



keys
for
kids[®]

DEVOTIONAL



DECEMBER • JANUARY • FEBRUARY

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF *KEYS FOR KIDS*



HEY, KIDS! I'M ZACH, HOST OF THE *KEYS FOR KIDS* RADIO PROGRAM. I'm so glad you're here! I love getting to know God better by listening to what He says in the Bible. That's what *Keys for Kids* is all about—it's a daily devotional meant to be read with your Bible.

TO GET THE MOST OUT OF EACH DAY'S DEVOTION:



1) Read the Bible passages at the top of the page before you read the story. They'll help you understand how the story relates to God's truth in the Bible.



2) Each story ends with questions to help you apply God's Word to your life. Read them carefully, and think about your answers. What did you learn from the Bible verses and story? What do you think God is saying to you?



3) Each story includes a key verse. Read it a few times and see if you can memorize it, or write it down and put it somewhere you can see it. Then take God's Word with you as you go about your day!

In each issue of *Keys for Kids* I'll help you take a deeper look at God and the Bible, and I also love to answer questions from kids like you! Flip to "Hey Zach!" on page 52. If you have a question, send it to me at keysforkids.org/heyzach.

Want to hear me read the *Keys for Kids* devotional story? Each day I host the *Keys for Kids* radio program on *Keys for Kids* Radio. Check it out at keysforkids.net, download the *Keys for Kids* app, or scan this QR code with your phone's camera.



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PRESENTS—WHAT'S THE POINT?

Melanie says it doesn't make sense that Christians give each other presents at Christmas," Andrew told Mom on the way home from school. "She says we just use Jesus's birthday as an excuse to be greedy like everybody else. Is she right? What makes us different from people who celebrate Christmas but don't believe in Jesus?"

"Well, tell me this," said Mom. "Who was Jesus?"

Andrew frowned. "Is this a trick question?" Mom shook her head. "Well, Jesus was God's Son," said Andrew. "God sent Jesus to save us from sin."

"Absolutely right," said Mom. "And did we pay anything to receive Jesus?"

"No," said Andrew. "Jesus was a free gift."

"A free what?"

"A free gif—aha! Jesus was God's present," said Andrew as Mom pulled into the church parking lot. "Hey, why are we at church?"

"I had an idea as we were passing by," said Mom as she opened the car door.

Inside stood a giant tree covered with envelopes, each one labeled with a child's first name and age. "Why don't you pick three?" said Mom. "These are kids who could use some presents this Christmas."

Andrew picked the envelopes of a boy named Andrew, a girl named Ruby Jane, and then—"Melanie—and she's my age!" exclaimed Andrew.

On the way home, Andrew opened the envelopes and read the lists. "Melanie wants a new hat. When can we go shopping, Mom?"

"As soon as you answer your own question. What makes Christians different, Andrew? Now do you know why we give gifts?"

"I think so." Andrew thought for a moment. "Christians give Christmas gifts because God gave us His gift. We give presents to remind each other of the best present—Jesus—and show others His love."

Weeks later at school, Andrew noticed Melanie was wearing a new hat. "I like your hat, Melanie."

"Thanks. It was a Christmas present." Melanie smiled. "I was wrong, Andrew. I guess some Christians give presents because, well, Jesus was God's present. At least that's what the card that came with my hat said."

Andrew smiled. "I want to be a Christian like that."  Kelly Carlson



JESUS IS THE BEST PRESENT | KEY VERSE: For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans 6:23 (NLT)



Did you know that when you give a Christmas present, you are pointing to Jesus? When we give gifts with generous hearts, we point others to the greatest gift of all—Jesus Christ. This Christmas, tell a friend or family member why you're giving them a present. Tell others about Jesus, God's greatest present to the world.

WHEN IN DOUBT

Yamen set his pencil down with a sigh. “I can’t concentrate on schoolwork, Mom. All these doubts keep filling my mind.”

Mom plopped down next to Yamen. “Like what?”

“Like...stuff they taught us in science class when I was going to school last year. They made it sound like we’re just here by chance instead of being created by God. I’ve trusted Jesus as my Savior, and I believe the Bible is true, but sometimes other people sound so sure about what they believe that I doubt.”

“We all have times when we doubt,” said Mom. “It’s what we do when we have doubts that matters.”

“What do you mean?” asked Yamen.

“Remember the story of Thomas in the Bible? After Jesus rose from the grave, He appeared to some of the disciples, but Thomas wasn’t there. When they told him they had seen the Lord, he said he wouldn’t believe until he put his fingers on Jesus’s scars.”


“Then Jesus appeared to Thomas and he believed,” said Yamen. “If He appeared to me, it would make believing a whole lot easier.”

“But don’t forget what Jesus told Thomas,” said Mom. “He said those who have not seen Him and still believe are blessed.”

“Oh yeah, I remember! And there are other stories in the Bible of people doubting—like when an angel told that old dude he would be the father of John the Baptist, but he didn’t believe so the angel said he would be mute until the baby was born.”

“Yes, that was Zechariah,” said Mom. “And when the same angel told Mary she was going to give birth to the Son of God, she didn’t understand how it would happen. But unlike Zechariah, she accepted what the angel said. Like Mary, we can still believe and trust God even when our questions are left unanswered.”

“So you’re saying there will be things we don’t understand but we can trust that God is with us and for us because He sent His Son to die for us and raised Him from the dead?”

Mom laughed. “You’re one smart kid! How about you be the teacher for the day?”  Savannah Coleman



BRING YOUR DOUBTS TO GOD | KEY VERSE: Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” John 20:29 (NIV)



Do you ever have doubts about God or His Word? It is human to have questions and doubts, and God understands that. When Thomas doubted, Jesus appeared to him and showed him His scars, and He wants to help you see who He is too. Pray and ask for wisdom in understanding the truth of the Bible, and talk to a trusted adult about your questions. Even if you don’t get the answers you’re looking for, you can trust Jesus to be with you in times of doubt because He died for you.

THE GREATEST ENGINEER

Grandpa's going to like that birdhouse you're making for him, Tomás," said Dad. "It looks great—but I see it's not quite like the one pictured in your woodworking manual."

"No," replied Tomás. "I left the perch off and made the hole smaller. This way, starlings won't move in before the songbirds get a chance."

"Good thinking!" said Dad. "That reminds me of the model plane you made that flew twice as far after you changed the design of the wings."

Tomás grinned. "I like to make things work better. Maybe I'll be an engineer when I grow up."

"I thought you didn't like long trips," said Tomás's little sister, Liliana. "Wouldn't you get tired of riding on a train all the time?"

Tomás laughed. "I don't mean the kind of engineer who drives trains. I mean the kind of engineer who designs things, like bridges and buildings. They don't just get thrown together. Engineers carefully figure out how to build them so they'll be strong and safe and work the way they're supposed to. They draw up the plans for skyscrapers and roads and all kinds of things."

"Wow!" said Liliana. "I bet you'll be the best engineer of all!"

Tomás grinned. "Thanks!"

"Actually, the best engineer of all made more than buildings and machines," said Dad. "He designed the whole universe—the forests and the deserts. The canyons and the mountains. All the plants and animals. The sun and the moon and the stars. Even us!"

"I know who that is," said Liliana. "God!"

"Right," said Dad. "God made everything. He knew how much we'd like to watch the birds and animals, and how much we'd love climbing the mountain trails and seeing all the stars at night. He also drew up a plan to save us from sin by sending Jesus to die for us so we could be with Him and enjoy His beautiful creation forever. Aren't you glad He created so many amazing things and carried out His wonderful plan of salvation?"

Tomás nodded. "That's an engineering job no one could ever match!" ♥

Katherine E. Swarts



GOD ENGINEERED EVERYTHING | KEY VERSE: God created everything through [Jesus], and nothing was created except through him. John 1:3 (NLT)



Are you impressed by things people make—like big buildings and new technology? God created humans with the ability to do amazing things, but only He could engineer the whole world and all that's in it. He also drew up a plan to provide salvation—forgiveness of sins and eternal life—by sending His Son, Jesus, to die for us. By trusting in Jesus, you can have eternal life and enjoy God and all His wonderful creation forever! (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

TRY AGAIN

When Penelope got home from school, she found Grandpa on his knees in the garden. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Planting vegetables,” replied Grandpa. He grinned. “Aren’t you glad we live in a climate where we can grow things all year round? Nothing tastes better than vegetables fresh from the garden.”

“But didn’t you plant stuff in those same rows last week?” asked Penelope.

“I did, but the hard rains washed most of the seeds away.”

“Oh.” Penelope picked up a pile of empty seed packets and flipped through them. “You planted radishes before, but you don’t have any now, do you?”

Grandpa shook his head. “They haven’t done very well, so I’m trying something else instead. I might try them again next year.” He stood up. “Tell me about your day. You were going to ask Michaela to go to Bible club with you this week. What did she say?”


Penelope sighed. “She said she’d rather go shopping with her mom.”

“Well, inviting someone to do something with you is kind of like planting seeds,” Grandpa told her. “Sometimes you get good results, and sometimes you don’t.” He looked down at his garden. “In fact, your invitation to Michaela points to a much bigger invitation God offers each one of us.”

“It does?” asked Penelope. “What’s that?”

“His invitation to trust in His Son, Jesus, and have our sins forgiven. The Bible says telling others about His invitation is like planting seeds in a field. Some of the seeds yield good results—people believing and trusting in Jesus—but some don’t. When you invite your friends to church and Bible club where they can hear about Jesus and what He did for them, you’re planting seeds.” Grandpa smiled at Penelope. “Keep praying for Michaela and planting seeds in her life by spending time with her and sharing what Jesus has done for you. But since she doesn’t want to go to Bible club with you this time, maybe there’s someone else you could invite.”

Penelope thought about it. “There’s a new family on our block with a girl my age.”

Grandpa nodded. “She may need a friend,” he said. “A friend who can help her understand how much Jesus loves her.”  Margaret M. Primrose



KEEP ON SHARING JESUS | KEY VERSE: Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.

Galatians 6:9



Do you give up if you tell someone about Jesus or invite them to come to church with you and they aren’t interested? Don’t give up! Keep on praying for them and showing them God’s love—and keep looking for other people you could reach out to who don’t know Jesus. God wants us to help spread the good news of Jesus by planting seeds in people’s hearts, but only He can make them grow. Keep sharing His invitation with others and trust Him with the results.

NO GREATER JOY

The Ravens were up by one in the championship game of the winter league basketball tournament when the scoreboard buzzed. The game was over! All the guys huddled around their star player, Bryson Phillips, who scored 28 of their 62 points.

On the car ride home, Bryson couldn't stop looking at his Most Valuable Player trophy. "This is the best day of my life!" he told his dad.

Suddenly a bird swooped down in front of their car. "Watch it!" yelled Bryson. Dad tried to swerve, but it was too late. The car hit the bird head-on, and it instantly fell to the ground.

Dad pulled over. Bryson raced out and knelt beside the bird. "Is it still alive?" "I'm afraid not," said Dad.

As they continued driving, Bryson set his trophy aside and peered out the window. He thought of his friend Alex. It had been over a year since Alex had passed away from cancer. It had taken him and his family by surprise—one day Alex was fine, and then suddenly, he was gone. *Just like that bird getting hit by our car*, Bryson thought.

"Are you okay?" asked Dad.

Bryson looked at the trophy in the seat next to him. "All of a sudden this trophy seems kind of worthless," he said. "I'd give it back in a heartbeat—along with every Raven basketball victory—if it meant getting Alex back."

Dad sighed heavily. "I miss Alex too. Life is precious—more precious than anything we earn or receive on this earth."

"Much more precious than winning basketball championships," added Bryson.

Dad nodded. "Jesus is the giver of life. That's why He came into the world. He sacrificed His life on the cross so we could have eternal life—a life that goes beyond the years we live on earth. The joy of life with Him is better than anything else. Even when we experience difficult things—like losing Alex—we can be joyful knowing that Jesus walks with us through life's troubles and promises us a life with Him that lasts forever."

Bryson smiled as he thought of Alex in heaven with Jesus. He picked up his trophy again. "I do like the joy of winning, but it will never come close to the joy Jesus brings."

Dad smiled. "Nothing does."  Randy Saller



REJOICE IN JESUS | KEY VERSE: When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. Matthew 2:10



What things in life give you joy? Winning a game? Spending time with family and friends? Having others recognize your accomplishments? God blesses us with many good gifts, but there's one thing He wants us to treasure above everything else—His Son, Jesus. Only Jesus can give us life that lasts forever and joy that is unlike anything else.

A MUCH-NEEDED PUSH

Ella and Ryan helped their dad load groceries into the car. “I hope it stops snowing soon,” Ryan said as he closed the trunk. Hearing the sound of spinning tires, he looked around the snow-covered parking lot. A few rows over, a car was having trouble moving.



“Let’s give that driver a hand,” Dad said, and the three of them walked over to the car. The driver rolled down the window. “I don’t think you’re stuck too bad,” Dad said. “We’ll give you a push.” The man stepped on the gas as they pushed, and the car moved slowly ahead. With a grateful wave, the driver was on his way.

As they walked back to their car, Ryan had a thought. “My teacher at church said that sometimes people get stuck in life. Like, they try and try to solve some problem but just spin their wheels, or they don’t see that their actions are taking them in the wrong direction of where they need to go. They need help.”

“I guess we all have times when we need a little push,” Dad said as they got in their car and headed home. “And sometimes the way God helps us is by having someone give us the push we need—and He also uses us to help others. Can you think of some ways we could help people who are stuck?”

Ryan grinned. “Besides giving them a shove when they’re stuck in the snow?”

“I know!” said Ella. “You gave me a push when you helped me with my homework the other day, Ryan.”

“Good,” said Dad. “And Ella, you gave me a push when you told me your friend’s parents enjoyed the class I’m teaching at church. It was very encouraging to hear that.” He turned the car into their driveway. “And Mom gave both of you a push when she made you take a timeout from fighting yesterday.”

“Yeah,” said Ryan. “I guess that was a push in the right direction, even though we didn’t like it very much!”

Dad nodded. “Sometimes a push like that is just what we need, and it’s one way Jesus shows His love for us and helps us grow in our faith. He puts other Christians in our lives so we can help and encourage each other in our walk with Him.” ♥ *Glenn G. Luscher*



HELP AND ENCOURAGE OTHERS | KEY VERSE: So encourage each other and help each other grow stronger in faith. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (ERV)



Has someone given you a push when you were stuck or headed in the wrong direction? Jesus wants you to grow in your faith, and one of the ways He makes you grow is by putting people in your life who help and encourage you—and He wants you to help and encourage others in their faith too. Ask Him to show you how you can help someone today.

JUST MUD

Hudson!" Mom's voice startled him as he stepped into the kitchen. "Look at your shoes!" Hudson looked down at his feet and then at the trail of mud behind him. "How did your shoes get so dirty?" Mom asked.

Hudson shrugged. "I was just outside."

"Well, please go back outside and clean off your shoes."

A few minutes later, Hudson came back, and he and Mom wiped up the dirt. "I'm sorry, Mom," Hudson said.

Mom smiled. "No harm done. I know it was an accident. It's pretty easy to get dirt on your shoes without knowing it, isn't it?"

Hudson nodded. "I still don't know how they got so dirty."

"Well, at least it was just mud—not sin," Mom said. Hudson looked puzzled. "Getting your shoes dirty with mud is a little like getting your life dirty with sin," Mom explained. "We talked about that at church this morning, remember? Sometimes you don't even think about what you're doing, and then you suddenly realize that something you've done wasn't right."

"Does that ever happen to you?" asked Hudson.


"Yes. When I mess up, it's like my life has gotten dirty with sin. And do you know what I have to do then? To get clean again?"

Hudson thought about it. "Jesus would have to clean up the sin, wouldn't He?"

"That's right," Mom replied. "He promises to clean away any sin from our lives when we confess it and ask for forgiveness."

Hudson frowned. "Does that mean every time I sin, I'm not saved anymore until I say I'm sorry and ask for forgiveness?"

Mom shook her head. "No, Hudson. Because we've trusted Jesus to save us, we belong to Him, and nothing we do could ever separate us from Him. We'll always be His children—just like you'll always be my child, even when you have dirty shoes. When we realize we've been tracking sin around, we need Him to wash it away."

Hudson smiled. "I'm glad Jesus will always forgive me when my life gets dirty with sin—just like you forgave me for tracking mud in the kitchen!"  *Richard S. Maffeo*



CONFESS SIN AND BE CLEAN | KEY VERSE: Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. Psalm 51:2 (CSB)



Have you done something that's gotten your life dirty with sin? Even though Jesus has already saved you from sin if you trust in Him, you'll still struggle with it in your daily life until He comes back and gets rid of sin once and for all. When you sin, confess it to Him right away to keep it from getting in the way of living the way He wants you to. He'll forgive you and make you clean!

COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS STARTS TODAY!
SEARCH FOR "COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS WITH ZACH"
IN YOUR PODCAST APP

THE WRAPPING PAPER REDO

It's my idea! I should wrap all the presents!" Libby cried.

"But you're not good at wrapping," Hattie answered.

"It's a class project to raise money for missionaries our church supports. We are going to work *together*," Miss Coretta intervened.

When Miss Coretta had asked their class for ideas to help support missionaries, Libby shared her plan: wrapping Christmas presents at the mall in exchange for donations from shoppers getting their purchases wrapped. Everyone agreed, so Miss Coretta made the arrangements.

Libby felt proud of her idea and wanted to carry out the project by herself. When Hattie noticed Libby rushing to wrap each gift the shoppers brought them, she tried talking to Libby. But Libby insisted on handling it alone.

"Please get more tape and ribbon from the box I brought," Miss Coretta asked Libby. Grumpily, Libby yanked the supply box from under the table.

Then a man approached. "I had this candle wrapped for my wife's Christmas present," he explained. "But the paper fell off on my way out. I was wondering if you could rewrap it."


Libby stood up from her search for ribbon and tape. She remembered wrapping that candle. She now saw how sloppy she'd been.

"I'm sorry." Libby's face turned red. "Hattie, why don't you rewrap the candle? I'll get the shiny paper."

Afterwards, Miss Coretta took Libby aside. "I know that embarrassed you, but I think you can learn something from this mistake."

"I can?" Libby asked.

Miss Coretta nodded. "God tells us He gives grace to those who are humble. When we admit we need help, He'll provide it. Jesus humbled Himself by dying on the cross for our sins because we couldn't save ourselves, and He'll help you have the same kind of humble attitude He did. When we're prideful and try to do His work all on our own, we set ourselves up for failure. But when we humbly work with others to serve Him, people can see His love and grace in us."

"I did fail at wrapping that man's candle," Libby replied. Then she smiled. "Hey, Hattie?" Libby called. "Will you show me how you wrap presents? I think I have a lot to learn."  Allison Wilson Lee



BE HUMBLE | KEY VERSE: When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. Proverbs 11:2 (NIV)



Are you humbly serving the Lord with other Christians? God gives each of us abilities to use for His purposes. When we work together as God's people, we bless others and glorify Him. But when we think we have what it takes to do God's work all by ourselves, our pride leads to failure, and we keep others from doing their part too. As we grow in Jesus, He'll help us get rid of pride and be humble so the work we do with others can show people who He is.

ONE-OF-A-KIND MASTERPIECE



When Emmalyn got home from school, she went straight to her room, flopped face-first on her bed, and began to cry.

Soon there was a knock at her door. “Emmalyn, it’s Mom. Can I come in?” Emmalyn managed to let out a muffled yes, and Mom came in and sat down on the bed. “What’s wrong?” Mom asked.

Emmalyn sniffled. “Judson noticed that I’m the only one with red hair in our class. He made jokes about redheads all day and even got the other kids to call me carrottop!” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Can I dye my hair a different color, Mom? Please?”


Mom was silent as she stared at Emmalyn’s bedroom wall. Emmalyn had a very special bedroom wall. Last summer her uncle had come and helped her paint a mural of a tropical scene on it. “Well,” Mom finally said, “I guess we’ll have to go to the store and pick up some hair dye. While we’re at it, we should pick up a gallon of white paint to cover up your mural.”

“What?” Emmalyn looked shocked. “Why? Uncle Joe and I worked hard on that, and it turned out really well. It’s a one-of-a-kind masterpiece!”

“Well, you want to change your hair so you can be just like your classmates, and I know none of them have a bedroom wall like yours,” said Mom. “So we should get rid of that too.”

Emmalyn stared at her mom for a few moments before she finally understood. “Oh, I get it. You’re trying to tell me that I’m a one-of-a-kind masterpiece, just like the mural on my wall.”

“That’s exactly right,” said Mom. “God made you the way you are, and He loves you—so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for you! And He created you to show His love to others in your own unique way. So don’t try to change yourself just to make other people happy—you’re beautiful just the way you are because you belong to Jesus.”

Mom gave Emmalyn a tight hug, and Emmalyn smiled as she looked at the mural on her wall and thought of herself as God’s masterpiece.  *Melissa Yeagle*



YOU ARE GOD’S MASTERPIECE | KEY VERSE: For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. Ephesians 2:10 (NLT)



Has anyone ever made fun of you for the way you look? It hurts when that happens, but remember God made you the way you are and He loves you. He made you for a special purpose—to know Jesus and share Him with others in your own unique way. Your beauty doesn’t depend on other people’s opinions about how you look. You’re beautiful because you know Jesus!



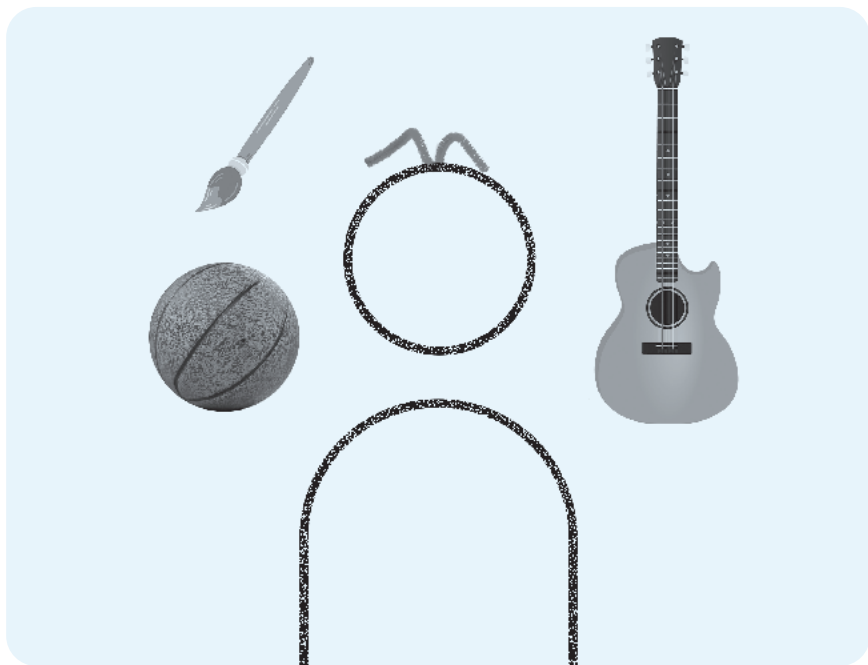
ACTIVITY

Self-Portrait

Have you ever made a self-portrait? Well, now's your chance! All you need for this activity is a big sheet of paper, writing utensils, and whatever else you can find to make your self-portrait unique to you. Start by drawing or tracing the outline of a person on the paper. Then go crazy decorating it! Leave some room around the outside for another activity that comes later in the devotional book (see page 47).

As you create, think about what details make you *you*. Maybe you can use string or pipe cleaners for your hair, colorful paper for your clothes, or glitter for your skin. The best thing about self-portraits is that you can include whatever details about yourself you want. You can depict your hobbies, skills, and interests. If you like plants and nature, maybe you can give yourself vines or flowers for hair. If you play or watch sports, add a ball in your hand. The possibilities are endless! Use fun art supplies and colors to show not only how you look on the outside but also how God made you on the inside.

When you're done, share your self-portrait with your family or friends. Talk about what makes you similar and different from others. This is an incredible way to appreciate God's creativity in how He made each person unique so we can reflect Jesus and share His love with others in our own special way.



NO SACRIFICE TOO GREAT

Mrs. Chavez read us a short story today called ‘The Gift of the Magi,’” Jenna announced at dinner.

“By O. Henry! I love that story,” exclaimed her mother.

“It’s about a young couple who were really, really poor,” Jenna told her older brother, Damon. “They really wanted to buy each other a special Christmas present, but the only valuable thing the guy owned was a gold watch, and the girl had nothing except her beautiful, long hair. So she secretly decided to cut her hair off and sell it so she could buy a chain for the watch her husband was so proud of. Meanwhile, he secretly sold his watch so he could buy expensive combs for the hair she no longer had!”

Damon laughed. “What a disaster!”

“I know, it sounds awful. But it ended up the best Christmas ever, because it made them realize how much they really loved each other.”

“Sappy.”


“Damon.” His father shook his head. “Remember the year you spent all your money on a Christmas gift for Mom? You’d been saving forever for a video game, but you sacrificed it to buy a cookbook she wanted.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Damon grinned. “It was worth it seeing your expression, Mom, when you opened the box!”

“A gift that keeps on giving,” Mom said, pointing to their dessert. “Jenna, I wonder if your story is called ‘The Gift of the Magi’ because the magi—the wise men who visited baby Jesus—brought Him costly gifts? They brought Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which were special because they pointed to how Jesus was King over everything but had come to sacrifice Himself so we could have the gift of eternal life. The couple in the story made sacrifices to show their love for each other, and Jesus showed us His love by making the greatest sacrifice of all.”

“Maybe we should all think of ways we can show others God’s love this Christmas,” said Dad.

Jenna was quiet for a moment. “Maybe instead of keeping all the clothes I get this year, I could share my new sweaters and stuff with girls I know who don’t have much. What do you think, Mom?”

Mom smiled. “I think any gift you give from your heart pleases Jesus and makes His birthday extra special!”  *Debbie Meroff*



GIVE JOYFULLY LIKE JESUS | KEY VERSE: Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew 25:40 (NIV)



Have you ever sacrificed something valuable in order to give a person you love a particular gift? Or maybe you’ve had a friend or family member make a sacrifice to give you a gift. Jesus broke every record for sacrifices when He gave His life for us! How can you share His love with others this Christmas?

A FAKE CHRISTMAS

It's so pretty!" said five-year-old Julia as she stood at the rope barricade and stared in wonder at the shiny balls, glittering stars, and sparkling snow on a Christmas tree at the mall. "Is the snow on the Christmas tree real?"

"No," said Julia's older sister, Dakota. "It comes in a spray can, and you just spray it on."

"It looks so real," said Julia, disappointed. "Who are all the presents under the tree for?"

"They're not real presents," said Dakota. "They're empty boxes wrapped to look like presents—just part of the decorations. They're supposed to get people in the mood to buy Christmas presents."

Julia could hardly believe that the beautifully wrapped boxes were empty. She wanted to reach over the barricade, pick one up, and shake it.

Back home, Julia told her mother about the tree. "The snow looked so real, and the presents did too, but Dakota says they're just empty boxes. Are they really?"

"I'm afraid so," said Mom. "Even though they're covered in shiny paper and colorful bows, there's nothing inside."


"That's sad," said Julia. "It's not real at all—it's a fake Christmas!"

"In a way, it is," said Mom. "And we wouldn't want to celebrate a fake Christmas, would we? Not at the mall, and not at our house."

"At our house?" Julia giggled. "We don't wrap empty boxes and put them under the tree!"

"No," said Mom. "But if we're not careful, the things we do to celebrate Christmas—all the parties and gifts and decorations—can distract us from the real reason we celebrate Christmas—Jesus coming to earth to save us from sin. He's the true gift of Christmas, and without Him, Christmas is empty, just like one of those empty boxes wrapped in pretty paper."

"So is it bad to do those things, like give each other presents or decorate the house?" Julia asked.

"Of course not!" said Mom. "But those things are like the pretty paper we use to wrap the gifts we give each other—it's not the gift itself. And all the fun things we do at Christmas point us to the real reason we celebrate—God sending His Son to the world to save us and give us eternal life."  *Pauline Youd*



CELEBRATE THE TRUE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS | KEY VERSE: The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23



Do you celebrate the real reason for Christmas? Or do you just focus on buying gifts or getting presents? At Christmas, we celebrate God giving us the best present ever—Himself. He sent Jesus to save us from sin so we could have eternal life with Him. If you haven't received that gift, do it today by trusting in Jesus. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

FORGET YOUR SHOES!

Lexie dangled her feet off the bunk bed as her sister got ready for their Christmas program rehearsal. “I’m going to mark my script so I don’t miss any of my lines,” Lexie said. She stuck her pen in her princess purse.



“Girls! We need to be at church soon!” Mom stuck her head in the door. “What? You’re not even dressed? We should have left already!”

Anna poked her head out of the closet. “But I can’t find my shoes.”

“Forget your shoes! Just come on!”

Mom rushed away to check on the twins. By the time everyone was loaded in the van, Mom was downright angry. “This happens every time we need to go somewhere!” she said. “I’m so sick of being late!”

As Mom was about to shut the van door, Anna gasped. “I forgot my shoes!”

Mom let out an exasperated groan. “Get your shoes now! And if you’re not back in one minute, I’m leaving!”

Five minutes later, Anna climbed into the van, shoes in hand. Mom fussed as they pulled onto the street.


“Anna, how could you possibly forget your shoes on a day this cold? And Lexie, that is the last time I want to see you lollygagging when you should be getting ready!”

Just then the radio began to play a song that the twins had been singing all week. Their three-year-old voices quickly chimed in with the music. “For unto us a child is bo-own...unto us a Son is gibben...”

Mom stopped yelling. Then she let out a big sigh. “I’m sorry, girls,” she said. “I’ve been so focused on blaming you for making us late that I forgot why we’re going to rehearse for the Christmas program in the first place—to tell others about Jesus. The truth is, I wasn’t ready on time either, but I didn’t want to admit that, so I made you feel bad about it instead. Will you forgive me?”

Anna and Lexie looked at each other. “Forgive you?” Lexie asked.

Mom nodded. “Sometimes parents make mistakes too. Jesus is still working to make me more like Him, just like He is with you.”

Anna smiled. “Yes, Mom,” she said. “We forgive you!”  *Rebekah Dorris*



FORGIVE YOUR PARENTS | KEY VERSE: And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:32



Have you ever heard your parents say things they later regret? Just like you, parents make mistakes. The good news is that Jesus is still working on all of us, so remember that when your parents fall short. Remember that Jesus has forgiven you, and He wants you to show His love to others by forgiving them—including parents!

UNTAMED TONGUE

Why didn't you invite Jase to come camping with us?" Dad asked as he and Thatcher sat beside their campfire.

Thatcher looked at his dad. "His mother's in a mental hospital!"

"Yes," Dad said. "She's getting the help she needs for her mental health."

"I knew she was in a hospital, but I didn't know it was that kind of hospital until a guy at school told me," Thatcher said. "The kids at school say Jase must be nuts too, and...well, don't you think he's a little weird sometimes?"

"No weirder than anyone else," Dad replied. "Just because Jase's mother is ill does not mean he has the same problems. And remember, she's ill, not 'nuts,' as you called it." Thatcher didn't say anything, but he wasn't convinced.


After swimming in the river the next day, Thatcher let out a yell. "Dad! There's a yucky worm on my leg! I can't pull it off!"

Dad hurried over. "That's a leech, Thatcher. They live in the water and sometimes stick to swimmers. Hold still, and I'll try to get it off." Dad succeeded in removing the leech, but Thatcher's leg kept on bleeding. "Leeches give off a substance that keeps blood from clotting," Dad explained. "We'll wash and bandage your leg, and I'm sure it will be fine."

Soon Dad had Thatcher all bandaged up. "You know, Thatcher, leeches remind me of gossip. Gossip also sticks tight. Even after people quit talking, those they've gossiped about continue to hurt. I'm sure the things kids say about Jase hurt him. All that gossip may be sucking the joy of life right out of him."

"I...I didn't mean to hurt Jase," Thatcher replied.

"No, but people get hurt by gossip, and it's a sin. When we gossip, we're using other people's problems and shortcomings to get attention and make ourselves look better—and often the things we hear and repeat about others aren't even true! We need to remember we're just as flawed as everyone else and that Jesus died to save all of us. We're not showing others His love when we gossip—either the people listening or the person we're talking about."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Thatcher said. "I'll text Jase and see if he wants to come out here. Then I can tell him I'm sorry too."  *Barbara J. Westberg*



GOSSIP IS SIN | KEY VERSE: I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin. Psalm 39:1 (NIV)



Are you guilty of hurting someone by spreading gossip? Don't sin by hurting others this way. Even if you believe a negative thing you hear about someone is true, think about how you'd feel if someone said a similar thing about you. Then show Jesus's love by speaking words that help support and encourage others instead of hurting them.

THE DOGSLED RIDE

Why do we have to take Mrs. Anderson to church with us tomorrow?" asked Miriam. "She's so boring—all she talks about is her cat. I can't stand her!"

"I don't like her either," said Miriam's little brother Brendon.

"Me neither!" said Flynn, the youngest.

"That's enough!" said Mom. "That's not a kind way to talk about an elderly woman who can't get out on her own."

A while later, Mom came to Miriam's room. "Want to go for a ride? I have the dogs hooked up to the sled. Dad will stay here with the boys."

"All right!" Miriam eagerly followed her mom outside. "You put Kodiak on the team today?" she asked as she looked at the dogs. "When we take him, the other dogs don't run as well!"

"He needs more practice," said Mom. Miriam frowned as she sat down on the sled. Mom hopped on the runners. "Let's go!" Mom shouted. The dogs took off, and they glided onto the snow-packed road. Miriam yelled out in excitement as they raced to the top of the hill.

Then Kodiak spotted a branch sticking out of the snow. He pulled hard toward the side and stopped. For a minute, the other dogs tried to go on, but soon they all stopped and got tangled up in each other's lines. Mom got off the sled to straighten them out.

"I knew this would happen!" said Miriam. "Why did we have to use Kodiak?"

"You should be more patient with him. After all, you two are kind of alike."

"What do you mean?" asked Miriam in surprise.

"Kodiak sets a bad example for the other dogs, and you've been setting a bad example for your brothers. You often say mean things about people, and then they think it's okay for them to think of people that way too. That's not how Jesus wants us to treat others."

Miriam sighed. "I know."

Mom finished untangling the lines and got back onto the sled runners. "Jesus loves Mrs. Anderson—He died for her! His example of love is the one we should follow. Ask Him to help you love Mrs. Anderson like He does. Then you can set a good example for your brothers and encourage them to love her too." ♥

Corrine C. Canavan-Fifield



BE A GOOD EXAMPLE | KEY VERSE: Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. 1 Timothy 4:12 (NLT)



What kind of example are you setting for your siblings and friends who are Christians? Think about your actions. Do the things you do and say line up with the things Jesus would do and say? Trust Him to help you follow His example so you can encourage other Christians to live that way too. Then you can work together to show others His love!

SNOWFEST

Mom, guess what?" said James. "My school is having a snow sculpture contest, and there are prizes!"

"What are you going to make?" Mom asked.

"A polar bear." James grinned. "That will be the perfect animal for this cold, snowy weather."

Each day leading up to the contest, James practiced making bears. At the end of the week, a whole family of snow bears stood in front of the house.

"It's a good thing the contest is tomorrow," Mom said. "You've used up almost all the snow in the yard!"

The next day, the children started their sculptures. James worked hard, hoping to win the grand prize—a trip to Zehnder's Snowfest in Frankenmuth, Michigan.

After he finished his bear, James and his mom walked around and looked at the other entries. When the judges announced James as the grand prize winner, he jumped up and down. "I knew my bear was best!" he told his mom.


A few weeks later, when James and Mom arrived in Frankenmuth, a snow sculpture contest was underway. James watched the contestants make huge, intricate sculptures. "After seeing these entries, my bear doesn't seem so good."

"These contestants are professional," said Mom. "It's easy to feel humbled after seeing their work."

"That's for sure." James stopped to look at a sculpture of a huge polar bear. It was so lifelike, it almost looked real. "This looks nothing like my polar bear. There's just no comparison!"

Mom smiled. "It reminds me of how I used to compare myself to others. Sometimes I thought I was pretty good, and sometimes I didn't—it all depended on how 'good' or 'bad' I thought someone else was. Until I read the Bible, I thought God judged people the same way. But He has a higher standard, and none of us can live up to it, no matter how hard we try. There's only one way to be good enough for him."

"I know what it is!" said James. "We need to trust in Jesus."

"Right," said Mom. "Jesus is the only one who meets God's perfect standard, and He died to pay for our sins. When we trust in Him, He makes us good in God's eyes."  *David J. Belleau*



JESUS MAKES US GOOD | KEY VERSE: God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Ephesians 2:8 (NLT)



Do you compare yourself to other people to see how good you are? What about Jesus—have you ever compared yourself to Him? He's God's perfect standard, and compared to Him, we're all sinners in need of forgiveness. The only way to be good in God's eyes is for Jesus to remove your sin and give you His goodness. Trust Him as your Savior today. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

CANDY CANES

Mmm...I love candy canes! They're my favorite Christmas treat," Abbie said as she licked her sweet candy.

"They are yummy," said Mom. "But what makes them my favorite Christmas candy is the story they tell."

"Candy canes tell a story?" Abbie asked.

"Yes," Mom said with a gleam of excitement in her eyes. "Flip your candy cane upside down. What letter do you see?"

"It's the letter J," Abbie replied.

"That's right," Mom said. "And at Christmas we remember the birth of...?"

"Jesus!" said Abbie. "The J stands for Jesus!"

"You got it. The candy cane reminds us of Jesus at Christmas, and it also reminds us of two special groups of people who came to visit Jesus after He was born. If you turn your candy cane upright again, what does it look like?"

"A shepherd's staff!" Abbie exclaimed.

Mom nodded. "The staff reminds us of the shepherds who came to visit Jesus—and also that Jesus Himself is our Good Shepherd. And as you taste your candy cane, the sweet peppermint flavor tickles your tongue, which can be a reminder of the spices the wise men gave to Jesus."

"This part of the story tastes good," said Abbie, giving her candy cane another lick. "What do the colors mean?"

"The red represents the blood Jesus poured out for us when He died on the cross for our sins, and the white reminds us that when we trust Jesus as our Savior, He washes our sin away and makes us clean."

"I never knew the candy cane told a story before!" Abbie said as she munched on a hard piece of her candy cane.

"Every part of the candy cane tells a story. Even the fact that the candy cane is hard points to Jesus being our solid rock."

"Wow, that's amazing! Would it be okay if I give some candy canes to my friends at school? I want to tell them the story of the candy cane too!"

"That's a wonderful idea," Mom replied. "Telling others the story of Jesus is one of the best gifts you can give your friends."

"Yeah," said Abbie. "And it tastes good too!"  Rachel Vruggink



SHARE JESUS WITH OTHERS | KEY VERSE: When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. Luke 2:17 (NIV)



Do you have a friend you could tell the story of the candy cane? Telling others about Jesus's birth and how He died on the cross for their sins and rose again is a wonderful story to share at Christmastime. The shepherds were so excited when they saw Jesus that they spread the good news! Who can you share the good news of Jesus with this Christmas?



ACTIVITY

Good News Candy Canes

Today's story encourages you to share the good news of Jesus with someone. How does that make you feel? Excited? Nervous? Uncertain? Determined? Jesus wants us to tell others about Him, but have you ever wondered what to say when you do? In this activity, you'll practice sharing the good news of Jesus using candy canes.

How Does the Candy Cane Relate to Jesus?

Candy canes can help you remember and explain the good news of Jesus. Look up the following Bible verses to discover how different parts of the candy cane point to who Jesus is and what He did to save us.

"J" shape (Luke 1:31-33): _____

Red stripes (Ephesians 1:7): _____

White stripes (Isaiah 1:18): _____

Staff shape (John 10:11): _____

Hardness (Psalm 62:2): _____



If you've never trusted Jesus as your Savior, or if you want more information to share with others, go to "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.

Sharing Good News and Candy Canes

The good news of Jesus is for *everyone!* Every single person has sin only He can forgive and brokenness only He can heal. Can you think of someone in your life who needs to hear that good news? Before talking to them, pray for them. Use the simple prayer below and write their name in the blank.

God, thank you for _____. Please show them their need for Jesus and let them experience Your love. Please give me an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with them and help them see Your love in my life.

It may seem silly, but practicing what you might say can help you feel more comfortable and confident. So get a candy cane and start talking! Practice explaining the parts of the candy cane to a friend or family member who is a Christian. Once you're done, you can enjoy the sweet taste of the candy cane and remember the sweetness of Jesus's love.

THE PEARL NECKLACE



Johannah stared out her bedroom window as Mom came into the room and sat down on the bed. “How are you feeling?” Mom asked as she stroked Johannah’s forehead. “I think you still have a fever.”

“Why do I have to be sick today?” moaned Johannah. “I wanted to go sing at the hospital with my Sunday school class.” Her lower lip quivered a little.

“And it makes you feel bad that you can’t go, doesn’t it?” said Mom.

Johannah nodded. “I was really looking forward to going around and singing to people who were sick. Now I can’t.”

“I know, honey,” said Mom. “But you can pray and ask Jesus to use your class to bless the people at the hospital with their singing.”

Johannah shrugged. “It just doesn’t seem the same,” she said with a sigh.

“Maybe not, but...” Mom stood up. “I’ll be right back.” She left the room and returned a few minutes later with a strand of pearls. “See this necklace? Your great-grandmother gave it to me when I was a teenager.” She held it out so Johannah could look at it. “But there’s a very important part of it you can’t see.”


Johannah looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Well, what do you see when you look at it?” asked Mom.

Johannah took the necklace. “The pearls,” she said after examining it.

Mom nodded. “That’s what everyone notices, but look.” She carefully pulled two pearls apart to reveal the thin white thread holding them together. “No one notices this plain and simple thread, but without it, my necklace would fall apart.”

Still puzzled, Johannah looked at the pearl necklace and then at her mother. “Okay,” she said uncertainly.

“Prayer is like this thread,” Mom explained. “We often pray as an afterthought, but really, it’s what holds everything together—nothing we do would make any difference without God working behind the scenes and in people’s hearts. Even though you can’t go with the others to the hospital, you can have a very important part in what they’re doing. You can ask Jesus to use their singing to encourage the people at the hospital and show them how much He loves them and cares for them.”  *Richard S. Maffeo*



PRAYER IS IMPORTANT | KEY VERSE: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18



Do you ever feel like you can’t do anything important for Jesus because you’re too young, too sick, or too shy? That’s not true! There’s at least one thing every Christian can do, and that’s pray. It’s not something everybody notices, but Jesus does. He hears each prayer. Pray and ask Him to work in people’s hearts as you and fellow Christians serve Him and show others His love.

WONDERFULLY MADE

Nate and Peter watched as Dad assembled a miniature model of the human body they had gotten for their homeschool biology class.



"I'm amazed at God's creation," Dad said, holding up the plastic heart piece. "Did you know that the human heart, which is only about as big as a clenched fist, can pump up to two thousand gallons of blood a day?"

"I heard that in our class videos," said Peter. "We learned about eyes too. They're set in holes, or sockets, and they're protected by seven interlocking bones."

"And our eyelashes and eyebrows keep out dust and sweat," said Nate. "And each time we blink, a special fluid washes over our eyes."

Dad grinned. "Right! And have you noticed that the palms of your hands are sort of skid-proof so you can get a grip on things? And think about your fingers and all they can do. You use them to write, paint, hammer a nail, play the piano—"

"Catch a football," added Nate.

Dad nodded. "Just like the Bible says, we're fearfully and wonderfully made. God created the human body to do amazing things. His great handiwork is nothing to laugh about, is it?"


"Laugh about?" asked Peter. "What do you mean?"

"Well, sometimes I hear people say things that aren't respectful about the human body," said Dad. "They make jokes about things God designed it to do, and sometimes they even mock others whose bodies look different from theirs."

Peter nodded. "Sometimes my friends send me things that make fun of stuff like that—or even specific people."

"That's not how God wants us to treat the bodies—or people—He created," said Dad. "He loves us so much He sent Jesus to die for us. When we trust in Him, He gives us new hearts—not a physical heart that pumps blood, but a desire to know and follow Him and share His love with others. And one day He's going to give us new bodies too! Perfect bodies that will be free from sin, sickness, and death."

"Wow," said Nate. "That sounds amazing!"

Dad nodded. "It is amazing. That's why we need to treat the bodies God gave us—and everyone else—with respect."  Agnes Livezey



RESPECT THE BODIES GOD CREATED | KEY VERSE: I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:14



Are you ever tempted to make fun of the amazing bodies God created? Maybe you've made inappropriate jokes about them or looked at pictures or videos that are disrespectful. Perhaps you've even mocked someone for the way their body looks. Ask Jesus to forgive you for the times you didn't treat people He loves and their bodies with respect. Remember that our bodies are meant to remind us of His amazing love.

AN UNDESERVED GIFT

Caleb and Vanessa sat in the back seat of the car on the way home from Christmas shopping. They didn't dare say a word. Mom's face said it all. They were in big trouble. They had saved up money to buy gifts, but when they got to the store, they pushed and fought over every toy. After a couple warnings, Mom marched them out of the store empty-handed.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Caleb ventured. "I don't know what happened."

"Are we in big trouble?" Vanessa asked.

Mom took a deep breath. "We'll see when we get home. I'll talk to your dad."

When they walked through the front door, Dad saw their glum faces. "Uh-oh. What's going on?"

Mom looked at Caleb and Vanessa. "I want you both to go sit on the couch in the living room. We'll be there in a minute."

They slowly walked into the living room and plopped down on the couch. Soon their parents came in.

Dad looked stern. "I'm very disappointed to hear about your behavior today, but after talking it over, Mom and I decided we want you to open an early Christmas present."

Caleb and Vanessa looked startled as Mom handed them a small wrapped box. "Is this for real?" Caleb asked.

Mom nodded, and they both tore off the wrapping paper. Caleb pulled out a glass ornament of baby Jesus. Vanessa squealed. "It's beautiful!"

Caleb smiled but still looked a bit suspicious. "What's the catch?"

"Do you think you deserved an early Christmas present today?" Dad asked.

Caleb frowned. "No, Dad. We deserve something else. We deserve to be punished."

Mom smiled. "That's exactly why we wanted to give this to you."

Dad nodded. "We are all full of sin—we all act ugly and do bad things. Because of that sin, we all deserve punishment from God. But instead of punishing us, He sent us the most wonderful, undeserved gift. He sent us a baby to be our Savior."

"I get it!" Vanessa said. "Our little undeserved ornament will remind us that God sent Jesus to save us from sin."

Caleb smiled. "I understand too. Jesus was a gift we didn't deserve." ♥

Bethany Den Boer



JESUS IS THE GREATEST GIFT | KEY VERSE: But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Romans 5:8 (NLT)



Do you get lots of gifts at Christmas? Do you feel like you deserve your presents and get angry when you don't get what you want? We receive gifts at Christmas not because we earned them, but because those who give them to us love us. These gifts remind us God gave us Jesus to be our Savior not because we deserved such a wonderful gift, but because He loves us.

LOOKING DEEPER

On a bright winter day, Evelyn stopped by her Grandma's house after school. She found her in the kitchen, pulling a batch of cookies out of the oven.

"Hello, sweetheart," Grandma said. "Grab a cookie. How was school?"

"Pretty good," Evelyn said. "But there's a new girl in my class. She just moved here. I don't like her."

"Oh? That doesn't sound like my kind granddaughter. Why don't you like her? Is she mean to you?"

Evelyn blushed. "I'm sorry, Grandma, I didn't mean to sound unkind. I haven't talked to her, but she just looks so grumpy! She never smiles."

Grandma put a hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "Would you do me a favor, honey? Run upstairs to my bedroom and get the box underneath my bed."

Soon Evelyn was back downstairs with the box. "What is it?" she asked.

Grandma opened the box and pulled out a very old violin. It was dirty and missing parts, and all the strings were broken.

"Oh, ew!" Evelyn exclaimed.

Grandma smiled. "Yes, this old thing has been through some rough times. I haven't touched it in years. Tell you what—come back in a week and I'll show it to you again."

The next week, Evelyn was back. "I want to see that violin again," she reminded her grandma. "Did you clean it up some?"

"Yes, I did," Grandma said. "In fact..." She pulled the violin out of a case and handed it to Evelyn. "It looks like a different instrument."

Evelyn gasped. "Grandma! This is beautiful! I had no idea."

"It just needed some love," Grandma said. "You know, Evelyn, I showed you this because I thought it might change your mind about the girl from your school. Sometimes people seem mean or grumpy because they've been through rough times or are having a bad day. They need love and care, just like my old violin. That's one reason the Bible says we shouldn't judge by what we see on the outside. Everyone, no matter what they act like, needs Jesus just like we do, and He wants us to show them His love by caring for them." Grandma gave Evelyn a wink. "See if you can't make that girl smile tomorrow."

Evelyn smiled. "Thanks, Grandma. I will!"  *Lucy Alessio*



LOVE INSTEAD OF JUDGING | KEY VERSE: Stop judging by the way things look. Be fair and judge by what is really right. John 7:24 (ERV)



Do you know someone who doesn't seem very likable from a distance? Instead of holding it against them, maybe you need to get to know them. God commands us not to judge people by how they look or act but to treat people equally and show love to everyone. We all need Jesus, and He died for our sins when none of us were very likeable. Follow His example by showing everyone His love.

THE LEAD ROLE

Jessie and Grandma clapped as Chloe emerged from backstage long after the audience left. Chloe had spent weeks preparing to audition for the role of Mary in her church's Christmas musical, but she was instead cast as Mary's cousin, Elizabeth.

"Wonderful job, Chloe," Grandma said. "You played an excellent Elizabeth."

Chloe sighed. "Thanks, Grandma."

"Do you get to keep the gray wig?" Jessie asked.

"Why would I want to keep that?" Chloe cried.

"You could pretend to be Grandma on her birthday and get all her presents."

Grandma poked Jessie playfully on the shoulder. "How about instead of stealing presents, we go get frozen yogurt to celebrate Chloe's performance?"

"Yay!" Jessie exclaimed. Chloe nodded reluctantly.

As they stood in line, Grandma went on and on about how wonderful the musical was. Finally, Chloe couldn't take it anymore. "Can we stop talking about the musical already? It's not fair that Shelley got to play Mary and I was stuck playing Elizabeth!" Chloe wailed. "When will I get to play the most important role?"

Jessie's eyebrows furrowed. "Chloe, what does Ms. Hill say before every rehearsal?"

"There are no small parts, just small actors," Chloe grumbled.

"Right—your attitude matters more than the part you play. Even though you didn't get the role you wanted, you can encourage Shelley and be happy for her."

"And don't forget what the Christmas story is all about—Jesus's birth!" Grandma added. "Jesus plays the most important role—in the Christmas story and in our lives. Without His love and sacrifice on the cross to save us from our sins, we wouldn't get to look forward to eternity with Him or be able to share His love with others on earth. We all have an important role to play, but none of us are capable of filling Jesus's lead role."

"You're right," Chloe admitted. "Jesus's role is too big for me."

"Or any of us," Jessie added.

They got their frozen yogurt and sat down. "Maybe we should thank Jesus before we eat," Chloe said.

"Good idea," Grandma said. "And not just for the yogurt, but for His love too." ♥

Hannah Chung



ONLY JESUS CAN SAVE US | KEY VERSE: Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12 (NIV)



Do you compare yourself to others? Maybe your friend connects faster with younger kids than you do, or you don't have as much money to give at church as your older siblings. The good news is Jesus doesn't love us based on our works. The best news is Jesus already completed the most important work—dying for our sins and coming back to life! Our job is to love Him and love others.

WHITE CHRISTMAS



It's still snowing, Grandpa," said Evan. "We'll have a white Christmas for sure!" Evan had not seen much snow when he lived in the valley, but now he was staying with his grandpa in the mountains.

Grandpa nodded. "It makes the whole world look so clean, doesn't it? It reminds me of one of my favorite Bible verses. Isaiah 1:18 says our sins can be made as white as snow. That happens when we trust Jesus as our Savior."

Evan nodded, even though he wasn't really sure what that meant. "I like the snow," he said. "Can I go sledding for a while?"

"Sure," said Grandpa, so Evan bundled up and went out.


That evening, Evan enjoyed a mug of hot chocolate while Grandpa read the Christmas story from the Bible. When Grandpa finished, Evan turned to him. "Grandpa, I was thinking about that verse you like—the one about snow. Didn't you say my dad trusts Jesus as his Savior?" Grandpa nodded. "So does that mean his sins are as white as snow now?" Evan asked.

"It sure does," Grandpa assured him.

"Then why is Dad still in jail?" asked Evan.

"Well, Evan, your father broke the law, so now he has to face the consequences for what he did—even though He decided to trust in Jesus while he was in jail and asked Him to forgive him for all the bad things he did. Jesus washed all his sin away and made his heart clean, and your dad is a new person and will spend eternity with God. Even though he's still in jail, God won't hold the wrong things he did against him. In God's eyes, your dad's heart is as clean and white as snow."

Evan thought about that. "I want my heart to be as white as snow too."

"It can be," said Grandpa. "Shall I pray with you so you can ask Jesus to forgive your sins and make you clean? Then you can have a white Christmas—inside and out."  *Esther M. Bailey*



TRUST JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOR | KEY VERSE: Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Isaiah 1:18



Did you know that you can have a white Christmas anywhere in the world? Even if you don't get snow where you live, you can have a white Christmas on the inside by asking Jesus to wash away all the wrong you've ever done. He died to take the punishment for your sin, and when you trust in Him, He will make your heart as clean and white as snow. Trust in Him today! (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

STORMY WEATHER

Oh no!" Dad exclaimed as the car slid off the road and into a snowbank. The wind was strong, the snow was deep, and they were stuck!

Dad stepped on the gas pedal and tried to rock the car forward and then back. Nothing happened. So Mom got behind the wheel and Dad, Olivia, and Nina tried to push it free. But it was stuck tight.

Dad sighed heavily. "Last winter I bought a shovel to keep in the trunk in case something like this happened, but then we had such a mild winter that I never needed it. Last spring I put it in the garage—it's still there."

Mom pulled out her phone and made a call. Then she flicked on the emergency flashing lights. "I'm afraid we'll have to wait a while before help can get here," she said.


She was right. It seemed like a very long time before help arrived, but eventually they were back on the road. "I'm putting that shovel in the trunk the moment we get home," Dad said as they drove. "While we were waiting, I was thinking about how important it is to be prepared. I was wondering how prepared we would be if we got caught in one of life's storms."

"One of life's storms?" Olivia asked.

"Yes. Think about this," said Dad. "Up to now, the winter has been mild, so I didn't pack a shovel. And when things in life are going smoothly, we sometimes forget how much we need Jesus and aren't as motivated to pray and read His Word. But sooner or later we're going to be challenged with a storm in life—a difficult problem or time of hardship. We need to be prepared for stormy weather in life, just like on the road."

"So how do we prepare for life's storms?" asked Nina.

"When we pray, read the Bible, and go to church, it helps us remember that Jesus died and rose again for us and that He's always with us," said Dad. "As we grow in our faith, we'll be prepared to depend on Him for help when life gets stormy."

Nina smiled. "We should pray and thank Jesus for helping us through that snowstorm. That will help us remember He's with us through life's storms too!" 
Nance E. Keyes



BE PREPARED FOR LIFE'S STORMS | KEY VERSE: [Jesus] called out to them, "Don't be afraid. I am here!" John 6:20 (NLT)



Are you preparing for whatever may happen in life? If you trust in Jesus, He will always be with you and help you through whatever storms life brings. But sometimes it's easy to forget that, especially when things are going smoothly. Spending time with Jesus and growing in your relationship with Him will help you remember to trust and depend on Him—not only when life gets stormy, but all the time!

ANIMALS TALK ON CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas presents made Sam nervous. Santa's "nice" list made him worried. As the days drew closer to Christmas, Sam's anxiety about presents increased.

Maybe it was the wondering—*is Santa coming?* Maybe it was the worry—*was I good enough this year?* Or maybe Sam was afraid he couldn't buy the perfect gifts for his family with the little money he had.

"Homemade gifts again," he said sadly.

On Christmas Eve, Sam's parents took him and his brother, Bobby, on an outing to the zoo to help get their minds off presents. As they walked around, the family noticed the animals were being extra active and noisy in their enclosures. The eagles squawked. The mountain lions grunted, pacing back and forth. The black bears huffed, as one clawed up a tree stump and the other scratched its backside along the fence.

Then the parrot said, "Hi, Bobby."

"Did he say my name?" asked Bobby in amazement.

The petting zoo sheep and goats were *baaing* and *maaing* louder than ever.

"Why are the animals acting so funny?" Sam finally asked.


"I think animals talk on Christmas Eve," said Dad, grinning. "I think they're excited for the birth of baby Jesus, just like the barn animals were on the night He was born!"

Sam was old enough to know the animals couldn't really talk, but he was warmed by the idea of it. The animals were God's creation, and perhaps they wanted to celebrate Christmas too.

"It's not about the presents, it's about God sending Jesus into the world to save us because He loves us," said Sam. "He's the present!"

"You got it! Spending time together at Christmas and giving thanks to God for His wonderful gift is what really matters," said Mom.

Dad nodded. "Jesus died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life, and He fills our lives with love, joy, peace, and many other good things. There's nothing better than that!"

That night, Sam slept peacefully and awoke to a beautiful Christmas morning. He jumped out of bed, ready to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.  *Elizabeth Janczyk*



CELEBRATE THE GIFT OF JESUS | KEY VERSE: Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! 2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV)



Do you worry about presents at Christmas? Maybe you don't know what will be under the tree or if you'll be able to buy others the gifts they want. The good news is that the best gift of Christmas isn't anything anyone can buy. It's Jesus, and He doesn't have a "nice" list—He offers eternal life to everyone, even though none of us deserve it. Have you received that gift? Trust in Him today so you can celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

CRYBABY CHRISTMAS

This is the worst Christmas ever!" Riley told her brother. "Not only did we have to move because of Dad's job, we have to live in this tiny apartment because we can't find a house." She groaned as she tripped over a box on her way to the couch. "There's no room in here!"

Logan shrugged. "At least we have beds. When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, all they could find was a stable. They probably just had straw."

"Yeah, well, at least they had the gifts the wise men brought them. We don't have any presents to open because we've been too busy moving that we haven't had any time to go Christmas shopping!"

"Actually, the wise men didn't bring gifts to Jesus right when he was born," Logan said. "They didn't come until later."

Riley crossed her arms. "Well, at least they had the angels singing. I can't download any music because the internet isn't working!"

"It was actually the shepherds who heard the angels singing—not Mary and Joseph." Logan looked at his sister. "It sounds like you're having a crybaby Christmas."

Riley raised her eyebrows. "A crybaby Christmas?"

"Yeah," said Logan. "You're complaining about everything!"

Riley threw a pillow at her brother's head, but Mom came down the hallway just in time and caught it in midair. "Okay, you two. What's going on?"


"Logan says I'm complaining about everything!" said Riley.

"Well, are you?" asked Mom.

Riley sighed. "Well, maybe. But everything's a mess, and just because he's not bothered by any of it doesn't mean he can make fun of me!"

Mom sat down next to Riley. "I know Christmas is a lot different for us this year, but we can still be joyful. After all, Christmas is about Jesus coming to earth to save us! He cares about us and understands what we're going through because He went through so much more when He was on earth."

Riley looked around their small apartment. "But He never complained, did He?"

Mom shook her head. "The Bible says He went to the cross with joy because it was the only way we could have eternal life with Him." She smiled at Riley. "Trust Him to help you be joyful too."  *Ruth McQuilkin*



BE JOYFUL | KEY VERSE: The angel said...I bring you good tidings of great joy. Luke 2:10



Have you been rejoicing in the birth of Jesus this Christmas season? Or have you been too weighed down by problems to feel joyful? Problems can be hard to deal with, especially at Christmas, but remember that you don't have to face them alone. Jesus came to earth to save you, and He promises to be with you through every problem you face. Because of Him, you can celebrate Christmas with joy!

JUST HAVING FUN

Boo!" Blake shouted from behind the couch as his younger sister walked past. Gabby screamed and jumped in surprise, and Blake laughed as he climbed out. "Gotcha!"

"Mom!" Gabby wailed. "Blake's scaring me again!"

Mom came into the living room. "Blake, we've talked about this before. You know it scares Gabby when you jump out at her like that. You need to stop it."

"Yeah," said Gabby. "And stop hitting me with your pillow too."

"Oh, come on. I just wanted to have a pillow fight! Lighten up, Gabby."

"Blake," said Mom, "are you being kind to your sister?"

"Well, I'm not trying to be mean. I just want to have fun." As Blake spoke, their black cat raced past them, followed by their big golden dog.

"Oscar, leave Morris alone!" yelled Blake. He chased the golden retriever around the coffee table. Oscar pranced around and panted happily as he trapped the hissing cat in the corner.

"Oscar looks like he's laughing," said Gabby.


Mom nodded. "I'd say he's having a lot of fun."

"Oscar, come!" At Blake's command, the dog finally turned away from the cat. "No chasing Morris." Blake glared at the dog sternly as Oscar trotted to him. "Don't do that again!"

Mom smirked. "But Oscar was only having fun. He didn't do it to be mean."

"Well, it wasn't fun for Morris, and—" Blake stopped. He was quiet for a moment, then sighed. "I see your point, Mom. What's fun for one animal—or person—might not be any fun for the other."

Mom nodded. "Oscar was having fun at Morris's expense. That's also how you've been having fun with Gabby. You've been doing things that were fun for you, but not fun for her—in fact, I think part of your fun came from seeing her get upset. That's not how Jesus wants us to treat people. He tells us to show others love and kindness by considering how they feel and not just thinking of ourselves. That's the kind of love He showed us when He sacrificed His life so we could be saved."

Blake looked over at Gabby, who had picked up Morris and gone into the kitchen. "Come on, Oscar," he said. "You and I both need to apologize." 

Jody Hedlund



CONSIDER HOW OTHERS FEEL | KEY VERSE: Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others. Philippians 2:4 (CSB)



Are you sensitive to the feelings of others? Or do you like to have fun by teasing people who may not find it as fun as you do? As Christians, we need to put other people's feelings before our own fun and enjoyment so they can see Jesus's love in us. He loves us so much that He gave His own life to save us, and He'll help you reflect His love in the way you treat others.

A HOLE IN ONE



Matthew lined up his first putt. He bounced his golf ball off the side wall, past the spinning windmill, and it rolled to a stop just a few feet away from the hole.

“Great shot, buddy!” said Dad. It was Matthew’s first time mini-golfing, and his dad was teaching him how to play. “That was a great way to start the game. My turn now, and then whoever is farther away from the hole after that goes next.” Dad steadied his shoulders, took aim, and swung.

Dad’s ball went straight through the tunnel, barely dodging the windmill blades. It kept rolling over the green turf, slowed to a crawl, and almost stopped before tipping into the cup.

“Wow, a hole in one! I can’t believe it!” Matthew exclaimed. He was sure he’d never be able to play like that.

“I admit, that was pretty cool. I didn’t think I was going to be able to do that,” Dad said as he reached into the cup to retrieve his ball. “It’s really tough to get a hole in one.”


“Do you think I’ll ever be able to do that?” Matthew asked.

“I’m sure you could, with practice. You even got pretty close on your first shot today.” They continued to play, and Matthew kept trying for his own hole in one, but he never quite made it.

“You’re right, Dad, getting a hole in one is a lot tougher than it looks. I don’t think I’ll ever be good enough.” Matthew sighed. “It’s like what I learned at church last week. We talked about how no one is good enough to get into heaven on their own either.”

Dad nodded. “That’s a really good point. Earning your way into heaven would be like getting a hole in one every time your whole life—only way more impossible! No matter how hard we try, we could never be good enough to get into heaven. There’s only one person who is.”

“Right. Jesus!” said Matthew. “He died on the cross so we wouldn’t have to be punished for the bad stuff we’ve done. The only way to get to heaven is to trust Him to save us.”

Matthew lined up his ball and putted, then gave his dad a huge grin as it went straight into the hole.  *Dylan Kraayenbrink*



ONLY JESUS CAN BRING YOU INTO HEAVEN | KEY VERSE: As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Romans 3:10 (NIV)



Do you think you can get into heaven on your own? If you’ve done even just one bad thing—like telling a little lie to your parents or taking something that’s not yours—you have failed. And the Bible says we’ve all failed to do what’s right. That’s why God sent His perfect Son, Jesus, to die for us. We can only get into heaven by trusting in Him. (See “Have You Heard the Good News?” on page 104.)

A GOOD ENDING

Why does Grandpa have to hurt so much?” Bentley asked his dad as they left the nursing home one afternoon.

“I don’t know, Bentley. It’s hard to see Grandpa the way he is now, isn’t it?” They were silent as they walked out to the car and got in. “How about a hike up Piestewa Peak tomorrow?” Dad asked.

Bentley’s eyes lit up. “Okay! I’ve been wanting to do that.”

Less than halfway up the mountain the next day, Bentley began to struggle to keep up with Dad. *Whatever made me think it would be fun to climb Piestewa Peak?* he wondered. When he heard Dad say, “Time for a break,” Bentley sighed in relief.

“Ready to go again?” Dad asked after the break. Bentley hesitated, trying to decide if he should suggest going back down. Dad ruffled Bentley’s hair. “You’re not going to quit on me now, are ya, buddy? When we get to the top, you’ll see the hard climb was totally worth it.” Bentley wasn’t so sure about that, but he nodded and trudged up the mountain with his dad.

When they finally reached the top, they could see the whole city below, surrounded by hills and desert. A sense of wonder came over Bentley. “You were right!” he said. “This is awesome!”

Soon they found a nice spot to spread out their picnic lunch. “Being up here is totally worth the hard climb, just like you said,” Bentley mused.

Dad took a bite of his sandwich and nodded. “I’ve been thinking,” he said. “Our climb up here was hard, but it had a good ending. What’s happening to Grandpa is something like climbing this mountain.”

“How?” asked Bentley.

“Our world is cursed by sin—it’s what causes hard things like death and Grandpa’s illness. But when Jesus returns, He’s going to make all things new. Christians will have perfect bodies, and we’ll live with Jesus in a new, beautiful world where there won’t be any sin, death, or suffering. Our lives now are hard—just like climbing this mountain was hard. But Jesus is with us every step of the way, and like the view after the hike, we know the ending will be worth it.” ♥

Esther M. Bailey



JESUS WILL END SUFFERING | KEY VERSE: Sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:18



Have you struggled with having a friend or family member die? Do you wonder why people have to suffer through sickness and pain? People go through many different kinds of struggles in life, and it’s hard to understand why. But Jesus promises to be with us in our pain and struggles on earth, and one day He will come back and make everything new. Then we’ll be free from sin, pain, and death and will live with Him forever!

GONE FOR GOOD

With her sidewalk chalk, India colored in the flowers she had drawn along the edge of the driveway. Then she stood back and frowned.

Dad came out of the house and smiled at India. “What lovely flowers!” he said. “And I won’t even have to water them.”

“No, but I’m going to,” said India. “I want them a different color.” Taking the garden hose, she aimed the stream of water at her artwork. *WHOOSH!* All traces of chalk soon disappeared down the driveway.

India grinned at Dad. “Now I can start all over. Cool, huh?”

“That is pretty cool,” said Dad. “That’s a picture of what Jesus does for us. He gives us a chance to start over when we confess our sin to Him.”

“Oh, great,” India said, rolling her eyes. “I can already see my chalk flowers are going to be used in a sermon!”

Dad laughed. “Well, that’s what happens when you have a pastor for a dad!” He nodded toward the wet spot on the driveway. “Where are the flowers you drew?”

“They’re gone,” India replied. “And I know what you’re going to say—that when we confess our sins, they’re gone too.”


“That’s right,” said Dad. “Now bring those flowers back for a minute.”

“I can’t!” India said. “They’re washed down the drain, and they don’t exist anymore.”

Dad smiled. “They’re gone, never to be seen again. That’s what happens to our sins when we confess them to Jesus and turn away from them. He forgives and forgets them. The Bible says He removes them from us as far as the east is from the west!”

“But sometimes I still go over them in my mind—even after I tell Jesus I’m sorry,” India said.

Dad nodded. “Sometimes it’s hard for us to forget the bad things we’ve done, and even after confessing them, we wonder how God can forgive and forget them. When that happens, ask Jesus to help you remember His promise to always forgive your sins and remove them.”

“And thank Him for letting me start over,” added India. “Just like I’m going to do with these flowers!” Chalk in hand, she began drawing again on a dry section of the driveway.  Hazel W. Marett



GOD FORGIVES AND REMOVES SIN | KEY VERSE: I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more. Jeremiah 31:34



Have you done something wrong? If you trust in Jesus, He’s already taken the punishment for all your sins and promises to forgive any sin and remove it from your life. When you do something wrong, tell Him and ask Him to forgive you. Even if you think of the bad thing you did again, He won’t—it’s gone forever! Then you can start over, depending on Him to help you do what’s right.

THE HIDDEN GIFT



Christmas was over, and Malachi and Nevaeh helped their parents remove the ornaments, lights, and strands of silver and purple garland from the Christmas tree branches. Soon the shimmering and festive tree looked bare except for the colorful tree skirt surrounding the tree stand.

“Hey,” Malachi called out. “Look at that!” He pointed to a small box wrapped in green and red paper peeking out from under a fold in the tree skirt.

“Where did that come from?” Mom asked as she bent down to pick up the box. “We must have missed this when we opened our gifts.” She held the box in her hands and looked for a name. “It’s for me! From Aunt Maddi,” she said in surprise. “I didn’t think she had sent anything this year, and here it was under the tree the whole time.”

Mom opened the gift and found a necklace and matching earrings. “They’re so pretty!” Nevaeh said as Mom held them up for everybody to see.


“Just think—Aunt Maddi’s gift was here all this time, but Mom couldn’t receive it because she didn’t know it was there,” Dad said. “It reminds me of another gift—God’s gift of salvation. It’s available to everyone, but many people don’t even know it’s there.”


Mom nodded. “It stays hidden until someone shows it to them—like you showed the package to me, Malachi.”

Nevaeh and Malachi thought about that. “So we need to show people God’s gift by telling them about Jesus,” Nevaeh said.

“And tell them that if they receive it, Jesus will forgive their sins and give them eternal life,” added Malachi.

“That’s right,” said Dad. “It’s an amazing gift! But they can’t receive it if they don’t know it’s there. That’s why we need to share it with others.” Dad motioned to the boxes of decorations. “Let’s see if each of us can come up with a person we can tell about God’s amazing gift by the time we finish putting this stuff away.” ♥ *Richard S. Maffeo*

 **TELL OTHERS ABOUT GOD’S GIFT** | KEY VERSE: For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23 (NIV)

 Have you received God’s gift of salvation? (See “Have You Heard the Good News?” on page 104.) It’s wonderful to know all the wrong things you’ve done have been forgiven and you have eternal life with Jesus. But many people don’t know this amazing gift exists. Think of someone you know who may not know about Jesus and the eternal life He offers. Then tell them about it! God may use you to help someone receive Jesus, the best gift of all.

INVENTORY TIME

Hi, Dad,” Kiera said as she sat down at the table for breakfast. “Are you going to have to work late again tonight?” Kiera’s dad was a manager at a large store.

“Nope—it’s New Year’s Eve, so we close early today.” Dad sighed. “I’m ready for a night off. We’ve been busy all week with people returning and exchanging things they got for Christmas and with our annual after-Christmas sale.”

“Why do you always have a big sale right after Christmas?” Kiera asked.

“Well, mostly so we can sell as much as possible before we take inventory next month,” replied Dad.

“Inventory?” Kiera repeated. “What’s that?”


“It’s when they count everything in the store to see if it lines up with what their computer system says they’re supposed to have,” said Kiera’s brother, Brent. “Some things in the store may have gotten lost or stolen, and they need to see what’s missing so it can be replaced or removed from the computer. Right, Dad?”

Dad nodded. “That’s a very good description. We do that once a year.” He paused to take a bite of cereal. “You know, we all need to take inventory of our lives too—and New Year’s Eve is a great time to do that.”

“Take inventory of our lives?” Kiera laughed. “You mean we should count how many pairs of shoes and jeans and socks we have?”

“Not exactly. I was thinking it would be good to review how we’ve been living and whether it lines up with how God tells us to live in the Bible. We should think about whether there are any sins we need to confess. Then we can ask Jesus to forgive us for those things and show us any changes He wants us to make in our lives.”

“So, the changes we should make are like New Year’s resolutions?” asked Kiera.

“Well, I guess they could be,” said Dad. “But they aren’t changes we should try to make on our own—and thinking about our actions and confessing sins is something we should do every day, not just once a year. No matter what time of year it is, we need to trust Jesus to help us reflect His love in all we do and grow to be more like Him.”  Hazel W. Maret



REVIEW YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE | KEY VERSE: Remember that the LORD your God led you all the way. Deuteronomy 8:2



Have you taken a spiritual inventory lately? Think about the things that have happened and what you’ve done this past year. How has Jesus helped you grow in your relationship with Him? What are some areas where you didn’t always reflect His love in your thoughts, words, or actions? Ask Him to forgive you for anything you regret. Then depend on Him to help you make any changes you need to and become more and more like Him.

FROM COBWEBBS TO CABLES

My Sunday school teacher said we should read the Bible on our own every day,” Macey said on the way home from church. “I’m going to start doing that today.”

“That’s great,” said Mom. “It’s good to spend time with Jesus in His Word each day. He uses it to refresh us spiritually and remind us who we are in Him.”

That afternoon—and for the next couple of days—Macey read a whole chapter in her Bible. As time went by, however, she read less and less often.

“I’m so mad at myself, Mom,” Macey said with a sigh as they were taking a walk a few weeks later. “When I decided to read the Bible every day, I really intended to do it. But I forget most of the time, or I’m too busy or too tired.”


“I used to neglect reading my Bible too,” Mom told her. “But then I made it a habit to read at a certain time every day. For me, mornings are best, and I try not to let anything interfere with my time with Jesus. By doing this, I developed a habit, and I seldom miss it now.”

“Maybe I—oh, look!” Macey stopped to look at something at the side of the road. “There’s a huge spiderweb between that post and the telephone cable.”

Mom came over to look at the web. “This reminds me of something my grandmother used to say about habits and spiderwebs. Grandma called them cobwebs, and she said, ‘Habits are first like cobwebs, then like cables.’ What do you think that means?”

Macey studied the spider’s web. “I think it means that when you first start doing something, it’s easy to forget or just not do it. You’re trying to make it a habit, but it’s easy to break—like spiderwebs are. But if you keep on doing something over and over, the habit you’re working on will become strong and hard to break—like that cable.”

“Right!” said Mom. “That’s why it’s good to make reading your Bible a habit.”

Macey thought about that as they began walking again. “Hey, Mom? Can you wake me up fifteen minutes earlier tomorrow morning? That might be a good time for me to read my Bible too.”  *Mary Rose Pearson*



READ THE BIBLE EVERY DAY | KEY VERSE: I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. Psalm 119:16 (NIV)



Do you take time to read the Bible each day? Maybe you’ve tried to before but got busy or forgot to keep it up. Starting a new habit can be hard, but reading the Bible regularly can help you get to know Jesus better and grow in your relationship with Him. Think about how you can spend time in His Word each day. Then trust Him to help you make it a habit strong enough to last a lifetime.

LIAR, LIAR, PANTS ON FIRE

Daisy ran to the left as her sister Mia threw the ball toward her. Daisy bumped into a tall vase as she caught the ball. She yelped as the vase crashed to the ground. The sea-green glass hit the wood floor and splintered into a hundred pieces. Flowers lay on the ground, and water was soaking into the rug. *Oh no!* Daisy thought. *Mom and Dad will be furious!*

Just then Daisy's parents came running in. Daisy quickly tossed the ball into the hallway, away from their view.

"Daisy, Mia, are you two okay? What happened?" Mom asked, frowning when she saw the hopelessly broken vase. Dad looked at Daisy and Mia with a raised eyebrow.

Daisy glanced at Mia, hoping she wouldn't tell on her. Mia looked down, the floor suddenly seeming to be very interesting.

"Um, Mr. McFluffy Pants jumped on the desk and knocked over the vase!" Daisy blurted, pointing at their cat. Daisy's face turned red as she realized the cat was sleeping. "I'm sorry," she murmured. Tears streamed down her face. "I was trying to catch the ball when I bumped into it. And then I hid the ball in the hallway," Daisy said, pointing at the ball.

"Mia, Daisy," Mom said, "you two know better than to play catch indoors."


"Sorry," Mia said.

"Daisy, it's okay that you broke the vase," Dad said.

"It is?" Daisy said, looking up.

"Yes, but it's not okay to lie," said Mom. Daisy looked down again.

"Especially when Mr. McFluffy Pants is such an honorable member of the family!" Dad joked. "This reminds me of a Bible verse," he said. "Second Corinthians 8:21 tells us to do what is right in God's eyes and to make sure people can see we are honorable too—and that means being honest. When we do that, we bring honor to Jesus by letting others see the goodness and love He's put in our hearts."

Daisy turned red again. "I'm sorry I lied," she said. "And I'm sorry for blaming Mr. McFluffy Pants too." Daisy looked back at the orange-and-brown-spotted cat, who had managed to sleep through all the commotion. "At least now I know that Mr. McFluffy Pants isn't a good cat to blame." Everyone laughed.  *Ira Ool*



BE HONEST | KEY VERSE: We are careful to be honorable before the Lord, but we also want everyone else to see that we are honorable. 2 Corinthians 8:21 (NLT)



Have you ever lied to get out of trouble? Lying not only makes things worse, it's also wrong in God's eyes and hurtful to others. As Christians, God calls us to be honorable and honest so others can see that we belong to Jesus, who died and rose again to make us God's children. Trust Him to help you tell the truth and do what is right so others can see His love in your life.

COLOR!



A TIGHT GRIP

Mom!" Jessica cried. "Cassi hit me!"
"Because you pushed me!" cried her little sister.

Mom sighed. "Can't we ever drive to school without you two fighting?"

Jessica felt her face flush with anger at her sister. She tried to ignore her by picking a book out of her bag to read, but before she even finished a sentence, she felt Cassi's elbow in her side. She pushed back, and before long the girls were hitting each other again.

"Honestly, you two!" Mom brought the car to a stop in front of the school. "No more fighting!"

The girls got out of the car and headed their separate ways without saying goodbye to each other. Jessica held her lunch bag tightly in her hands as she walked to her first class, still fuming at her sister.

At lunchtime Jessica saw her sister sitting alone, looking troubled. "What's wrong?" Jessica asked coolly as she came up to the table.

"I forgot my lunch," Cassi said.

Jessica's hands tightened around her lunch bag. "Too bad. Maybe if you spent less time fighting with me and more time getting ready for school, that wouldn't have happened."

Cassi looked down at the empty table sadly. Jessica turned to walk away, but Mrs. Gregory stood in her way. The teacher looked down at her and smiled.

"You're holding on to your lunch bag very tightly," she noted. "Are you afraid love and forgiveness might spill out?"

Jessica looked down at the bag in her hands, confused.

"Sometimes when we're angry about something, we want to hold on to our anger like you're holding on to that bag," Mrs. Gregory said, pulling out chairs for herself and Jessica. "But the Bible tells us to let go of our anger and forgive others, just like Jesus has forgiven our sin and doesn't hold it against us." She smiled at Jessica. "Maybe it's time to loosen your grip."

Jessica looked over at her sister and then down at her lunch bag. She slowly opened her bag and took out part of her sandwich and a small bag of crackers. "Here," she said, placing them in front of Cassi.

Cassi looked up and smiled. "Thanks, Jessica."

Jessica smiled back. "You're welcome."  *Chandra Philip*



DON'T HOLD ON TO ANGER | KEY VERSE: Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger...Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:31-32 (NIV)



Do you often find yourself fighting with your siblings or friends? Everyone gets angry sometimes, but the Bible warns against holding on to anger tightly and refusing to let go. Instead, remember the love and forgiveness Jesus shows you and trust Him to help you do the same for others. Then let go of your anger and act in love.

ALWAYS ROOM FOR ONE MORE

Connor stood beside his dad on the cracked, uneven sidewalk of Nairobi, Kenya, and watched in fascination at the hustle and bustle of city life around him. Horns blared, the sounds of people speaking other languages filled his ears, and the sour smell of diesel fumes from passing cars and buses made him want to hold his nose.

“Hey, Dad!” he called over the noise. “What do they call minibuses in Africa again? I forgot.”

“They’re called *matatus*.” Dad pronounced the word again slowly. “Muh-TAH-too.”

Just then a brightly colored *matatu* with writing and pictures on it sped around the corner and came to a screeching halt in front of them. Connor and his dad climbed in, and four more people crammed in behind them. A lady with a live chicken squeezed in and held it on her lap like she was giving it a big hug. Just as they were about to drive off, three more men hopped on and held on tight as the *matatu* sped up and started zigzagging from one lane to another. The ride was bumpy and fast.

“That was awesome!” Connor said after Dad paid the *matatu* driver and they climbed off. Dad looked a little dazed.


“Dad, why did more people keep getting on when we were running out of room?” Connor asked.

“Well, Nairobi is a big city, and it’s the cheapest way to get around if you have to get somewhere fast,” Dad explained. “A famous saying about *matatus* is ‘there’s always room for one more.’”

“That’s kind of like the Bible verse you read during family devotions last night,” Connor remarked. “The one that talks about God’s house being full.”

Dad nodded. “Good memory. Luke 14:23—‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in so that my house will be full.’ Jesus longs for each of us to have a relationship with Him and wants us to share that good news with others so we can all live with Him in heaven one day. He wants His house to be full.”

“But He’ll never run out of room or turn anyone away.” Connor grinned. “Sort of like a *matatu*.”

“Right,” Dad said with a smile. “Because in heaven, there’s always room for one more.”  Kelly Hope



TELL OTHERS ABOUT JESUS | KEY VERSE: Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. Luke 14:23 (NIV)



Do you tell others about Jesus? God’s love is so big that He sent His Son to die not just for you but for the whole world! He welcomes anyone who comes to Him, and He wants you to let others know they can live with Him forever. Pray for people who haven’t heard about Jesus—both where you live and around the world—and trust God to use you to help fill His house by telling others the good news.

PLUG IT IN

Mom, I can't get the toaster to work!" called William. Receiving no answer, he went to the small office where his mother was working on her computer. "I want to make some toast, but the toaster's not working," he said. "It won't heat up."

Mom shuffled through papers on her desk. "Is it plugged in?"


"Umm...it always is, isn't it?" William sighed. "I'll go check." He went back to the kitchen. "Oops!" he said when he found the cord nestled against the wall. "No wonder it didn't work." He plugged in the toaster, put a piece of raisin bread into it, and was soon enjoying perfectly browned, buttered toast.

The next morning, William shared his toaster incident with his class at church. Their teacher, Mr. Scott, smiled. "William, your story reminds me of an important truth." He picked up his Bible. "I'm sure you all know you should read your Bible every day, right?" Heads nodded. "While that's good to do, did you know that just reading the Bible isn't enough? What you read needs to be plugged into your life."

"Plugged into my life?" asked Lena. "What do you mean by that? The Bible doesn't have a cord!" She and some of the other kids giggled.

"When something is plugged in, it's used to make a change," Mr. Scott replied. "Toasters change bread. Vacuum cleaners change carpet. Phones and other devices change what we see and hear. When we trust in Jesus, we receive the Holy Spirit, and He changes us. One of the ways He does that is by helping us understand and obey God's Word."

"So when we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit plugs it into our lives?" William asked.

Mr. Scott nodded. "The Holy Spirit uses the truth of God's Word to change us and make us more like Jesus. As you learn more and more about Jesus by reading the Bible, your thoughts and actions will be affected." Mr. Scott smiled at the class. "So keep reading your Bible and learning more about what it says at church, but don't stop there! Trust God to help you plug it into your life so others can see the love of Jesus in all you say and do."  *Janice M. Jones*



THE HOLY SPIRIT CHANGES YOU | KEY VERSE: Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1:22 (NIV)



Is the Bible plugged into your life? It's good to read it on your own and study it with others at church, but just reading and studying it isn't enough. What it says needs to affect how you live your life, and that can only happen through the Holy Spirit. As you read and learn about God's Word, trust Him to plug it into your life so your attitudes and actions reflect Jesus.



GETTING READY

Madelyn picked up the tissues and old drawings off the floor and threw them in the trash can. As she was making her bed, her little sister Aria ran into the room. Madelyn's dad followed her.

"Grandma's coming!" Aria yelled. She had already told all her friends and teachers at preschool, and she still wanted to tell someone else the good news.

"I know, Aria." Madelyn picked up a toy and set it on her shelf. "That's why I'm cleaning my room."

Aria bounced up on the bed, wrinkling the neatly spread covers.

"Aria," Madelyn said, frowning as she watched her hard work being destroyed, "why don't you go watch TV?"

The little girl beamed. "I can't. I have to get ready for Grandma!"

"By bouncing on the bed I just made?" Madelyn asked with a sigh.

Dad smiled and lifted Aria off the bed. "That reminds me of someone else who's coming too."

Aria's eyes grew wide. "Someone else is coming? Who?"


"Jesus!" Dad said. "We can be just as excited about His coming as we are about Grandma's. And just like Madelyn is tidying her room for Grandma's visit, we have to prepare for Jesus's return. Like you said, Aria, we can't just sit around watching TV when a visitor is coming!"

"How do we prepare for Jesus's coming, Dad?" Madelyn asked.

"First we need to get our hearts ready. We do that by trusting Jesus to forgive our sin. Then we need to do what Aria's been doing. We need to tell others about Him and let them know He's coming again so they can get their hearts ready too."

Aria looked around the room. "Madelyn's room is ready for Grandma, but I know some of my friends at school aren't ready for Jesus. I'll tell them about Him on Monday so they can get ready too!"

"Good idea," Dad said. "He's the only one who can make our hearts as clean as your sister's room."

Madelyn smiled and grabbed Aria's hand. "Come on, Aria. Let's go watch for Grandma's car!"  *Jessica Kleeberger*



BE READY FOR JESUS'S COMING | KEY VERSE: Always be ready. You don't know the day your Lord will come. Matthew 24:42 (ERV)



What do you do when a friend or family member is coming to visit? Clean your room? Plan fun things to do together? It's exciting when someone comes to visit—and when Jesus comes again, it will be even more exciting! Will you be prepared for Him? Make sure your heart is ready by trusting Him to make you clean. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.) Then tell others the good news of what Jesus has done for you!

BIG BROTHER

Josiah felt like his head was going to explode. “Get married! You’re going to get married? To Ryan? But what about Dad?”

“Josiah, you know that after your dad left, he married someone else. He won’t be back,” Mom said quietly. “I thought you liked Ryan.”

“Not for a dad! And I definitely don’t want Brenner and Simon for brothers either.” Josiah stomped to his room, fighting back tears.

The next day they went to church, and Josiah, who normally loved going, was sad all morning. After class his teacher, Mr. Park, asked what was wrong.

“Mom’s getting married again,” Josiah told him. “The guy she’s marrying already has two sons. I don’t want someone else’s dad! I’ve got to get away.” He sank down into his seat. “I’m going to leave—for good! If they get married, I’ll never be happy here.”

“Do you think you’ll find happiness someplace else?” asked Mr. Park.

Josiah shrugged. “I sure won’t find it here!”


Mr. Park sat down next to him. “You know, Josiah, happiness isn’t something you find. It’s rooted in the joy that comes from trusting in Jesus—from knowing He’s good and rejoicing in all He’s done for you, even through tears. The Bible tells us that Paul and Silas sang even though they were in prison. You know Jesus and have the hope of eternal life with Him, so you can be joyful too, even when things are hard.”

Josiah sighed, and Mr. Park patted his shoulder. “I know it will be difficult at first, but I’ll be here if you need someone to talk to. And you can talk to Jesus about it too. Trust Him to give you patience and show your family His love. Your little sister will need her big brother, and your new stepbrothers will need help too—it will be difficult for them as well as for you.”

Josiah hesitated. “I guess you’re right,” he murmured.

“Give your future stepfather a chance to be part of the family,” said Mr. Park. “He loves the Lord, and I know he loves all of you.”

Josiah was quiet a moment, then asked, “Will you pray for me?”

Mr. Park smiled. “Of course.” They bowed their heads, and Mr. Park asked God to give Josiah comfort, peace, and joy.  *Agnes Livezey*



TRUST JESUS FOR JOY | KEY VERSE: Those who trust the LORD will be joyful. Proverbs 16:20 (NLT)



Is something in your life making you unhappy? Are you doing all you can to get away from it? Running away from problems doesn’t bring joy. That only comes from trusting Jesus. Trust Him to be with you and help you through whatever is troubling you. Trust Him to help you show His love to those around you, even in difficult times. Trust Him to fill you with the joy of knowing Him.

WHY WE'RE HERE

Hey, Caleb!" Josh shouted when they got off the bus. "I almost forgot! Tomorrow I'm going to Planet Pizza, and I was wondering if you—"

"I'd love to go!" Caleb started running toward his house before Josh could finish his sentence. "I'll ask my mom!"

That night, Caleb asked his mom about going to Planet Pizza with Josh. "Of course you can go," said Mom. "I just spoke with Josh's dad, and I'm glad you want to help."

Help? thought Caleb. *I'll always help eat pizza!*

The next day, a long line of people waited outside Planet Pizza. "Whoa!" said Caleb. "I hope we get a table. I'm starving!"

Josh gave Caleb a funny look. "Not like they are," he said. "Follow me."

They walked to the front of the line. "Hi, Josh!" said the man at the door. "Who's your friend?"

"Hey, Pastor Eric. This is Caleb. He came to help serve lunch."

"Help serve?" Caleb was confused. "I thought we came to eat!"

"We will." Josh handed Caleb a pair of gloves. "After everyone else is served first." Josh ran to the table of pizzas. "Our church is buying pizza and passing it out as part of our food drive this month. It's why we're here!"

"You mean we don't get to eat pizza until after we're done serving everyone else?"

Josh handed Caleb a stack of plates. "I think you'll make it."

Soon Pastor Eric let in the line of people, and Caleb and Josh helped serve slices of pizza to everyone who came in.

"My name's Tommy," one boy said. "I've never had pizza here before. Is it good?"

"Good?" exclaimed Caleb. "It's the best! Here, sausage is my favorite."

After everyone was served, Pastor Eric prayed for the meal. "Dear God, thank you for this pizza and for every person here, and thank you for sending Your Son, Jesus, to die for us. Help us see the ways we can serve those around us and show others Your love. Amen."

Caleb lifted his head just as Tommy took his first bite. "This pizza is the best!" he said.

Caleb smiled and slid his own piece of pizza across the table. "Here, Tommy. You can have mine too."

"Really?" asked Tommy.

"Really," said Caleb. "It's why I'm here."  Kelly Carlson



SERVE OTHERS | KEY VERSE: For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45 (NIV)



Do you serve others? Or do you always put your own needs before everyone else's? Even though He's Creator of the universe, Jesus came to earth to serve and give His life for us. Ask Him to help you see the ways you can serve others and show them His love. Today, find at least one person who could use your help and serve them before you serve yourself.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Alexis rushed into the house. “Mom! Bree’s mom and new baby sister are home now! She’s so cute, and her name is Arabella. I love that name! How do people decide what to name their babies?”

“Well, some are named after a family member or a person the parents admire, and sometimes parents choose a name for its meaning.”

Alexis was surprised. “Names have meanings?”

“Most do,” said Mom. “For instance, Alexis means ‘helper’ or ‘defender.’ I can show you a website where you can search for names and their meanings if you want.”

“Oh, yes please!” So Alexis and Mom looked up several names together. Bree meant “strength,” and Arabella meant “yielding to prayer.” They even looked up Dad’s name—*Matthew*—which meant “gift of God.”

“Did you know the Bible says it’s better to choose a good name than to choose great wealth?” Mom asked as they got up from the computer.

“But we don’t choose our own names,” said Alexis. “Parents give them to us.”

“You’re right. You didn’t choose the name Dad and I gave you—you received it when you were born into our family. And there’s another name you’ve received that’s even more important.”

“There is?” asked Alexis. “What’s that?”

“When you trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you became part of His family and received His name—*Christian*, which means ‘little Christ.’ That name means He’s made you a new person and that you have His righteousness, or goodness. Your new name means you belong to Him.”

“Really?” Alexis smiled. “I didn’t realize that’s what *Christian* meant.”

Mom nodded. “In the Bible, God even renamed some people when He called them to follow Him. Abram became Abraham, Sarai became Sarah, and Simon became Peter. Their new names had special meanings that told others God had made them new people and was using them to show others who He was.” Mom smiled at Alexis. “He’s doing the same with us as Christians, shaping us to be like Jesus so we can point others toward Him. When we trust Him to help us speak and act in ways that show others who He is, we’re choosing to let people know us by the good name He’s given us.” ♥ Agnes Livezey



CHOOSE TO HAVE A GOOD NAME | KEY VERSE: A good name is to be chosen over great wealth; favor is better than silver and gold. Proverbs 22:1 (CSB)



Do you know where your name comes from? Were you named after a special person or given your name because of what it means? We can’t choose our names at birth, but the best name of all is one anyone can have by trusting in Jesus and becoming part of God’s family. The name *Christian* means that Jesus has saved you and made you a new person. Let others know your new name by showing God’s love in all you say and do.



ACTIVITY

What's in Your Name?

Did you know that you have two names? One is your birth name, which is made up of your family name and the names your parents gave you. And if you trust in Jesus, you also have the name God gave you—*Christian*, or “little Christ.” But what is a “little Christ”? In this activity, you’ll explore the meanings of all your names.

Write down your first, middle, and last names on the lines below with the meanings to the right. You can refer to your parents or guardians for this part and use the internet if you need more information.

_____ → _____
(first name)

_____ → _____
(middle name)

_____ → _____
(last name)

Christian → Little Christ

Romans 3:22 – righteous

Ephesians 2:8 – _____

2 Corinthians 5:17 – _____

John 1:12 – _____

1 Corinthians 11:1 – _____

John 15:12 – _____

1 Peter 4:10 – _____

James 1:22 – _____

Now look up the Bible verses on the right to learn more about what it means to be a “little Christ.” Each verse includes a word or short phrase that describes Christians.

Bonus: List all the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23.

_____, _____, _____, _____, _____,
_____, _____, _____, and _____.

Now add your names and their meanings to the self-portrait you created earlier (see page 13). At the top of the page, write “Christian” and its meaning in one color. Remember, the name God gave you is the most important because it means that Jesus saved you and you are in God’s family! Then write your birth name and its meanings in another color. If you have space, write down the descriptions you found in the Bible verses all around your self-portrait so you can always remember your new name in Jesus.

NO REGRETS

I don't think I did well on that history test today—I should have studied more," Breonna said as she followed Mom into a store. "And then Shirina got upset when I said her skirt looked like one you used to wear in high school. I meant it as a compliment, but she didn't take it that way. I tried to explain and say I was sorry, but I still feel bad about it." Breonna sighed. "What a horrible day!"

"Well, don't dwell on it, honey," said Mom. "Now you'll know better next time."

"But I should have known better *this* time!" Breonna picked a pair of shoes and tried them on. "Hey, these are exactly what I want! Can I get them?"

"It's up to you," said Mom. "You're spending your own money. But this is our first stop—you might find something else in another store." Yet Breonna was so sure she wanted the shoes that she not only bought them but also decided to wear them.

In another store, they saw the same shoes again—on sale. Breonna was dismayed. "I should have waited! I could have saved money."

"Well, it's too late now. You're already wearing the ones you bought, so you can't return them."

In store after store, Breonna continued to mope. Finally, Mom took some bills out of her purse and handed them to Breonna. "Here. This covers what you paid for the shoes."

Breonna gaped at the money. "But you told me to wait, and I didn't listen! Why should you pay for them?"

"Because I want you to enjoy your shoes—and I want to help you understand that because of God's grace, you don't have to live with regret. Grace is giving someone what they don't deserve, and Jesus did that for us when He died to take the punishment for our sin. Because of His grace, we can trust that He will bring good out of everything that happens in our lives, even things we mess up. Instead of going over and over what we should have done differently, we can learn from our mistakes and move on. We can enjoy life with Him now instead of reliving the past."

Breonna smiled and put the money in her pocket. "Thanks, Mom." 

Hazel W. Marett



DON'T DWELL ON PAST MISTAKES | KEY VERSE: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:13-14 (CSB)



Do you dwell on past mistakes and what you should have done differently? Maybe you got a bad grade because you didn't study, or you failed to help someone when you had the chance. Learn from your mistakes so you don't make them in the future, but then put them behind you. Jesus saved you by dying on the cross, and He wants you to look forward to a life full of peace and joy with Him.

THE BENCHWARMER

"I'm quitting basketball," Tyler announced flatly as his dad entered the room.

"Quitting?" asked Dad. "But you could hardly wait to join the team!"

Tyler frowned. "I'm just a benchwarmer. Coach Adams hardly ever lets me play."

"Well, no, he hasn't yet, but he told me you have great potential."

"If I'm so great, why doesn't he let me play more?" asked Tyler.

"Because the older players have more experience, and Coach Adams is naturally going to use his best players when it's necessary for a win."

"I can play as well as they can," Tyler said. "At least, I could if I got to play in more games. Basketball is almost over for the year!"

"Just be patient," said Dad. "We all need to wait patiently sometimes."

Tyler crossed his arms. "I've waited long enough!"

Dad scratched his chin. "Do you remember King David in the Bible? He was a benchwarmer too."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Dad, King David never played basketball! It didn't exist back then."

"No, but you could say he was a benchwarmer for a long time. When David was just a young boy, the prophet Samuel anointed him to be king, but he had to wait about twenty years before he actually became king."

"Yeah, but being king is an important thing, and it was something God said would happen," Tyler said. "I don't think God really cares if I play basketball or not."

"I think He does," said Dad. "He gave us our gifts, and He uses them to shape us to be more like Jesus. Learning to play basketball involves more than just dribbling and shooting. A good player also knows when it's best to take a shot or pass the ball, and that requires skills that take time and patience to develop. I think God is using this experience to teach you to be more patient. Then you'll be a better basketball player *and* a more mature Christian."

Tyler nodded thoughtfully, then stood up. "How about a little one-on-one, Dad?"

Dad smiled. "You're not quitting?"

"Not me," said Tyler. "I love basketball, and I want to keep getting better." He grinned. "I just hope it doesn't take me twenty years to get into more games!" ♥

Joyce R. Lee



LEARN TO BE PATIENT | KEY VERSE: But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)



Do you feel like a benchwarmer? Perhaps your coach isn't letting you play or your parents won't let you do something you think you're ready for. When things like that happen, remember that Jesus uses everyday experiences to shape you to be more like Him. Think about what He might be teaching you in the situation you're dealing with. Then trust Him to give you patience as He helps you learn and grow.

HOW OLD IS GOD? (PART 1)

A B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, and Z.” Hailey looked at her three-year-old brother. “Okay, Liam, now you try.”

Liam looked like he was thinking intensely. “A!” he suddenly shouted, and then, after a pause, “Z!”

“Ugh!” Hailey clapped a hand to her forehead in frustration.

Dad, who was watching the whole thing, began to laugh.

“I’m glad you think this is funny,” Hailey said. “I’ve been working with him for an hour, and he’s just not getting it.”

“Why is it so important that he know the alphabet right now anyway?” asked Dad.

“Jenny and I are having a race. If I can teach Liam the alphabet before she teaches her dog to sit and roll over, I get to pick the movie we watch this weekend.”

Dad chuckled and shook his head. “You guys are silly.”

Hailey laughed. “Yeah, I guess.” She sighed. “Yesterday Jenny asked me a question that made me feel really silly. She asked me how old God is. I didn’t know what to say.”

Liam walked over to where Dad was sitting, and Dad picked him up and put him in his lap. “Well, Liam just told you the answer.”


Hailey gave her dad a confused look. “But all he said was, ‘A, Z.’ That’s not a number.”

“In the Bible, Jesus says He’s the Alpha and Omega—the beginning and end. *Alpha* and *omega* are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, like our A and Z. God is A to Z, just like Liam said. He always was, is, and will be. He doesn’t have an age.”

“So God has no beginning or end?” Hailey asked.

“That’s right.” Dad’s eyes twinkled. “And yet, He was born—and also died.”

“But wait, you just said...” It took Hailey a moment to realize what Dad meant. “Oh, I get it—you’re talking about Jesus! He was born as a baby and died on the cross for us, and then He came back to life.”

Dad nodded. “Jesus is God, who is eternal with no beginning or end, but He was willing to become human and die for us so we could have eternal life with Him.” 

Melissa Yeagle



GOD HAS NO BEGINNING OR END | KEY VERSE: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” Revelation 1:8



Have you ever wondered how old God is? Unlike humans and everything else, God doesn’t have an age—there was never a time when He didn’t exist! But even though He has no beginning or end, Jesus still chose to be born on earth and die on the cross so we could be saved. When you trust in Him, He gives you a new life that will never end. (See “Have You Heard the Good News?” on page 104.)

HOW OLD IS GOD? (PART 2)

Hailey burst into applause as Liam finished saying the alphabet. “Dad, I think he’s finally got it!”

“Does this mean you win your race with Jenny?” Dad asked. Hailey was trying to teach her brother the alphabet before her friend taught her dog how to sit and roll over.

“Well, I need to prove to Jenny that Liam learned the alphabet first,” Hailey replied. “I’ll see if she can stop over.”

When Jenny arrived, Hailey brought her into the kitchen. “Okay, Liam,” she said. “Say your ABCs, just like we practiced.”

Liam took one look at Jenny, then giggled and shook his head.

“Liam, come on! Please?” But Liam giggled again and covered his eyes, trying to get Jenny to play peek-a-boo. Hailey continued to coax him, but Liam refused to say one letter of the alphabet.


“Ugh!” Hailey said after Jenny had left. “Why couldn’t Liam do what he was supposed to? Now Jenny doesn’t believe I taught him the alphabet.”

“Well, just because Jenny doesn’t believe something doesn’t mean it’s not true,” said Dad. “I heard Liam say his ABCs.”

“Yeah, but I need to prove it to Jenny to win our game.” Hailey sighed. “I wish I could prove more than that to her. As I was walking her out, I answered the question she asked me yesterday about how old God is. I told her God doesn’t have an age—that He always was, is, and will be. But Jenny said she’s not sure God even exists. I wish I could make her believe!”

“Well, you can’t make anyone believe in God just by what you say, but maybe you can help Jenny think about it another way.” Dad tickled Liam’s tummy, and Liam giggled. “Would Liam be here if I never existed?”

“Of course not. You’re his father, so without you, he wouldn’t exist either.”

Dad nodded. “Because he’s my son, Liam points to the fact that I exist. Well, God has a Son too, and He points to the existence of His Father. Jesus came to earth to show us that God is real and that He loves us. By helping Jenny understand who Jesus is, you can help her see that God exists—and that He loves her so much He sent His Son to die for her.”  *Melissa Yeagle*



GOD EXISTS—AND HE LOVES YOU | KEY VERSE: In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. John 1:1-2 (NIV)



Do you wish you could prove God exists? Perhaps you have friends or family members who don’t believe in God—or maybe you struggle to believe yourself. God reveals Himself in many ways, but the most important way is through His Son, Jesus, who came to earth and died for us. You and others can know God exists by knowing Jesus. (See “Have You Heard the Good News?” on page 104.)



HEY ZACH!

Hey, kids! I'm Zach, host of the *Keys for Kids* radio program. At Christmastime we always learn about Jesus being born in Bethlehem. And since that story is in the New Testament, we might assume Jesus isn't talked about at all in the Old Testament. But guess what—He is! Here are three ways you'll notice Jesus in the Bible before He was born.



Pictures and Patterns

Sometimes Jesus shows up in “pictures” hidden in Old Testament stories. For example, the lambs that were sacrificed for sin point forward to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who died for the sins of the world. The Passover meal, the tabernacle, even the manna in the wilderness—all of these are hints that point straight to Him.



Theophanies (big word alert!)

A *theophany* is just a fancy way of saying Jesus appeared before He was born as a baby. Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace? (You can read about it in Daniel 3.) The king looked in and saw four men walking in the fire instead of three. The fourth man looked like “a son of the gods.” Most Bible teachers believe that was Jesus protecting them!



Prophecies

The Old Testament is also filled with promises that Jesus was coming. One of the clearest is Isaiah 7:14: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (NIV). Immanuel means “God with us”—and that’s exactly who Jesus is!

So even though it may look like Jesus only shows up in the New Testament, the truth is He’s all over the Bible—from the very first page to the last. That’s why one of His names is the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End!

I love learning about the Bible with you, and I also love answering your questions! If you have a question about God, the Bible, or the Christian life, be sure to send it to me. Go to [keysforkids.org/HeyZach](https://www.keysforkids.org/HeyZach)

ZACH

Listen to Zach on the *Keys for Kids* radio program at [keysforkids.net](https://www.keysforkids.net)

Ready to find Jesus in the Old Testament?

Grab your Bible, look up each passage below, and decide:

Picture/Pattern → a symbol or story that points to Jesus

Theophany → Jesus showing up before He was born in Bethlehem

Prophecy → a promise or prediction about Jesus coming

When you're finished, go to [keysforkids.org/answerkey](https://www.keysforkids.org/answerkey) to check your answers!

Passages to Look Up:

1. Genesis 22:11-14 – Abraham and Isaac on the mountain

2. Exodus 3:2-6 – The burning bush

3. Exodus 12:21-23 – The Passover lamb

4. Joshua 5:13-15 – The commander of the Lord's army

5. Daniel 3:24-25 – The fiery furnace

6. Isaiah 7:14 – Immanuel

7. Numbers 21:4-9 – The snake on a pole

8. Isaiah 53:5-6 – The Suffering Servant



THE GRUMBLING GAME

Remi,” said Mom, “will you come and dry these dishes, please?”

Remi groaned. “Can’t Dayo do it?” he asked. “I’m sick of drying dishes!”

Dayo rolled her eyes. “You’re always sick of one thing or another.”

“We seem to get the ‘sick of something’ illness too often around here,” said Dad. “We’re about as bad as the Israelites, who complained constantly in spite of all the good things God did for them.”

Mom nodded. “I have an idea for a game we can play to help us learn to stop grumbling and complaining. When one of us is caught saying we’re sick of something, we have to say one thing we’re thankful for about that same thing.”

“Okay,” said Dayo. “You won’t catch me!”

But all Remi said was, “Huh!”

The next day, Dayo walked in from school with a bulging backpack. “I’m so sick of all this homework!” she said.

“Oh really?” Remi grinned. “And what about your homework are you thankful for?”

“Oh no!” Dayo smiled and shook her head. “I guess I’m thankful it helps me understand more of what we’re learning at school.”

A bit later, Dayo bumped into her brother as he was walking to the table with a glass of milk. “Ugh, I’m so sick of you never watching where you’re going!” he said, grabbing a napkin to wipe the milk off his shirt.


“I’m sorry, Remi.” Dayo smiled and fluttered her eyelashes. “But what about me are you thankful for?”

Remi looked startled for a moment. “Well, I guess I’m thankful you’re not twins.”

Dayo sputtered and started after him.

“Okay, okay,” Remi said with a laugh, halting their chase around the kitchen table. “I’m thankful you always let me choose which shows we watch when I’m sick.”

Dayo smiled. “That’s better.”

“You guys seem to be getting the hang of this,” said Mom, who had overheard everything from the living room. “I think this grumbling game is helping you see the blessings God has put in your lives. When we focus on all He’s given us—and all Jesus has done for us—we may soon find there’s really nothing to complain about.”  Vera M. Hutchcroft



TURN COMPLAINTS INTO THANKS | KEY VERSE: Do everything without complaining or arguing. Philippians 2:14 (ERV)



Do you have a habit of grumbling and complaining? God was not pleased when the Israelites complained instead of trusting Him to care for them, and He’s not pleased when His children complain today. When you catch yourself grumbling, stop and remember all God has given you—including His own Son to save you from sin and always be with you. Then think of a reason to thank God for the thing you were complaining about.

A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN

I'd rather go to school than shovel the snow left behind from the blizzard," Miguel grumbled.

"Oh, it's not so bad." Dad pitched a large scoop of snow into the yard before he stopped and looked at their surroundings. "I think a heavy blanket of snow like this is pretty."

Miguel scanned the horizon. The snow twinkled in the sunlight like it was dusted with silver glitter. He squinted against the brightness and harrumphed. "All I see is work." Miguel flexed his fingers in his cold, stiffened gloves, then he scraped the flat shovel blade across a patch of sidewalk hoping he could push the snow off the cement, rather than lift the heavy precipitation. "Scooping snow is worse than taking out stinky garbage."

Dad laughed.

Miguel frowned. He wasn't joking. He hefted another scoop and flung it into the yard. "I'd rather eat Brussel sprouts than shovel snow." Now Dad would know he was serious because Miguel disliked Brussel sprouts. A lot.


Again, Dad laughed.

Miguel stopped. "I'm not joking." His angry breaths came out in huffs of vapor.

Dad stuck his shovel in a deep snow drift. "Shoveling, like any chore, is something that must be done, so you might as well do it with joy. Besides, seeing the ground covered in sparkling snow makes me think God is giving us a little glimpse of heaven's glory, a reminder to believers of what we will see someday."

Miguel scrunched his brows. "What do you mean?"

"Heaven is a beautiful place. The Bible says that when Jesus comes back to make everything new, the heavenly city where we'll live will sparkle and shine with gold, crystal, and many jewels. Of course, it's not the sun glistening on the ice crystals that makes heaven sparkle with beauty. It's the glory of the Lord."

"Oh." Miguel had learned about heaven's splendor and God's promise to believers at church, but he never thought about seeing that beauty on earth. He shielded his eyes with a hand and looked at the yards blanketed in snow. This time he appreciated the beauty around him. He smiled at the thought that it was just a small glimpse of the magnificence he'd see one day when he was in heaven surrounded by God's light.  *Rose Ross Zediker*



GOD IS HEAVEN'S LIGHT | KEY VERSE: The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. Revelation 21:23 (NIV)



Do you see little glimpses of God's light on earth that point to His promise of heaven? A rainbow after a thunderstorm. A sun dog in the bitter cold of winter. The shimmer of morning dew on green grass. A mirrored reflection off a crystal-clear lake. These are small reminders of the beauty that awaits those who trust in Jesus when He creates a bright, beautiful home for us with Him in heaven.

ACCEPTABLE WORDS



Isabela peeked over her brother's shoulder at the picture he was drawing. "Hey, that's pretty good! But you need to color in that bit of sky you missed in the corner or turn it into a cloud."

"You're so bossy!" Matías shot back. "I don't care what you think, so stop trying to tell me what to do!" Isabela's eyes filled with tears, and she left the room.

That afternoon, Isabela played at a friend's house while Matías and Mom went to a greenhouse. "Why don't you look around while I find the stuff I'm looking for?" Mom said.

Matías wandered around, looking at various plants. "Come see our mimosas," one of the workers said. He pointed to some spiky green plants, and Matías went over to see them. "Blow on one of those," the man said.

Puzzled, Matías blew. He was surprised to see the plant's leaves suddenly curl up. "Did I hurt it?" he asked in alarm.

"No, it will be fine," the worker assured him. "These plants respond to possible injury by curling their leaves. That keeps them from being harmed by insects or rain. It doesn't take much to cause them to curl up."


Matías was fascinated by the plants, and he told Mom about them as they drove home.

"Those mimosa plants remind me of your sister," Mom said.

"Isabela?" asked Matías. "How?"

"They're very sensitive," Mom replied. "When you blow on mimosa leaves, they curl up. And when you say harsh, unkind words to Isabela, she's hurt deep inside and withdraws to avoid being hurt more. We've talked about this before, but I've noticed that you might have forgotten."

"I'm sorry, Mom," Matías said quietly. "I'll tell Isabela I'm sorry too."

"Good," said Mom. "We may not always realize it, but our words have an effect on people. That's why we need to depend on Jesus to help us make our words acceptable in His sight. Every word He says to us in the Bible communicates His love for us and what He did to save us so we can grow in our faith. Trust Him to help you speak to others in a way that encourages them and helps them grow too."  Karen S. Birt



USE WORDS TO HELP, NOT HURT | KEY VERSE: Let the words of my mouth...be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD. Psalm 19:14



What kind of words have you used today? Did the things you say encourage others and help them grow—or make them shrivel up? Even if you don't mean to, it's easy to say things that are hurtful, so pay close attention to your words and how they affect others. Trust Jesus to help you show His love through everything you say and speak words that are acceptable to Him.

POWER OVER DEATH

Editor's note: This story's subject matter may not be suitable for young children.

Mom had tears in her eyes as she put down her phone. “Maria, Daniel, I’m so sorry, but Jalen died this morning.”

Daniel tried to comfort his younger sister as she began to cry. Jalen was their friend and next-door neighbor, and he had been sick for a long time. “At least he became a Christian at camp last summer,” Daniel said. “That means he’s with Jesus now.”


Several weeks later, Maria and Daniel walked home from school with Jalen’s sister, Audra. “Did you know that people who die can still talk to you?” she asked excitedly. “It’s true!” she insisted when she saw Maria frown. “Tomorrow my parents and I are going to a séance. That’s a meeting where there’s a medium—a person who contacts spirits of people who have died. The medium said she might be able to contact Jalen’s spirit so we can talk to him!”

Daniel and Maria gave each other worried looks as Audra waved goodbye and walked to her house. When they got home, they told Mom what Audra had said.

“I can only imagine the pain she and her parents must be feeling right now,” said Mom. “But the Bible says trying to contact people who have died is wrong. Only God has power over the dead; going to a medium who claims to be able to communicate with people’s spirits is an attempt to take that power for ourselves. The Bible tells us to have nothing to do with those kinds of things. Instead, we need to bring our pain and sadness to Jesus and trust Him to comfort us and give us peace.”

“But Audra and her parents aren’t Christians,” said Maria. “They don’t know Jesus or trust in Him.”

Mom nodded sadly. “For people who don’t know Jesus, death is a very scary thing. But as Christians, we don’t have to be afraid of death because Jesus freed us from sin and death when he died for us and rose again. When someone we love dies, we need to remember that only Jesus holds power over death and trust Him to be with us in our sadness.”

“It does make me feel better to know Jalen is with Jesus now,” Daniel said. “Let’s pray that we can help Audra and her parents know that too.”  Agnes Livezey



ONLY GOD HOLDS POWER OVER DEATH | KEY VERSE: I [Jesus] am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. Revelation 1:18 (NLT)



Has anyone ever tried to get you to do something they say will allow you to communicate with someone who’s died? Don’t believe it. Only God has power over people who have died, and He forbids trying to communicate with them. Instead, tell Jesus what you’re feeling and depend on Him to help you through your pain and sadness. He saved you by defeating death on the cross. Trust only Him.

A BEAUTIFUL HEART

Clarissa sat looking at herself in the mirror as Tara's words spun through her head. *You're just so plain*, Tara had said. *I don't think we can be friends.*

Clarissa had wanted to be friends with Tara, but not anymore. She wore name-brand clothes, had hair that was—well, perfect. And her teeth—flawless! That's what Clarissa thought anyway. She heaved a loud sigh. "Pretty plain, huh, Snowball?" she said to her kitten. Snowball meowed beside her on the bed.

"What's up?" Mom asked as she walked into the room.

"Just talking to Snowball about how plain I am. Tara says I'm plain."

"Who's Tara?" Mom asked.

"Only the most popular girl in school, with the fanciest clothes, hair to die for, and perfect teeth. Everybody wants to be her friend, and I thought I wanted to be her friend too, but today she told me I was too plain."

Mom hugged Clarissa tight. "You are my beautiful daughter—both inside and out." She opened the Bible app on her phone. "And remember, Clarissa, in First Samuel 16:7, God says, 'People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'"

Clarissa thought about that as she looked at herself in the mirror again. "I want God to be pleased when he looks at me."

"He already is, because when He looks at you, He sees Jesus. When you trusted Jesus to be your Savior, you became a child of God, and the Holy Spirit now lives inside of you. Jesus has given you a new heart, which means you can show others His love and kindness—and those traits make you a great friend to people. You are far from plain. You are God's beloved child, and He created you just how He wanted you to be and has given you a special purpose."

"To be a good friend to people?" Clarissa asked.

With a nod, Mom added, "And to love people the way He loves you. Why don't we ask Him to help you remember that next time you feel insecure?"

Clarissa nodded, and she and Mom prayed together while Snowball purred.

"Thanks, Mom. I feel better now," Clarissa said as she gave her mom a hug. ❤️

Lisa Fuller



JESUS MAKES YOUR HEART BEAUTIFUL | KEY VERSE: You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God. 1 Peter 3:4 (NLT)



Do you ever compare your appearance to how others look and what they wear? In the Bible, God reminds us that He cares more about our hearts than He does about our hair or clothes. What does your heart look like? Has it been made new and beautiful by Jesus? (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.) Instead of comparing yourself to others, trust Jesus to help you love them with the beautiful heart He's given you.

CAN'T THANK YOU ENOUGH

Dominic bit his cheek as he sat at his desk and stared up at his teacher. “I’m sorry, Ms. Foreman,” he said. He looked over at his handwriting on the whiteboard that read, *Dominic was here*.

“Thank you for apologizing,” Ms. Foreman said. “But you knew the consequences of writing on the board without permission. I’m going to have to call your parents.”

Just then Jamey, one of Dominic’s classmates, returned from the bathroom. He and Dominic hadn’t gone to recess yet.

Jamey looked at Dominic, the board, and Ms. Foreman, then said, “Oh, that’s an easy fix.”

Jamey went to the whiteboard and quickly erased Dominic’s writing. He turned around and smiled at Ms. Forman, who laughed.

“That was an easy fix, Jamey, thank you.” She turned to Dominic. “You’ve been a good student, so let’s call this a warning. I won’t call home, but if I catch you breaking that rule again, I will. Understood?”

Dominic nodded, then followed Jamey out to the playground. He couldn’t believe it! Jamey had gotten him out of trouble.


“Thank you!” Dominic said to Jamey, but then felt like once wasn’t enough. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” he repeated.

“Hey, man, it was nothing. You’re welcome,” Jamey said, smiling and blushing a little.

“Sorry, I just—I can’t thank you enough. I would have gotten in so much trouble if Ms. Foreman had called my mom.”

“You sound like my mom when she’s talking to Jesus,” Jamey said. “She says she can’t thank Him enough for dying on the cross and saving us from sin so we could live with Him as God’s children forever.”

Dominic thought for a moment, then remembered something his dad told him about heaven. “We’re going to thank Him forever, aren’t we? In heaven. My dad says that everyone in heaven will sing praises to Jesus forever because of what He did to save us.”

Jamey nodded, thinking. “That’s true,” he said. “I guess, with Jesus, we really can’t thank Him enough!”  *Raven Merz*



WE WILL THANK JESUS FOREVER! | KEY VERSE: O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You with all my heart. I will bring honor to Your name forever. Psalm 86:12 (NLV)



Have you ever felt like you can’t thank Jesus enough for everything He’s done for you? Tell Him what you’re thankful for every day, but know that if you are a child of God, you will be able to thank Jesus and praise Him for all eternity in heaven. It’s okay that you can’t thank Him enough, because you don’t have a limited time to do it!

LITTLE LOST LAMB

Mom!" Nia ran into the kitchen. "My lamb is gone! I'm sure I latched the door after I fed him, but it's open now and Wooly is gone."

"Oh dear," said Mom. "We'd better go look for him."

They started off, calling Wooly's name as they searched the ditch and fields along the road. "Look," Nia said as they approached a house not far from their own. "Mr. and Mrs. Harris are working in their garden. Let's ask if they've seen Wooly." Mom nodded, and they headed over to ask their neighbors if they had seen the lamb.

"No, we haven't seen him," said Mrs. Harris. "But we'll help you look for him." So she and her husband joined the search, leaving their work unfinished.

Mr. Harris was the one who finally found Wooly behind a neighbor's barn, and Nia happily took her lamb home. After making sure he couldn't get out again, she went to thank Mr. and Mrs. Harris for their help.

"I'm sorry you had to leave the work you were doing," Nia said. "Can I help you finish it?"

"No, no, we'll finish it tomorrow," said Mrs. Harris. "I'm just glad we were able to find your lost sheep."

Mr. Harris nodded. "Nia, do you remember the parable Jesus told about lost sheep? Pastor Roy talked about it at church last week."

"Yeah," said Nia. "The shepherd left all the sheep that were safe and went out to search for one little lamb that was missing."

"That's right," said Mr. Harris. "And did you know that people are like lost sheep?"

Nia nodded. "And Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He left heaven and gave His life to find us and save us."

"Right again," said Mr. Harris. "I hope our search for Wooly will help us remember we were all lost sheep once and should never be too busy to hunt for other lost sheep—other people who don't know Jesus."

Nia thought about that. "I have a new friend at school who doesn't know Jesus. That means she's just as lost as Wooly was. I'm going to ask Jesus to help me tell her about Him so she can be found, just like I was!"

"Good for you," said Mrs. Harris. "We'll be praying for her—and for you." ♥

Nancy I. Mercial



TELL OTHERS ABOUT JESUS | KEY VERSE: Your Father in heaven does not want any of these little children to be lost. Matthew 18:14 (ERV)



Do you know any lost sheep? The Bible says anyone who doesn't know Jesus is lost. But there's good news! Jesus came to find and save the lost. He found you when you put your faith in Him, and He wants you to point other lost sheep to Him so they can be found too. You can do that by praying for them and sharing what Jesus has done for you. Do all you can to help bring others to Jesus.

FINGERPRINT ART

Press, stamp! Press, stamp!

Kaitlyn's thumb squished into the orange stamp pad, then she squashed it onto paper. Next, she pushed her finger into the yellow stamp pad, and a sunny oval appeared on the page. Soon she had a collection of colorful fingerprints, and she was ready to create designs with her black pen.



But her fingers were coated in wet, gooey ink in every color of the rainbow! She couldn't pick up her pen without leaving bright marks all over it.

"Mom," Kaitlyn called. "Help!" She waved ten inky fingertips in the air.

Mom arrived with a warm towel, and as Kaitlyn's fingers washed clean, the white washcloth became stained with color.

"You know," observed Mom, "this reminds me of something."

"What?" asked Kaitlyn. She picked up her pen with clean fingers and began to doodle on top of the fresh, dry ink.

"When we are stained with sin, like your fingers were stained with ink, Jesus is the only one who can make us clean."

Suddenly, Kaitlyn's elbow was bumped from behind. The black pen in her hand wildly curved across her page. "It's ruined!" she cried. "Hunter, it's all your fault!"

Her little brother's shoulders slumped.

Immediately, Kaitlyn felt remorseful. She prayed silently. She thought of how the white cloth had just removed ink stains from her hands, and she asked Jesus to forgive her harsh words and wash her clean. Then, taking a deep breath, Kaitlyn said, "I'm sorry I yelled at you, Hunter. It was just an accident."

Hunter moved close for a little hug, then leaned against the table to watch.

Kaitlyn turned that wild black line into a swooping antenna. She dotted on black eyes and colored in larger spots to make an orange ladybug. Next, on a green print, she drew curly wool, a little face, and spindly legs to make a sweet lamb.

Soon Kaitlyn's page filled with animals of all kinds. When she was finished, she turned to Hunter. "Would you like me to help you make fingerprint art?"

A wide smile was her answer.  *Wendy Lynne Smith*



JESUS WASHES AWAY YOUR SIN | KEY VERSE: The next day John saw

Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29 (NIV)



Do you need God to wash away the stain of your sin? God loves you so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to take your guilt upon Himself. All you need to do is confess your wrongdoings and trust Him to make you clean. Jesus will forgive your sins and give you a clean heart.

AGAINST THE CURRENT

C'mon, guys!" Lara jumped into the pool. "Let's make a whirlpool!"

"Ooh! Yeah!" Her brother Jerome pushed his goggles up onto his forehead.

"A world pool?" Four-year-old Emelia, the youngest of the seven siblings, hung onto the ladder and scrunched her forehead.

"A *whirlpool*, Lia. It's where we go around and around until we make a current," Lara explained. "I'll piggyback you, okay?"

"Okay." Emelia leapt onto Lara's back.

They all went around and around and around, until Imogene decided she was going to go the other way.

"Aaahhh! Help!" She giggled. "I can't...move!"

Lara turned and braced her feet, laughing. "I can't either!"

"Look! I'm swimming in place!" Jerome paddled furiously. "I...can...almost...reach...the wall! There!"

Momma, who'd been watching from the deck, stood up. "Who wants a snack?"

"Me! Me! Me!" everyone chorused.

"All right." Momma opened the cooler. "Come on out and have a granola bar, and then you can go back in."

They clambered out and dangled their legs in the water while they ate.

"You know," Momma said after a minute, "you kiddos making a whirlpool made me think about how we as Christians have to live."

"I hope we don't go around in circles." Lara frowned.

"No, I was thinking more about the current you made. It was hard to go against it once you really got it going, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Imogene grinned. "I couldn't get anywhere!"

Momma nodded. "The world around us makes a current, and it can be very hard not to go along with it. But we as Christians are called to live another way—we're called to trust and obey Jesus and follow His way of truth and love in the Bible. If we try to live that way on our own, it's like you trying to go against the whirlpool—you can't get anywhere." Momma smiled. "Thankfully, Jesus doesn't leave us to swim against the current on our own. He supplies us with His own strength and grace. And if we're relying on Him as we go against the world's current, His love will become evident in us." ♥ *Ellie Shirk*



FOLLOW JESUS, NOT THE CURRENT | KEY VERSE: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Romans 12:2



Have you ever made a whirlpool? It's difficult to go against a strong current in the water, and it can be even harder to go against the world's current. But God will always give us the strength we need to stand against the world's ways and follow Jesus instead. Trust Him to help you follow the way of Jesus in this world so others can see His truth and love in your life.



ACTIVITY

Whirlpool in a Bottle

As the characters in today's story found out, making a whirlpool in the water is really fun! In this activity, you'll learn how to create your own water vortex. This is the perfect indoor activity, especially if it's too cold to swim.

Supplies

- 2 clear and empty plastic bottles (preferably 2-liter)
- Tornado connector tube or duct tape
- Water
- Glitter or food coloring

1. Fill one of the water bottles $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way full with water. Add glitter or food coloring to make the vortex easier to see.
2. Use the tornado connector tube to attach the two water bottles together. If you do not have a connector, duct tape will also work. Be careful to hold the connection point tightly when making the tornado and watch out for leaks (especially if food coloring is involved).
3. The first time you flip the bottles over, do so gently. Listen for a *glug, glug*.
4. Now for the fun! This time when you flip the bottles, shake the bottles in a spinning motion. Shake for 15-20 seconds or until you see a funnel start to form.

The Science

In a swimming pool, the whirlpool is formed after swimming around and around in a circular motion. The current builds until all the water rotates together, often forming a dip in the middle. The experiment you completed is slightly more complex because of the air-filled bottle underneath the bottle with water. When you tip the bottle over and water dripples down, air moves upward to replace it. The *glug, glug* sound occurs when the water and air collide. As you shake the bottles, the water swirls around the sides, creating a funnel for the air to pass through smoothly. Centripetal force keeps the water moving in a circle. If you look closely, you might see that the water spins faster near the bottom of the funnel. Faster motion needs stronger centripetal force to keep turning, which is why the funnel looks steeper there.

Now that you've learned about vortexes, see where else you can find them in nature!

Hint: Check out images of tornadoes, galaxies, and smoke rings from a volcano.

PARABLE OF THE BAKERS

Bright and early in the morning, Kira flew into Grandma's kitchen with a grin on her face while her cousins were still sleeping upstairs. Grandma had just finished setting out bags of flour and sugar and loads of cookie cutters. This could only mean one thing—Grandma's delicious sugar cookies.

"Oh, Kira, thank goodness you're here!" Grandma exclaimed. "We have to make twenty boxes of cookies for the church fundraiser tomorrow. If you help, you can bring a dozen home tonight to enjoy."

"I'm in!" Kira cried.

After an hour of working, Sophie came downstairs and spotted the cookies. "Can I help?" she asked.

"Join the fun!" Grandma replied.

Another hour passed and Jackson ran in with his nose in the air. "I smell cookies!" he cried.

"Roll up your sleeves!" Grandma said with a laugh.

Finally, just as they were rolling out the last bit of dough, Kevin wandered in yawning. Without even asking, he grabbed a cookie cutter and got to work.

When all the cookies were iced and boxed, Grandma gave each grandchild a dozen cookies. But Kira frowned.

"Grandma, I worked the longest," she said. "Kevin barely did anything. Why does he get the same number of cookies as me?"

"Be quiet!" Kevin shushed.


"Kira, we agreed to a dozen cookies as compensation, right?" Grandma asked, crossing her arms. Kira nodded. "So why are you upset?"

"It's not fair!" Kira cried.

"Maybe not," Grandma said. "But is Jesus's love based on fairness?"

"Ooh, this is like the parable of the workers!" Sophie said.

Grandma winked. "Exactly. That parable illustrates how at any stage of life, we have the chance to receive Jesus's love and forgiveness. That might not seem fair to us who have been saved longer, but we have no right to complain when it wasn't fair to begin with that Jesus died on the cross for *our sins*. We serve a generous and merciful God."

"I'm glad I have a generous God *and* a generous grandma," Kira said with a smile as she bit into a cookie.  *Hannah Chung*



GOD IS GENEROUS | KEY VERSE: For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. 1 Peter 3:18 (NIV)



Has someone's generosity ever seemed unfair to you? Perhaps your sibling got a present on your birthday or your teacher allowed another student to turn homework in late. Just remember that if you trust in Jesus, you are the recipient of the ultimate act of generosity—His gift of unconditional love and forgiveness. As you recognize His love in your life, consider how you can be generous to others too.

COME AND SEE

Michael stood on a stepstool so he could see over the grille to where his dad was working underneath the hood. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m replacing the spark plugs,” said Dad. “Then it should run a lot better.”

“Cool!” said Michael. “Are you going to do anything else?”

“After this I’ll replace the brake pads,” Dad said.

“I want to watch when you do.” Then Michael thought of his friend down the street who loved cars. “Can Jason come and see too?”

“There should be room for both of you to watch,” said Dad. “Why don’t you go ask him while I finish up these spark plugs?”

Michael was so excited, he ran the whole way. He didn’t want to miss seeing anything.

Dad was ready to start on the brake pads by the time Michael returned with Jason. First, Dad removed a wheel. The boys stepped back to give him room. Then he loosened the nuts that held something called a caliper. The boys moved closer together to get a better view of the action. Dad then took off the brake pads and made sure each of them got a good look.

“See how thin it is right here?” he asked, pointing to the thin layer of material on the old brake pad. “It’s worn away from use. It’s dangerous not to replace it when it looks like this.” Then he held up a new one for them to see that was black and much thicker.


“Thanks for letting me watch,” Jason said after Dad had put the new brake pads on the wheels. “I’m sure glad Michael came and got me.”

Dad smiled at Michael. “You running to get Jason reminds me of the story in the Bible about Philip telling Nathanael to come and see Jesus.”

“You learn about Jesus at church, right?” asked Jason. “We don’t go to church.”

“Why don’t you come with us sometime?” said Michael. “We learn about Jesus and sing and hear stories from the Bible. Come and see!”

“Yeah, maybe I will,” said Jason. “I’ll ask my parents!”

After Jason left, Dad patted Michael’s shoulder. “I’m proud of you for inviting Jason to church. I hope he comes and sees how much Jesus loves him!”  *Bonnie Clarkson*



INVITE PEOPLE TO COME AND SEE JESUS | KEY VERSE: Come and see what our God has done, what awesome miracles he performs for people! Psalm 66:5 (NLT)



Do you invite others to come and see Jesus? There are lots of ways you can do that, such as inviting friends to church, telling others what Jesus has done for you, or letting people see His love and kindness in the way you treat them. Not everyone knows who Jesus is or that He died and rose again to save us, and it’s our job to tell them. Invite others to come and see how much Jesus loves them and all He’s done for them.

DUSTY BIBLE

Your Bible's getting a bit dusty," Dad remarked one day when he came into George's room.

George shrugged. "I haven't moved it in a while."

"No?" Dad asked.

"I've been busy." George put the finishing piece on the castle he was building. He loved making all kinds of cool buildings with his blocks.

"That's too bad." Dad stepped over to examine his newest creation. "I know you love a good story."

"Especially about bad guys and good guys and a good fight." George grinned as he grabbed a toy soldier to defend his block tower.

His dad picked up another toy and played with him for a few minutes. Then he walked back over to the bookshelf. "You're missing out."

George glanced up at him. "What do you mean?"

"The Bible has many stories about bravery and strength," Dad said.

George set down the toy soldier. "Like what?"

"There's a story of a young boy killing a giant. Another story of a city falling to the ground after the good guys march around it." Dad gently wiped the dust from the cover of the Bible. "The Bible is one big story of God's love for us. Every story points to Jesus—our Savior. He's the hero because He died and rose again to save us from sin and conquer evil and death."

"Maybe I should read it more." George had heard some of the Bible stories before, but now his dad made them sound more interesting.

"Maybe we can start reading it together," Dad said. "I think it would be fun—and it will help us learn more about Jesus too."

"Sure," George said.

They sat together on the bed, and Dad read the story of Daniel, who was thrown into a den of starving lions because he trusted and obeyed God. It was an exciting story, and George was amazed to learn how God protected Daniel and saved him from the lions.

When his dad had finished reading, George smiled and said, "I don't want my Bible to get dusty again."  *Bethany Acker*



THE BIBLE IS THE STORY OF GOD'S LOVE | KEY VERSE: These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:31 (CSB)



What kinds of stories interest you? Do you like action stories? Or ones about friendship? Or stories where the hero saves the day? The Bible has all kinds of stories in it, but they all point to one big story—the story of God's love and how Jesus came to rescue us from sin and destroy evil forever. As you read or listen to the stories in the Bible, think about how each one points to Jesus and teaches us to trust and obey Him.

DIFFERENT, BUT ALIKE

love being out in the snow,” said Addison, catching a snowflake on the tip of her tongue.

Dad smiled. “I know—you never want to come in! But Mom sent me out to tell you dinner is hot and ready.” So Addison and Dad went in and washed up for dinner.

“Did you have a good time playing with the new neighbor girl?” Mom asked as they sat down to eat.

“Not really,” said Addison. “She’s from another country, and she’s hard to understand. I don’t think I’m going to play with her again.”

“But you don’t even know her very well yet,” said Mom. “Give her a chance.”

Addison shrugged. “I don’t know. I think she’s just too different.” She glanced out the window. “Look! It’s snowing again—great big snowflakes! Did you know that no two snowflakes are alike? At school we learned that each one is made up of different patterns and designs.”

Dad nodded. “Did you know that even though no two snowflakes are alike, all of them have something in common? Each one has six points. That’s like people too.”

“How is that like people?” Addison asked.


“Well, we know that no two people are exactly the same or have the same experiences, but we often forget that we’re also alike in many ways,” Dad explained.

“You mean we all breathe and eat and sleep and grow hair?” Addison asked. “Stuff like that?”

“Well, yes, that too,” Dad replied. “But I was thinking about how people from different parts of the world have their own languages and customs, but deep down we all have the same feelings and desires. We all want to feel loved and accepted, and we feel sad and upset when others make quick judgments about us.”

Addison sighed. “You’re talking about the new neighbor girl, aren’t you?”

Dad nodded. “Another thing all people have in common is that we’re all created in God’s image, and He loves us all so much He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us. As His children, He wants us to share His love with others—even those who seem different—because we all have the same need for Him.”

Addison looked out at the falling snow and nodded.  *Janice M. Jones*



SHOW LOVE TO EVERYONE | KEY VERSE: If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:11



How do you treat kids who are different from you? Do you avoid them—or include them? If they moved from somewhere else, do you do your best to help them? No two people are exactly the same—God created each of us to be unique. But we’re all created in His image, and Jesus died for each one of us. Share His love by reaching out to those who are different from you.

UNIQUELY GIFTED

"I can't wait for our youth retreat!" Katie said. "Do you have permission to go yet?" Tammy bit her lip. "Not yet." If she went, she would have to invite her brother, Clint. Tammy loved Clint, but kids at school whispered behind his back because he didn't understand when they were joking or when he should stop talking about his obsessions, especially with polar bears.

"Promise you'll ask!" Katie called as Tammy got into Mom's car.

Mom smiled at Tammy as they drove away. "What do you need to ask me?"

Tammy sighed. "There's going to be a youth retreat at the ski lodge."

"That's awesome!" Mom said. "Of course you can go."

"But if I go, then Clint will want to come. Remember the last time we went skiing? He almost got lost searching for polar bears. It was so embarrassing!"

"I see," Mom said. "I'll let you decide whether or not you want to invite him."

Tammy was too surprised to respond. Suddenly, Mom pulled into an empty parking lot. Tammy gasped as Mom shut her eyes. "What are you doing?" Tammy cried.

"What?" Mom asked. "I thought it would be fun to drive with my eyes closed. I still have my foot to press the gas and my hands to steer the wheel."

"But you can't see where you're going! What if we hit something?"

Mom opened her eyes. "What if I try driving without my feet? Or taking my hands off the wheel?"


"No!" Tammy said. "You need your whole body to drive."

Mom nodded. "That's right. Have you ever heard Christians described as a body?"

Tammy shook her head. That sounded weird!

"The Bible says we are the body of Christ," said Mom. "God created each of us with unique gifts so we can show people who Jesus is and help each other grow in our faith. And every single person is needed. We're all part of the wonderful purpose Jesus has given us as His people."

When they got home, Clint ran to give Tammy a hug. "Clint, I have something important to ask you," Tammy said. "Do you want to come on a ski retreat with me?"

Clint danced down the hallway as Tammy laughed. She already knew what gift Clint had—joy.  *Hannah Chung*



EVERYONE HAS GOD-GIVEN GIFTS | KEY VERSE: Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12 (NIV)



Do you struggle to include kids who are different from you? Or maybe you're often left out because of your differences. God created and loves each one of us, and He has given each of His children unique gifts that allow us to show others the love of Jesus. Even if others don't recognize your gifts, God always sees you, and He will help you see and encourage others in the body of Christ.

THE GOODEST PLAYDOUGH

Gannon's mom plopped the mushy, still-warm mound onto the coffee table for him to enjoy. After locating a recipe for homemade playdough online, Mom and Gannon gathered the ingredients and started creating. He was so excited to see the first batch!

Gannon pressed his small hands into the stretchy substance, pulling it this way and that. "It feels perfect, Mommy! I like it!" he exclaimed. "How did you do this?" Gannon asked. "You must be the goodest playdough maker in the world!"

Gannon's mother smiled and settled on the rug beside the coffee table. "As much as you enjoy what I made for you, I'm just as happy about the playdough as you are," she said.

"You are?" Gannon rolled the dough between his hands.

"Yep, I love to see how much joy it gives you. To know I made something for you that brings you pleasure is a blessing to me." Then she picked up a lump of playdough and began pressing it into shape.

"I'm not the only one who likes creating things for their children to enjoy," Mom continued. "I mixed together some items from our pantry to make the playdough—but think about what God created."

"Yeah! Oceans, mountains, flowers...even koalas!" Gannon exclaimed.

Mom laughed. "Yes, even koalas. And God created all of that out of nothing."

"Not even stuff from the pantry," Gannon said.

"That's right. God shows us His glory through His handiwork in the world, and He likes it when we enjoy His creation."

"The world is a neat gift from God." Gannon twirled his playdough into a bird's nest.

"It is, and when we know God as His children—by trusting in Jesus, who lived a perfect life and then died to take the punishment for our sins—we understand how God loves to show us His love. He gives us good gifts, like the beautiful world we live in, and the gift of Jesus so we could become His children."

"Mommy, we should say thank you to God for the world He made, for Jesus—and for this good playdough!"  Allison Wilson Lee



GOD GIVES GOOD GIFTS | KEY VERSE: He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32 (NIV)



When you play outside, do you notice the world around you? God created it for you to enjoy—the sun and moon to give you light, grass for you to play on, and animals for you to see and learn about. God not only created a beautiful world because He loves you; He also sent His Son, Jesus, so you could have eternal life. Next time you go outside, let the world God made remind you of His love!

INVISIBLE HANDS

I knew I'd win a prize. I just knew it!" Jack stroked the shiny blue ribbon he was holding and grinned, remembering how quickly his horse had stood straight and still, with ears flicked forward. "Blaze was the best because he had the best trainer—me!"

"You did a good job training your horse," Dad said. "But remember, you didn't train him alone."

"Yes, I did," said Jack. "No one helped me—at least not much. I don't need help. I know everything about..." He paused as Dad suddenly slowed down and stopped at the side of the road.

"Aha!" Dad said. "I thought I saw something odd."

"What?" asked Jack, peering out the window.

"Come and see."

Jack got out and followed Dad to a fence that ran beside the road. "Look." Dad stopped beside one of the thick, round fence posts. A big turtle sat on top of it, sleeping in the sun.

Jack was flabbergasted. "How did he climb up there?"


"Well, I'd say someone must have put him there," said Dad. "But he probably never even saw the hands that picked him up!" He lifted the turtle and set him on the ground. "Or the hands that put him down. When he sees his friends again, maybe he'll tell them—in turtle language, of course—that he got up on that post and back down again all by himself." Jack had a feeling Dad was talking about more than just the turtle. "Invisible hands," said Dad softly. "I'd say that's the help you had in training Blaze—God's invisible hands."

"You mean God helped me?" asked Jack. "God helped me train a horse?"

Dad nodded. "God gave you a brain and arms and legs and the ability to learn how to train Blaze—and people who taught you how to do it. Right?"

"Well, yeah," Jack said thoughtfully. "So..."

"So maybe He deserves some credit?" suggested Dad. "After all, if Jesus hadn't died and rose again to save us, none of our accomplishments would mean a thing. But He did save us, and He's given us the abilities we have so we can use them to point to Him and everything He's done for us."

Jack sighed. "You're right, Dad. I owe Him everything. He deserves the credit, not me."  *Jane K. Chase*



GIVE GOD CREDIT FOR EVERYTHING | KEY VERSE: If anyone wants to be proud, he should be proud of what the Lord has done. 2 Corinthians 10:17 (NLV)



Do you give God the credit for your accomplishments, like getting good grades or winning at sports? Or do you let others think it's all you? It's okay to feel good about things you do well, but don't forget to thank God for each success—after all, He's the one who created you, saved you from sin, and blessed you with everything you have and are able to do. Nothing you do compares to what He's done, so give Him the credit He deserves.

COLOR!



A LIGHT TO SHARE

Come on, Dad. We're ready," called Lina. They had all gathered for family night. It was storming outside, but in the den, they felt snug and cozy with plenty of games and popcorn.

"Coming," Dad called from the bedroom.

Just then the power went out. "Oh no!" said Manuel. "No lights!"

"Now what do we do?" Lina asked.

"Honey," Mom called, "bring that big candle from the bedroom, please. There are matches in the drawer there too."

"Okay," said Dad. "I hope I can find them in the dark—ouch! Stubbed my toe on the dresser!" A moment later they saw a glow in the bedroom as Dad lit a match, and he soon arrived in the den with the flickering candle.

"I hope the power won't be off long," said Manuel. He was eager to play games and munch on popcorn.

"I don't even care. I like the room with just the candlelight," Lina said.


Before long, they all agreed they could see well enough to play a game. "It's amazing to see what a difference a small light makes, isn't it?" said Mom.

Lina nodded. "When the lights first went out, the dark seemed kind of scary, but when Dad brought in the candle, it lit up the whole room."

"A dark room may seem scary," said Dad, "but it's not nearly as scary as the darkness of sin. Without the light of Jesus, we'd have good reason to live in fear. But because He came into the world to save us and give us His light, we no longer have to go on stumbling in darkness."

"Like you were in the bedroom when you stubbed your toe, Dad?" Manuel asked with a grin.

Dad chuckled. "Right. Jesus brings the light of His love into our lives, and we can share that light with others—just like I shared the light of this candle with you by bringing it in here from the bedroom."

"So we have to let our lights shine, just like it said in the verse I learned at church last week," Lina said. "We need to tell people about Jesus and let them know how much He loves them."  *Robert Truesdale*



SHARE THE LIGHT OF JESUS | KEY VERSE: Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:16 (NIV)



Are you sharing the light of Jesus's love with those around you? Don't hide His light because you're embarrassed about what others might think or say about you. When we were stumbling in the darkness of sin, Jesus came to save us even though He knew many people would reject Him. If you have His light in your life, share it with those around you. Tell others about Him and show His love in all you do.

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL



The waves crashed as Graham sat on the beach. Even though he was vacationing with his friend Omar and his family, his thoughts were dark. Back home, things were anything but a fun day at the beach. *No one wants me, Graham thought to himself. Mom and Dad are too busy fighting to notice me. Except when I get bad grades. That's the only time my teacher notices me too.* Graham held back tears as his thoughts ran on. *I can't do anything right. I wish I'd never been born!*

Just then Omar's grandfather came over. "Mind if I sit down?"

Graham nodded and watched as the elderly man began to chip small bits from an old piece of driftwood. "What are you going to do with that?" Graham asked.


"Oh, I have great plans for this old piece of wood," replied the man. "I'm carving a whale this time. I like to carve sea animals." He lifted a beautifully carved dolphin from his bag and handed it to Graham. "Here's one I finished recently."

"Wow!" Graham held up the dolphin, then looked again at the wood the man was carving. "That driftwood you're working on now is so old and dirty. It looks worthless! How can something as cool as this come from junk like that?"

The man smiled. "It takes time, work, and skill to get rid of the dirt and make something beautiful from the wood. I carve it carefully, sand it, and polish it." He turned the wood over in his hand. "This driftwood is something like me."

"Like you?" asked Graham. "How's that?"

"There was a time when I felt worthless—like all the things I did and said were wrong and I might as well give up. In fact, even though I know better now, I still feel that way sometimes. Ever feel that way yourself?" Graham nodded. "Well, we're definitely not worthless—not to God," said the man. "Whenever bad things happen in my life or I feel worthless, I remember that Jesus loves me so much that He died and rose again to make me His. When I trusted Him to save me, He made me into something beautiful. Have you asked Him to do that for you?"

Graham shook his head and sat up straighter. He was eager to hear more about how Jesus could make something beautiful out of his life.  Harry C. Trover



JESUS MAKES US BEAUTIFUL | KEY VERSE: But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (CSB)



Do you sometimes feel worthless, as if nothing you do is any good? Everyone does wrong, and there's a lot of pain and hardship in the world because of it. But you're special to God. He made you, He loves you, and He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for you. When you trust in Jesus, He makes you into something beautiful. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

TO READ OR NOT TO READ

Sierra shut her bedroom door and tossed her backpack onto the bed. She set her cat, Tommy, on the floor. “Stay away from the curtains, Tommy,” she warned. “You know you always get stuck in them.”



Sierra flopped onto her bed and opened her backpack. After digging around a moment, she pulled out a book. “What do you think, Tommy? Should I?”

Tommy didn’t answer. He was staring at the lace curtain waving in the breeze from the window.

Sierra tossed the book onto the bed beside her. “I know Mom told me not to read these kinds of books, but all my friends read them. They can’t be that bad, can they?” She picked the book up again. The cover looked interesting. She flipped it over and read the back for the tenth time. A few pages couldn’t hurt.

Sierra opened the book and soon had read several pages. Then a quick movement made her jump. It was only Tommy, she realized with relief. He had pounced on the curtain. His claws were caught in the fabric, and he hung down, his full length stretched out. He was helpless.


“Silly cat, leave the curtain alone!” Sierra freed him, and he marched across the room and sat with his back to the curtain.

Sierra turned to her book again. She knew she shouldn’t read any more, but soon she was engrossed again. She had finished the first chapter when a sound caught her attention.

She looked up and stared in disbelief. Tommy was hanging from the curtain again. The temptation had been too great. Sierra began to laugh.

“Tommy, you should know better, after all the times you’ve gotten stuck. Resist the temptation! You should—”

Sierra stopped and stared at Tommy and then at the book in her hand. She dropped the book as though it were on fire. *I’m acting just like Tommy*, she thought. *But he can’t resist temptation, and I can, because Jesus gives me the power to say no to sin.*

She loosened Tommy from the curtain again, then picked up the book and placed it in her backpack. “I’m going to return this book and ask Jesus to forgive me for disobeying Mom,” she told her cat. “I don’t want to become ensnared like you!”  *Christa Long*



RESIST TEMPTATION | KEY VERSE: God is faithful...When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NLT)



Have you ever given in to temptation and regretted it later? When you give in to sinful desires, it’s easy to get stuck. But there’s good news—Jesus gives us the power to resist temptation. Confess the wrong you’ve done to Him, and He will forgive you and help you do what’s right.

PRACTICE TIME

Oliver was passing the kitchen door when he heard his little brother's voice. "Dad, can I please have those shoes? They're the kind Daryl Stewart wears."

Oliver grinned and went into the kitchen. "Do you think that since Daryl Stewart is a basketball star those shoes will automatically turn you into a great player?"

Jude shrugged. "They might help."

"Jude," said Dad, "you know it's effort, not a fancy pair of shoes, that will help make you a good basketball player."

Oliver nodded. "Dad's right, Jude. If you practice every day, you'll get better and better, no matter what kind of shoes you wear."

Jude looked a bit disappointed. "Guess I'll start practicing then," he said with a sigh and headed for the door.

Oliver grinned at his dad. "I was about to head over to Bible study at church, but I think I'll stay and help Jude with his basketball practice instead."


Dad motioned toward Oliver's Bible on the kitchen counter. "Grandma gave each of you kids a new Bible for Christmas, didn't she?" he asked. "Is that it?"

Oliver nodded. "Yep. My name's on the cover. Isn't that cool?" He smoothed his hand over the embossed name.

Dad nodded thoughtfully. "Nice shoes and nice Bibles are great, but just having them doesn't make you a good player or help you grow spiritually, does it?"

It took a moment for Oliver to realize what his dad meant. "You're saying that just like Jude needs to practice to become a better basketball player, I need to learn from God by spending time in His Word."

Dad nodded. "And one really great way to do that is to study the Bible with other believers. After all, you can't learn to play basketball all by yourself, can you? You need to practice and learn from the coach as a team. Jesus never meant for us to live the Christian life alone—He puts other believers in our lives so we can learn to walk with Him together and love and support each other along the way. That's a big way He shows us who He is, and why church and Bible studies are so important."

"Okay, Dad," Oliver said. "I'll go to Bible study. I don't want to miss practice with my spiritual team!"  A. J. Schut



LEARN WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS | KEY VERSE: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42 (NIV)



Do you want to get to know Jesus more and more? To improve in sports, you need to learn the game and spend time practicing. To deepen your relationship with God, you need to learn about who He is, and a good way to do that is to spend time in His Word—both by yourself and with other believers. Spend time with other Christians so you can learn about Jesus together and encourage each other in your walk with Him.

TOMORROW'S TEARS

Mom found Clare crying in the backyard, watching her dog, Sheba, paw at leaves in the flower bed. "What's the matter, honey?"

"I don't want Sheba to get sick," Clare said. "I know the vet took that lump off her leg, but she said it could come back."

"It could, but maybe it won't," said Mom. "It may never come back."

"But what if it does?" Clare sniffed. "I don't want Sheba to die."

"Of course you don't," said Mom, giving Clare a hug. "But worrying about that is keeping you from enjoying her. You look just as sad now as you would if she died." Mom bent down to pet Sheba. "Do you remember what happened to Job?"

"Job?" asked Clare. "You mean the man in the Bible?"

"Yes," said Mom. "He had plenty to be happy about—a big family, lots of money. Then he lost everything. After Job's problems started, he said, 'What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me.'"

"That doesn't make me feel better," said Clare.

"Wait! I have a point." Mom dried a tear from Clare's cheek. "All those years, he had his family with him. He had prosperity and success. Do you think his worrying helped him enjoy those things?"

"No," said Clare, petting Sheba's head.

"And did being afraid of losing everything stop it from happening?" asked Mom.

Clare hugged Sheba. "No. But what can I do about being sad? It doesn't have an off button."

"No, but we have a choice when it comes to worrying about sad things that might happen," said Mom. "We can worry, which doesn't help anyway, or we can remember that Jesus died for us and will always be with us and thank Him for the good things we have today—like Sheba. We can talk to Him about troubling things and trust Him to work them out. Job did that. He continued to love and believe in God."

Mom picked up a ball and looked at Sheba, who wagged her tail. "I think she needs a playmate," said Mom, throwing the ball.

Clare took off running. "Come on, Sheba! I bet I can get that ball before you do." Sheba quickly caught up with her, and together they raced across the lawn. ♥

Elise L. Perl



ENJOY YOUR BLESSINGS TODAY | KEY VERSE: Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Matthew 6:34 (NIV)



Do you worry about what might happen tomorrow? If worrying keeps you focused on what might go wrong, you can't enjoy what you have right now. When you start to worry, pray about the problem, and talk to a parent or another adult about it. Then choose to thank Jesus for the many blessings you do have and enjoy them as you trust in Him.

COLOR!



THE HAIRS ON YOUR HEAD



“Hall I brush your hair before you go to bed, sweetie?” Grandma asked. Jiya, who was spending the night with her grandparents, nodded and got her hairbrush. Her scalp tingled as Grandma brushed her hair with long, gentle strokes.

When she finished, Grandma handed the brush to Jiya. “There, now. Why don’t you clean the hair out of the brush so it’ll be all ready for next time?”

Jiya carried the brush to the wastebasket. “When you brush my hair, a lot comes out, Grandma,” she said as she pulled out strands that had twisted around the bristles. “Am I going to be bald like Grandpa?”

Grandma chuckled. “No, you don’t have to worry about that, sweetheart. It’s normal to lose up to a hundred hairs a day, but you have many more than that on your head—maybe a hundred thousand.”

“Wow!” said Jiya. “That’s a lot! I wonder who counted them.”

“Well, God keeps count of every one,” Grandma said.

“He does?”

“That’s right. The Bible says the hairs on our heads are all numbered. I think that shows He loves us very much, don’t you?”

Jiya nodded. “The first verse I ever learned was John 3:16—‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...’” She paused, thinking hard. “God loves me so much He sent Jesus to die for me, *and* He cares how many hairs I have. That’s awesome!”

“Yes, God is awesome,” Grandma said, pulling back the sheets on Jiya’s bed. “He even knows when a hair falls out, and He cares for you and watches over you day and night.”

“Even when I’m sleeping,” Jiya said with a yawn.

Grandma smiled. “Yes, and I can see that it’s time for you to snuggle into bed. Go tell Grandpa goodnight and then I’ll tuck you in.”

“Okay. And I’ll tell him not to worry about his hair,” Jiya said, heading for the bedroom door. “I’ll tell him God cares how many hairs he has and won’t let him lose more than he should.” ♥ *Kim Sheard*



GOD CARES FOR YOU | KEY VERSE: The very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matthew 10:30



Are you aware that God knows everything about you—including how many hairs are on your head? He knows when you’re happy and when you’re sad. He watches over you when you’re awake and when you’re sleeping. He loves you so much He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for you, and He cares about every detail of your life. He is truly an awesome God!

THE JOY OF WORK

I'm outta here!" Micah dunked an old cleaning rag in the trash can and ran into the house.

Calvin looked around at his half of the garage, then at the other half that had been Micah's responsibility to clean. What a difference! He knew Micah had worked a lot harder than he had. Now Micah was finished and could go to the ball game. Calvin scowled. He hated cleaning the garage!

By the time Calvin finished, the game had been going for an hour. "I'm done!" he called to his mother as he entered the house. "Will you take me to school so I can see the rest of the game?"

"No, Calvin. You should have been ready when I took Micah. I'm cooking dinner now."

Calvin sighed. "What are you making?"

"Chicken tacos and lemon-garlic potatoes," Mom replied.

"Yum!" Calvin's mouth watered as he thought about biting into a taco. "You make the best food. You must love to cook."

Mom shrugged. "Not always—it can be hard, messy work sometimes. But I do it because I want to provide you and Micah and Dad with healthy food that you enjoy."

Calvin was surprised. "I sure wouldn't do all that work if I didn't have to!"

"Calvin," Mom said, "did you know that work is part of God's loving plan for us?"


"No," Calvin muttered. "I kind of figured work was more like God's way of punishing us."

Mom shook her head. "Work is a good thing. The first thing God did after He created Adam and Eve was give them work to do. It was the curse of sin that made work difficult, but that doesn't mean we can't find joy and satisfaction in our work."

"How do we do that?" asked Calvin.

"By remembering that God has done the most important work of all. Jesus saved us by dying for our sins, and God is working in our lives to make us more like Him—and that means the work we do is important. He uses it to help us learn and grow and show others who He is."

"He does?" Calvin smiled. "I guess work isn't so bad after all."

"I'm glad to hear you say that." Mom handed him a bowl. "Because I could really use some help peeling potatoes!"  Agnes Livezey



FIND JOY IN WORK | KEY VERSE: Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people. Colossians 3:23 (CSB)



Do you hate work? Do you complain about it or avoid doing it? God created work to be a good thing, but when sin entered the world, work became difficult. The good news is that because Jesus did the most difficult work of all—dying for our sins—we can find joy in our work. Even when you have to do things that seem boring or unimportant, do them for Jesus, knowing He'll use your efforts for good.

SERVING DOWN THE STREET

Mom!" Jade called as she ran into the kitchen.

"What's up?" Jade's mom asked from where she stood kneading bread dough.

"I just saw an ad about kids who don't have enough food to eat or clothes to wear, and I want to help, Mom!" Jade explained in a rush.

Mom dusted flour off her hands. "Jade, I'm so glad you want to help and serve others. Why don't we start with Mr. Barton?" Mom turned to the cabinet and pulled down two cans. "I have this chicken noodle soup that we can drop off to him since he's sick."

Jade frowned. "But he lives just down the street. I want to help people in a poor country in another part of the world."

"He's an older man who lives alone," said Mom. "It's hard for him to afford groceries or cook, and he can't drive anymore. We can show kindness to Mr. Barton by helping him out."

"He's just one person, Mom! I want to help lots and lots of people!" Jade exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air.

Mom removed her apron. "Jade, remember when you trusted Jesus as your Savior last year?"

Jade nodded. "Of course I remember."


"Well," Mom continued, "when you trusted Jesus to forgive your sins, the Holy Spirit came to live in your heart. He gives you the desire and ability to love and help others so they can know Jesus loves them too."

"Then isn't it good that I want to help lots of people?" Jade asked.

"Of course!" Mom smiled. "Jesus doesn't want us to forget about people in faraway places. But He wants us to look for opportunities to bless people who are nearby too."

"So serving one person is just as important as helping out lots of people?"

Mom nodded. "Jesus said that whenever we serve even one person, we are actually serving Jesus Himself."

"Wow!" Jade's eyes grew big. "Let's take Mr. Barton the soup right now. I'll grab a jug of orange juice from the fridge too. Come on, Mom! We have important helping to do!"  Allison Wilson Lee



SERVE OTHERS NEAR AND FAR | KEY VERSE: The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Matthew 25:40 (NIV)



Has God given you a desire to help people around the world who are struggling? What about people in your hometown or church? Or just one person down the street? When we help others, we show them Christ's love. You don't need lots of money or have to go someplace far away to live out His love. Helping a neighbor, friend, sibling, or whoever God places in your life is a wonderful chance to serve Jesus by serving others.

A SON FOREVER



Brock was sprawled on his bed with a book when Seth, his older brother, came into the room. “Hey, Brock, did you know that Dakota Smith talked with Pastor Briggs after church yesterday and decided to trust Jesus as his Savior?”

“Great,” Brock said halfheartedly. “Maybe he’ll stay out of trouble now.” Then he frowned. “But what if he doesn’t? What happens if he sins again? I always wonder about that. Or even you—you’re a Christian. What if you sin again?”

“You mean you think I don’t sin?” Seth grinned. “Wow! Go on thinking that!”

“But what if you started doing really bad things?” Brock asked.

“Well, sometimes Christians do really bad things, Brock. But when I do something wrong, that doesn’t mean I’m not saved anymore. I’m God’s child forever.”

“I don’t know,” said Brock doubtfully. “I don’t want to trust in Jesus till I’m sure I can live right.”

“Brock, no one can live right—that’s why Jesus died on the cross for our sins. We can only be good in God’s eyes by trusting in Him.” But Brock still wasn’t sure, and Seth couldn’t convince him otherwise.

A few days later, an older boy from church crashed his parents’ car while driving it recklessly. “Mr. and Mrs. Peterson are so upset,” Mom said. “But they’re glad Caden’s okay.”

After Mom left the room, Seth turned to his brother. “It’s too bad Caden’s not a Peterson anymore, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Brock.

“Well, Caden took his parents’ car without permission and crashed it into a tree.”

“But he’s still a Peterson,” said Brock. “He’s still their son.”

“Right,” said Seth. “And just like Caden still belongs to the Peterson family, a Christian who sins still belongs to God’s family. Once you trust in Jesus, you’re God’s child forever. Christians still sin, but when we admit our mistakes to Jesus, He forgives us. If you wait until you’re good enough to trust in Jesus, it’s never going to happen. Only He is good, and once you’re part of His family, He will help you live in a way that shows His goodness to others.”

Slowly, Brock nodded. He was beginning to understand.  *Agnes Livezey*



YOU ARE GOD’S CHILD FOREVER | KEY VERSE: I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. John 10:28



Have you put off trusting in Jesus because you think you can’t live the way a Christian should? When you know Jesus, He forgives you when you sin and gives you the ability to do what’s right. Once you become part of God’s family, you’re His child forever. Nothing can change that. If you haven’t joined His family, don’t wait any longer. (See “Have You Heard the Good News?” on page 104.)

BABYSITTING BLUES

Mina pouted as her older sister, Jackie, folded a pastel quilt and placed it on top of a large stack of quilts their mother had made.

“Ready to go?” Mom asked as she hurried into the living room. Kitty, Mina and Jackie’s toddler sister, giggled as she bounced on Mom’s hip.

“Ready!” Jackie replied, grinning.

“Why can’t I go to the craft fair too?” Mina whined.

“Dad will take you and Kitty this afternoon,” Mom said.

“But babysitting Kitty is boring,” Mina said. “I want to help at the fair!”

“Shh, don’t listen to her,” Jackie said teasingly, cupping her hands over Kitty’s ears.

Mom passed Kitty to Jackie and led Mina to the couch. “Mina, we’ve talked about this. You *are* helping me by babysitting.”

“But why does Jackie get to work at the booth and I don’t? Do you love Jackie more than me?” Mina wailed.

Jackie groaned. “Mina, *please*. You don’t really believe that. If it means that much to you, I can watch Kitty and you can go with Mom.”

“Really?” Mina asked, hopping to her feet. “Yay!”

“Hold on,” Mom said. “I appreciate your willingness, Jackie, but I will make the final call. Mina, there’s a reason why I chose Jackie, even though I love all three of you equally.”

“Why?” Mina asked, slumping back down.

“Jackie already spent years babysitting both you and Kitty. Because I can trust her with smaller responsibilities, I can give her bigger responsibilities. Even now, she put your interests before her own.”

“Oh,” Mina whispered.

“Believe it or not, I’m doing this out of my love for you, based on Jesus’s example,” Mom said. “Jesus loves us and is shaping us to be more like Him, and He offers us opportunities to be faithful and show His love to others. But because He knows us so well, He only gives us challenges we can handle. I want to give you a task you can succeed in to encourage and prepare you for bigger challenges to come.”

Mina nodded. “I guess you’re right. I’ll be faithful by taking care of Kitty today.”

Mom hugged Mina. “Thank you.”  *Hannah Chung*



EVEN SMALL TASKS HELP US GROW | KEY VERSE: Whoever is faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and whoever is unrighteous in very little is also unrighteous in much. Luke 16:10 (CSB)



Have you ever been given a task that felt too simple? Maybe you’ve compared yourself to older siblings or friends who were given tasks you wanted instead. Jesus was always willing to do anything God asked of Him, from washing dirty feet to dying on the cross for us. As you experience Jesus’s love, you will realize any task is important when it shows others His love and faithfulness.

STILL LOVED BY GOD AND DAD



Harvey threw a baseball toward his dad. “What if I do all this practicing and I still don’t make the team?”

Dad grinned. “I’ll still love you.”

Harvey sighed. “You’ll always love me. You say that all the time.”

“God will always love you too.” Dad lifted his arm.

“Get ready to swing.”

The ball came toward Harvey. He swung hard, but his bat didn’t connect with the ball.

“This is what I mean.” Harvey went to get the ball so he could try again.

“What if I somehow make the team and then I strike out every time I’m up? My teammates are going to hate me.”


“If we keep practicing, I don’t think that will happen,” Dad said. “But even if it does, I will still love you, and God will still love you too.”

Harvey threw the ball back to his dad. Dad held on to it as he looked over at him. “God and I will still love you, Harvey, but how will you feel about yourself? Do you feel like you have to do well to be deserving of love? What’s going through your head, bud?”

Harvey looked down at the ground. “Ever since Mom left, I find it hard to believe that anyone really loves me. Even you and God. Sometimes I don’t like myself too much either.”

He heard footsteps and knew his dad was coming over to him, but he was surprised when Dad knelt on the ground in front of him. “Bud?” His dad looked up into his eyes. “You are so worthy of love. You can’t imagine how much I care about you and how much God loves you. He sent Jesus to die for you so you could be His child! Your mom leaving had nothing to do with you or anything you have or haven’t done.”

“But...a mom shouldn’t leave her kid.” Harvey blinked his eyes hard.

“No, she shouldn’t.” Dad dropped the baseball and wrapped his arms around Harvey. “But what she did doesn’t change your value in my eyes or God’s eyes, and it shouldn’t change how you think about yourself either. God will always love you, and I will too.”  *Emily Acker*



YOU ARE VERY LOVED | KEY VERSE: As the Father loved Me [Jesus], I also have loved you; abide in My love. John 15:9



Do you let what others think about you affect how you see yourself? You have great value in God’s eyes, and nothing will ever change how He feels about you. He loves you so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for your sins so you could belong to Him forever. He cares about you so much and will never, ever leave you. When others let you down, know that He is with you and that you are loved.

GUARDRAILS

Dad, what are those ropes on the side of the road?” asked six-year-old Arthur as they drove down the highway.

“Those are called guardrails,” Dad replied. “Sometimes guardrails are made of wide metal bands, and sometimes they’re heavy wire ropes. They’re to make sure people driving on the highway stay on the road.”

“Why would they want to leave the road?” Arthur asked.

“They wouldn’t want to leave the road,” said Arthur’s brother, Keaton. “But sometimes people have accidents. Like in winter. If the road gets slippery, cars might run into each other and go off the road.”

Dad nodded. “Or drivers may not be paying attention to what they’re doing, or they may get sleepy and swerve off the highway. Then those guardrails would catch their cars before they could roll down the hill at the side of the road. Without the guardrails, the cars would suffer much more serious damage—and the people inside them could have more serious injuries.”


“Wow!” Arthur said. “Then I’m glad they’re there. They’re really important!”

“Yes, they are.” Dad smiled. “You know, God’s Word can be like a guardrail. Just like guardrails protect us on the highway, reading the Bible can protect us from false teaching.”

“What do you mean?” asked Keaton.

“The Bible shows us what comes from God and what doesn’t,” said Dad. “It shows us who God is, and if we know Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit to help us understand His Word and use it to test ideas we come into contact with. The Bible helps us recognize when something is false teaching and not the truth.”

“Like what that person was saying on the radio earlier?” asked Keaton. “The one who said all religions lead to God?”

“Right. That’s not what the Bible says—it says the only way to have eternal life with God is by trusting Jesus to save us from sin.” Dad sighed. “We hear so much in the world that’s untrue, which is why we need to be careful not to veer off the right path in our spiritual lives. As we read the Bible and learn about it at church, we can trust the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom about what it says so we can guard our hearts against falsehoods.”  *Robert Truesdale*



GOD’S WORD CONTAINS TRUTH | KEY VERSE: Do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. 1 John 4:1 (NLT)



Do you read the Bible regularly? Do you check it when you’re not sure about something you’ve heard? As you learn what God says in His Word, the Holy Spirit will use it to give you wisdom and help you recognize Satan’s lies. So keep reading the Bible and studying it, and trust God to use it to help you stay on the right road in your walk with Jesus.

BITTERNESS BLOTCHES

Mei hung up the phone and walked into the living room with her arms crossed and her jaw clenched. “That was Everly.”

Mom frowned. “You’re not still angry with her, are you?”

“Of course I am!” said Mei. “She shouldn’t have made fun of me that way. She did it right in front of everyone, and they were all laughing at me!”

“I know she hurt you, Mei, and what she did was wrong. But you can’t let bitterness fester in your heart. That’s wrong too.” Mom knelt down to scrub a spot on the carpet. “You need to deal with your anger.”

Mei watched as her mother vigorously rubbed the dark spot on the carpet. “Do you think that will ever come out?” she asked. “It doesn’t really look much better than before.”

“I hope it will,” said Mom. “Of course, it would have come out a lot easier if I had cleaned it right after the juice was spilled.” Mom wiped sweat off her face and glanced up at Mei. “You should deal with your anger the way I should have dealt with this stain.”

Mei frowned. “What do you mean?”

Mom continued to rub the dark blotch. “Time has allowed this stain to penetrate into the carpet fibers. Once it’s soaked in and dried, it’s really hard to remove all traces of it. Anger does something like that to your heart. If you let it stay and saturate there, it becomes more and more difficult to remove. Over time, it can grow into bitterness and rage.”

Mei looked at the stain on the carpet and sighed. “I don’t know how I can stop being mad at Everly, but I want to.”

“Good for you!” Mom said. “Start by talking to Jesus about it, and trust Him to help you forgive others the way He’s forgiven you. And pray for Everly too. It’s hard to be angry with someone you’re praying for. With God’s help, you can replace your bitterness with His love. Then maybe you should call Everly and ask her to come over so you can talk about what happened.”

Mei nodded. “Okay,” she said. “I will.”  *Suzanne Daly*



DEAL WITH ANGER NOW | KEY VERSE: Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper—it only leads to harm. Psalm 37:8 (NLT)



Are you angry about something? Anger isn’t a bad emotion, but left unchecked, it can fester into bitterness or rage. Don’t let anger build up in your heart. Ask Jesus to help you when you’re struggling with something someone did to you. He is with you and knows your pain, and He gives you the power to forgive others the way He’s forgiven you. Trust Him to replace your anger and bitterness with His love.

BUILDING BLOCKS

“Hey, Blaine, what are you working on?” Dad asked as he walked into Blaine’s room. “I’m making a building out of interlocking blocks for the library contest,” Blaine said. “If I post a picture on their website, I could win a free meal at a local restaurant.” Suddenly, he frowned. “Hey, where’s my baseplate? Can you help me find it, Dad? It’s the big flat one that I have to build on to make sure the structure won’t tip over.”

“All right.” Dad kneeled and began to look through the chest of blocks. He pulled out a large flat piece like Blaine had described. “Is this it?”

“Yeah! Thanks, Dad.”

“Do you mind if I build something too? I loved playing with blocks like this when I was younger.”

Blaine nodded. “Sure.”

“I think I’ll build a minivan like ours.” Dad began looking for black blocks to use for the tires. “So, did you finish reading this week’s Bible passage for Sunday school?”


“I started, but I don’t really understand it. It talks about something being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ being the cornerstone.”

“It’s talking about the church,” Dad explained. “Everyone who joins the church by trusting in Jesus is an important part of it.” He pointed at the blocks Blaine was attaching to his building. “It’s like those blocks. Imagine if you only got one block in a set! You wouldn’t be able to build a complete car, or building, or much of anything with one block. But when you have many blocks that fit together perfectly, you can build a structure that is complete.”

“So, are we the blocks?” Blaine asked.

“Yes! Christians make up the church the way your blocks make up the building you’re working on. And just like your baseplate, Jesus is the base of our church. It’s built on what He did to save us from sin—His death and resurrection. Like blocks that connect together, we are connected through the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us and is shaping us to be more like Jesus.”

Blaine nodded. “I think I understand better now. And I’m finished with my building!”

“All right. I’ll take a picture,” Dad said. “I can already taste that free meal!” 

Jessica Kleeberger



THE CHURCH IS BUILT ON JESUS | KEY VERSE: In [Jesus] you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. Ephesians 2:22



Have you ever built something with interlocking blocks? If so, you know how much fun it is to see a bunch of tiny pieces come together to form a complete creation. The church is the same way! Each Christian belongs to the church and has a part to play in what God is building on the foundation set by Jesus. His Spirit lives in us and works through us so others can see Jesus’s love.

CHANGE OF PLANS

When Journey and her dad clapped their hands and shouted loudly, two barn swallows quickly flew out of the garage, their tails looking like forks against the blue sky. “Why can’t we let them nest in the garage, Dad?” Journey asked as she watched the birds fly over a neighbor’s house and disappear.



“Our garage wouldn’t be a safe place to raise baby birds,” said Dad. “See what happens when the garage door is closed?” He pressed a button to lower the garage door. Instantly, it became dark, and the cool breeze was gone.

Journey nodded. “Our garage would get too hot for them, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, and not just that. When the door is closed, the mother and father birds wouldn’t be able to go in and out and bring food for the baby birds.” Dad opened the garage door and let the cooler air back in.

“I guess they’ll have to change their plans and find a new home—just like we had to change our plans and find a new home when we moved here.” Journey sighed. “Sometimes I wish our plans hadn’t gotten changed. I like living here, but I miss my old school and the friends I had there.”

Dad nodded. “Mom and I liked where we lived before too. We were surprised when my company wanted us to move here, but I’m sure we’ll grow to like it.” He leaned against the wall and thought for a minute. “We can make our plans, Journey, but like the Bible says, it’s the Lord who determines our steps—and we want to follow Him wherever He leads us.”


“But why would God want us to move?”

“Why did we chase those birds out of the garage?” Dad asked.

“Well, because we know they need to build their nest someplace else,” Journey replied.

“Right. The birds don’t understand that, but we know it’s best. And we don’t know why God would want us to move, but because He loves us so much that Jesus died for us, we can trust Him to know what’s best—even when it doesn’t make sense to us.”

“I know,” Journey said. “And I’m thankful He’s with us and promises to help us through the things we don’t understand.”

Dad smiled. “Me too.”  *Mary F. Watkins*



ACCEPT GOD’S PLANS FOR YOU | KEY VERSE: We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps. Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)



Is it hard for you to accept a change in your plans? It’s good to plan ahead, but remember that God is the one in control and that your plans may have to change in order for Him to do what’s best. Trust Him to work things out for your good, knowing He’s with you and will always help you through any difficult changes in your life.

ROSES ARE RED

Sebastian was so focused on coloring the big red heart that he didn't hear his Dad come into his room. Dad stood behind him and read the poem written on the card Sebastian was making out loud. "Roses are red, the snow is white... you light up my life like a big headlight." Dad grinned. "You certainly have a way with words, son. I'm guessing this Valentine isn't for your mom."

Sebastian looked up from his coloring. "It's for a girl in my class. It took me two weeks to come up with that. Do you think she'll like it?"

"I think every girl likes to hear kind words. What else are you planning to do for her for Valentine's Day?"

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't planning on doing anything. I was just going to wow her with words."

Dad smiled. "Your words are a great start, but you need to do something to back up what you say. Offer to clean the hamster cage when it's her turn. Or change your poem to 'A rosy, red rose, a white snowflake...you warm my heart like a cookie that's baked,' and make her a batch of cookies. Do something to prove your words have meaning."

"Did Grandpa give you this advice when you were my age?" Sebastian asked.

"Believe it or not, I got this from the Bible."

Sebastian laughed. "I don't think the Bible talks about baking cookies."

"No, but it does talk about backing up our words with action. It tells us to show the truth of our love not only through what we say, but what we do. Think of it like this. The Bible says that God loved the world and that He gave His only Son, Jesus. God doesn't just say He loves us. He backs it up with action. And we need to do more than just say nice things to people. We need to do things that show them we care—not just on Valentine's Day, but every day."

Sebastian pulled a fresh piece of paper from his desk drawer.

"What are you doing now?" Dad asked.

"Tell me that poem about baking cookies again," said Sebastian. "I want to remake this card and then go put a batch of cookies in the oven." ♥

Jared Hottenstein



LIVE OUT LOVE | KEY VERSE: Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. 1 John 3:18 (NLT)



Do you say kind words to people and tell them you care about them? That's great, but don't forget to back up the truth of your words with action. God wants us to build others up with our words, but He also wants us to live out our faith in what we do as well as what we say. Love others like Jesus by letting them know you care through both your words and your actions.

TANGLED THREADS



Marta sat down on the couch beside her grandmother and glanced at the needlepoint canvas she was working on. “That’s so pretty!” said Marta. “That’s going to be the cover for the pillow you made for my bed, isn’t it? Is it almost finished?”

“Not yet,” said Grandma, “but it’s getting there.” She turned the canvas over and cut a thread.

“Wow!” said Marta. “It doesn’t look so good on the back side—just a big tangle of threads.” She grinned. “Be sure you don’t put it on the pillow inside out!”


Grandma laughed. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

Marta picked up a photo album from the coffee table and flipped through it. “Grandma,” she said after a few minutes, “I still miss Grandpa a lot. I just don’t understand why God didn’t make him get better! We prayed and prayed for him, but he died anyway.”

Grandma squeezed Marta’s hand. “I know you miss him, honey. I do too. I don’t know why the Lord took Grandpa to heaven instead of giving him more time here with us, but...” She paused and held up her needlework so Marta could see the back of the canvas again. “As you pointed out, this side of the picture isn’t very pretty.” She turned the cloth over to the finished side.

“That side is much better,” said Marta. “I love the little frogs in that picture. They’re so cute!”

“Yes, they are—even though I’m not finished yet.” Grandma laid the needlework back in her lap and looked at Marta. “Some things that happen to us—or to those we love—look like the tangled threads on the wrong side of a needlepoint picture,” she said softly. “But God sees the right side. His picture of our lives isn’t finished yet, and He knows what threads are needed to make it beautiful. We need to trust Him to work out every part just right, knowing that Jesus gave His life so that our lives could be a beautiful reflection of Him.”

Marta picked up her grandma’s needlework and smiled. “Once this is finished and on my bed, the frogs in the picture will remind me to trust God with my life, even when things happen that I don’t understand.”  *Richard S. Maffeo*



TRUST JESUS IN EVERYTHING | KEY VERSE: Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Proverbs 3:5



Has something sad happened in your life? Is it hard to understand why God allows those kinds of things to happen? When things happen that you don’t understand, trust that God is using them for good, even though you can’t see it. He loves you and will always be there to help you through the hard times, and one day you’ll be able to see the beautiful picture He’s made of your life.

HIS LIFE FOR MINE

Why would Jesus allow Himself to be killed if He were really God?" Jackson asked his youth group leader. "I don't get it!" Mr. Anders did his best to explain, but Jackson still thought it made no sense.

A few days later, Jackson joined the group on a campout at a national park. Before heading off, they met with Ranger Davis. He told them about his work and even let them climb up the watchtower where he regularly checked for fires. Then the boys and Mr. Anders headed into the woods.

The next day, the group awakened to the smell of smoke in the air. "There must be a fire in the forest somewhere," Mr. Anders said. He tried to call the park office but couldn't get any reception on his phone. "We don't know where the fire is," he told the boys. "If we start moving, we might head closer to the blaze."

"Look!" Jackson called out. "A helicopter!"

The boys whooped as a helicopter zoomed in and hovered over their campsite. Within a few minutes, they were all inside and taken to safety.

As the boys talked excitedly about their narrow escape, a sheriff came in. "Where's Ranger Davis?" someone asked. "Was he able to see where we were from the watchtower?"

The sheriff nodded sadly. "He spotted your campsite and radioed your location right before a burning tree fell on the tower."

Jackson gasped. "You mean...he died?"

The sheriff nodded again. "He refused to leave before you boys were located. He stayed and saved your lives instead of his own. If he hadn't...well, you wouldn't be here now." Jackson was stunned.

Later that day, Mr. Anders talked with Jackson. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I can't stop thinking about Ranger Davis. He could have left the tower sooner, but he stayed to save us—and died because of it." Jackson paused to wipe his eyes. "It's like what you were trying to tell me about Jesus, isn't it?"

Mr. Anders nodded. "Jesus could have chosen not to die, but then we couldn't have been saved from our sin. He died in our place—and then He rose again! Everyone who trusts in Him will live with Him forever."

"I get it now," Jackson said in a trembling voice. "I want to trust in Him too." ♥

Jan L. Hansen



JESUS WILLINGLY DIED FOR YOU | KEY VERSE: I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. John 10:17-18 (CSB)



Did you know that Jesus sacrificed His life for yours? You can't save yourself, but Jesus willingly died so you could be saved and have eternal life with Him. Have you trusted Him as your Savior? If not, do it today and He will save you. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

BE CAREFUL, CHARLEY!

Charley toddled happily around the living room. He had just learned to walk, and it was Lacie's job to keep an eye on him while Dad was cooking dinner. He was a very curious little boy and almost always found a way to get into trouble.




"Charley, get out of there! You could pull the whole bookcase down on you," Lacie exclaimed. Charley had begun to climb up the shelves to grab an interesting picture he wanted to see. Lacie pulled him off the shelf, and he howled in anger. She set him back on the floor and watched for his next move carefully.

He casually glanced back at his sister, then wandered over to the basement stairs. Lacie wasn't fooled, and she knew he couldn't handle going down big steps yet. She scooped him up, and again he screamed.

Lacie tried to explain what would happen to him. "Charley, if you try to do things that will hurt you, then I'm going to keep you from doing them. I know you're mad because you don't get to do what you want, but you have to learn what's good for you and what's dangerous." It didn't make a difference to Charley.

I really hope he figures out he could really get hurt if he keeps this up, Lacie thought. *I don't want to keep rescuing him from danger just because he doesn't know it's dangerous.*

As Lacie thought about Charley's attitude, she realized she was doing the exact same thing. Not that she was going to climb a bookcase, but her dad had told her several times that she couldn't get her own phone like the other girls at school. *I just want to fit in with my friends,* Lacie thought. *But maybe Dad knows it's something I'm not ready for yet. I need to remember that God wants me to obey Dad because He loves me, and Dad loves me too. I can trust that they both know what's best for me.*

"I know today hasn't been fun for you, Charley," she told her bawling brother, "but thanks for helping me learn that I can't always get what I want either. I just hope I can help you learn the same thing too!"  *Dylan Kraayenbrink*



TRUST YOUR PARENTS TO KNOW BEST | KEY VERSE: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Ephesians 6:1



Do you get angry when your parents won't let you have something you want? Maybe you're upset that you can't have a smartphone, a new bike, or the latest clothes. Remember that God puts parents in our lives to help us learn and grow because He loves us. We need to trust that they—and God—know what's best for us. Obey your parents and trust that God is using them to help you grow.

SEND OUT THE SEARCH PARTY

Why is there an old apple core inside a crinkled chip bag under your pillow?" Dad asked when Camila came into the kitchen.

Camila smirked. "The real question is why were you looking under my pillow?"

"I was just following my nose," said Dad. "Your room is a mess! You need to clean it before going to Mackenzie's house."

Camila stomped upstairs, mumbling something about how unfair life was.

Dad had just finished his second cup of coffee and morning Bible reading when Camila scooted into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "I'm guessing you're taking a snack break," he said.

Camila crunched into an apple. "Nope. I'm finished."

"How could you have cleaned your room in thirty minutes? I couldn't have cleaned it that fast with a bulldozer."

"Take a look if you don't believe me."

Camila followed her dad upstairs. He was amazed. There was no clutter to be found. Dad got down on his hands and knees. "What are you doing?" Camila asked. This didn't look good.

"When I was a kid, my favorite cleaning method was to shove all the junk under my bed so everything looked clean. I didn't think my dad was smart enough to look there." Dad peeked under the bed. "And it looks like you didn't think your dad was smart enough either. I guess you have a full day of cleaning ahead of you."

"I thought it'd be easier to just hide everything by shoving it under the bed," said Camila. "I didn't know you were going to send out a search party!"

Dad sat on the edge of her bed. "Believe it or not, a lot of people think they can do the same thing with their sin—they try to hide it to make their lives look perfect. They may think they're fooling everyone, but they're not fooling God. In the Bible, David asks God to search his heart. He wanted God to find the sin in his life so he could confess it and be forgiven."

"Well, God is our Father, and fathers are really good at finding stuff!" Camila said. "I guess I need to tell Jesus—and you—I'm sorry."

"I forgive you," Dad said. "And Jesus promises to always forgive us too." ♥

Jared Hottenstein



LET GOD SEARCH FOR SIN | KEY VERSE: Search me, God, and know my heart...See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23-24 (NIV)



Do you try to hide your sin and keep others from seeing the messes in your life? Even if you're able to hide the wrong things you do from others, you can't hide them from God. The Bible calls the wrong things we do sin, and the best way to handle sin isn't to try to hide it from God, but to show it to Him. The Bible says that if we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful to His promise to always forgive us.

THE FIX-IT KID

Whoa!” Lachlan yelled as his remote control jeep crashed. He picked it up and saw that a piece had fallen off.

Lachlan tried to fix the jeep—but it was no use. “Parker, can you fix this?” he asked his older brother.

“You’re always breaking things!” said Parker. But he held out his hand. “All right, give it to me.” In no time at all, the jeep was as good as new.

“Thanks, Parker,” said Lachlan. “I sure wish I could fix something myself.” Lachlan often knew in his head how to fix things, but the information seemed to get lost between his head and his hands.


Lachlan put the jeep back on the floor and raced it into his bedroom. He plopped down on his bed. *I can’t fix anything*, he thought. *Last week when the chain flew off my bike, Parker had to fix it. When my bird feeder fell apart, Dad fixed it. I wish there was something I could fix.*

Lachlan did the one thing that always helped him when he was struggling. He talked to God. “Jesus,” Lachlan prayed, “I know you’re able to fix anything. You fixed people who couldn’t see or walk, and you fixed me by taking away my sin. Please show me something I can help fix. Amen.”


Later that evening, Lachlan went to the kitchen where Mom was making dinner. Instead of smiling as she usually did, she looked sad. He heard her sigh, and Lachlan wondered what was wrong. “What’s the matter, Mom?” he asked.


“Oh, Lachlan,” said Mom, “it’s nothing for you to worry about. I’ve just had a difficult day, that’s all.”

Lachlan wrapped his arms around his mom and gave her a big hug. “Don’t be sad, Mom,” he said. “I love you. You’re the best mom a kid could have!”

Mom wiped tears from her eyes and began to smile. “Thank you, honey,” she said. “You’ve just made me the happiest mom in the whole world.” Lachlan smiled too. Jesus had answered his prayer and helped him fix something—his mom’s sad heart.  Steven R. Smith



 **ENCOURAGE SOMEONE TODAY** | KEY VERSE: Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones. Proverbs 16:24

 Do you ever feel like you can’t help anyone? One of the very best things you can do is encourage others. If you know Jesus, He has given you the ability to help discouraged people by showing them His love. He can use you to help bring healing to tough situations. Share His love with those who are hurting through kind words and a helpful heart.

LOVED WHILE MESSY

Dad's here!" Keziah peeked her head around the side of the house. "Jonah! Jonah stared at his older sister. "No. He can't be here yet."

Jonah's eyes filled as he heard his dad greeting his sister. He wanted to join them, but he'd been working on painting the fence for their mom all afternoon. He didn't want to look all messy when they reunited.

He heard his dad's voice. "Where's my Jonah?"

Jonah couldn't stop himself from running to Dad as soon as he rounded the house. "You're home!"

Dad opened his arms. "I'm home."

Jonah let his dad hug him tight, then pulled back. "I'm probably getting your uniform dirty. I wanted to get cleaned up before you got home..."

"It's fine." Dad chuckled. "I'm just happy to be back home with you." He pulled Jonah back into a hug. "I missed you."


"I'm a mess," Jonah muttered.

"You don't have to get cleaned up for me." Dad patted his back. "I love you even when you're messy. You don't know how much I've been looking forward to being back with you, your mom, and your sister."

Later, after Jonah had taken a shower and put on clean clothes, his dad took him out for ice cream.

"You know," Dad said. "I was thinking...I told you that you didn't need to get cleaned up for me, and that's true. God feels the same way—and isn't it great that He does? When we make a mess of our lives with sin, we don't have to get cleaned up before we go to Him—we can come to Him just as we are, and He will make us clean."

"I could've used some help getting clean today—that paint was hard to scrub off!" Jonah teased.

Dad rolled his eyes. "You could take care of that yourself. But we can't clean ourselves of sin. Yet God loves us even when we're messy—that's why Jesus died and rose again to save us. When we trust in Him, we become God's children—clean and forgiven."  *Emily Acker*



GOD LOVES US AT OUR MESSIEST | KEY VERSE: See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
1 John 3:1 (NIV)



Have you ever felt too messy for God? Have you wondered if you've done too many wrong things for Him to love you and accept you? The amazing news of the gospel is that God loved us while we were sinners. We can't clean ourselves up, so Jesus died for our sins. When we trust in Him, He will forgive us and make us clean. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.)

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Austin watched as his uncle put a treat right in front of Trixie. “No, Trixie! No!” Uncle Josh told the puppy. “Look at me!” Trixie looked straight at her master’s face, then glanced down at the treat she wanted so much. “Trixie, no! Look at me!” The dog raised her eyes and gazed at her master again, ignoring the treat.

“Why does Trixie have to look at you?” asked Austin. “If she looks at me instead of at the treat, she’s more likely to obey.”

Uncle Josh had Trixie sit and lie down, then picked up the treat and gave it to her. “Trixie just showed us how we should act when we’re tempted to do something wrong,” he said, patting Trixie on the head. “If we’re focused on whatever it is that’s tempting us, it’s easier to give in. But if we keep our eyes on our Master—Jesus—we’re far more likely to obey Him.”

“How do we keep our eyes on Jesus?” asked Austin. “We can’t really see Him.” “You played in a tennis competition last summer,” said Uncle Josh. “You worked so hard to be in shape. Why did you do that?”


“I wanted to win the trophy,” said Austin. “And I did!”

“So you understand what I mean if I say you had your eyes on the prize?”

“Yeah,” Austin said. “I couldn’t really see the trophy, but I kept thinking about it and what I had to do to win it.”

Uncle Josh nodded. “We can do what God wants us to do by keeping our eyes on the prize—Jesus! But unlike your tennis competition, Jesus has already won the trophy for us. He saved us by dying for our sin, and He’s given us the Holy Spirit so that we have the power to do what’s right.”

“And that’s why we need to keep our eyes on Him,” said Austin.

“Right. When we’re tempted to do something we know is wrong, we need to remember that Jesus has already won the battle against sin and that we belong to Him. That’s how we resist temptation—by looking to Him and what He’s done for us.”  *Caroline E. Yost*



LOOK TO JESUS | KEY VERSE: Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face evermore! Psalm 105:4



Do you keep your eyes on Jesus? When you’re tempted to do something wrong, remember that He has saved you from sin and given you the reward of eternal life with Him. Sin doesn’t define you anymore, and you have the power to obey Jesus instead. Keep your eyes and heart focused on Him, and trust Him to give you strength to fight every temptation.



THE PRAYER CLOSET

Callum heard someone calling his name. “Amen,” he said quickly, then opened his closet door to find his dad standing in the middle of his room.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” Dad said, “but I’m curious. Why were you praying in your closet?”

“Well, I always pray beside my bed, but our lesson at church this week was about prayer, and my teacher read a verse that said to go into your closet and shut the door when you pray. So tonight I prayed in my closet.”

Dad chuckled. “I think the closet in that verse means something a little different from the closets where we keep our clothes. In fact, most Bible scholars agree that the word *closet* in that verse could also be translated *room*. That’s the word many Bible translators use.”


“Really?” said Callum. “Well, that’s good! Then I can go back to praying beside my bed again. It was really stuffy in the closet!”

Dad smiled. “I think the main thing Jesus is saying in that verse is that we should pray in order to talk with Him and worship Him—not to show off in front of other people. That’s why it’s good to get away by ourselves—like in a separate room—and shut the door.” Dad paused. “Of course, we can pray anytime, anywhere. Then we just need to shut the door of our hearts and minds.”

“How do we do that?” asked Callum.

“That just means find a way to eliminate distractions,” Dad explained. “One way to do that is to close your eyes when you pray. But even if you’re doing something where you can’t close your eyes, you can focus your mind and shut out thoughts about other things.”

“Like making a prayer room inside my head.” Callum grinned. “And I’ll have it with me all the time, so I can pray anywhere.”

“Right!” said Dad. “It’s great to be able to pray at home, at school, when you’re playing—or anywhere else. But also having a special prayer time alone with God is a wonderful way to get to know Him better. He sent Jesus to save us so we could have a relationship with Him, and He wants us to spend time with Him in prayer.”  *Harry C. Trover*



SPEND TIME IN PRAYER | KEY VERSE: When you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father. Matthew 6:6



Do you spend time alone with God? Do you talk to Him when you’re afraid, thankful, happy, or in need? You can talk to Him anywhere, but it’s also good to talk with Him regularly in a quiet place by yourself. Tell Him what you’re struggling with, pray for the needs of others, and thank Him for His love and what He’s done for you.

ROOM TO GROW

Guess what?” Isla said when her mom got home from work. “Miss Collins is moving, and she doesn’t want to take her fish tank with her. She gave me her three Oscar fish.”

“Aren’t Oscars really big?” Mom asked.

“In an open lake they are, but if they grow up in a fish tank, they stay small. Miss Collins says they always grow in proportion to their surroundings.”

“That’s interesting.” Mom went over to Isla’s fish tank and peered at the newcomers. “Your fish might be an interesting topic for you to talk about on show-and-tell night at your youth group next week. In some ways, we’re like those fish.”

“We are?” Isla frowned. “Mom, about youth group...after this year, kids my age are supposed to move up to the older group, and we don’t want to. We just want to keep our same small group.”


“You’re worrying about that a little early, aren’t you? Your group will stay the same for quite a while yet.” Mom looked at Isla’s fish. “What if Miss Collins had set those Oscars free in the lake instead of giving them to you, Isla? What would happen?”

“I guess they would have grown much bigger,” Isla replied.


“Right,” said Mom. “Now, do you think God would want you kids to be like little fish in a tiny cramped tank, never growing very much? Or do you think He’d want you to stretch and grow spiritually as Christians?”


“I guess He’d want us to grow.” Isla thought of her older cousin Chris, who was a missionary overseas. “Chris probably had to grow a lot before he was ready to leave his family and tell people in another country about Jesus. I bet he never thought he’d be doing that when he was my age!”

Mom nodded. “He had to learn to depend on Jesus and follow wherever He led—even if it was somewhere he wasn’t totally comfortable at first.”

Isla sighed. “Okay, I’ll use my fish for an illustration on show-and-tell night. Maybe the other kids will agree that it will be good to move up so we can stretch out and grow.”  Heather Tekavec



 **GO WHERE YOU’LL GROW** | KEY VERSE: But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. Jeremiah 17:7 (NIV)

 Do you have a place where you can go to grow spiritually? Do you have Christian friends who help you? Going to church, learning about the Bible with others, taking part in service projects that show people the love of Jesus—all these things help you grow as a Christian. It may be scary at first, but take advantage of new opportunities that help you learn more about Jesus and share His love with others.

JESUS IN THE WINDOW

I'm sorry to interrupt your schoolwork, boys," Mom said, "but we should go outside and see the sunset. It's spectacular tonight."

Zach and Connor bookmarked their pages and got up from the sofa.

"How do you even know what the sunset looks like tonight, Mom?" Connor asked as he glanced toward the window. "This window faces north. There's no way you can see the sun from here."

Zach nudged him. "Moms have eyes—or spies—everywhere. It's a known fact."

Mom laughed as she opened the door. "It's true I see a lot of things. But my only spies are the houses across the street."

"Huh?" Connor stepped out, squinting around the neighborhood.

"Look at their windows. What do you see?"

The three of them stood on their front steps. "The sunset!" Zach pointed. "I can see it in the neighbors' windows! That's how Mom knew what it looked like."

Dad joined them as they walked down the driveway until they could see the sun in all its glory to the west. "What if the neighbors didn't have any windows?" Dad asked.

"Then we wouldn't have known there was a wonderful sunset tonight," Zach replied.

"That's right. There's a spiritual lesson here for us," Dad said. "The Bible says others can see Jesus in us, almost like we are windows or mirrors reflecting Him. He changes us more and more into His likeness when we spend time with Him and grow in our faith. Then when our neighbors look at our lives, they may see He's for real and want to know Him themselves. We want others to see wonderful things about Jesus when they look at us."

"You mean like seeing us do nice things for people? Like forgiving others or taking food to sick neighbors?" Zach asked.

"How about being more patient when younger kids wanna shoot hoops with us?" Connor added.

Dad put an arm around each of the boys as the family walked back to the house. "Yep. Something like that."

"Cool! Let's make a list of ways we can be good reflectors before bed," said Connor.

"Good idea," said Mom. "Just don't forget to finish your schoolwork." 

Robin Steinweg



REFLECT JESUS | KEY VERSE: And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:2



How do you reflect Jesus in your life? You might try hard to do good all on your own, but you'll only end up showing people yourself. To reflect Jesus, you need to belong to Him. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.) Then, as you spend time with Him and read His Word, He will renew your mind and transform you from the inside out. Trust Him to help you reflect Him so others can see Him at work in you.

BREAD TO EAT

Hi, Grandpa,” called Caleb as he and Abigail ran up the porch steps to their grandpa’s house.

“Hi, yourself,” answered Grandpa with a grin. “What are you up to today?”

“We got behind in learning our verses for Bible club,” said Abigail, “so we have to learn a whole bunch of them today. Mom said we could take a break and come over here for a while.”

“Yeah,” said Caleb. “I just don’t see how I’m going to remember all those verses.”

Grandpa smiled. “Do you know your locker combination? And what about your address? Aren’t they hard to remember?”

Caleb shook his head. “They’re easy to remember because I use them all the time.”

“I see,” said Grandpa. “In other words, we remember what we use in everyday life.” He sniffed the air. “Mmmm...I smell fresh bread!”

Abigail opened the sack she was carrying. “Mom sent this loaf for you.”

“How nice!” Grandpa took the bread and set it on the table next to the lamp. “It looks good there, don’t you think?” He sat down on the sofa and looked at the bread.


Caleb stared at him. “You’re not going to leave it there, are you?”

Grandpa smiled and shrugged. “What else should I do with it?”

Abigail threw up her hands. “Eat it, of course! Just letting it sit there isn’t going to do you any good.”

Grandpa nodded. “I agree. Bread doesn’t do us any good if it’s left on the table—and the Bible doesn’t do us any good if it’s left on the bookshelf! I’ll eat this bread and get energy from it, and if you regularly ‘eat’ God’s Word—if you read it and let it nourish your soul—it will help you grow in your relationship with Jesus. So keep learning those verses! The more you think about them and apply them to your everyday life, the easier they’ll be to remember.”

“Okay, Grandpa,” said Caleb. “We’ll keep ‘eating’ God’s Word and ask Him to use it to help us grow.”

“Good.” Grandpa picked up the loaf. “And now I’m going to eat some of your mother’s bread, and it will help me grow—around my middle!” He patted his stomach, and they all laughed.  *Jan. L Hansen*



READ GOD’S WORD | KEY VERSE: Direct my steps by Your word.

Psalm 119:133



Where is your spiritual “bread”? Are you “eating” it—or is it just lying on a shelf? If you haven’t been reading the Bible, why not start now? You can begin with the suggested verses at the top of this page. Ask God to give you encouragement and direction as you think about what you read in His Word. Then trust Him to use it to help you grow in your faith.

A FEAST OF THE HEART



Aisha very carefully rolled onto her side, trying to get a little more comfortable. At least she was feeling a little better than earlier.

A quiet knock sounded on her door, and Dad came in. “Do you think you could handle some soup?” he asked. Aisha shook her head. “I’m sorry you have to miss Vivian’s party,” Dad said.

“Me too, but I told Vivian she could come over here next weekend. We could have a late birthday celebration—just the two of us.” Aisha rolled over onto her back. “Dad, could you get me another blanket? I’m cold.”

“Sure, honey. Got one right here.”

Aisha smiled as her dad covered her up all the way to her chin. “I’m glad you stayed home from work to take care of me today. When I feel better, can we play a game?”

“That’s a good idea.” Dad sat down on the edge of the bed. “Know what, honey? I appreciate you not getting upset about missing Vivian’s party. Her mom always fixes a big feast for you kids, and I know how much you enjoy it.”

“Yeah,” said Aisha, “but it sure doesn’t sound good today.”

“Well, you and I are having a feast right here at home.”

Aisha opened her eyes in surprise. “A feast? But I can’t eat anything right now, and all you had was soup. That’s not a feast!”

“Not a physical feast,” said Dad. “A spiritual one. The Bible says that when we have a cheerful heart, we have a continual feast. When we remember the hope we have in Jesus—even on bad days—we feast on His goodness and grace, and that affects our attitude and how we respond when things don’t go our way. We can be joyful even in hard times knowing He saved us and is always with us and will one day come back to make all things new—including giving us new bodies that will never get sick.”

Aisha laid her head back on her pillow and sighed. “I can’t wait for that!”

Dad adjusted Aisha’s blanket and turned out the light. “Get some rest now, and before you know it, you’ll be able to give your stomach a feast too.” ♥

Mary F. Watkins



TRUST JESUS EVEN ON HARD DAYS | KEY VERSE: The cheerful heart has a continual feast. Proverbs 15:15 (NIV)



Are you having a feast today? It’s no fun to feel sick or have to deal with other hard things. At times like that, you probably wouldn’t describe yourself as cheerful. But if you focus on Jesus and His love and promises—even in times of disappointment—He can help you keep a cheerful attitude. This gives you a different kind of feast—a feeling of joy in spite of circumstances.

SILENT FRIEND

Hey, Dad.” Kwan plopped down on the couch next to his father. “Today I tried to be kind like Jesus, but it didn’t work.”

“Really?” asked Dad. “What happened?”

“I tried to be friendly to Jayden—he’s new at school—but he’d hardly talk to me. I asked if he wanted to sit with me at lunch, and he said no. During recess I asked him if he wanted to play, and he just shrugged and said, ‘I don’t think so.’ He must not want friends.”

“Any idea why he acted that way?” asked Dad.

“Well, Jackson’s aunt knows Jayden’s mom, and he said Jayden had to change schools because his dad is in jail and his mom had to sell their house and move to an apartment.”

“It sounds like Jayden has a lot of things on his mind,” said Dad.

“I know, but doesn’t he need a friend?” asked Kwan.


Dad nodded. “Remember when you broke your leg and your friends came over with books and games to cheer you up? As I recall, you weren’t very interested in them that day. Your pain medicine made you sleepy, but if you didn’t take it, your leg hurt too much. You didn’t feel good enough to do anything.”

“Yeah,” Kwan said. “That was a bad day.”

“You were healing, so you needed space. Jayden may need time too. With all the difficult things that have happened in his life recently, he must be hurting. He might not have enough energy to make new friends right now. Maybe you can ask Jesus to show you another way you can be a friend to him.”

That’s when Kwan got an idea. He took a piece of paper and wrote, *Jayden—I’m sorry if I bugged you today. I won’t do that anymore. How about I be your silent friend? If you want to play with me, just let me know, okay? Kwan.*

The next morning, Jayden was standing alone on the school playground, so Kwan walked over and handed him the note. “What’s this?” asked Jayden.

Kwan decided to remain a silent friend, so he just smiled. As he left, he glanced back over his shoulder. Jayden was reading the note, and Kwan thought he saw a little smile appear on his face.  *Janice M. Jones*



BE SENSITIVE TO THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS | KEY VERSE: Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Romans 12:15



Are you sensitive to how other kids feel? Be friendly with others, but don’t be upset if someone wants to be left alone. They may be dealing with difficult things and not want to talk about them. But that doesn’t mean you can’t still be a friend to them. Pray about the situation and ask Jesus to show you how you can help. Show His kindness to those who are hurting.

HOPE SPRINGS UP

Luke peered out the van's window as his dad drove down the cemetery's narrow path past rows and rows of small gray tombstones. Snow and ice covered the ground from the last winter storm. When they reached the last row of tombstones, Dad pulled to the side of the road and turned off the engine. They all got out of the van, and Mom opened the back door and pulled out a colorful cross made of purple flowers. Purple had been Luke's grandma's favorite color.

Luke pulled his hood tightly around his head as he and his parents walked slowly down the row of graves. He counted the tombstones as they passed each one. He knew his grandma's grave was the seventh in the row. When they reached it, the family stopped and read the inscription once again: *Beloved wife, mother, and grandmother.*

They stood silently for a moment as a bitter wind pierced the air. Then Luke spoke up. "It's so sad and depressing coming out here." He looked around the cemetery and shivered. "Just thinking about how many dead people are buried in these graves gives me chills."

Dad put his arm around Luke. "I know, buddy. But we know the grave's not the end. We have hope for eternal life. Jesus said He is the resurrection and the life and that anyone who believes in Him will live forever."

Mom nodded. "Grandma trusted Jesus as her Savior, so she is with Him now. Even though our physical bodies die, Jesus promises to always be with those who trust in Him—even in death. After we die, we go to be with Him, and one day He will give us new bodies that will never die."

Dad gave Luke a pat on the shoulder. "Nothing beats that hope."

"Do you want to put the flowers on Grandma's grave?" Mom asked, holding out the flowered cross.

Luke took the cross and stooped down beside his grandmother's tombstone. He pushed the stake down firmly into the ground. As he started to stand up, he noticed something green behind the grave. A few blades of grass were poking up out of the snow. There in the cemetery, out of the deadness of winter, the new life of spring was on its way. ♥ *Vanessa Small*



CHRISTIANS HAVE HOPE FOR ETERNAL LIFE | KEY VERSE: Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying." John 11:25 (NLT)



Do you know someone who has died? Are you afraid of dying yourself? Death can be a difficult reality to face, but those who trust in Jesus have hope beyond the grave. If you don't know Jesus as your Savior, you can trust in Him today. (See "Have You Heard the Good News?" on page 104.) If you do know Him, share the hope you have with others so they can have eternal life with Jesus too.

HAVE YOU HEARD THE GOOD NEWS?

God loves you so much, He did something amazing for you!
The Bible—God’s message to all people—tells the whole story.



GOD MADE YOU AND LOVES YOU

God created everything there is—including you! He loves you more than any person could ever love you. He loves all people and created them to live in a perfect relationship with Him.



THE BIBLE SAYS: So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:27 (NLT)



THE PROBLEM OF SIN

The first people God created—Adam and Eve—disobeyed Him. This caused sin to enter the world, breaking the perfect relationship they had with God. We sin by doing things God says are wrong and making ourselves the center of our lives instead of Him. Because Adam and Eve disobeyed, every person is born a sinner. Our sin separates us from God, and because He is perfect, He must punish sin—and the punishment for sin is death. Not just death of the body but separation from God that lasts forever.



THE BIBLE SAYS: Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Romans 3:23 (NLT)



GOD’S PERFECT PLAN

Because every person—including you—has sinned, every person deserves to be punished by death. But God loves us so much He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take the punishment for our sin. Jesus lived a perfect life on earth and then died on a cross in our place, even though He didn’t deserve it. But it didn’t end there—God raised Him back to life! Through Jesus’s death and resurrection, the punishment for sin was paid so we could be forgiven and have a relationship with God.



THE BIBLE SAYS: God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not be lost but have eternal life. John 3:16 (ERV)



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

It means you don’t have to pay the price of death for your sin—Jesus paid it for you! When you confess you’re a sinner and trust in Jesus by believing He died and rose from the dead to save you from sin, God forgives your sin and gives you a new life as His child that lasts forever. Your grateful response to His wonderful gift is making Jesus the center of your life instead of yourself.



ARE YOU READY TO TRUST IN JESUS?

Tell Him you know that only He can save you from sin and that you want to begin a wonderful relationship with Him.



Still thinking it through? Answer the Key Questions at
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