

Jesus, God with Us

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us). Matthew 1:23 ESV

Our God is with us. I hope those very words refresh your heart and spirit! Part of my story of following Christ is that there was a time in my life when I lived in loneliness and fear. Really, I was afraid of being lonely. I filled that loneliness with girlfriends, sports, friendships—anything I could find to occupy my mind and time. Nothing worked, though.

After my girlfriend broke off our relationship, I realized I was living my worst fear: loneliness. In desperation I accepted her invitation to a Bible study on our college campus. The Bible study was focusing on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Immediately I could tell these people knew God as if He were real—as if He were their personal friend. They spoke of Scripture as not just something to know, but also to be lovingly obeyed.

That night my life changed. God met me in a way I had never experienced before, and He put me on a journey to discover who He truly is—that He is not simply a God who is out there, but He is near to us (to me, to you). He is so near, in fact, that there is nowhere we can go from His presence! (Check out Psalm 139.)

A couple of months after that Bible study, on a Friday night in my dorm, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. I was alone on a Friday night, which before would have been terrible for me. This was different because I understood I was not alone, but God was with me. Our Savior is Immanuel, God with us. He is with you right now!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 8:1-27
1 John 2:1-17
Psalm 120:1-7
Proverbs 28:25-26

Tuesday, December 3

Will You Settle?

How blessed is the man whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion! Psalm 84:5

We have lived in Romania for twelve years now as missionaries, moving several times. While in Kansas and Louisiana visiting family, I had that bittersweet heart-tug, loving to catch up with family, but seeing how much we have missed and do miss all the time.

Discussing this with the Lord one morning, I thought, “I just want to settle.” I meant “settle down,” where *I, Amy*, wanted to be. I didn’t want to go back. Immediately, the Lord asked me, “*Are you going to just settle for that? Settle for second-best?*” It took a second, but I realized, “No, no! I don’t want to be anywhere but where You, Lord, have called us to be.” Once the Lord helped me reaffirm my first loyalty to Him, I was at peace.

The Lord also has a sense of humor! While waiting a very long time for our luggage in the Bucharest airport, I was thinking about who we are in Romania for. I mentally went through the various people and projects we have invested in over our stay here. Though we have friendships, new and old, I came to the conclusion that we are meant to be here to continue our mission with Adi and Violeta Buhai and the rest of our church community. They have become like family to love and work with, side by side, reaching out towards many people who don’t know Christ.

Just then the security doors slid open. Someone who looked like Adi strode by with a big smile. The doors shut; when they opened again, he was gone. “Now I know I’m really jet-lagged,” I thought. “Why would Adi be here?” Minutes later David mentioned that Adi had texted him that he *was there* to greet us but had run to catch a plane. I had to laugh at God’s confirmation, reminding me that we *are* like family. I will not emotionally or physically settle elsewhere until God calls.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 11:2-35
1 John 3:7-24
Psalm 122:1-9
Proverbs 29:1

Jesus, Tying It All Together

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

The last two days we have looked at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel and have seen some amazing things about our Savior: He is the Son of David, the promised King, He is the Son of Abraham who blesses all the nations, and He is Immanuel, “God with us.”

Today we are at the very end of Matthew’s gospel at what is known as the Great Commission. I hope you see the beauty of these words.

Matthew reports: “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me’” (verse 18). Jesus, the Son of David, is the King who has all authority, everywhere!

Verse 19 contains a command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (along with all that goes with that disciple-making). Jesus is the Son of Abraham who is the blessing to all the nations. Jesus is for all people, all nations. As we make disciples, God is using us to fulfill His promise to Abraham. How cool is that?!

Jesus gives us a promise in verse 20: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Jesus is Immanuel. He is with us on our good days, He is with us on our bad days. He does not even stop being with us when we sin!

Praise be to our God and Savior Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham, Immanuel! May our love for Him be ever increasing!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 9:1-11:1
1 John 2:18-3:6
Psalm 121:1-8
Proverbs 28:27-28

Wednesday, December 4

Believing the Best

If there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.

Philippians 2:1-4

To follow and obey this scripture is often pretty difficult. What makes it so hard between us Christians? Because we see things in each other! And sometimes those things are not that attractive. We notice character traits that are not particularly Christ-like in our brother or sister. And then what should we do? We don’t want to be labeling or judging our brother, but often we do it anyway.

And so Paul instructs us here in Philippians. The first phrases sound like a series of questions, but Paul is really assuming the answer is clear in our hearts. Do we admit that there is fellowship and friendship between any two believers, simply because of the shared Spirit that resides in each of our hearts? And recognizing this “*sharing*,” that we both share a Savior, does this lead to affection for our brother, and even compassion? He then instructs us to maintain a certain kind of love and to not be so selfish in our evaluations of each other. Instead, we ought to always regard our brother as the one who is really more important. We need to train ourselves to always do this, to always think this, in our *heart of hearts*.

This may be God’s fight of faith for you to engage in—and win—this very day. You may be noticing a weakness in your brother, but deep down, where our judgments and opinions are formed, you and I both need to believe and state clearly to ourselves, that our brother is *good*.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Daniel 11:36-12:13
1 John 4:1-21
Psalm 123:1-4
Proverbs 29:2-4

Still Building the Wall

Next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs. Nehemiah 3:9

So the wall was completed on the 25th day of the month Elul, in 52 days.

Nehemiah 6:15

In October our little church had the privilege of hosting the Heartland Regional Men's Conference. The theme was outreach, particularly to the young. Many brothers from across the region shared various reports, updates, prayer requests, and music; a favorite of mine was "How Deep the Father's Love for Us."

There was discussion about reaching those in the LGBTQ community. I couldn't help but remember 1 Corinthians 6:11: "Such were some of you," and Rosaria Butterfield's book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*. God can change lives.

Not all reports were rosy, but Dave Putthoff brought his usual enthusiasm and good thoughts from John 17. While the difficulties of reaching and engaging the younger generation were discussed realistically and honestly, I noticed something that I couldn't help but point out. I asked the "multigenerational men" present (the gray-haired, sons, and grandsons) to stand, which brought many to their feet. Applause followed.

So what does Nehemiah have to do with this? While our church hosted (which means our wives baked and did a lot of set up), my biggest take-away from the time was noting the servanthood of many. Growing up on a farm, I heard farmers extol the virtue of hard work. Nehemiah named names. From our conference Greg Cranston (How many pots and pans did that man scrub?), Randy Baker, and Gary Busse stood out. Ones who drove from the other side of Missouri were among the first to arrive and last to leave. "That the leaders led in Israel, that the people volunteered, bless the Lord!" (Judges 5:2).

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One-Year Bible Reading

Hosea 1:1-3:5
 1 John 5:1-21
 Psalm 124:1-8
 Proverbs 29:5-8

Saturday, December 7

The Nativity

So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. Luke 2:16

I love the Nativity. As I look at the Nativity, I marvel at the miracle of it all. Look at it with me.

Mary, the Jewish virgin, the maiden picked by God to be the mother of Jesus. But why her? We can summarize that Mary was a godly, young Jewish woman. What made Mary special? Nothing. Mary was just a regular, everyday Jewish woman who said "yes" when God asked.

Joseph, the carpenter, the man picked by God to help Mary raise Jesus. We only know he was a carpenter and a godly Jewish man. Why him? Nothing about him stands out, except that he obeyed God when God told him to accept Mary and raise Jesus as his son.

Shepherds, not exactly high class. Yet they are whom God chose to share the news of Jesus' birth with first. Why them? What made them special? God put them at the right place at the right time so that they, lowly as they were, could witness the angels celebrating Jesus' birth. God was so excited to share the news of Jesus' birth. He had to tell someone. The angels Facebooked the news across the sky. It was a glorious event. It was meant to be shared.

The shepherds responded, as God knew they would. They flocked to see this newborn King, the Savior of the world. A baby heralded by the angels.

How about you, in the busyness of Christmas, are you eager to see Jesus? Like Mary and Joseph, say "yes" to God, then like the shepherds lay aside your work and go glory in the birth of our Savior.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Hosea 6:1-9:17
 3 John 1:1-15
 Psalm 126:1-6
 Proverbs 29:12-14

A Walk Interrupted

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you . . . Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? Job 12:7-9 ESV

My morning walk was not going all that well.

I walk a lot, most every day. And I pray when I walk.

It was early, still dark out. Just a little bit of dawn in the east. I walk our property, through our pasture and woods, a big circle. And I enjoy it.

When I walk, I talk to God, and I had a lot I wanted to talk to Him about. I was anxious and knew I should "cast my worries on the Lord."

But I kept getting distracted from my prayer that morning. Why?

Well, the sunrise was glorious. First a gray light, then pink, then orange. And the birds were carrying on, like they owned the morning. I kept stopping and looking for them.

The sky turned from gray to brilliant blue. It had recently rained so all the trees and grass and bushes were incredibly green. All different shades of green. And those wild flowers were beautiful.

Our flock of sheep got excited when I walked by. They followed after me, like they wanted to tag along. I stopped, looked at them, and they ran off.

What was that wild vine growing on our fence line? It was honeysuckle and smelled incredible.

Several times I tried to focus on my prayers. But I gave up.

I paused, listened, smelled, and heard the morning.

God spoke to me: "*Today, Neva, this is enough. Just enjoy this morning I have made for you. I know your heart struggles. I've got it. I'm caring for you.*"

So I let Him.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Hosea 4:1-5:15
 2 John 1:1-13
 Psalm 125:1-5
 Proverbs 29:9-11

Sunday, December 8

Guard Your Heart

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. Proverbs 4:23 NIV

Notice that the verse above doesn't say, "Watch over your heart because you have to guard against all the evil things coming from it." No, we are to guard our hearts because *life* flows from the heart. This is doubly true of those who have the Holy Spirit, since "rivers of living water" are promised to flow from our inmost being (John 7:37-38).

Is caring for your heart your number one priority, the thing you do "above all else"? If your heart is dull or hard or cold or discouraged, how can you give to others? It's impossible to give away something you don't possess. Oh, you can go through the motions, but unless your heart is full of the love of God, full of joy, full of peace, full of faith — your efforts to serve or give or love will be largely wasted.

Don't get me wrong. There are times when God asks us to serve or give even when our hearts seem empty. But overall, His plan is to fill our hearts with Himself so that our loving and giving and serving are an overflow of the abundance welling up from within.

Care for your heart. This is God's number one priority for your life. *Above all else*, He wants you to receive from Him so that you have something to give to others. Spend much time alone with Him. Go deeper in His love, discover His kindness, know His riches, delight in His Word.

May you go deeper in His love so that your heart will overflow with the water of life.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Hosea 10:1-14:9
 Jude 1:1-25
 Psalm 127:1-5
 Proverbs 29:15-17

Yes, I Am!

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21

Our three-year-old granddaughter and one-year-old granddaughter spent several weeks with us. The first time I would see them each morning I would ask them, "Are you the best Natalie ever? Are you the best Charlotte ever?" When I first started asking that both girls would respond with a resounding "NOOOOOO!" We would then banter back and forth.

"Yes, you are."

"No."

"Yes, you are."

"No." After a few of our "back and forths" we would end with laughter and a kiss. What fun!! I kept this up each day for two weeks with the same result. However, about the third week each girl started answering my question with a "yes" and a big smile. And, of course, a sweet kiss followed. After being told day after day that they were the best "insert name" ever, they began to believe it!

We need to do the same. According to the above verse, we are righteous, as righteous as God through Christ. When you look at yourself in the mirror each day, do you see a *schlub*, a failure, a flawed creation? Or do you see someone righteous through Christ? It is very easy to think the pastor is righteous, or your small group leader is righteous, or the mom with the well-behaved children is righteous, but you know your own heart. And Satan reminds you of the lie you told yesterday, and the overlooked quiet time you missed on Saturday. We pile up these flaws and conclude that there is no way we are righteous.

Speak truth to your heart. Take those thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ. Are you righteous? **YEEEEESS!**

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One-Year Bible Reading

Joel 1:1-3:21

Revelation 1:1-20

Psalms 128:1-6

Proverbs 29:18

Imperfect

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. 1 Timothy 1:15 NLT

I gave a sermon recently that wasn't too good. My co-pastors lovingly told me it was a real snoozer. Boring. Lacked energy.

It was possibly the worst sermon of all time.

Quite an achievement. I need to repent. Our church deserves better. Jesus deserves better. I can do better.

Ever feel like a loser? I mean, a La-hooooo-za-her . . . ?

Look at the above verse. Paul didn't say he was just a sinner. He rates himself dead last. He is the worst sinner of all.

I guess I'm doing better than Paul. Whew.

As Christians, it's important for us to be open about our imperfections. Why? Paul explains: *"But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. All honor and glory to God forever and ever! He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen"* (1 Timothy 1:16-17 NLT).

Our imperfections show others that God is patient. God loves us even though we have faults. God is a good Father. It's safe to trust Him.

Our light shines dim so His light is brighter. He gets the glory.

Don't be afraid to share your failures. Your imperfections. Others need to hear it. It can make all the difference.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Amos 1:1-3:15

Revelation 2:1-17

Psalms 129:1-8

Proverbs 29:19-20

Idolatry and Porn: The Allure of Images

Little children, guard yourselves from idols. 1 John 5:21

I listened as my fourth-grade teacher explained the worship of idols in an Asian country, and my preteen brain thought, "What? How stupid!"

But if we think idol worship is senseless and wrong, what about pornography? Like idolatry, porn directs your heart to an image. Both idolatry and porn elicit false love without true relationship. Fantasizing over a statue can bring hope and peace. Fantasizing over a nude image can bring pleasure and satisfaction. Yet though seemingly harmless, they destroy. They poison your "worshiping" heart by robbing you of true love—with your Creator or with a real spouse. If you think your spouse (or future spouse) shouldn't be bothered by porn, then how about saying God shouldn't be bothered by idolatry?

A lover's broken heart is on the other side of both fantasies. Spouse. God. You stab the rightful lover when you redirect your heart to a fantasized "other" (and remember, the fantasies actually represent real beings behind the scenes—people in porn and demons in idolatry). Many spouses have reacted by separating temporarily or permanently. And God declared eternal separation over idolatry.

Though it seems difficult, both fantasies *can* be overcome. Our ever-loving Father initiated a pathway to reconciliation when Jesus Christ took eternal separation onto Himself to offer us forgiveness. *God's forgiveness prods us into the reality of true love.*

Whether porn or idolatry, fantasizing occurs in the mind, so it must be counteracted in the mind. Find people—church members, support groups, and counselors—who can help you stop your imaginations. Seek to focus on God's reality. Truth in the context of loving relationships will set you free from the addictive allure of images.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Amos 4:1-6:14

Revelation 2:18-3:6

Psalms 130:1-8

Proverbs 29:21-22

Submit and Resist

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

James 4:7 NIV

The supernatural world is very real. In Mark 5:1-20 we get to witness the power and love of Jesus on full display: He seeks out and completely delivers a man bound by a "legion" of demons. We learn from our Lord how to deal with demons and spiritual forces that would seek to destroy us.

How do we deal with the devil? Should we go on the offensive and enter into a power encounter with the Evil One? No! We are powerless on our own. It is only through Jesus that we can defeat the ancient serpent.

In fact, James tells us exactly what to do when we are attacked.

First, we **submit**. Submitting to God means humbly putting on the full spiritual armor of God (Ephesians 6). One way we do this is by reading and obeying God's Word (the sword of the Spirit). We should also practice faith-filled praise and intercessory prayer when we feel confronted by Satan and his demons.

Next, we **resist**. Resisting the devil means we withstand, strive against, or oppose. We should be alert, knowing Satan seeks to devour us (1 Peter 5:8). We should also not be caught off guard, so that Satan won't outwit us: "For we are not unaware of his schemes" (2 Corinthians 2:11). We only need to call out to Jesus to defend us and rebuke the devil. He is all powerful—not us. I like the quote by Pastor Skip Hietzig (Cavalry Church of Albuquerque): "When the devil knocks on your door through deception, lies, or emotional attack, don't open the door and rebuke him. Ask Jesus to answer the door."

Finally, never forget that as a believer, we have God living inside of us. That makes all the difference. The apostle John tells us, "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4 NIV). Amen!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Amos 7:1-9:15

Revelation 3:7-22

Psalms 131:1-3

Proverbs 29:23

Breaking Out of a Sexual Prison

You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy—their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols. 1 Peter 4:3 LB

Today literally millions are enslaved by pornography, immorality, homosexuality and lust. This includes thousands of Christians who also indulge fantasies or various forms of immorality. In an extensive survey, people were asked if in the last year they had watched an X-rated movie, viewed porn on the internet, made a call for telephone sex, or had made sexual advances toward someone they were not married to; 41% said yes. When we allow lust to have control of our minds and bodies, we become imprisoned and controlled by that habit. How can we break out of that prison? The Bible says by grace—that is by God's help and power.

There are three areas that must be invaded: First, there must be a *willingness to cut off the source*. This is never easy. We will need help, encouragement, and accountability. We will need to be honest and willing to radically change habits and practices. Second, *the primary battle will be in our minds*. We will need to memorize Scripture promises and instructions daily. We will need to develop whole new habits of prayer and earnestly seek God's grace, help and power. The final area is *fellowship and accountability*. We will need to be with people who care and will help us win the battle. We will need to be very honest and acknowledge every failure and indulgence. We may need to start over many times and pay the price of saying "no" to our fleshly desires. "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Praise God.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Obadiah 1:1-21
 Revelation 4:1-11
 Psalm 132:1-18
 Proverbs 29:24-25

Sunday, December 15

Scrubbed Brains?

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

In the story of the radical, life-transforming nature of his conversion, Christian musician Barry McGuire reported that his friends and relatives were concerned that he was going overboard. They thought that he was being brainwashed by the Christian group that he had joined. His response? "Yea, my brains needed a scrub—dirty, sick, old brains anyway!"

The apostle Paul says a similar thing in Romans 12:2 (NIV): "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" The word "transform" in the original language is the word "metamorphoo," from which we get the word "metamorphosis." Can there be a more radical picture of change? The creature's life begins as a caterpillar—ugly, slimy, and earthbound—a creature you might squash and think nothing of it. Then it forms a cocoon and mysteriously, almost miraculously, is transformed into a butterfly—delicate, free and gloriously beautiful—a creature that holds you in awe with its breathtaking wonder. This is the kind of transformation that God wants to bring about in our lives.

How does such radical transformation come about? Paul says, "By the renewing of your mind." The mind is our cocoon, the place of our transformation. If we can but see things as God sees them—if we can just comprehend the truth about God, the truth about ourselves, the truth about the past and the future—we will be forever changed.

Is there an area of ugliness in your life that you long to see become a place of beauty? Get God's perspective. Renew your mind. Start to think the way God thinks, and you will be forever changed.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Micah 1:1-4:13
 Revelation 6:1-17
 Psalm 134:1-3
 Proverbs 30:1-4

Dog Pictures

Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.'" Ezekiel 8:12 ESV

For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Jeremiah 2:13 ESV

Jeremiah and Ezekiel were prophets writing from Jerusalem and Babylon, respectively, during the years before the exile of the last Jews from Israel. God used these men to diagnose the spiritual blindness and depravity of the Jews before Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and his army in 586 BC. These Jews rejected God both in their willful apostasy and their embracing of other gods: "God doesn't see me anyway; I'll choose my own gods." Does this not sound like contemporary America in our obsession with images, "each in his room of pictures"?

A microcosm of this problem occurred on the day our grandson Amos met his new baby brother. During his nap at our house, Amos was invited home to see the baby. When he woke up, I was eager to leave for this exciting event. Amos did not feel that way. As yet, "baby" and "brother" were abstract words in his 22-month-old mind. What Amos wanted to do was to run to the computer upstairs to see if his grandfather would show him more of the wonderful dog photos they had enjoyed together earlier. Returned to the lower level, Amos disappeared into the laundry room to push the washing machine buttons. That was so much fun!

Amos had not the least idea of the person he was to meet and the huge impact Henry Isaac would have on the rest of his life. He was enthralled with pictures and buttons to push. How like the rest of us, I thought!

The Savior is waiting for our attention every day. Are we eager to meet Him?

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One-Year Bible Reading

Jonah 1:1-4:11
 Revelation 5:1-14
 Psalm 133:1-3
 Proverbs 29:26-27

Monday, December 16

More for Christmas

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. James 1:17

A few years ago, during the weeks leading up to Christmas, the presents under our tree were beginning to stack up. As a rule, we never put *all* the presents out early—we always hold back some for the special *reveal* on Christmas morning. After one of my wife's gift-wrapping marathons, our youngest boy hugged her and said, "Thanks for not putting *all* the presents under the tree, Mom." You see, he wanted to be surprised on Christmas morning!

I think we can all relate to this innate desire to be surprised with *more*. I'm convinced that we long for *more* because we were created for more than what this world has to offer. This life can leave us feeling cold and unsatisfied. In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

It's true: we were made for a new world! And that's why Jesus was born—to die for our sins so we could be with Him forever in heaven. Remind yourself that this life can only offer temporary happiness and limited satisfaction. God has *so much more* for us in the future, and it will be revealed to us in a very special way. Jesus alone provides us more; it's ours for the asking.

I'm looking forward to more!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Micah 5:1-7:20
 Revelation 7:1-17
 Psalm 135:1-21
 Proverbs 30:5-6

Combatting 94:19

On my bed, I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. Psalm 63:6-7 NIV

What do you think about when you lie down to sleep? If you're like me, I often reflect back on the day, noting the good things as well as the bad. If something is especially upsetting to me and weighing me down, those bad things can produce a swirl of emotions escalating in fear, alertness, and muscle tension that keep sleep from coming! I call it a "94:19"—"When my anxious thoughts multiply within me . . ." (Psalm 94:19).

At time like these, I've tried different things to promote sleep—slow, deep breathing, focusing on relaxing muscles, or hitting the "off button" in my thinking. King David offers another suggestion that I've tried to add to my sleep repertoire: Remember God!

Instead of letting my mind and heart go wild with escalating anxiety, I need to turn my attention upwards. First, first, first, I must remember God! I must remember that He is there—always—in the middle of the quiet night, when no one else seems to care if I am awake or struggling. **He** is aware and cares!

Second, I need to hand those cares and concerns to Him, knowing that He wants to help and that His shoulders are strong enough, His mind wise enough, and His heart loving enough to take care of my burdens. I need to quiet my heart with the knowledge that He is "on it" in ways I never could be.

Third, I sing myself to sleep. I have several songs based on Scripture that I internally sing, reminding myself that "Yes, He cares, I know He cares . . ."

The rest of 94:19 continues, "Thy consolations delight my soul." And that brings rest indeed!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Nahum 1:1-3:19
 Revelation 8:1-13
 Psalm 136:1-26
 Proverbs 30:7-9

Thursday, December 19

One Act Of Kindness

In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. But the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence. Esther 2:21-23

Mordecai was in the right place at the right time to save the king's life. He chose to disregard his fears and the danger of reporting the murderers. If they found out, they likely would have killed him! Mordecai's act of kindness was recorded but unrewarded. Life went on for the Jews who were captives in Persia.

We underestimate the effect of our good deeds on people coming to Christ. We often think that our faithful deeds of kindness go unnoticed or have little effect on people turning to Christ for eternal life. Later in this story we see the sovereignty of God as Mordecai's deed was rediscovered and, as a result, the plot to annihilate all the Jews was thwarted. Nothing is truly coincidental or unnoticed by God.

Recently, a friend of my wife's family told me how I helped him 40 years ago learn how to clean a paintbrush while simultaneously sharing the gospel with him. He later gave his life to Jesus. I was pleasantly surprised! We rejoiced together. God used one act of kindness to open his heart to the gospel.

Don't underestimate the power your one act of kindness can have in the eternal destiny of others. Here are the last words of Esther, "And many among the peoples of the land became Jews, for the dread of the Jews had fallen on them." May God bring many to Jesus through our acts of kindness!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zephaniah 1:1-3:20
 Revelation 10:1-11
 Psalm 138:1-8
 Proverbs 30:11-14

Christmas Distractions

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Isaiah 7:14 ESV

"To perceive Christmas through its wrapping becomes more difficult with every year," said E.B. White, American author and essayist. I recently read that Americans will spend an estimated **\$719 billion** dollars on Christmas. That is up \$100 billion from four years ago! I also read that 10% of presents bought this holiday season will break before New Year's Day. And a little less than 25% will still be in working condition by next Christmas! This means we will be spending over \$450 billion dollars this Christmas on things that probably won't even last one year.

Over 2,000 years ago God gave us the most fantastic gift that will last an eternity—and it's **free!** The Christmas season can easily distract us from what Christmas is all about. Beloved, as we approach Christmas next week, may this holiday hypocrisy not be true of us.

Over the next few days, I'd love to help refocus you and your family's hearts towards Jesus. I encourage you to carve out some time with loved ones to reflect on the most amazing event in history: God coming to us.

Below is a simple, six-day reading plan that you can do every day. Read the verses out loud together. Talk about what they mean. Pray together, thanking God for our Savior's birth.

Day 1: Isaiah 7:13-14 and Isaiah 11:1-10 *Prophecy of Jesus*

Day 2: Luke 1:26-38 *Birth of Jesus Foretold*

Day 3: Luke 2:1-21 *Birth of Jesus*

Day 4: Luke 2:22-40 *Jesus Presented at the Temple*

Day 5: Matthew 2 *Wise Men Visit the Messiah*

Day 6: Luke 2:41-52 *Boy Jesus at the Temple*

May all our hearts prepare Him room this Christmas!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Habakkuk 1:1-3:19
 Revelation 9:1-21
 Psalm 137:1-9
 Proverbs 30:10

Friday, December 20

Your Position

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this? Esther 4:14

Have you ever pondered why you have the position you have at work, in your community, in your club, at school, or in government? Is there a reason God put you there?

The entire Jewish population in Persia had been sentenced to death because of an evil man named Haman. Thousands of Jews were to be killed because one Jew named Mordecai was not willing to violate his conscience and bow down to Haman, who was second in power only to King Ahasuerus. Mordecai asked queen Esther, his niece, to inform the king about the evil plot Haman had contrived and to tell him that she too was Jewish. Doing so would be at the risk of her life. None could go to the king unless he requested them to come to him. It was a rare occasion for anyone to ask and then be permitted to come. We read Mordecai's response to Esther's hesitancy and fear, "Who knows if you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" In other words, "Why do you think God allowed you to be the queen? Maybe it was for this exact moment?" It was a kairos moment indeed!

Esther responded to Mordecai, "Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens also will fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."

What opportunities has God given you to stand for Him because of your position? Then ask God for courage, solicit the prayers of the saints, and speak up!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Haggai 1:1-2:23
 Revelation 11:1-19
 Psalm 139:1-24
 Proverbs 30:15-16

Earthly Dweller

But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!

2 Chronicles 6:18 NIV

King Solomon had the glorious privilege of overseeing the construction of a magnificent temple in which to worship God. At its completion, he led the people in consecrating it to the Lord. Leading out in prayer, he humbly realized that “Wow! This is the God of heaven and earth that we are worshipping! Who are we to think that this puny temple could contain such a God as this?” (my paraphrase).

Amazingly, at the end of Solomon’s humble prayer, God’s fire from heaven fell and consumed the altar sacrifices and “the glory of the Lord filled the temple” (2 Chronicles 9:1). Puny temple, puny people, puny sacrifices—it didn’t matter to God! Our glorious God descended with power and pleasure. He wanted to connect with His people!

Something even more amazing happened years later. The same God (remember, the one who not even the highest heavens can contain), chose to dwell once again among men in an even smaller, less glamorous, punier temple—that of human flesh! “The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us” (John 1:14).

Jesus was that Word, the Son of God, the very image and expression, the incarnation, of our all-glorious Most High Creator God. What a miracle! But instead of coming with a lightning bolt setting a sacrifice on fire or filling a temple with a thick cloud, he came quietly, virtually unnoticed into our broken, troubled world.

He chose to live among us for a while, to connect with us, to live God before us, to die for us *as the sacrifice* . . . an earthly dweller so that we might become heavenly ones!

Submitted by:

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Ames, Iowa

One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 1:1-21

Revelation 12:1-17

Psalm 140:1-13

Proverbs 30:17

Traffic

I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. 1 Timothy 2:1 NLT

In Minneapolis, there’s a downtown freeway entrance that presents drivers with a myriad of road options. It’s a mad scramble for everyone to figure out the lane they need to be in. Secure in my lane choice, I watched the car behind as it passed me on the left, veered over two lanes in front of me, and made the desired exit at the last nanosecond.

My first thought was “Wow, that could have been in a movie.”

Anger affected my second thought. That maneuver was only possible if the other cars behaved predictably. If anyone else would have made a similar impulsive move, who knows what could have happened?

It’s hard to love people. Especially in traffic.

The above verse is both a challenging command and a helpful “how” in loving people. It’s hard to be thankful for people when they make our day worse. But the key is the first step.

Pray for them.

When we pray for others, it warms our hearts up. We remember their needs, physical and spiritual. They reflect God’s image. Their hairs are numbered by our Lord. Jesus gave us the perfect example as He hung in pain on the cross, the taunts of people in His ears: “*Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing’*” (Luke 23:34 NLT).

Irritated by someone? Pray for them. Ask God to help them. And then thank God for them.

Love them.

Even in traffic.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 2:1-3:10

Revelation 13:1-13:18

Psalm 141:1-10

Proverbs 30:18-20

Undercover Boss

There was a written notice above Him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Luke 23:38 NIV

I’ve enjoyed watching the CBS reality show, *Undercover Boss*. The show is about a high-ranking executive who dons a disguise to infiltrate his or her own business. The incognito executive then works alongside his own employees in order to learn what really is going on in the business. At the end of the show, the executive reveals to the employees, one by one, who he or she really is. Sometimes the executive punishes poor workers but richly rewards good ones. In some shows, executives have given stand-up workers \$100,000, college educations, homes, needed medical help, or delinquent rent payments. Invariably the workers say something like “Oh, my gosh,” when they learn who their fellow employee really was.

In some ways Jesus was like the undercover boss. He came to the earth as a man, though He showed through miracles that He was God. Many who stood at the base of the cross that day looked upon Jesus’ body nailed on the tree and would have read the sign above His head, “This is the King of the Jews.” Some believed, some did not. Philippians 2:10-11 teaches the day will come when, “every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” In that day, all will say, “Oh my gosh . . . You really are God!”

Jesus is like the undercover boss of today’s TV series in that He gives great rewards to those who believe in Him. He gives them eternal life and an abundant life on earth. I pray for all my loved ones and my descendants that they all would bow their knee to Christ in this life, not just in the life to come.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 4:1-5:11

Revelation 14:1-20

Psalm 142:1-7

Proverbs 30:21-23

What Are You Waiting For?

Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. Psalm 62:5 NLT

If your church is like ours, every Sunday in Advent you light a candle in the Advent wreath. This past year when the candle in the center was lit on Christmas Eve, I was struck by a sentence in the reading: *The waiting is over.*

The arrival of Jesus into our hearts and our lives changes everything. He is Emmanuel, our Wonderful Counselor, and our Prince of Peace. He comes into our daily lives to give us purpose and joy.

The word *wait* is filled with meaning, but two definitions I especially like are “to watch” and “to expect.” When we watch, our hearts are fixed on something that we eagerly long for. When we are expectant, we are filled with hope and trust in the things we do not yet see.

There are so many things in life that we all are waiting for. Unfulfilled dreams for ourselves or our children. Physical healing. A better job. Restored relationships. None of these things may yet be realized, but the waiting is over because Jesus is here. A lyric from *O Holy Night* assures us that “He knows our needs,” and there is such hope in that truth.

Take some quiet moments this morning to think about the things you are waiting for. Then take time to reflect on all that you know to be true about the character of Jesus. He is worthy of your trust in the things that mean the most to you. The waiting is over because Jesus is here.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 6:1-7:14

Revelation 15:1-8

Psalm 143:1-12

Proverbs 30:24-28

Rejoice in Jesus' Birth!

For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:11

"Silent Night" is one of the most popular Christmas carols. Its words immediately remind us of Christmas and fill us with joy. Come, sing the first two verses with me. Belt it out, rejoice in Jesus' birth!

These two verses set the stage, telling us of the glory of Jesus' birth. But don't stay there. Jesus didn't come to earth just to be a baby in the manger. With verse 3 of "Silent Night," we come to the real celebration of Christmas.

Silent night! Holy night!

Son of God, love's pure light

Radiant beams from Thy holy face

With the dawn of redeeming grace,

Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!

Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth!

"The dawn of redeeming grace" tells us Jesus didn't come to be a cute baby in the manger. Jesus came as the Savior of the World. God spared not His Son. Unlike Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, you and me, Jesus was not a normal human being. Jesus was and is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, Yahweh, the I AM . . . come to earth as a lowly baby. He came to live a human life so that He could die for our sins. Our sins, not just thieves' and murderers' sins, our sins put Jesus on that cross.

As we gaze at that baby in the manger, we rejoice with the angels: "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to man." God has become flesh. He has come to die for you and me—bearing our sins, our sorrow, our shame on the cross. This baby in the manger, God in flesh, my Savior, my King, all glory goes to Him.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 8:1-23

Revelation 16:1-21

Psalms 144:1-15

Proverbs 30:29-31

The Lord Reigns

The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed; he has put on strength as his belt. Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty! Your decrees are very trustworthy; holiness befits your house, O Lord, forevermore. Psalm 93:1-4 ESV

As another Christmas season winds down, we turn our attention to the fast approaching new year. It can be a time of hope-filled anticipation for all that the next 365 days will hold. For some of you, the start of a new year doesn't sound all that bright and exciting. To you a new year means being reminded of what a grueling year you have just been through.

We just spent weeks reflecting on the birth of Jesus. The Prince of Peace came to earth as a baby—lying quietly in a manger so that there could be peace on earth. But if we just let the story stop at the birth of our Savior, we miss the powerful ending of the story: the truth that Jesus is Lord and He is now on His throne!

Recently Psalm 93 has been on my heart. It is only five verses long, so it has been easy to meditate on. It has been so encouraging to remember that it is talking about Jesus—He is the Lord.

Our Lord **reigns!** His throne is established and shall never be moved. His ways are perfect and trustworthy. Jesus has conquered sin and death and the power of hell has no hold on Him or His people. We can remember that Jesus is for us.

When we face troubles that have no end in sight, we need to remember that Jesus is in control of all things; He is strong and mighty. We must cling to the truth that God has a purpose and a good plan for what we are going through (Jeremiah 29:11). God's mercies are new every morning.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 9:1-17

Revelation 17:1-18

Psalms 145:1-21

Proverbs 30:32

Friday, December 27

Promise, Peace, and Power

And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you..." Judges 6:16 ESV

But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace . . .

Judges 6:23-24 ESV

But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. Judges 6:34 ESV

There was a three-fold progression of God's encounter with Gideon. God first spoke to him and gave him a promise. Then God established peace with him through the shedding of blood by a sacrificial offering. Finally, Gideon was clothed in power to go out and do battle with the enemies of God.

In this progression I see the operation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This progression was not only for Gideon but the way God has worked in the course of history. The Father spoke to His people the Jews and established His promises in the Scriptures. The Son then became incarnate in the person of Jesus and provided the Sacrifice that made peace between God and man as recorded in the gospels. Finally, the Spirit came in power to build His church. Believers were clothed in power and strength to do spiritual warfare. I could summarize this progression in the following triads: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Promise, Peace, and Power; Scripture, Sacrifice and Strength; Word, Worship, and Warfare.

This is not only God's way with Gideon and in history but what He is doing in our lives. We first need to hear, believe and receive the testimony and promises of Scripture. We then must believe and receive the sacrifice of the Son for our sins. The big question currently is: "Have we adequately appropriated the power of the Holy Spirit to do battle and bring glory to His holy name?" At this stage of my life, I am being challenged to appropriate that power more effectively through prayer.

Submitted by:

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Coulee Rock Church

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 10:1-11:17

Revelation 18:1-24

Psalms 146:1-10

Proverbs 30:33

Bifocal Vision

You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's.

Mark 8:33 NLT

I used to think bifocals are for old people. Now that I wear them, my view has changed. (Actually, no one knows since I have the lenses that are graduated.) Why bifocals? They bring the long and the short view into focus. Someone said, "How you view your life shapes your life." Peter had his view adjusted with a conversation from the Lord: "Peter...you are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's" (Mark 8:33).

As a young Christian I remember God beginning to change my paradigm on how I viewed life. An older Christian said this passing comment to me that drastically affected "what I want to live for." He said: "Dennis, just make sure you are living for what will last 100 years from today." It didn't take rocket science to figure out what he was getting at. He is the one who also said to me, "Your time on earth is training time for reigning time." This man was full of one-liners, and most of them dealt with my view of life! He was saying that my life on earth is a test, and if I understand this, it will help me have a whole new way of viewing "bad things" that happen to me.

You may be in a test right now. Maybe it's an impossible problem, unanswered prayer, undeserved criticism, or a sense that God isn't present in your life. (That's a tough one!) Just remember: God wants to use this test to help you view life more from God's perspective. Think about how God wants to use it to strengthen your faith, to develop your character, and to make you long more for your home to come.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 12:1-13:9

Revelation 19:1-21

Psalms 147:1-20

Proverbs 31:1-7

Saturday, December 28

No Middle Side

[Jesus said,] "Whoever is not with me is against me." Luke 11:23a ESV

I missed a flight once. We got there about a minute after the doors shut. In my mind I felt that we should get credit for "almost" or "close." However, airlines don't work that way. In their way of thinking, either we made it, or we didn't. And we didn't. We watched the plane sit for several minutes and then pull away without us.

Jesus doesn't seem to be much for "almost" and "close" either. He groups people into those with him and those against him. The problem we have with this is that most people don't quite feel that way about Jesus. They believe that they are neither for him, nor against him. They think of themselves somewhere in the middle. They like some of what He says, and they don't like some of it. They think of Jesus as a good or moral person, but they don't believe Him to be the Son of God. They want to take some, but not all.

In speaking about Himself, in the time of judgment, Jesus said, "He will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left" (Matthew 25:32-33 NLT). Again, no middle. No almost. No close.

In a world of sides, it is important to know what side you are on. Which side are you on? His or yours? He wants you on His side and has made it immensely easy for you to be on His side. Don't settle for the middle—because there isn't one. The things that are holding you back are keeping you from life in Him. Let go and follow Him.

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Zechariah 14:1-21
 Revelation 20:1-15
 Psalm 148:1-14
 Proverbs 31:8-9

Process, Power, Plans

No, the Lord's delight is in those who fear him, those who put their hope in his unfailing love. Psalm 147:11 NLT

Process, power, plans, capital, vision, connections. These are the types of words we tend to associate with success—especially in business (and sometimes in ministry). A passion of my heart is [The Rock Music](#) (TRM). If I'm honest, I often feel like we should be further ahead or more successful than we are. I tend to think we should somehow have more *reach* for the Gospel with our music ministry than it seems that we do. I can get insecure fairly quickly when I see the success of others around me. Perhaps I don't have the right process, power, or plan?

But I take great confidence in this verse. I am comforted when I remember that God delights in the one who knows Him and is hoping in His love. My strength, if there is such a thing, comes only in that I love the Lord and hope in Him. My *success* must be within that scope. If my passion is wrong, His love will show me. If my plan is flawed, His love will correct me. If my power or ability is misplaced, His love will guide me.

I have big dreams and ideas for The Rock Music (along with many failed plans). *But* I have a God who delights in those who know Him. I will rest confidently in this promise. I will press on to know Him more and more.

Do you know Him? Ask Him right now, "Jesus, help me to know You more and hope in Your unfailing love."

He will show you!

Submitted by:

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One-Year Bible Reading

Malachi 1:1-2:17
 Revelation 21:1-27
 Psalm 149:1-9
 Proverbs 31:10-24

Tuesday, December 31

Of Sins Forgiven

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Luke 15:7 NIV

Harry Kunkle was my great-grandfather. He started well, but by the end of his life he tarnished his reputation through an affair he had with another woman, leaving his wife in the remote and desolate plains of western South Dakota. This hard-working, self-made man from devout Irish-German Pennsylvania settlers passed the bar exam in South Dakota. But those who remember him can't help siding with their beloved grandmother whom he abandoned.

It was near the end of life that Harry Kunkle joined the ranks of the thief on the cross, proving that Jesus really did come for sinners. His daughter gave me his poem, "Of Sins Forgiven," written shortly before he died.

*There is a place to me more dear than native dale or mountain,
 A place for which affection's tear springs grateful from its fountain.
 'Tis not where kindred souls abound, though that is like to heaven,
 But where I first my Savior found, and had my sins forgiven.*

*Hard was my toil to reach the shore, long tossed on ocean of my doubt –
 Above me was the billow's roar, beneath, the waves' commotion.
 Sinking and fainting as in death, I knew not help was near me,
 I cried, "O, save me, Lord, from death! Jesus, Savior, hear me!"*

*Then quick as thought I felt Him mine, my Savior stood before me,
 I saw His brightness round me shine, and shouted, "Glory! Glory!"*

*O! Sacred hour, O! Hallowed spot, where Love divine first found me
 Wherever falls my distant lot, my heart shall linger round thee.*

*And as from earth I rise to soar up to my home in heaven,
 Down will I cast my eyes once more, where I was first forgiven.*

Submitted by:

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 Firehouse Church
 Denver, Colorado

One-Year Bible Reading

Malachi 3:1-4:6
 Revelation 22:1-21
 Psalm 150:1-6
 Proverbs 31:25-31