowing what to expect, I was surprised when suddenly he said to me, "I am sorry for your loss." In

the midst of the most devastating event in my life, God had placed before me this gentle man — in mourning himself — to express his compassion and sorrow.

This man had shown me the kindest act of Christian compassion that I have ever witnessed. In one brief moment, through him, God took my grief away and showed me a picture of the compassion and love of a true follower of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Compassionate God, thank you for the people who show others your blessings, mercy, and grace. Amen.

Lisa Scallio (Maryland, USA)

KEEP SINGING!

READ Psalm 104:31-34

MON
AUG 3
2020

Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

— Colossians 3:16 (NRSV)

When my wife and I moved into an assisted-living facility, our minds were alert and active, but our bodies were less than strong. As we settled in, I realized that my ability to think, converse, and lead others was well ahead of many of the other residents. In talking with them, I learned that many were experiencing sadness, even depression. So I thought I would offer encouragement, even in small ways.

I decided to lead an occasional songfest after dinner. The first night, more than 30 people showed up! I used a songbook I had saved from my elementary school years and made copies of the words of some of the songs for everyone. A young man who was an excellent pianist came to accompany us. Through the songs I chose I tried to reveal the presence of God's Spirit. It worked! The response was positive, so I decided to keep on singing with them. Singing can lift our spirits and point us toward God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The gift of song can draw me close to God and others.

Prayer: O God, keep us singing so that we sense your Holy Spirit bringing us encouragement and hope. Amen.

Ron L. Keller* (Michigan, USA)

*The author passed away before the publication of this issue.

Prayer Focus: RESIDENTS OF ASSISTED-LIVING FACILITIES 45

Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

— Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV)

One morning as I prepared for work, I was trying to decide what to carry in my handbag and what to leave behind. The issue was not the handbag's capacity but its weight. I won-

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No burden is too heavy as long as I am with Jesus.

dered how many people would see me struggling with my handbag and not understand why I was dragging my feet early in the morning. Another part of

me thought that I could hide my struggle and carry the full bag, but it would eventually tire me.

We have many weights to carry — family identity, job titles, responsibilities — and we have to carry them all in one body. It might not show at first as we go through our days, but eventually we will grow weary. The verse above reminds us that we can run with perseverance as we lay aside every weight and look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We can rely on him to help us face every challenge before us. We don't have to do it alone.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for giving us rest as we lay aside every weight in our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Vimbai Chizarura (Harare, Zimbabwe)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE OVERWHELMED
BY RESPONSIBILITIES

THE DELIGHT OF PRAYER

WED
AUG 5
2020

READ John 17:1-8

It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

— 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 (NRSV)

As a part of a prayer chain at our church, I delighted in the opportunity to pray for others. I was able to grow spiritually and offer God's love to others.

Whenever I received a call, I would immediately step into my quiet space with Bible in hand. The Lord would direct me to an appropriate scripture. Then I prayed the scripture for the person requesting prayer. I did not have to know any details. I did not have to learn the results. My task was to lift the person through God's word, God's promise.

When we moved to a new location, I lost my connection with the prayer chain. But the Lord gave me a new source for knowing whom to pray for. Now my friends request prayer through social media, sometimes for themselves and sometimes for loved ones.

Through this experience, I am learning how to pray more effectively in my daily quiet time. I can listen for the nudge of appropriate scripture in any situation, pray that scripture, and then leave all in the loving hands of God. What a delight!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
For whom can I pray today?

Prayer: Thank you, loving God, for giving us the opportunity to pray for others. We know you hear and answer each prayer. In Christ's name. Amen.

Dusty Reed (Iowa, USA)

God is our refuge and strength.

— Psalm 46:1 (NIV)

My part of the country has experienced many destructive storms this summer. They often bring large hail — sometimes as big as baseballs — that can crash through windshields of cars, destroy crops and buildings, and even kill our livestock. The psalmist, seeking to bring courage and hope to God's suffering people, wrote about such destruction.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Even when I feel alone,
God is with me.

As we read the verses of Psalm 46, we can be comforted through the many storms we have experienced.

When we see entire houses destroyed and businesses blown apart by the weather, we begin to realize how vulnerable we are. So we turn to God for strength in the midst of our weakness and fear.

When we turn to God in the face of storms of any kind, we can find our faith deepened and realize we are not alone. God, “our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble,” is the one who causes fear to dissipate and gives us courage to forge ahead through every adversity we may face.

Prayer: God of eternity, open our eyes to see that you are nearer than we can imagine, closer than a friend or brother. Amen.

Al Trucano* (Nebraska, USA)

*The author passed away before the publication of this issue.

READ Job 37:14-24

God's voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding.

— Job 37:5 (NIV)

When I became ill and my business failed, I was abandoned by people who were close to me. Some people thought that I must have committed a great sin and was being punished for it. Some people advised me to seek healing from another god. I lost hope and complained to God, “Why should I experience all these things? Why did you not immediately lift me up and recover my business?”

In the silence, God spoke to me through Elihu’s words in Job 37. After tragedies befell Job, most of Job’s friends came with a variety of advice and opinions. But Elihu talked about God’s power.

This scripture reminded me that we can see God’s power and glory in the universe through creation. God’s wisdom is unfathomable, and God does great things beyond our understanding. God restored Job and blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. (See Job 42:12.) The story of Job helped me to continue to trust in God despite my hardships. God also restored me and blessed me, as God wants to restore and bless all of us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can see God’s power and glory through creation.

Prayer: Dear God, teach us to see your glory and to give thanks for your faithful love and care. Amen.

Linda Chandra (Banten, Indonesia)

SAT
AUG 8
2020

PEOPLE OF PEACE

READ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

We are . . . Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

— 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NIV)

Last fall, my autistic son was struggling in school with an impatient, inexperienced teacher. After daily unpleasant encounters, he became anxious and began to lose his love for learning. As his main advocate, I attempted to communicate with the teacher for several months, only to be ignored.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today I will show God's love by responding peacefully.

of peace. I had become more focused on injustice than love, more intent on being right than seeking resolution. After I repented, God showed me that underneath the teacher's prickly, defensive reactions was a person leading a challenging classroom and having to constantly prove herself to keep her job. My heart was moved from irritation and outrage to compassion and understanding. I began to pray for this teacher daily, and God empowered me to respond to her with words of encouragement and peace. Over time, the teacher changed her approach, treating my son with greater patience, gentleness, and consideration for his challenges.

God asks us to be Christ's representatives to those around us. When others are angry, defensive, or hurt, we are called to respond as God does to us: with compassion, love, and peace. Through our prayers and Christlike responses, God's transforming love can heal the hearts of those around us and bring peace to all of us.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for helping us to respond in love to everyone we encounter today. Amen.

Sara Hague (Oregon, USA)

READ **Philippians 2:1-4**

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

— **1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)**

When I finished the sermon, I prepared to celebrate Holy Communion. Seeing Lina near the chancel, I asked her to assist me in serving the elements. After the worship service, Lina's mother cried with joy. Lina is Deaf and communicates using sign language. Her mother recalled how she endured distress because of her daughter's condition. But when she saw her assisting during Holy Communion, she understood that Lina communicates with God in a unique way and does it joyfully.

A faithful Christian, Lina is independent, caring, and valued in the church and in the workplace. She is filled with God's love and grace as she communicates through sign language to others who are deaf. Instead of being constrained by what she cannot do, Lina abides in the hope of one day being involved in formal ministry wherever God can use her gifts and her service.

God delights in the variety of ways we serve others, sharing the love of Christ with the world.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God rejoices in all our differing abilities.

Prayer: God of grace, grant us the wisdom to acknowledge and honor the gifts of all your people who seek to serve you with a joyful heart in unique and wonderful ways. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Juan Guerrero (Valle del Cauca, Colombia)

READ Hebrews 4:12-16

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

— Hebrews 4:16 (NIV)

Everything went wrong that week. Three managers usually ran the assisted-living floor, but one was on maternity leave and another needed emergency heart surgery.

Still, I managed all the resident and employee issues. But when two staff members called in sick, I was frantic to find enough staff. When the third employee called in sick, I broke down in tears and cried out, "I can't do this anymore!" A co-worker from another department heard me crying and

stopped to help. We talked, I cried, and she helped me piece a plan together.

When I became overwhelmed, I was blind to any solution to my problem. Yet

I thought I should handle it myself instead of asking for assistance. In the same way, we sometimes don't ask for God's help until we're overwhelmed with our burdens and fears. We forget that we don't have to handle life on our own.

I realized that I should have asked for God's guidance. After that, I began praying for God's wisdom each day. As I did so, I found I was less stressed when things didn't go as planned. I learned that I don't have to cry to get God's attention either — God hears even a whispered, "Help me, Father."

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the availability of your help. Remind us to rely on your power instead of our own. Amen.

Diana L. Walters (Tennessee, USA)

READ Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The father said to his older son, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

— Luke 15:32 (NRSV)

As the older of two brothers, I have always felt that the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son has been treated unfairly. To me, his objections are justified. I am sure that this feeling was due in part to the similarities between his story and my relationship with my brother. I was always the responsible, dutiful, stay-at-home child.

He was the spendthrift, wandering from home and hanging out with questionable company. I once gave him my old car because I felt sorry for him; he sold it and used the money for things I don't want to know about.

But just as in the parable, my brother eventually came to himself and returned home — literally and figuratively. He has been a recovering alcoholic for over a decade and has mentored many other recovering alcoholics.

Jesus' parable is about how to love unconditionally. God does not reject us for reckless living or for unforgiving hearts. God loves both the prodigal and the self-righteous. We are not told how the older brother responded to his father's plea for love. But we are invited to ponder how we would respond.

Prayer: God of mercy, when we have wandered away from your presence, call us back. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Michael A. Macdonald (North Carolina, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE ESTRANGED FROM THEIR FAMILIES 53

READ Isaiah 40:28-31

They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength.

— Isaiah 40:31 (KJV)

I hate waiting. For me waiting is wasting time. I want the plane to take off once I am seated. I expect the server to bring the food soon after I place my order at a restaurant. Waiting makes me feel angry, frustrated, even hopeless.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When I wait on the Lord,
I am not wasting time.

After my home was damaged by Hurricane Irma, my nephew said he would handle the repairs. But after I had waited two weeks, he still had not

begun. Having little damage to my home, I had thought my repairs would happen fast. But that was not the case; I had to wait. But as I waited, I learned that through the prophet Isaiah the Lord tells us that waiting can be a good thing. The prophet says, “They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength.”

Shifting my attitude from one of “impatiently waiting” to one of “waiting upon the Lord” has taught me that God is working while I am waiting. This perspective has opened my eyes to the many gifts my heavenly Father has given me since I learned to wait. These gifts include renewed strength and purpose for my life.

God works on a different timetable than ours. If we are open as we wait, God can bless and shape us into the people God wants us to be.

Prayer: Father God, teach us to wait upon you. Help us to know that you are always working for our good. Amen.

Berthille Laveist-Chittick (St. Maarten)

*Humans see only what is visible to the eyes,
but the LORD sees into the heart.*

— 1 Samuel 16:7 (CEB)

When our grandsons were ages 4 and 6, my husband underwent chemotherapy. We wondered how the outward changes in him would affect them. After a momentary look of concern, four-year-old Seth went running to his grandpa and entered into play as usual. Six-year-old Elliot said, “It’s okay, Grandpa, because you’re still the same inside.” From then on, they seemed oblivious to the outward changes. They simply basked in the love of the man they knew to be kind and caring.

Many changes can cause us to appear different to one another: illness, aging, genetics, choices in clothing, hairstyles, etc. If we form opinions about one another based only upon outward appearances, we may miss opportunities to perceive the beauty of a “gentle and quiet spirit” — the kind that is of “great worth in God’s sight” (1 Pet. 3:4, NIV).

How blessed we are that God looks upon our hearts! When we seek to value what is in the hearts of others, our hearts will be pleasing to God.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to look beyond our differences and to seek your image within one another. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I will try to value others the way God values me.

Sandra Sullivan (West Virginia, USA)

READ Psalm 40:1-10

The psalmist wrote, “[The LORD] lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.”

— Psalm 40:2 (NIV)

I was 89 years old when illness and depression forced me to enter a long-term care facility. There I faced the combined challenges of physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental exhaustion. Being so heavily dependent on others caused me to wonder if my lifetime of ministry as a pastor, chaplain, and counselor would help me now.

During that frightening, near-death journey, I found that my years of practicing what I was teaching others sustained me without

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God is as near as my latest breath.

my having to think about it. With great thanksgiving, I celebrated my ninetieth birthday with many friends in the facility.

On the day I was preparing to return home, a staff member said, “When you came in here you were half dead. Now look at you! You’re going home. What part did prayer and faith have in your healing?”

The question made me realize that prayer and faith are not new, additional, or spectacular emergency items that we use during crises. Physical breathing, spiritual believing, and praying without ceasing are ongoing practices essential to spiritual health that sustain us not just in times of crisis but every day.

Prayer: Kindhearted Jesus, make us aware of your presence in every circumstance. Amen.

Jack Albright (Kansas, USA)

DETOURS

SAT
AUG 15
2020

READ James 4:13-17

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

— Proverbs 19:21 (NIV)

My sister-in-law and I had great plans for our girls' getaway, and we had traveled hundreds of miles to our destination. We were going to take lots of early morning walks, enjoying the scenery. We were going to dip our toes in the ocean and breathe in the salty sea air. We also planned to tour a beautiful local park and see the swans there.

That was all cut short when, five minutes after we arrived, my sister-in-law missed a step coming out of the house and injured her knee. Instead of long walks, we spent long hours in the emergency room with X-rays and doctors. Our plans had to change. Instead of morning walks, we had morning talks on the porch. Instead of exploring a park, we explored each other's lives and grew closer as we sat and chatted. This was a major detour from what we had planned, but it became a precious time together.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I will trust God in the midst of unexpected changes.

We are often disappointed or frustrated when things don't go according to our plans, but I have learned in these times to trust that God will use them for good. And without fail, each detour has drawn me closer to God and often helped me grow in mind and spirit. Thankfully, every change in direction comes with an unchanging God who guides us through it.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to trust you no matter where life takes us. Give us peace in the midst of change. Amen.

Linda Fasking (Kentucky, USA)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE DEALING WITH A LIFE "DETOUR" 57

READ Luke 14:15-24

Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

— Luke 14:15 (NIV)

While I was in India staying with a woman named Nalini, a man named Kumar called round to help us organize a music workshop. Nalini invited him to stay for lunch. He declined graciously but did not leave. She set a place for him, and he

joined us at the table for a meal prepared by Nalini's daughter-in-law.

Kumar said, "Since my wife left me years ago, I've been eating out in restau-

rants. Each has its own 'taste,' but nothing as good as this. Whenever I'm asked to eat in someone's home, I always say no. But inwardly I'm longing for home-cooked meals." Nalini's daughter-in-law replied, "You must come often, Uncle." I marveled at her sincere, loving invitation to this man she had just met.

Jesus reminds us of the importance of warm invitations. He told the parable of a man who invited many guests to his feast in Luke 14. And in Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." A joyous welcome awaits whoever comes to Jesus. Why hesitate? Jesus loves all people to the utmost and longs for us to enter into a life-transforming relationship with him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for inviting us to your table. We come to you just as we are, asking you to live and reign in us. Amen.

Lynda Samuel (Scotland, United Kingdom)

READ Romans 8:31-39

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

— Romans 8:38-39 (KJV)

Hurricane Harvey, a Category Four storm, touched down on the Texas middle coast in August 2017. After four days of intense rains, some areas were deluged by more than 40 inches of water. The damage caused by the destructive and deadly storm shook America to its core.

On Monday after the storm, a Dallas newspaper reported that some people held Sunday worship services in an outdoor athletic facility in south Texas where Hurricane Harvey hit hardest. Those who attended said it was important for them to be at worship, despite the ravages of the storm. They were demonstrating their faith in Christ.

In his letter to the Roman church, Paul said that none of life's events can separate us from God's love. We are more than conquerors! The people in south Texas proved that devastating circumstances and calamities like Hurricane Harvey cannot prevent us from worshiping the true and living God. We will bless the Lord at all times. With our faith rooted and grounded in Christ, we are unshakable!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I will trust in the Lord
at all times.

Prayer: Living God, help us always to be steadfast, immovable, and abounding in your work and love at all times. In Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.

D. L. Ellis-Johnson (Texas, USA)

Prayer Focus: COMMUNITIES REBUILDING AFTER STORMS 59

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.

— Psalm 9:1 (NRSV)

Once again I couldn't sleep. Unresolved fear and anxiety became magnified by the dark quiet. Praying only made me focus on my troubles even more and question if God really cared.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God's love drives out my fears.

I snuggled under the covers, shut my eyes, and began remembering the good things that had happened that day. As I counted them, the bright spots added up: an email, a phone call, a friend having a good day. Peace slowly replaced fear. Still awake, I listed things I had accomplished that day, no matter how trivial: washing dishes, bringing in the mail. Contentment replaced restlessness.

Finally, I recited comforting Bible passages and prayers. By the end of this process, I was falling asleep, secure again that God really does care and is working in my life.

These three steps don't always cure insomnia, but with practice they help. When my brain thinks it's morning at 2 a.m., I eat a banana, drink some water, and start the three steps over again. It's amazing how much more positive I have become each evening. And the habit of listing the good things in my life sets a mood of praise that is truly relaxing.

Prayer: Dear God, may your love drive out our worries and give us peaceful sleep. Amen.

Genie Stoker (Arizona, USA)

READ Matthew 5:13-16

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

— Matthew 5:16 (NIV)

In my earliest ministry with the youth at a small church, I had to start from scratch with no resources. Although I had no idea what I was doing, I also knew that God could use the youth at this church. I believed I could connect with them and be their pastor.

One day, God opened up my opportunities when I was invited to join a group of neighborhood boys who were playing football. Reluctantly, I decided to play — but only because I knew that I needed to take part in their lives if they were ever going to consider anything I would say or do. Early on, the ball rolled right to me. I picked it up and started running. After colliding with one of the boys, I stumbled into the makeshift end zone. Almost immediately, all these boys became a part of the youth ministry at the church.

My experiences in youth ministry taught me that if I want people to be interested in what I say, I first need

to be interested in what they say and do. I have applied this principle in all my ministry: The good news of Jesus spreads first by embracing the lives of others. This is what I believe the incarnation of Jesus is truly all about.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I can spread the good news of Christ by taking interest in the lives of others.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, help us to reach into the lives of the people we meet every day to reflect to them the light of your love. Amen.

Cletus L. Hull III (Pennsylvania, USA)

*I have come that they may have life,
and have it to the full.*

— John 10:10 (NIV)

By late winter most of us have had enough of seeing bare, lifeless branches. Judging by the bigger picture, the color, warmth, and vibrance of spring seem far off. But if we go out into the garden and look at the smaller picture, we can see the beginnings of tiny shoots and the earliest signs of new life.

Something is happening after all.

Sometimes our lives are a bit like that. We feel much the same and look the same from a distance, but up close

God is at work in us — creating small changes. Little by little, God clothes us in more gifts and more love. We may summon up the courage to try something new. Often when we take that risk, we are surprised by the gifts that God has placed within us. We find that we are better at doing something than we thought we might be.

As we accept and enjoy these small changes, we sense God's love flourishing within us. Just as the first signs of spring are beginning to show in the garden, so God's spiritual gifts are taking root deep within us.

Prayer: Living Lord, thank you for the new growth within us. Help us to trust your presence within us as we risk doing new things for you. Amen.

Meg Mangan (New South Wales, Australia)

READ Matthew 6:9-13

Your will be done.

— Matthew 6:10 (NRSV)

Visiting Ruth in the hospital, I realized I had seen her many times at worship services but did not really know her. “My brain has been scanned so many times,” she said. I asked what she would like me to pray for. I was expecting to hear requests such as healing, relief of pain, or to go home soon. I was surprised when Ruth replied simply, “Whatever is God’s will and purpose for my being here, pray that it be fulfilled.”

She was living in pain and would rather have been enjoying time with her grand- and great-grandchildren, but in her prayer she put God’s will first. She loved and trusted the Lord with all her heart.

A few weeks after our first visit, Ruth died. I wish I had known her longer. In our short time together she had a great influence on me, especially on my prayer life. I think of her often as I pray for others and myself. Praying for God’s will and purpose to be fulfilled is fitting for all circumstances.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In all circumstances, I strive
to be able to tell God,
“Your will be done.”

Prayer: Sovereign God, help us always to put your will above our own desires as we pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:9-13, NIV). Amen.

Bob Peterson (Texas, USA)

SAT
AUG 22
2020

PRODUCING BEAUTY

READ Galatians 5:16-25

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

— Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV)

On a recent trip to the garden center, I was hoping to select a flowering plant that would continue to produce beautiful blossoms throughout the entire summer. The clerk told me to be sure to pick off the faded blossoms. That way the plant's energy would go into producing new flowers.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What everyday tasks can teach me the ways of God?

I began to think about my own life. Do I spend my time and energy projecting God's beauty in the world, or is my energy being wasted on things

that aren't life-giving? Do I harbor feelings of anger, jealousy, or resentment toward anyone? Do I waste my energy feeding my fears and doubts? When I began to take an inventory of my thoughts and feelings and how I spend my time, I came to realize that my negative thoughts are using energy that could be used to allow God's light to shine through me.

I followed the clerk's advice, and my plant produced beautiful blossoms throughout summer. Each time I picked off the faded blooms, I prayed for the wisdom and guidance to use my energy to produce beauty in the world through kindness, joy, and love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to learn from all of your creation how to spread the gospel message of peace, joy, and love. Amen.

Andrea Woronick (Connecticut, USA)

INVITATION TO WITNESS

READ Mark 16:9-20

**SUN
AUG 23
2020**

[Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

— Mark 16:15 (NRSV)

After I joined our church prayer fellowship, I shared the testimony of how I have been led closer to God. Then God cultivated within me a longing to share my faith in writing. At the time, however, I did not know where to start.

One day my husband came home with a devotional booklet called *Saat Teduh*, the Indonesian edition of *The Upper Room* daily devotional guide. As I began to read it, I immediately felt blessed by the testimonies of God's children from around the world. Though the reflections are brief, they are full of meaning, offering uplifting insights. *Saat Teduh* has become a companion to my Bible reading.

At the end of that issue, I noticed an invitation for readers to write their own reflections for possible publication. My thoughts quickly turned to thanksgiving because God had answered my longing to share my faith. Right away, I wrote some reflections and sent them to the editor. But even if my work is not published, I know that God loves to see us eager to share our faith for the uplifting of God's people.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to be your witnesses to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Emiriana Malelak-Bana (East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia)

Prayer Focus: THOSE AFRAID TO SHARE THEIR FAITH **65**

Jesus said to the ruler, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

— Luke 18:22 (NIV)

In 2017, I pleaded guilty to one count of bank fraud. Due to the felony conviction, I was required to surrender my CPA license, which meant that I had to physically return my certificate. As I began removing the certificate from its frame, I started to cry when I saw the label that read “Main Street

Framing.” My parents had been so proud of my accomplishment that they had my certificate framed in my hometown.

This experience made me think of the wealthy ruler in Luke 18. Up until this point, I had gone to church and lived a pretty straight-and-narrow life, but I had always put my career, success, and money before God.

If we are intent on living an abundant and successful life, we will place a greater value on God and our relationship with God than on our worldly success, career, material possessions, or anything else that stands between us and God. When we put God first and seek to follow God’s will in all that we do, we will have everything that we need. Only then can we experience true success.

Prayer: Dear God, shape our hearts and desires so that we can follow your will for our lives. Amen.

Steve Wakefield (Georgia, USA)

READ 1 Corinthians 12:5-6, 12-27

*There are different kinds of service,
but the same Lord.*

— 1 Corinthians 12:5 (NIV)

On vacation in Vienna, Austria, my husband and I took time to watch the famous Lipizzaner stallions. These beautiful horses performed elegant maneuvers, precise and controlled steps, and amazing leaps. I was enthralled by their magnificence.

Later, as we strolled through the old town of Vienna, I saw pairs of horses pulling carriages, giving tourists a relaxed view of the city. Their hooves clip-clopped on the pavement as they plodded along — no fancy maneuvers or leaps for them. However, while these horses lacked the majesty of the Lipizzaner stallions, they still served a valuable purpose.

Sometimes I wish I could be like the Lipizzaners, elegant and applauded for my accomplishments. But maybe God wants me to humbly pull a carriage, serving others without reward or recognition. I think of the neighbors who gave us a ride to the airport, the other neighbor caring for our cat while we were gone, the people at church who encourage us and make us feel welcome. I am grateful for these ordinary people serving God in quiet ways. They may gain little attention, but they receive great honor in God's eyes.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
How can I use my talents to
serve God today?

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to use the talents you have given us without looking for reward or recognition. Amen.

Susan Thogerson Maas (Oregon, USA)

Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

— Matthew 22:39 (NIV)

Being a perfectionist, I can be pretty hard on myself when things don't go just right. Often judgmental, condemning, and merciless thoughts about myself plague me. *Why can't I be the loving person I want to be all the time? Three out of five times just won't do!* On one particular day when I had snapped for the third time in a row at an unsuspecting loved one, the condemning thoughts were about to flow. Then a new thought interrupted: *You can't give what you don't have.*

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When I accept God's love for me, I can pour out that love on others.

It was as if God were telling me that if I could love myself the way God loves me, I would be able to more fully love others.

It had never occurred to me how much loving others depended on loving myself. And it had never occurred to me how much I didn't love myself. It was a time of intense soul-searching. *Does God condemn me? Is God merciless and unforgiving toward me? No.* I decided to suspend all thoughts about myself that didn't match God's thoughts of me. For the first time in a long time, I had genuine love for myself: forgiveness, grace, hope, peace, joy — and enough to share.

Although I continue to mess up at times, now only thoughts of forgiveness flow. I choose to keep on loving myself so that I will have an ample supply of God's love to give to others.

Prayer: Merciful God, help us to see ourselves and others the way you do — as your children worthy of love. Amen.

Amorelle Browne (Grenada)

Paul wrote, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

— 2 Timothy 4:7 (NIV)

I remember the day I witnessed my daughter's first marathon. While the grueling physical toll is evident in the bodies of the athletes, the mental and emotional strain is not so clear — at least to the spectators. After five or six miles, the runners are hitting their stride. At mile marker 13, they sigh in relief and hope. But at around 20 miles, runners often “hit the wall” and experience overwhelming exhaustion, wondering if they can continue. But still this challenge is not insurmountable for those with determination, adequate training, and the desire to finish one of the toughest races anyone can pursue.

Witnessing that marathon taught me something about living the Christian life. Through any challenge life brings, purpose, diligence, and the willingness to place ourselves in the hands of God will help us to finish the race set before us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
If we persevere in faith, God will carry us to the end of our life's race.

Prayer: Dear God, give us your strength in moments of weakness so that we can complete our life's race. In the name of your Son. Amen.

David Payne (Missouri, USA)

[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.

— Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV)

In the front yard, our brightly decorated birdhouse was home to a family of bluebirds. I was riveted to my binoculars as I watched the babies peer out one by one — some even hopping daringly onto the wooden edge of the birdhouse opening. Probably sometime later that day they would discover that they could fly.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I will be ready to take a leap of faith when God says it's time.

Is this the way God views my fledgling attempts to try new things? Does God get excited when I step out a little on faith and spread

my wings? I recently flew from North Carolina to Austria for a prayer conference. It was exciting and also scary to travel that far across the world by myself. Taking that somewhat frightening leap greatly deepened my faith and my prayer life.

God's mysterious gift of instinct moves in baby birds, leading them to stretch their wings and fly at exactly the right time. I pray to be given a similar inner direction when God wants me to try new areas of ministry or personal growth. May I always be willing to spread my wings and jump when God says it's time.

Prayer: Dear God, give us the courage to try new things as you lead us into deeper paths on our journey of faith. Amen.

Cynthia Harris (North Carolina, USA)

READ Matthew 25:31-46

Moses said, *“Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”*

— Deuteronomy 15:11 (NRSV)

Jesus' words in Matthew 25 remind me of the importance of caring for the needs of those around me. This passage helps me to remember that Christ lives around us, and although we cannot see him face-to-face, we can see him in the faces of others. And we can reflect Christ's love through our actions. Every day, we have the opportunity to reach out to those in need and show them God's love. Christ wants us to be God's hands to touch them, God's ears to listen to their cries, and God's heart to love them.

What a privilege it is to be able to give food to those who are hungry, to visit those who are sick or imprisoned, or to pray with and encourage those who feel discouraged! We can be answers to the prayers of those in need. God trusts that we will attend to the cries of others.

The excess that we have is someone's portion, placed in our hands by God. Let us give it willingly.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
When I give generously to others, I show them God's love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us see the ways we can care for the needs of others. Open our eyes to see Christ around us every day. Amen.

Muyiwa Benralph Olaiya (Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria)

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

READ Psalm 3:1-8

From the LORD comes deliverance.

— Psalm 3:8 (NIV)

Five years ago, my firstborn son was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. This life-threatening disease requires checking his blood sugar and dosing him with insulin several times a day. At the same time, my own body has begun to betray me. With a recent hysterectomy, an inoperable labral tear, and recurring migraines, I'm always struggling to keep my spirits up. These trials have made simple things, like getting a full night's sleep, much more difficult.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The Lord is strong enough to deliver me.

son's glucose level, I tossed and turned for an hour trying to get back to sleep. Finally, I slowly got out of bed. With my Bible in hand, I intended to read Leviticus but instead opened to an old bookmark that said: "LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" (Ps. 3:1). The writer of this psalm was not so different from me. Though not the same as mine, his problems were as numerous. In the midst of them he turned to God: "I call out to the LORD" (vs. 4). And he trusted God to help him: "From the LORD comes deliverance" (vs. 8). Through this passage, God showed me that I am not alone, and God can rescue me. No matter what our trials, God is faithful and will be present with us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for caring for us through all our trials. Amen.

Heidi Kupitz (Oregon, USA)

O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

— Isaiah 64:8 (NRSV)

During a trip to celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary, my wife and I had the opportunity to see a glassblower at work. It was fascinating to watch. He blew through the long tube to produce a bubble of molten glass and continued to grow and shape it through heat and pressure. He then added what appeared to be colored dust and eventually produced a beautiful bowl that we now have on our fireplace mantel.

This reminded me of the prophet Isaiah's words in which a similar process makes us beautiful and useful for God. While the glassblower added the "colored dust" to give the bowl its beauty, it was the heat and pressure together that formed its final shape and substance. I do not always understand or like the "pressures" or "heat" of life's tough times. But I believe that God uses them to make me the person God intends me to be. I believe in the love and goodness of God. When we place our lives in God's hands each day, we can trust that God is at work in us for our ultimate spiritual good and for God's ultimate glory.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The pressures of life allow
God to shape me.

Prayer: O God, help us to see every situation as an opportunity to become more like your Son, Jesus. Amen.

J. Leland Collins Jr. (Virginia, USA)

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

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

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

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

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

JULY 1: *God's Handwriting*

1. Describe the handwriting of a loved one. What do you think this person's handwriting reflects about their personality?
2. What reflections of God do you see around you? How can you learn more about God by studying the strokes of God's hands? How will you make time to study God's handiwork today?
3. Today's writer describes ways we can come to know God more. What other ways can you think of to grow closer to God? In what ways can these practices help you?
4. How do your relationships with others help you to see God's handiwork? How do your interactions with nature do this?

Do you find that you need to look intentionally to see reflections of God, or do they show up when you least expect them?

5. What do you hope to reflect to others? What can you do to intentionally reflect these qualities? How would your community change if everyone focused on reflecting God?

JULY 8: *Standing Up*

1. When have you chosen not to do something for someone and later regretted your decision? What do you wish you had done differently? How did you learn and grow from this experience?
2. Do you naturally feel pulled to defend and help others, or do you often need to convince yourself to step in? Why do you think this is? What helps you choose to aid others when you might prefer to stay out of the situation?
3. Name biblical characters who inspire you to reach out to those who are being bullied or need help. What do you admire about them? How do their examples affect your choices?
4. What small acts have you witnessed that have ultimately had a big impact on a person? What can you do to make a difference like that in someone's life?
5. In what ways do you reach out to and stand up for those in your community? How do your loved ones and your church encourage you in your efforts? How can you support others as they also reach out and stand up for those around them?

JULY 15: *Just as I Am*

1. Have others ever made you feel like you needed to change parts of your personality? If so, what brought you comfort during that time? How can you encourage someone who is experiencing similar pressures?
2. Do you think Christians should behave a certain way — calm and quiet, loud and inquisitive, or somewhere in between? Or do you think Christians should embrace their natural personality traits? How would your church community change if every member either embraced their natural personality or adopted a specific way of behaving?
3. Do you know who you are in God? If so, how has that helped you reach out to others? If not, what do you think will help you discover who you are in God?
4. What scriptures remind you of the importance of accepting

and loving others as they are? When you find it difficult to accept someone, what prayers help you overcome such feelings?

- How does it encourage you to know that God loves you even when you don't love yourself? What helps you remember that? How can you remind others that God loves them?

JULY 22: *Coming Near to God*

- Describe a time when you realized your need for a disciplined approach to a task or situation. How did changing your method help you reach your goal? How can you apply what you learned from that experience to other situations?
- What spiritual disciplines bring you closer to God? How do you remain committed when beginning a new spiritual practice? Do you think there is a time or place for spirituality without specific disciplines? Why or why not?
- What changes do you see in your life and your relationship with God when you direct your heart toward God? What happens when you lose focus on God? How do you refocus on your relationship with God when you get distracted?
- What does it look like when God comes near to you? How do you know when God is near? In what ways are you comforted by knowing that God is close?
- What spiritual disciplines does your church prioritize? What spiritual disciplines would you like to see more of in your congregation? How can you participate more actively in the spiritual practices your church offers?

JULY 29: *Taste and See*

- Today's writer remembers a special time with her family. What special times bring you closer to your family? Talk about a time spent with your family that is particularly memorable.
- Name some people whom you tend to avoid or overlook based on outward qualities or first impressions. How have you found these first impressions to be inaccurate? What can you do to help others see that they are valued?
- Have you ever been put off by something Jesus does in scripture? Why? What in the story challenges you most? What has the story taught you about how Jesus wants us to treat others?
- Describe a time when you tasted God's goodness. Did that

taste make you desire to follow Jesus? What does it look like for you to follow Jesus wherever he leads?

5. How can you share the goodness of God with others? What specific actions and services can you do for those in your community to give them a positive impression of Jesus?

AUGUST 5: *The Delight of Prayer*

1. If you have ever been part of a prayer chain, describe your experience. How did you see prayer working in your life and in the lives of others? How is praying as part of a group different from praying alone?
2. When have you felt distant from other Christians? What helped you reconnect with your Christian community?
3. What does it mean to you to “pray scripture” like today’s writer does? How do you prefer to pray? Describe how your prayer practice enriches your prayer life.
4. What sort of prayer outreach ministry does your church offer? How can you engage more fully with it? What new prayer ministry would you like your church to start?
5. Name some people in the Bible who remind you of the importance of prayer. What do you most admire about how these people prayed? How can you follow their examples?

AUGUST 12: *Waiting*

1. Do you dislike waiting as much as today’s writer? When has waiting been especially difficult for you? What does it mean to be “open as we wait”?
2. Describe a time when you had to adjust your attitude. What changes did you notice in yourself and your situation after the adjustment? How do you stay mindful of your attitude?
3. Does it ever feel like waiting on God is a waste of time? Why or why not? What scripture passages comfort you and remind you that God is always at work in your life? Why do these passages bring you comfort?
4. What does it look like for God to renew your strength? How do other Christians help to restore your strength? How can you help strengthen others when they are struggling?
5. In what ways can waiting patiently change your life? How can it change your church? How might it change the world? Name ways you can embrace waiting and encourage others to do so.

AUGUST 19: *Investing in Others*

1. Describe a time when you were invited to participate in something you didn't want to do. How did you respond? In what ways did your choice affect your relationships with others?
2. How do you feel toward someone when they take an interest in what interests you? How do you feel when someone shows no interest in what interests you? What do your reactions in these situations teach you about how you want to treat others?
3. What does it mean to invest in the lives of others? What spiritual practices help you make space for others in your heart and mind? How does investing in others enable you to share the love of Christ with them?
4. Name a story in the Bible that shows you what it means to embrace the lives of others. How can you apply that example to your life and the way you invest in others?
5. Who in your life serves as an example of investing in others? In what ways does this person enrich your life? How can you tell them how much you admire them and their example?

AUGUST 26: *Cycle of Love*

1. When your mind is filled with condemning thoughts, how do you change your perspective? What practices, prayers, or people help you remember to fill your mind with loving thoughts?
2. Have you ever felt unable to love others in the way you would like? What do you think prevents you from loving others? What might help you love others when you are struggling to?
3. In what ways does it comfort you to know that God loves you unconditionally? How does staying mindful of God's love change the way you love yourself and others?
4. How can you encourage someone and show them God's unconditional love? What prayers, scripture passages, words of encouragement, or companionship can you offer someone who needs God's love?
5. Name some Bible verses that remind you of the importance of love, forgiveness, grace, hope, peace, and joy. How can you incorporate these verses into your spiritual life? What practices can help you remember God's love for you?

WITNESS FROM A READER

As I was reading in *The Upper Room* about a man who wants to serve, even though he is older, I was reminded of one of the reasons these devotions are so valuable to me.

Hundreds of people over the years have been willing to share their struggles, their heartaches, and their joys with me. They tell me how they have turned to God in the hope and the expectation that God will help them in their circumstances. A 40-year-old woman hoping to adopt, parents whose child is desperately ill, a young college student having trouble in school; on and on they show how they rely on God's miraculous care. These words from people just like me and the Bible verses they select, fill my day with hope and peace, even when things aren't going very well.

So, if we start our day being reminded that we have this cloud of witnesses to the faith of our Lord, we can go out with confidence and assurance that God will be with us in everything we must do each day.

— Ken Claar* (Idaho, USA)

* Mr. Claar wrote the meditation published on July 19. (See p. 26).

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Romans 15:13 (CEB)

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MEET SOME OF OUR WRITERS

(Here and on p. 21.)



Ron L. Keller (p. 45) is a retired pastor. He enjoys candlemaking, travel, and leading groups in Bible study and singing.

Amorelle Browne (p. 68) is a wife, mother, musician, and writer. Family, food, and music are her favorite things.



Timothy Olumide (p. 22) is a community development enthusiast who promotes educational services in underserved areas.

After working as an engineer, Jeanne Gore (p. 20) began a second career as a construction coordinator.

Aftab Yunis Hakim (p. 39) and his wife are both seminary students. He loves to sing and play the guitar.



Lisa Scallio (p. 44) is a customer service representative in the insurance industry and has two grown sons. She likes to garden and looks forward to spending time in fellowship with her church family.

