

25 Days
of Advent Hope

In the Winter of Your Grief

Paige Van Meter Sturgeon

photography by

Sally Slotterback

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For Kimberly—
whose brave transparency in grieving the loss of her son, Dylan,
inspired the writing of this book.

For My parents—
Thank you for being my biggest fans.

It is said that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit,
because there is no winter there.

— John Bunyan

Dear Reader,

Originally, these pages were written as a daily message to encourage a friend of mine facing her first Holiday season while grieving the loss of her son. When I tried to find an advent devotional to buy for her, nothing I came across seemed appropriate. I had a prompting in my spirit to write her a page a day in December until Christmas Day. When I showed up early each morning to write it, I was often surprised at what God led me to write. My hope is that what I originally wrote for her would also encourage you.

A wise, elderly friend of mine would often say to me when I was sharing a difficult trial, “Dear-heart, you can’t force Spring to come when it’s Winter.” Winter may be the season of your heart whether it is December or not. When we are grieving, this is often when we can feel the most alone or misunderstood. You may not even know what is involved in the grieving process.

As a mental health therapist who has helped with grief groups for many years, I created my own definition of grief. *Grief* is the process of dealing with the complicated emotions surrounding your loss as well as adjusting to life without your loved one (or adjusting to your new circumstances such as grieving a divorce or diagnosis). Grieving involves intentionally working through many hard things. God’s grace (His power working in you) will help you more than anything. This grace began with Jesus coming in human form into our world to display God’s love for us. The more you know who God is, the more you can find comfort from Him. The word *Advent* means “to come”. The Christmas message is that Jesus came into our bleak, broken, and hurting world to bring the hope of His love to comfort us when life is hard. When life brings you down, you can choose to look up to Him.

It is a blessing for me to share photographs taken by Sally Slotterback. She has a true gift for capturing beauty in unexpected places during her travels throughout God’s world. I’ve included one of her photographs to enhance the theme of each day. There will also be a song suggested that you can listen to on YouTube.

The reason for including a photograph and songs is that all of our senses can work together to promote healing. Lighting a scented candle, listening to the song, absorbing the beauty of the photograph, and taking pen to paper to write out your prayers and thoughts can help you to move forward in your grief.

Each day’s reading will begin with praying words from the book of Psalms. Personalizing God’s word can strengthen our connection with the One who is able to carry us through all things. There is also a different theme for each week that focuses on who God is and on what He has promised for each of us. He is our Refuge (week one), our Redeemer (week two), our Restorer (week three) and our future Resurrection Hope (week four).

My prayer is that this devotional will help you to know that you are not alone and that God is always near and faithful in His love for you.

For His Glory,

Paige Van Meter Sturgeon



An Invitation

Bruges, Belgium

Jesus addressed the people: 'I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall wander in the dark; he shall have the light of life.'

John 8:12

Thou, Lord, makes my candle burn bright, and my God will lighten my darkness.

Psalm 18:28

The people living in darkness have seen a great light; and upon those living in the land of the shadow of death a new light has dawned.

Matthew 4:16

Week One, Day One—God is your Refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Opening Prayer from Psalm 27

Father God, Help us to seek you as our refuge in this life. One thing we ask of You. One thing we seek. Help us to be constant in seeking only You. 'Come,' into our hearts, help us to 'seek Your face.' We will seek Your face, O Lord. Please maintain our hope while hurting and be beside us this day. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

Advent is a time to intentionally invite God to come into our hearts as we light candles, read aspects of the Christmas story or worship Him with songs. This week we will focus on seeking God and coming to him for refuge when we're hurting. Peter Marshall, a Chaplain in the past to the US Senate, once said, "God is a gentleman. He will not go anywhere He is not invited."

Grieving a loss is hard in and of itself, but feeling alone while grieving can make it even worse. Often, those closest to us fail in providing comfort or company while we are hurting. You may even feel guilty that you are not "grieving right." Or, you may feel weary to be around others because you sense they are evaluating you as you are hurting. Loss can make you feel alone.

Whenever there is a storm, my golden retriever will whimper unless he is beside me and my hand is on him. When I remove my hand, he then paws at me until I put my hand back. His instinct is to seek the assurance of my presence as a refuge to calm him down.

This first week we will be learning that we can go to God and seek His presence to be beside us as a refuge when we need Him. A *refuge* is anything we seek out to ease our pain or distress. God has revealed Himself in the Bible as being a true refuge for safety or for comfort. In the book of Psalms, we read how God's people invited His help and sought Him out for refuge when their life was hard.

Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you with fainting heart; lift me up and set me upon a rock. For you have been my shelter, a tower for refuge from the enemy. Psalm 61:1-3

Jesus, You were not invited to come when you were born but You came anyway. Thank you for coming. You knew the world needed You as a refuge. Thank you for coming so that we could then come to Your Father as a refuge of comfort while still living in this broken world.

For Further Reflection

Read Isaiah 7:14, a prophecy about Jesus coming as Immanuel (which means God with us). Using a journal along with this devotional can help you to move forward and provide space to process your loss or to write out your prayers. God's presence can come as your refuge today.

Songs—*O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, *Joshua Aaron live in Jerusalem* on YouTube.
Oh Come All Ye Faithful, *Casting Crowns* available on YouTube.



Come Unto Me

Swaledale, England

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice
and opens the door, I will come in.*

Revelation 3:20

*Come to me, all whose work is hard,
whose load is heavy; and I will give you relief.*

Matthew 11:28-29

Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.

Psalms 62:8

Week One, Day Two—God is your Refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 121

Lord, we lift up our eyes to You, where else can we find help? Help comes only from You, the maker of heaven and earth. Please guard us against all evil; Please guard our body and soul. May the Lord guard our going and our coming, now and forevermore.

Devotion

We can often neglect our health and choose many things as a false refuge when we're hurting. Elijah was a great prophet who you can read about in I Kings, chapter 19. We learn how his pain affected both his physical and emotional health. He failed to seek God's presence as a refuge when he was hurting but God's help still came to him.

But he himself (Elijah) went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, "It is enough! Now, Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!" Then as he lay and slept under a broom tree, suddenly an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." I Kings 19:4-5.

An angel reminds Elijah to care for his physical needs. Notice that nothing was said about him being in emotional pain. The angel begins helping by taking care of Elijah's physical needs and leading him to a cave for refuge and rest. After Elijah was in a better place physically, he could then receive God's new plan for his future.

Once, I took a cuckoo clock in for repairs because the pendulum would go for a while and then stop ticking. This clock works manually without batteries using weights that lower as it keeps going. The repairman informed me that if the clock was even slightly off balance on the wall then it would not be able to tick for long. Not meeting your physical and spiritual needs can leave you unbalanced and unable to work well for long in connecting with God or with others.

Christmas is a time when we align our hearts with the message of hope that Jesus came to bring to us. Our spirits need this vision of grace as food for our souls. Caring for our physical needs and seeking God as a refuge will help us remember the true meaning of Christmas.

Lord, Please help us to seek You first as our refuge and our help this day. Convict us by Your Spirit when we try to create our own futile sources of help instead of turning to You. Grant us Your wisdom and grace to become more aware of unhealthy ways that we cope with our pain.

For Further Reflection

Read the entire story of Elijah in I Kings, chapter 19. How well are you caring for your physical and spiritual needs? Both your body and spirit need more care to bear the extra burden of your grief. Remember today to eat regular meals even if you don't feel hungry and to try to rest when you can. Seek God out more this day in prayer, Bible reading, or enjoying His creation.

Song— *A Prayer for the Grieving at Christmas*, by I Believe Videos on YouTube.



Rock of Refuge

Guimarães, Portugal

Be my strong refuge, to which I may resort continually; You have given the command to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress.

Psalm 71:3

My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved.

Psalm 62:5-6

What then of the man who hears these words of mine and acts upon them? He is like a man who had the sense to build his house on rock. The rain came down, the floods rose, the wind blew, and beat upon that house; but it did not fall, because its foundations were on rock.

Matthew 7: 24-25

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. Though its waters roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with its swelling.

Psalm 46:1-2

Week One, Day Three—God is your Refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 34

Thank you, Lord, that You are near to us when we are broken-hearted. Come, Lord Jesus, we invite You now to come near to us. Please be our refuge and our help during this day.

Devotion

Did you know that the enemy will use anything to separate you from the love of God and from the love of people in your life? I heard someone say once, "the enemy knows no low blow." Nothing is off limits for him to use to spread darkness over your life. He will whisper his lies in your thought life to get you to believe that no one cares or that you are a burden to others as you grieve. He will tempt you to withdraw from people and to withdraw from God. His ultimate goal is to stop you from contributing any good for God's kingdom. It's good to remember that feelings are not always true. We need to find refuge in scripture when our feelings promote lies.

Do you feel alone? God says: "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Matthew 28:20). Do you wonder why you have so many troubles and trials? Jesus says: "In this world you will have trouble but be of good cheer for I have overcome this world" (John 16:33). Do you feel separated from God's love? The apostle Paul tells us nothing can separate us from God's love.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword . . . Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:35-39.

The Christmas message reveals that God does not want to be separated from us. He sent Jesus to demonstrate His great love and desire to be near us. Jesus came to be our refuge.

Heavenly Father, thank you that we can be real with you about our struggles. Please increase our faith to know your great love for us. Would you heal our hearts so that we can receive your love and come to you for refuge when times are hard? Please help us to recognize when our feelings are lies that the enemy is using to separate us emotionally from you. Thank you that your truth is that nothing can separate us from your love. Grant us your grace to test every thought and feeling to the truth of your word. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Find scriptures about God's steadfast love for you. Be filled up with this love so that you can protect yourself from the lies of the enemy. Emotional storms and trials come and go but remember the rainbow is a symbol of God's love that is still there after a storm.

Songs—*God With Us*, *We are Messengers* (with lyrics) on YouTube.



The Promise

Snakelum Point, Washington

I will sing the story of thy love, O Lord, forever; I will proclaim thy faithfulness to all generations. Thy true love is firm as the ancient earth, thy faithfulness fixed as the heavens. Psalm 89:1-2

For thy true love stands high above me; thou has rescued my soul from the depths of hell . . . Thou, Lord, art God, compassionate and gracious, forbearing, ever constant and true. Psalm 86:13, 15

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.
Psalm 139:23

Week One, Day Four—God is your Refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 17

Father God, Please show us how marvelous your true love can be. Keep us like the apple of your eye, and hide us in the shadow of your wings. Be our comfort and true refuge this day.

Devotion

J.R.R. Tolkien once said, "Evil is anything that prevents you from being who God created you to be." Grief can be a strong influence to bend us down and prevent us from being the person that God intended us to be.

Once there was a pine tree by my house that was bent over from an ice storm. It was alive but couldn't stand tall again because of the weight of its branches. Using bungee cords, I attached it to a beam by my house. Soon, it was able to point up towards the sky again. When we are bent down in grief, this can cause us to point in the wrong direction too. If we are supported well in our suffering, this doesn't have to happen.

I know a woman who tragically lost her daughter. She told me that she prayed, "Lord, don't let this pain be wasted." She invited God to support her in her pain and also to use her pain for His good. She helped to change a law for more than one person to give a statement to the court as the victim of a crime. She has also lead grief groups for many years at her church. Her pain has not been wasted. She did not let the weight of her grief prevent God from using her.

When we have gone through hard times and maintained our faith, this can be the greatest testimony to others about God and about His love for us. His love heals. Christmas is about that healing victory. Jesus came to be the ultimate bungee cord to support us all.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 2 Corinthians 1:4

Heavenly Father, This life is so hard and without your support it is unbearable. Please help us to know how to abide in You this day as our refuge. Be with us in our darkest places by shining your light of love within us. Help us to be who You created us to be. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Do you need more support from God and from others? Be intentional to seek out support. Consider finding a grief group at a local church (such as Griefshare) or an online group to connect with people who are also grieving. Reflect on how you can help others even as you are hurting. This can provide a reprieve from your own situation. When you can be a light to others even in the midst of your own situation, you are more fully rooted and growing into who God created you to be. Try to think of a ministry or a person that you could bless today.

Song—*Oh Christmas Tree* (Panflute) by Glen Hoban on Youtube.



Still Standing

Canadian Rockies

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:14-19

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

Psalms 46: 1-3

Week One, Day Five—God is your Refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 37

Father God, Your word says that You are a refuge in time of trouble and that You promise to help us, to deliver us, and to save us when we seek shelter with You. Bless us to receive this truth today. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

God is always able to creatively show that He is a refuge for us in the midst of our troubles. One of my favorite examples of God showing up in the darkness of someone's life is found in a story told by Corrie Ten Boom, a holocaust survivor from WWII. She gives an account of experiencing God's care for her by receiving a small comfort in horrific circumstances. Take a moment to read her story on the following page.

In this story, God didn't remove Corrie from her circumstances at the concentration camp. He did, however, show His love for her by helping her life there to be more bearable. Corrie later became one of the most influential female Christian authors and speakers who ever lived. If she hadn't had those experiences of suffering, she would not have impacted millions of people with her own stories of hope, forgiveness, and of seeing God's presence in all circumstances.

God promises that He can "work all things together for good for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:28). This doesn't mean that the things that happen to us are good, but that God can bring good out of it if we are open to His work in our lives.

The Christmas message can bless us to know that God wants us to celebrate having His presence as a relief while living in hard times. He uses His created world and His people to bless us with beauty, or with kindness to give us added strength to keep going. Christmas decorations are able to cheer up a bleak winter landscape, for instance. God can even use our present pain as a funnel for His light to shine through us if we allow Him room in our hearts to work in us for His good. Don't turn Him away. Make room for Him in your life today.

Heavenly Father, Help us to see the coming of Jesus for what it truly is—Your gift brought down to a broken world. Your light in the darkness. Your hope that there is more beyond this life and this world. Soften our hearts, open our eyes and help us to truly hear You, Lord. Please help us to make room for You in our hearts so that we can see Your blessings this day. Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

When we are busy or hurting, it's easy to miss seeing God's blessings in our lives. Now more than ever times of quiet reflection and prayer are needed. Write a prayer asking God to bless you this day and to help you to see His blessings. If you are keeping a journal, consider ending your writing by recording any blessings that come to mind. Try to form a new habit of looking for blessings and writing them down each day.

Song—*No Room*, by Evie. *Born on that Day* by Matt Maher both available on YouTube.

Corrie's prison miracle

During World War II Betsie ten Boom died in a Nazi prison camp. She and her sister, Corrie, had been sent there because they had been caught hiding Jews in their Dutch home. Years after the war, Corrie wrote about an answer to prayer regarding a seemingly insignificant item. Betsie's specific prayer and mustard-seed faith is still an inspiration.

In her words:

I will tell you something that happened when I was a prisoner in a concentration camp with my sister, Betsie. One morning I had a terrible cold, and I said to Betsie, "What can I do? I have no handkerchief."

"Pray," she said. I smiled, but she prayed, "Father, Corrie has got a cold, and she has no handkerchief. Will you give her one in Jesus' name, Amen."

I could not help laughing, but as she said "Amen," I heard my name called. I went to the window, and there stood my friend who worked in the prison hospital.

"Quickly, quickly! Take this little package; it is a little present for you." I opened the package, and inside was a handkerchief.

"Why in the world did you bring me this? Did I ask you for it? Did you know that I have a cold?"

"No, but I was folding handkerchiefs in the hospital, and a voice in my heart said, 'Take one to Corrie ten Boom.'"

What a miracle! Can you understand what that handkerchief told me at that moment? It told me that in heaven there is a loving Father who hears when one of his children on this very small planet asks for an impossible little thing--a handkerchief. And that heavenly Father tells one of his other children to take one to Corrie ten Boom.

God answers prayers, and God's promises are a greater reality than our problems.

From: *Miracles Happen When You Pray* by Quin Sherrer, 1997, pag. 26, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Isaiah 61:3

And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; For you, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Psalms 9:10

Week One, Day Six—God is your refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 94

Lord, May your love hold us up when we feel that we are slipping. Anxious thoughts may fill our hearts, but Your presence is our comfort. For You alone are our strong tower and our rock of refuge this day. Amen.

Devotion

We will be looking at the person of Mary today. She was the first one to hear God's plan that would later become the story that we celebrate during Christmas.

And coming to her, the Angel said, "Hail, full of grace. The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God, Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. Luke 1:26-33

Mary could not have understood fully what this message meant or why she was chosen to be a part of God's plan. Yet, she accepted the task of becoming the mother of God's son. It would have been easy for her to give into fear about this. She would be vulnerable to Joseph's reaction and her community would not make things easy for her. She could have even been stoned for adultery in that time. Yet, we find in the Bible her praise to God for the opportunity to be His servant in this world. Her words are often referred to as *The Magnificat* or the Song of Mary. The verses are printed on the following page. Take a moment to read them.

Mary's faith in God allowed her to let Him take care of all the details of her life. This was how she was able to write a song of praise instead of giving in to the fear of all the unanswered questions. We are so self-sufficient in our times that it can be difficult to relinquish our circumstances to God or to see any good that could come from the pain and loss that we are facing now. The first Christmas was filled with trials and difficulties but God's plan was fulfilled.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for the example of Mary. She showed us what it looked like to accept your will and to submit to your plan. Please help us by your grace to also relinquish our lives to You. Increase our faith that You are able to bring good even out of the darkest of circumstances. Thank you that you are always beside us. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Going through grief is not something that we would plan for our lives. Would you be willing to accept your circumstances like Mary did and let God use you as His servant? Pain doesn't have to be wasted if we let God use it for His purposes. Consider writing or saying a prayer inviting Him to "be mighty on your behalf" today. Continue to look for blessings this day.

Song—*He who is Mighty, Sovereign Grace* or *Mary did you know*, Kenny Rogers on YouTube.



Mother of Might

Porto, Portugal

And Mary said: My soul magnify the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to His seed forever. Luke 1:46-55

Week One, Day Seven—God is your refuge

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 95

Father God, Help us to come to You in worship and to kneel before You, the Lord who made us. For You alone are our God, and we are your people. We are the flock that You shepherd. Help us to know your power and to listen to your voice to lead us today. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

There is nothing random about how God reveals Himself to man. He chose to tell shepherds about the birth of Jesus. It was nighttime and they were still faithfully watching over their sheep. The people of their day did not think much of shepherds. Yet, the angel assures them they have good news for "all people." *All people* is inclusive of everyone, everywhere. The shepherds later became the first evangelists for Jesus. When they found the baby Jesus, like the angels, they wanted to share the good news with anyone they met.

Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. Luke 2:17-18

Jesus later describes himself as "The Good Shepherd." He is teaching through an analogy that there are two shepherds in this world. The false shepherd is a thief who wants to lead our souls to hopelessness and to give us death and eternal separation from God. The true Shepherd leads us to abundant life and to a restored relationship with God.

Christmas is the celebration of the arrival of this hope. Now, we live in the land "of the shadow of death" but praise God that a new "light has dawned" (see Matthew 4:16). Jesus came from heaven to earth to be both our Refuge and our Shepherd to lead us out of this world and into His kingdom one day.

Heavenly Father, Help us to hear your voice. Increase our faith so that You can lead us through our darkest times. Thank you that You want to be our protective shepherd as we journey through this life. Grant us insight into your word so that we can hear your voice and follow You wherever You wish us to go. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Psalm 23 is familiar to many people. Try to read it as a personal promise to you. Reflect on what it would look like for you to follow your Good Shepherd more fully. Hearing His voice means taking time to be still, and to listen to His word speaking into your life. Consider writing a prayer to God inviting Him to lead you moment by moment and to be your shepherd for His glory all of your days. Record any blessings that come to mind.

Song— *Shepherds Song at Christmas* available on Youtube.



The Good Shepherd

Dolomites, Italy

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people."

Luke 2:8-10

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep (refuge). All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

John 10: 7-11

For He is our God, we are His people, we the flock He shepherds. You shall know His power today if you will listen to His voice. Psalm 95: 7

Week Two, Day Eight—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 107

Thank you, Lord, that we can cry out to You and that You will save us from our distress in this world. You sent your word to heal us and to bring us out alive from the pit of death. May we receive this gift of your enduring love and recognize the marvelous things that you have done for men. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

This past week we focused on seeking God as a refuge when we're hurting. Faith in God is where true hope, true relief and true help can be found as we live in this fallen, broken world. Things are not as they are supposed to be. We, ourselves, are not as we are supposed to be. We need a place to run to for safety and for help, but we also need someone to rescue us from the darkness in ourselves. We need a redeemer. This second week, we will be focusing on how God sent Jesus to redeem us. This is the Christmas message of hope available to anyone willing to receive it. A 'redeemer' is defined as "a person who brings goodness, or honor, to someone again" (Learners Dictionary). We cannot fix ourselves or approach a holy God.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Romans 3:23-24.

The Matchless Pearl is a story that demonstrates the meaning of God's Christmas gift that was given to redeem us. You can read it by searching online for "the matchless pearl story by inspire 21." We can do nothing to earn this gift but we do have to choose to receive it.

Heavenly Father, Thank you that You can be our refuge in this world full of troubles. Thank you that You also sent Jesus to redeem us so that we could be a part of your everlasting kingdom. Please help us to understand that we need Jesus as our Savior to redeem us. Grant us the grace needed to fully appreciate this great gift. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

In order for God to become our Redeemer, we must first accept this gift. When a person is baptized, they often recite a version of this prayer. "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and I accept Him as my Lord and Savior." When we make this statement of faith, God's redeeming light and grace will begin to grow within us and guide us. When life is hard, it may feel as if you're in a fog and unable to see the path that you should go. May God's redeeming light help you to find your way. Continue to record any blessings that come to mind.

Story—The Matchless Pearl—search online with the words Inspire 21

Songs—*Come, Oh Redeemer, Come* by Fernando Ortega and *Is He Worthy* by Andrew Peterson both available on YouTube.



Redeeming Light

Devon, England

Our redeemer, the Lord of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel.
Isaiah 47:4

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock (refuge) and my redeemer.
Psalm 19:14

Rise up, be our help, and redeem us for the sake of your lovingkindness.
Psalm 44:26

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as (His) sons.
Galatians 4:4-5

Week Two, Day Nine—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 119

Heavenly Father, Let your unfailing love comfort us today for You have promised to show compassion to us that we may live. Let Your Word be the lamp that guides our feet and the light that shows your path. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

In hard times, our worst selves often come out because of being in pain. We don't want bitterness or resentment toward God or towards others to control us. God alone is able to transform our attitudes, our feelings and our thoughts. We just have to be willing for Him to do this work (see Philippians 1:6). We need to be aware of the subtleties of darkness in our thoughts and invite God's grace to shine His light to dispel that darkness (see 1 John 1:19).

He is a holy God, and every time we give in to our darker nature, it is a little death or separation from Him. Fortunately, when you ask for forgiveness, you can be made new over and over again without limit. Jesus wasn't our Savior just once in our lives when we chose to believe in Him. He is our Redeemer who reconciles us to God each minute of our lives as we confess our mistakes to Him. The reason this is important is that when we allow God to do this, then we become Christians willing to love sacrificially and to serve others. God's light is able to shine in and through us. Our resentments and unconfessed sin are like pulling the shades down on all of our windows. We look and act like an unwelcoming place.

Christmas is about celebrating God sending Jesus into the darkness of this world. Jesus showed us how to shine by loving God (with all our hearts) and by loving others (as we love ourselves). Jesus had all his shades open and the light of his Spirit fully shining God's love onto others. No one was exempt from being blessed by His light. We, in turn, should strive to shine.

'Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said, 'What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?' He replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.' 'That is the right answer,' said Jesus; 'do that and you will live.' Luke 10:27-28

Lord, when we're hurting, it's hard to think of anyone else but ourselves. Please open our eyes to see the hurting people around us. Help us to be willing to be a light of love to others regardless of how we're doing. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Reflect or write in your journal about anything that may be preventing you from letting God's light of love shine through you. Write or say a prayer to release your life to God to be used to bless others. When we are alert to look for ways to encourage someone else, this often helps our own hearts to heal. Continue to try to recognize and record your blessings.

Song— *This Little Light of Mine*, with lyrics, Addison Road on YouTube.



Still Shining

Canadian Rockies

All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:15

You are light for all the world. A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it gives light unto all that are in the house. And you, like the lamp, must shed light among your fellows, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to your father in heaven. Matthew 5:14-16

For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

Psalm 56:13

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

John 8:12

Week Two, Day 10—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 102

Father God, Thank you that you looked down upon us and heard our groans as prisoners and You came to release those condemned to death. We praise you for your great love for us.

Devotion

God is a holy God. Under His law, our choices cause eternal separation from Him. Yet, God loved us so much that He became the solution to this problem. He exchanged places with us. He redeemed us, doing what we could never do for ourselves. One blameless man came to show God's love for us by dying to bring peace and fellowship between God and man again.

There is a good representation of this in the book by C.S. Lewis, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It shows what Aslan (the lion Christ figure) had to do to save Edmund from slavery and death by the white witch. She had earned her right to have him by his betrayal of his family and past desire for her false pleasures. Edmund represents us all. We all have chosen to be slaves to sin and have been captives in the darkness of an enemy's realm. The ruler of that sinful kingdom also has a right to enslave us. This is how Lewis portrays this truth in his story.

“Have you forgotten the Deep Magic?” Asked the witch. “Let us say I have forgotten it,” answered Aslan gravely. “Tell us of this deep magic.” “Tell you?” Said the witch, her voice growing suddenly shriller. “Tell you what is written on that very Table of Stone which stands beside us? . . . You at least know the magic which the Emperor (God figure) put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill. “It is very true,” said Aslan; “I do not deny it.” (Lewis, C.S., *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, 138-39)

Aslan then makes a deal to exchange his life for Edmund's life. The queen accepts this deal. Jesus came to exchange His life for ours. Christmas is about God coming to rescue us from our bondage to sin. He became the sacrifice of atonement for all of our wrongdoing. He redeemed us so that we wouldn't remain enslaved to darkness, but instead receive the light of His love.

Heavenly Father, Help us understand the depth of your love in sending Jesus as our Redeemer. Grant us wisdom and strength to live out our days in a manner where your light of love shines through us. Help us to truly appreciate the meaning of Christmas. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Do you fully understand the gospel as the light of pure grace and love shining brightly in this dark world? Accepting this love would be the greatest source of comfort that you could receive. Is there anything separating you from having a relationship with Him? Continue to reflect or record any blessings that come to mind.

Song—Search for: *Edmund—How Deep the Father's Love for Us* available on Youtube.



Far from the Flock

Devon Countryside, England

He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:3-6

Week Two, Day Eleven—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 90

Father God, Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. Grant us Your perspective even in this season of loss, we pray.

Devotion

Once I had a job as a mental health therapist where I couldn't choose my community as I lived and worked at an Outward Bound program for juvenile delinquents on Cape Cod. It felt like we were a clan of exiled tourists wandering the trails used also by vacationers. At the sight of us, the discomfort was obvious as people eyed our misfit group of youth wearing the same clothes. Our presence wasn't welcome. The Christmas story is filled with people who's presence wasn't welcome beginning with Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. God can gather unlikely people together for His purposes and unite them together to be a part of His community. The church should reflect God's intent to bring all people together. He'll receive the lowly shepherd along with the regal wise men. The world wants to segregate and separate communities. The Lord wants to unite people in His love and change our rigid perspectives about Him or about others.

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Luke 2:15

When the wise men found baby Jesus, they were also changed by this experience.

The star which they had seen at its rising went ahead of them until it stopped above the place where the child lay. At the sight of the star they were overjoyed. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and bowed to the ground in homage to him. Matthew 2:9-11

God alone can gather unlikely people together. He wants us all to be changed by the meaning of Christmas and to have an encounter with Him that would bless us with a new perspective. May you ponder this great love that He hopes will connect you to Him and to all of mankind.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for being the Author of our story. Increase our faith that You can bring good out of each chapter of our lives. Grant us grace to have a new perspective on how to live out our days and to be open to new communities, Lord, we pray. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Have you observed that others are uncomfortable being around you as you grieve? Instead of being discouraged, forgive them and be open to pursue new communities (like support groups) where each person both receives and gives comfort to others. Record blessings in your journal.

Song— *Wexford Carol* by Alison Kraus (sunflower8926) on YouTube.



God's Gathering

Lisboa, Portugal

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the all-merciful Father, the God whose consolation never fails us! He comforts us in all our troubles, so that we in turn may be able to comfort others in any trouble of theirs and to share with them the consolation we ourselves receive from God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Week Two, Day Twelve—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 25

Lead us, Oh Lord, in Your truth. Teach us for You are the Redeemer, the God of our salvation.

Devotion

People throughout time have tried to do penance to atone for a wrong-doing but our penance means nothing to God. There is nothing we could do for ourselves to make up for our sin. In fact, it puts us in God's place to think that we know how to make things right.

The same is true for revenge or for unforgiveness. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord (see Deuteronomy 32:35). We can relinquish both our faults and the faults of others to Him.

Praise God that we have a Redeemer to free us by forgiving our sins, and a Redeemer to help us to forgive the sins of others. Christmas is about God sending Jesus to grant us the freedom to receive His love. We should then use that love to bless others.

But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. Matthew 5:44

In the Movie, *The Mission*, Robert DeNiro portrays a character in the 1740's who was a slave trader that kidnapped natives to sell. Once, in a fit of jealous rage, he also kills his brother. This sends him on a journey to try to make penance for his sins. He attaches a thick rope and a bundle of heavy armor to drag behind him as he treks through the wilderness to go to the people he had once captured as slaves. He knows they may kill him when they see him, but he's ready to accept any fate.

The Christmas story is about God granting us a new fate of life instead of death for our sins. Jesus came as our Redeemer to fulfill the requirement needed to restore our relationship with God. This is a gift worth celebrating.

Heavenly Father, Thank you for your grace to forgive us. Help us also to forgive others. Thank you for your redeeming love. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Write or reflect on any reactions you had to seeing the movie clip. Do you carry any burdens of guilt, resentment or bitterness regarding your mistakes or the mistakes of others? Write or say a prayer relinquishing this burden to God. Continue to record any blessings that come to mind.

Movie Clip & Song

The Mission (Redemption scene) on YouTube (the longer version with the theme song).
Amazing Grace by Carrie Underwood with lyrics available on YouTube.



Winter Wanderer

Canadian Rockies

For he rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:13-14

Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ. For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you.

1 Peter 1:18-21

Week Two, Day Thirteen—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 107

We give thanks to You, Lord, for You are good. Your faithful love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord proclaim that He has redeemed them from the enemy. Amen.

Devotion

The first Christmas was not an easy time for Joseph. In the gospel of Matthew, we learn about his internal struggle with the situation with Mary.

But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save His people from their sins.' Matthew 1:20-22

Joseph was one of the first people to be told who Jesus would be—a *Redeemer* who would "save His people from their sins." We can assume that Joseph did not want to start his married life to Mary with her pregnant. Like Mary, what God was asking of him would be hard. He had to relinquish his pain and humiliation about her situation in order to submit to God's will and plan for his life. We are all called to do the same. Every moment is a battle internally for "My will be done," or "Thy will be done". We have heard from the angels in the Christmas story about who Jesus would be for mankind—a Redeemer, a Savior, and a King. When Jesus grows up, what does He declare himself to be?

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" John 11:25-26

Jesus is speaking to Martha as she grieves the loss of her brother. He is reminding her of the hope His redemption will bring. He redeems us so that we can have everlasting life. Later, her sister, Mary, approaches him weeping. He sees her sorrow and we are told, "Jesus wept." This is the shortest verse in the Bible but it has great meaning. Jesus has compassion on those grieving and He hates death also. He came to put an end to death and to sorrow by offering eternal life to those who will accept it. At Christmas, we have a lot to celebrate. We have the future hope of no more death or grief and eternal life with Him.

Heavenly Father, Please increase our faith to accept you as our Redeemer. Help us to see you as our hope of salvation even in our darkest days. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Like Joseph, God's plan for us is often not what we would have chosen for ourselves. Consider writing or saying a prayer asking God to help you to live His plan for your life. Take a moment to reflect or write your blessings.

Song—*Joseph's Lullaby* by MercyMe available on YouTube.



A Hopeful Horizon

Bandon, Oregon

Since therefore we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the son of God, let us hold fast to the religion we profess. For ours is not a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who, because of his likeness to us, has been tested in every way, only without sin. Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious God, where we may receive mercy and in his grace find help in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

1 Peter 1:3

He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Titus 3:5

Week Two, Day Fourteen—God is our Redeemer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 30

We give thanks to you, Lord. We know that in your anger there is anxiety but to have your favor is to have life. Thank you that our tears may linger at nightfall, but joy comes in the morning because You are our redeemer.

Devotion

One winter night, meteor showers were predicted. When I went out before dawn and gazed upwards, there was a haze over all the sky. Not even a regular star could be seen. It took faith for me to believe that there really was a meteor shower happening. I had to trust that the weather reports were correct even when I couldn't see it.

The Christmas story can be like the meteor shower that I couldn't see. There were a lot of reports written about what happened historically when Jesus was born. There were eye witnesses and different accounts of people experiencing the good news of Jesus coming into our world. Still, the vast majority of people then and now still have to decide if they will accept and believe that it happened.

In my astronomy class in college, there was one term that stuck with me—the word *parallax*. In astronomy, it means that the night sky looks different based on your location on earth. The stars and planets are still in the same place but where you stand looking up to see them affects what you see. During hard times, our pain can also obstruct our view. Yet, by faith we can choose to believe there is more going on eternally than what we can see or experience. All of the Christmas stories and symbols reveal that the miraculous still exists. Angels speak to the shepherds about God's plan. A bright star guides wise men to seek a new king. This Christmas story is about God's glory showering down on mankind in the person of Jesus.

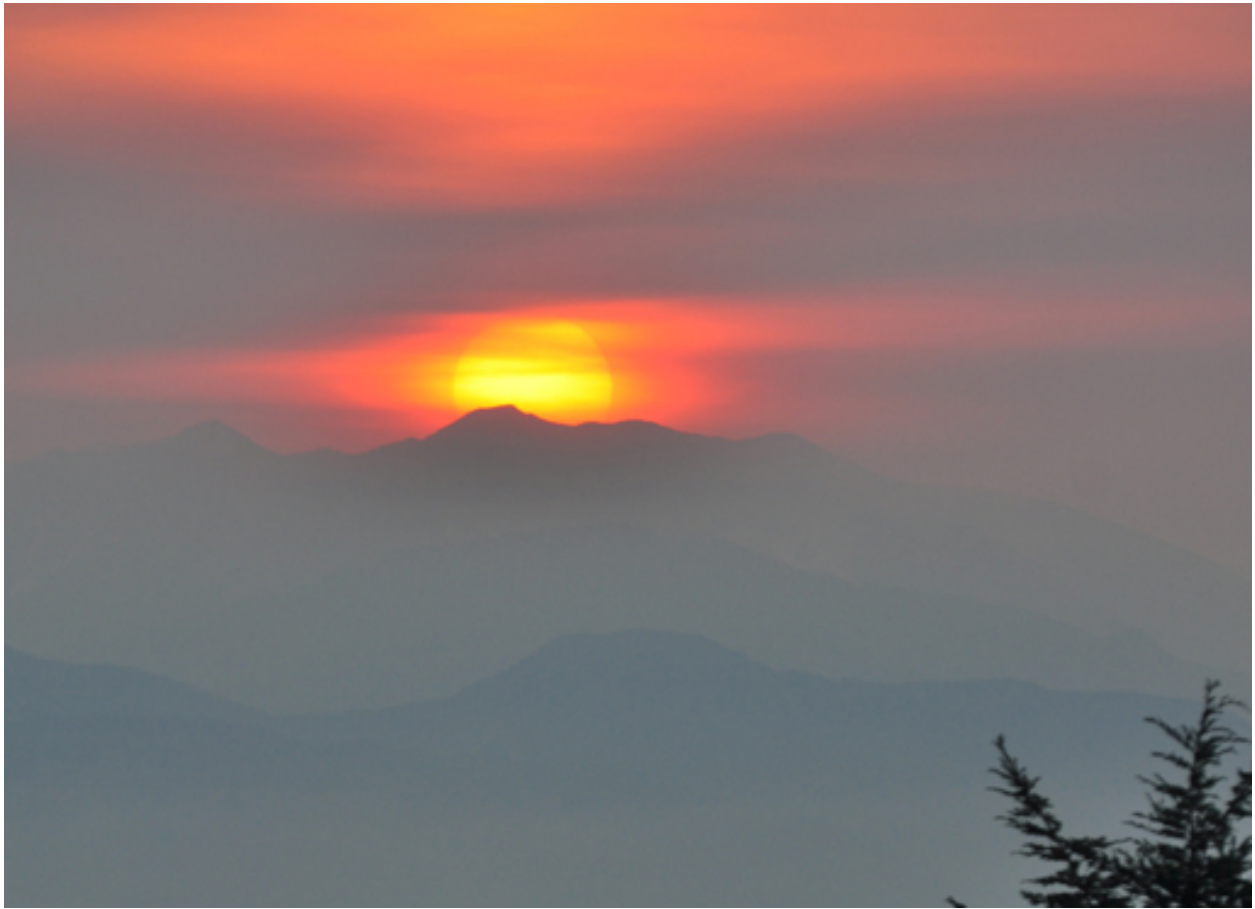
In times of loss, our pain can cause a blurry haze. That is when remembering God's promises and His love for us is needed the most. He is always there even when life's burdens are preventing us from seeing clearly.

Heavenly Father, Thank you that You knew what we needed most and gave the gift of Jesus to redeem anyone willing to accept it. Help us to receive this first Christmas gift, and to live lives reflecting this love in us. We may have tears now, thank you that You promise joy is coming.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Write or say a prayer asking God to help you to see beyond your present haze of difficulties. Pray for God to help you to see and to believe that He is good and can work good in you even through trials. Ask Him to make His presence known to you this day. Continue to reflect on your blessings and write them in your journal.

Song—*Christmas Must Be Tonight*, The Band available on Youtube.



Sights Unseen

Olympic Peninsula, Washington

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the Heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

James 1:17

What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.

Psalms 8:4

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 3:16

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

Week Three, Day Fifteen—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 62

We praise You, Lord, because power belongs to You, and true love is yours. Only You can cancel out our deeds and restore us. Thank you that our souls are safe with You. Amen.

Devotion

In the hymn, *It is Well with my soul*, there is a moving story behind the song. A father stayed behind while his wife and four daughters went on by boat for a vacation. He planned to meet up with them later. This boat collided with another ship and began to sink. His wife prayed, "that God would spare them if that could be His will, or to make them willing to endure whatever awaited them." She alone was found floating on debris in the Atlantic. She later sent a message to her husband, "Saved alone. What shall I do?" When the father sailed out to meet her, he asked the captain to tell him when the ship was crossing over the area where the boat went down and where his daughters had died. That's when he wrote the hymn:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
'It is well, it is well with my soul'.

This man suffered the loss of all his children, yet still wrote a song praising God. He found comfort in knowing that his soul was right with God. Though his earthly situation was tragic, he still maintained hope in his eternal situation. The hymn, *It is Well with my Soul*, encourages Christians to remain steadfast in their faith regardless of present suffering. Christmas is a celebration of Jesus coming into our world to restore our relationship with God. Because of Jesus, our souls are able to receive God's love. Sin no longer separates us from Him. We can shine with this love in our hearts even when we are suffering.

Heavenly Father, Help us to remember to praise you for what you have done for us. You sent Jesus to restore our souls so we can have a renewed relationship with you. Thank you that you are still working within us for our good even when we are in a haze of grief. Help increase our faith to believe this work is happening right now. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

It can be hard to feel like praising God when we're hurting. Yet, listening to music and turning our hearts towards Him in praise will increase our strength when suffering. Reflect or write about any reactions you had to the story behind this hymn. Remember the wife's prayer, "make them willing to endure whatever awaited them". Consider saying or writing a similar prayer for God to help you endure your situation. Try to intentionally listen to Christmas music, or worship songs regardless of your mood so that you can still praise God when you're hurting. Continue to recognize and record any blessings in your journal.

Song—*It is well with my Soul*, Audrey Assad available on Youtube. **Story**—It is well with My Soul—Hugh Bonneville Christmas Concert Narration on YouTube



It is Well

Admiralty Inlet, Washington

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Matthew 11:28

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Psalms 51:12

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 1 Peter 5:10

Week Three, Day Sixteen—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 63

Lord, Your true love is better than life. When I call on You in the night, help me to remember how You have been my help and that I am safe in the shadow of your wings. Amen.

Devotion

God on high sent Jesus to be the “great light” in our darkness. He came to “bind up the broken-hearted and to set the captives free” (Isaiah 61:1). He is our Refuge, Redeemer and Restorer in our present time and in times to come.

During a dark time for me one Christmas season, God showed up in a dream. I remember being on a mountaintop and marveling at all the stars above me. Then, I heard a voice asking me if I was ready to follow the maker of the stars. I woke up and decided to go forward to be baptized at church the next day. I even had a cross made with diamonds placed like a star to remind me of my commitment to follow Him. God's restoration within me began then. I can see now looking back how gentle the process of restoring and shaping me to be more like him has been. Over time, I have slowly lost interest in the things I enjoyed before I chose to follow Him.

God is able to restore you also when you choose to follow Him. He can restore hope within you even as you are hurting. We can run to Him moment by moment to restore us and to help us to be better than we could be on our own. With His strength, we can even carry our losses for His glory and still be a light of hope in this world. Christmas decorations often include lights on our trees, in our windows, or on our houses. Let these lights be reminders that hope exists even in the dark, cold days of Winter.

God will never forsake you, or let you be separated from His love. He will continue the work of restoration in you no matter what. Our task is to relinquish ourselves more and more to him so that He is able to restore us to be who He created us to be—a light of hope in this dark world.

For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.
Philippians 2:13

Heavenly Father, Thank you that Jesus came to restore us to be our best selves. Help us to be grateful that even when all seems hopeless in the present, you still show up in creative ways to bless us. Please continue to restore us to be more like you. In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Do you see His work of restoration in you? Invite Him to increase your faith that He is the Restorer of your soul and can raise you up above your present circumstances. Continue to recognize or record any blessings in your journal.

Song—*Light in the Darkness (A Christmas Song)*. David Harsh on Youtube.



Raised up

Whidbey Island, Washington

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away;
behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with
wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31

But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows
bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as He purposes in his
heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is
able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency
in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8

Week Three, Day Seventeen—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 119 verses 114, 116-117

Lord, We hope in the fulfillment of your word. Support us this day as You have promised. Sustain our strength that we may see your deliverance. Amen.

Devotion

If you have ever tried to change a bad habit, then you know how hard it can be to implement something new in your life. I once began an accountability program for nutrition and exercise. The program started with doing one five-minute healthy habit for a few weeks. This was to teach you that bigger changes can't happen until you've mastered smaller ones. Everything within me would make excuses not to do this one thing. Fed up with myself, I saw how resistant I was to change—even something that was good for me and only took five minutes. This was an eye opener. It reminded me of how Jesus would often ask people before he healed them, "Do you want to be well?" (see John 5:6).

In the past when I read this, I thought this question seemed redundant, strange, or even silly. Why wouldn't they want to be well? Later, as a mental health therapist, I learned there is often a payoff to not moving forward. A counseling professor had a client who said, "I am so depressed, something fell behind my dresser a few months ago and I moved it out to get what fell. I haven't had it in me to push the dresser back, it still stands askew." The counselor's response to them was, "Today's session is finished. We cannot make any progress until you push the dresser back." The following week she returned and shared that the dresser was pushed back. Now with her cooperation, the work could begin.

Each day it can be hard to move forward. In the Bible it says: "And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good" (2 Thessalonians 3:13). The Christmas story is about bringing something new to mankind so that every bad habit and influence could lose its power over us. Restoration is a lifelong process involving our choice to cooperate with God's will for our lives. In the movie clip from *Shawshank Redemption*, two men are discussing life. These men are in prison but they still have choices to be made about how they choose to live.

Lord, help us not resist change. Remaining the same is like drifting in a current whereas anything new feels like swimming upstream. Please help us to not drift. Strengthen us to welcome the new work of restoration that you will do for us if we are only willing. Help us to be willing. Thank you for the Christmas season to remind us to cooperate with you. Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Reflect or write about any reactions you had to the movie clip (apologies for the language). Consider writing or saying a prayer inviting God to strengthen you to make necessary changes in your life by His grace. Continue to recognize and record any blessings in your journal.

Movie Clip—"Get busy living or get busy dying", *Shawshank Redemption* on Youtube.

Song—*Christmas in our Hearts*, Jose Mari Chan (with lyrics) available on YouTube.



The Road

Connemara, Ireland

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I will do a new thing. Now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I
will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43: 18-19

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those
who are the called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

The Lord will accomplish his purpose for me. Thy true love, O Lord, endures forever; leave
not thy work unfinished.

Psalms 138:8

Week Three, Day Eighteen—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near to us.

Prayer from Psalm 138

Thank you that You will accomplish your purposes for us and that your true love endures forever. Leave not your work in us unfinished, we pray in Jesus name.

Devotion

The book of Hebrews speaks of those who had great faith. We hear about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Rahab, Samson, David, Daniel and others. Faith is important to God. Faith is defined as: "Confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1). If you keep reading, you learn that they didn't always receive what they hoped for in this lifetime, but had a "heavenly hope" for the future.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Hebrews 11:13

We are "strangers and pilgrims on the earth." We were made for God's world and His kingdom. We are in an imperfect world now. We cannot fix what is wrong with ourselves, with others, or with this world. God alone can restore all things. Faith is required for this restoration to occur.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 tells about having faith and hope to wait on God to act when nothing is going right in external circumstances. The quote under the picture on the next page references a deer in the mountains that climbs by jumping in such a way that it's back feet land with precision in the exact spot that the forefeet were moments before. Hard times may feel like a mountain that you have no skill to climb. But God is able to guide you by making your feet "like hinds feet" in a spiritual sense to keep you growing and moving forward.

Christmas is about a future hope that no one has yet experienced. We are all waiting in faith for the fulfillment of God's plan. Jesus will return as a King one day. He will create a new kingdom that restores the world and restores those who place their faith in Him. As the song says, "we will live forevermore" because of Christmas Day.

Heavenly Father, Please increase our faith that You are working to restore us even when it seems nothing has changed. Increase our faith and our patience to wait on You to make all things new. In Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

What are the high places in your life that He can help you to climb right now? Do you recognize His plan or purpose for your life? Continue to recognize and record your blessings.

Song— *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, by SE Samonte & *Long Time Ago in Bethlehem* on YouTube.



His High Places Olympic National Park, Washington

Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength and He will make my feet like hind's feet and he will make me to walk upon mine high places.

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:11

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”

Hebrews 11:6.

Week Three, Day Nineteen—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 25

Turn to us and show us your favor, Lord, for we are lonely and oppressed. Relieve the sorrows of our heart this day. Thank you that no man who hopes in You is put to shame. Amen.

Devotion

The book of Lamentations documents a dark time in Israel's history. Yet, they still continue to praise God during these struggles.

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion', says my soul, 'Therefore I hope in Him!' Lamentations 3:22-24

The verb "hope" suggests the idea of a positive attitude that good will come. Where can we place our confidence or turn to for help when we are at our lowest? By our own efforts, we can't heal our broken hearts nor can anyone else. Only God can. We are encouraged in the Bible to confidently hope in His power to help us when we are weak. "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

As we relinquish our life situation to Him, he paradoxically becomes more alive in us. The more we try to handle our life on our own without God's help, the more burdened we will become. He is the God who sees us, and the only one who knows us completely.

Christmas is about celebrating our future hope. God sent Jesus to show the world that He loves us unconditionally and that He plans on restoring everyone and everything completely one day.

Heavenly Father, Please help preserve our faith while we're hurting. Thank you that we can trust in your power to help us handle the high places that are emotionally hard for us to climb. Increase our faith so that we can also have increased hope. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Do you need a better attitude about what God is able to do in your life right now? This present life will never fully deliver what we need. It just slowly takes away all that we acquired while we lived—from possessions to people. Yet, God wants us to not lose hope. He can restore us completely in eternity. The Christmas message reveals that He wants a restored relationship with us now. Write about anything you need to relinquish to Him that distracts you from seeking full restoration and hope from Him. Continue to recognize any blessings this day.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Matthew 6:33

Song—*Hope for Everyone*, Matt Maher available on YouTube.



Hopeful Seeds

Dorset, England

I called on Your name, O Lord, from the lowest pit. You have heard my voice: Do not hide your ear from my sighing, from my cry for help. You drew near on the day I called on You, and said, 'Do not fear!' O Lord, you have pleaded the case for my soul; You have redeemed my life.

Lamentations 3:55-58

Turn us back to you, O Lord, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old.

Lamentations 5:23

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. Romans 5:5

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Week Three, Day Twenty—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence into our lives.

Prayer from Psalm 69

By Your saving power, Oh God, lift us high from our pain and distress. Help us to take heart knowing that You listen to those who seek after You. Amen.

Devotion

One night close to Christmas, I received a late night text. A broken-hearted friend reached out to tell me that she had lost her husband. After reading her message, I was speechless and groping for what to say in response. No words would take the pain away. No words would cheer her up. No words would change this new chapter of her story—life without her husband. All I could think to do was to express as best I could that I loved her and that God loved her too.

People who have experienced a great loss often know better than others what to say or what to do. God often guides them to reach out to someone who is raw with a recent grief and offer them comfort by being a person who has walked through grief themselves.

Many people, even those closest to us, often feel too awkward to talk about our losses. This can result in feeling isolated. Those who have had losses know better how to comfort someone. A loving presence can speak volumes. God can also guide us to gain wisdom in knowing how to help a person who is hurting.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14

The song below is about how a whole community loved on a family about to lose their son to cancer. The neighborhood decided to decorate their yards for Christmas early because it didn't look like this child would be alive in December. What a blessing this act of love was to this family! They couldn't take away the burden of grief they were facing. Yet, it sure must have helped strengthen them knowing they had so much love and support from others.

Heavenly Father, Tragedies often leave us speechless and silent. Please help guide us to know what to say so that we can bless others who are hurting. Help us also to forgive those who have hurt us by their words or by their silence when we needed their comfort. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Ultimately, others can either help us or hurt us as we carry the burden of grief in this life. What words or actions have been helpful for you? Based on your experiences, what would you say or do to help someone you know is hurting? How could you invite friends or family members to better help you to bear your emotional burdens? Continue to recognize or record your blessings.

Song—*One Last Christmas*, by Mathew West official music video on Youtube.



Burden Bearers

Lake Louise, Alberta Canada

*Carry one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.
Galatians 6:2*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Matthew 5:4*

*Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and
God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to
comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are
comforted by God.
2 Corinthians 1:3-4*

Week Three, Day Twenty-One—God is our Restorer

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence into our lives.

Prayer from Psalm 4

Thank you, Lord, that in our hearts You can put more happiness than those that enjoy the abundance of this world. You alone help us to lie down in peace, and You alone can help us to live unafraid. Bless us this day with Your peace we pray.

Devotion

Shalom is the Hebrew word for peace. It can mean many things—completeness, tranquility, friendship, safety and security, health, prosperity or peace from war. In the Jewish tradition, they pray for Shalom daily and bless others often with this scripture.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.
Numbers 6:24-26

I know someone who wrote a song with the words, "I'm ready for the day of my Shalom." The pain in this world increases our hope and desire for the day of peace that comes when God has restored all things. In Christianity, peace refers to spiritual restoration and a restored relationship with God. God alone can provide peace. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. His completed work on the cross grants us eternal peace. I'm ready for the day when peace is restored to those who put their faith in Jesus, the one who came to restore all things.

Christmas is about Jesus giving us His peace to claim as a gift from Him. He has the true power to give us peace or Shalom. Let us pray with faith and ask for this gift of peace today.

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. John 14: 27

Heavenly Father, Thank you that you weren't satisfied with us as we were, but in your grace and mercy sent Jesus, your Son, to be the Restorer of the world. May we have new faith, new hope, and a new peace even in our difficulties. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Peace between us and God did not come easily. Jesus had to die for it. We are told to take up our cross daily (Luke 9:23). One cross that you carry is your present circumstances of grief or loss. Jesus still calls us to follow Him even when life is hard. What would peace look like for you? Consider writing or saying a prayer asking for more of God's peace as you try making new changes in your life. Continue to recognize or record your blessings today.

Song— *Silent Night* by Josh Groban (with lyrics) on YouTube.



Shalom

Galway, Ireland

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulders. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end.

Isaiah 9:6-7

You will establish peace for us, for You have also done all our works in us.

Isaiah 26:12

You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Isaiah 26:3

Week Four, Day Twenty-Two—God is our Resurrection

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence into our lives.

Prayer from Psalm 6

Lord, in dark times we can be weary with groaning and grief can dim our eyes. Yet, you hear the sound of our weeping and You accept our prayers. Thank you for this. Amen.

Devotion

If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.
1 Corinthians 15:19

December 21st is often the longest night of the year—the winter solstice. We live in a world of darkness, pain and suffering. Some churches have services to acknowledge those going through dark times in their lives. This can be a day to mark all that we grieve over in this world.

Today is the 22nd, and the light of day is growing longer and brighter. Our future with Him is the greatest light of hope that we have in whatever darkness we are facing.

The message of Christmas is that Jesus is “with us” now in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God Himself will tabernacle with us. The Bible says that He “will wipe away every tear from (our) eyes.” Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic when she was young. Every day she is challenged to not let her pain and discomfort overpower her. She has an inspiring perspective about her pain and how it has helped her to be closer to Jesus. Her story can be watched using the information below to find it on YouTube. We must remember that the days of our lives here are so brief compared to our future resurrection in eternity.

But in keeping with His promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13

Heavenly Father, You are the great light that was sent into the world through Jesus. Thank you that You are there to be our Refuge, our Redeemer, our Restorer and our future Resurrection in heaven. Help the Christmas story renew our faith and our hope in who you are so that we can have your peace even during present painful circumstances. Thank you that You hear us and are near us even when we are in pain. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Watch the story clip below. Do you believe like Joni that even in great pain there is hope available for you from God? Consider looking up verses about hope or heaven and writing them in your journal. Write or say a prayer asking God to increase your hope in His promises and to be near you moment by moment this day. Continue to recognize and record any blessings.

Song—*Christmas in Heaven* official lyric video by Maribeth Johnson on YouTube.

Story—“I'd Rather be in this Wheelchair Knowing Him” Joni Eareckson Tada on YouTube.



A Hopeful Heart

Lavelle, Pennsylvania

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will be with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:1-4

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5

Week Four, Day Twenty-Three—God is our Resurrection

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 124

If You, Lord, we're not by our side, we would be swallowed up. The waters would carry us away. Blessed be the Lord who does not leave us. Amen.

Devotion

We have to keep moving forward to survive emotionally when life is hard. Maintaining hope is a daily challenge. In the book, *Georgina of the Rainbows*, a seafaring man, whose son is missing, is showing a girl a figurehead statue taken from the front of a boat that is now on a house. The statue is of a woman who represents hope with her head tilted upwards to meet whatever comes. She is holding a wreath which represents everlasting life. This statue is now attached to a house that he is showing her on Cape Cod. He tells her these words that his friend once shared with him while using this same figurehead as a metaphor to maintain hope.

As long as a man keeps hope at the prow he keeps afloat. As soon as he drops it he goes to pieces and down to the bottom, the way that ship did when it lost its figurehead [that's now on the house]. You must keep hope at the prow [stay above water]. . . And then he gave me a line to live by. A line he said that had been written by a man who was stone blind [John Milton], and hadn't anything to look forward to all the rest of his life but groping in the dark. He said he'd not, "Bate a jot of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer right onward" [meaning not lose the slightest bit of courage or hope but still keep moving forward]. At first it didn't seem to mean anything to me, but he made me say it after him as if it were a sort of promise, and I've been saying it every day of every year since then. . . And I said it when I was lying on my bed at night with my heart so sore and heavy I couldn't sleep, and after a while it did begin to put courage into me, so that I could hope in earnest. And when I did that, little lass—He leaned over to smile into her eyes, now full of tears, he had so wrought upon her tender sympathies—When I did that, it put a rainbow around my trouble. (Johnston, pages 107-109)

A figurehead on the the front of a ship was there to bring hope to the crew that something other than themselves was going before them into troubled waters. Christmas is about celebrating that we have a true Savior who has gone on before us. This Jesus was also able to calm the storms at sea (Matthew 8:23-27). One day all emotional storms will be calm too.

Heavenly Father, You are the Resurrection and the Life. Thank you that Jesus came so we could have life in abundance. Help us to hope in your resurrection promises when we feel hopeless. Increase our awareness of the great Gift that You gave us—a way to be with You.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Have you thought about maintaining hope as a daily discipline? What would help you to focus on hope and on the heavenly things above? Continue to record your blessings in your journal.

Song—*I Saw Three Ships* by Orla Fallon available on YouTube.



The Figurehead House (vintage picture) Provincetown, MA

Now when he got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But he was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' But He said to them, 'Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?' Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, 'Who can this be, that even the winds and sea obey Him?'

Matthew 8:23-27

I have set the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope. For you will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy.

Psalms 16: 9-11

Week Four, Day 24—God is our Resurrection

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Psalm 139

Lord, You have traced my journey and are familiar with all my paths. Please keep close guard before me and behind me. You know me through and through. Guide me in your ways today.

Devotion

Simeon is an example of a man in the Bible who waited patiently for God to keep His promises. Because of this, God granted his wish to see the Messiah before he died. He also had discernment to listen to the Holy Spirit prompting Him to go to the temple that day. Simeon acknowledged that Jesus would grow up to be the Messiah, but he also had words for Mary. He told her of her future grief, 'yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also' (Luke 2:35). Simeon foretold that Mary's grief would be like a sword going through her. Mary heard hints throughout Jesus' life that His death would happen, yet that would not have lessened the pain of seeing Him die. Mary would later be at the foot of the cross. She would watch helplessly as her son, Jesus, died an excruciating death in order to save us all from the penalty of sin. There would be no Christmas without the cross. May you grasp God's great love for you today.

And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

'Lord, now You are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of All peoples, A light to bring Revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.' Luke 2:25-32

Heavenly Father, Let us be inspired by the story of Simeon. He devoted himself so much to your future promises that you let him see the baby Jesus. Please reveal Yourself to us this day and help us to focus on Your future promises and our future resurrection hope of heaven with you even when things are hard here. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Write a prayer for God to help you to see the sacrifice, the suffering, and the salvation that is the true meaning behind Christmas. Did you have any reactions to the songs? Whatever is joyful about the reason behind the Christmas celebration came about because of Jesus's willingness to endure great pain for us. Continue to recognize any blessings this day.

Songs—*New Again* by Brad Paisley and Sarah Evans (with lyrics) on YouTube.
Now That I've Held Him in My Arms, by Michael Card available on Youtube.
His Light Shines Brighter (Simeon and Anna's Song), Voices of Christmas on YouTube.



Behold

Porto, Portugal

And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, 'Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.'

Luke 2:25-35

Week Four, Day Twenty-Five—God is our Resurrection

Light a candle. Let this be a symbol to invite God's presence to be near.

Prayer from Song of Songs 2:10-13

Thank you, Lord, that You are calling us to come away to be with You. In You, the Winter is past, the flowers appear in your countryside, and the birds will sing. Rise up, Oh Lord, and take us away to be with You. In Jesus name, Amen.

Devotion

Christmas is a time to give and to receive gifts. The story of Christmas inspires this sacrificial giving of gifts. Jesus shows us that God is a gift giver. I began this devotional because I wanted to give a friend a gift to help her find hope in the Christmas season even while grieving the loss of her son. In an earlier devotional day, I shared the story of Corrie Ten Boom and the handkerchief given to her while she was in a concentration camp during WWII. I have my own handkerchief story. Shortly after my friend's tragedy that inspired me to later write this devotional, I wanted to do something to bless her. It came to my mind to embroider her son's name on a handkerchief. I then included a little poem that I wrote with it.

Jesus wept when his friends lost a loved one, and he sees when you cry. He came to bind up the broken-hearted and He is always nearby. So, cry for your loss and with each tear, know that Jesus and your loved one are both near.

I put the handkerchief and poem into a box and mailed it to her. Later, I was sitting on my sun porch and saw an old red journal of mine on the shelf. I opened it and read the final page.

In a dream on 08-31-08, I envisioned making memory or "comfort-chiefs". Handkerchiefs with embroidery or beads for a person to have of a loved one or for a person with a disease to carry for strength.

Reading this dream I had several years earlier, did not trigger any memory of that dream. I had never made a handkerchief for anyone before. Reading this dream entry got me thinking. What if we serve a God who gave me that dream years ago to float around in my unconscious mind just so that I could reach out and give a gift to a friend who years later would be hurting? God needs people here on earth to help make someone's life lighter when things for them get hard. As you bring the Christmas Spirit into your present journey, may Jesus shine His love and His light through you to be a gift that can bless others. Remember, He is your Refuge, your Redeemer, your Restorer and your future Resurrection hope.

Heavenly Father, Help us to share the hope of Christmas all year. Thank you for sending Jesus, the best gift given to the world. Guide us to be your hands of love to others, we pray. Amen.

Journal/Personal Reflection

Consider continuing to journal as you move forward to record your blessings, thoughts, and prayers. Look for signs of Spring and healing to come into your soul.

Song—*Hands*, Jewel with lyrics, and *Noel* by Lauren D'aigle available on YouTube.



We are His Hands

Snakelum Point Cottage, WA

*For the entire Law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.
Galatians 5:14*

*My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.
John 15:12*



The Gift

Guimarães, Portugal

Set your troubled hearts at rest. Trust in God always; trust also in me. There are many dwelling places in my Father's house; if it were not so I should have told you; for I am going there on purpose to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I shall come again and receive you to myself, so that where I am you may be also; and my way there is known to you.' Thomas said, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus replied, 'I am the way; I am the truth and I am life; no one comes to the Father except by me.

John 14:1-6



Paige van Meter Sturgeon has a Masters degree in Counseling. In her life journey, she has helped people carry emotional burdens while living in New England and the Pacific Northwest before returning to her home state of Kentucky. She has a passion for helping people cope with the Grief and Loss in their lives. She is nationally certified as a School Suicide Prevention Specialist and wrote the ANCHOR for life

program that can be done online for students (www.anchorforlife.org), as well as a program for survivors of suicide loss (strides4healing.org). Paige can be reached at psturgeon74@icloud.com.



Sally Slotterback is an avid adventurer who calls the world her home. Her photography emerges organically in the course of everyday life while exploring God's creation, whatever it holds: a torrential downpour in the Yorkshire Dales or a serene stroll through her childhood stomping grounds in Pennsylvania. Sally also has a Masters degree in Counseling from Colorado Christian University. She hopes these images will bring comfort and beauty as they reveal that hope can be found even in dark places. All images are copyrighted by Sally Slotterback and are not to be used without permission. Her images are available for sale by request at whippoorwill@hotmail.com.

Notes

Day One

Song— *A Prayer for the Grieving at Christmas*, by I Believe Videos on YouTube.
Oh Come All Ye Faithful, Casting Crowns available on YouTube.

Day Two

Song— *Born on that Day*, Matt Maher on YouTube.

Day Three

Songs— *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, Joshua Aaron live in Jerusalem* on YouTube.
God With Us, We are Messengers (with lyrics) on YouTube.

Day Four

Song— *Oh Christmas Tree* (Panflute) by Glen Hoban on Youtube.

Day Five

“Corrie’s Prison Miracle” from *Miracles Happen When You Pray*. Sherrer, Quinn, 1997, pg. 26, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Song— *No Room*, by Evie available on YouTube.

Day Six

Song— *He who is Mighty, Sovereign Grace or Mary did you know*, Kenny Rogers on YouTube.

Day Seven

Song— *Shepherds Song at Christmas* available on Youtube.

Day Eight

Redeemer defined by Learners Dictionary, online search.

Story— *The Matchless Pearl*, author unknown. Story posted on www.inspire21.com.

Song— *Come, Oh Redeemer, Come by Fernando Ortega* available on YouTube.

Day Nine

Song— *This Little Light of Mine*, with lyrics, Addison Road on YouTube.

Day Ten

Lewis, C.S., *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Collier Books, 1970. Pages 138-39.

Song— Search Edmund—*How Deep the Father’s Love for Us* available on Youtube.

Day Eleven

Song— *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, Martina McBride available on Youtube.

Day Twelve

The Mission (Redemption scene) movie clip available on YouTube. The longer version with the theme song.

Amazing Grace by Carrie Underwood with lyrics available on YouTube.

Day Thirteen

Song— *Joseph’s Lullaby* by MercyMe with lyrics. Video by Robert Magee on YouTube

Day Fourteen

Song— *Christmas Must Be Tonight*, The Band available on Youtube.

Day Fifteen

<http://staugustine.com/living/religion/2014-10-16/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul#.WjOzqHp59p8.email>

Video Clip— Hugh Bonneville *It is Well With my Soul*

Song— *It is well with my Soul*, Audrey Assad available on Youtube.

Day Sixteen

Song— *Light in the Darkness (A Christmas Song)*. David Harsh on Youtube.

Day Seventeen

Movie Clip— “Get busy living or get busy dying”, Shawshank Redemption on Youtube.

Song— *Christmas in our Hearts*, Jose Mari Chan (with lyrics) available on YouTube.

Day Eighteen

Song— *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, by SE Samonte available on YouTube.

Day Nineteen

Song— *Hope for Everyone*, Matt Maher available on YouTube.

Day Twenty

Song— *One Last Christmas*, by Mathew West official music video on Youtube.

Day Twenty-One

Song— *Silent Night* by Josh Groban (with lyrics) on YouTube.

Day Twenty-Two

Song— *Christmas in Heaven* official lyric video by Maribeth Johnson on YouTube.

Day Twenty-Three

Georgina of the Rainbows. Johnston, Annie Fellows. Pages 107-109. New York, Britton Publishing Co., 1916.

Song— *I Saw Three Ships* by Orla Fallon available on YouTube.

Day Twenty-Four

Song— *Now That I've Held Him in My Arms*, by Michael Card available on Youtube.

His Light Shines Brighter (Simeon and Anna's Song), Voices of Christmas on YouTube.

Day Twenty-Five

Song— *Hands*, Jewel with lyrics, and *Noel*, by Lauren D'aigle—both on YouTube.