

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

Jan/Feb 2020

## PSALM 119

ALSO: SEEKING GOD IN SUFFERING

Friends:

Recently my sister showed me a video she shot while trying to drive on a flooded country road. In the pitch dark of night the roadway disappeared under a sheet of water. A flooded farm field had washed over the road into a field on the other side. Though the water on the road wasn't deep and the road itself was straight, it was risky to keep going in the dark. Without side markers, it was a lot like driving with your eyes closed. Thankfully, another car approached from the other direction, and their headlights shone down along the flooded road like a lighthouse. With the headlights as a guide, my sister could move forward and stay out of the ditches on either side.



This January, Kurt Selles studies Psalm 119 and its call to look to God's instruction as our lighthouse in the storm. God's Word is a light on our path and a lamp for our feet (Psalm 119:105). With its guidance, we can always find our way.

Then, in February, Bonny Mulder-Behnia leads us a bit deeper into the storms of life as we explore seeking God in suffering. Just what can we expect from God when life's turbulence tosses us about?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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**“Psalm 119”  
Kurt Selles**



**“Seeking God in Suffering”  
Bonny Mulder-Behnia**

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**ReFrame**  
Media

# february

## Seeking God in Suffering

**Bonny Mulder-Behnia**

God never promises that life will be easy on this side of eternity, but God does promise to be present with us through the Holy Spirit. That is our comfort as we face the major and minor storms of life; we are held by the God who is much bigger than any of our problems.

In this series of devotions about seeking God in suffering, Bonny Mulder-Behnia shares from her experiences of facing cancer and grief, and she shows that the people in her family and ministry network have been some of the richest resources for navigating difficulties and finding strength in God and his Word. Their faith in God in the midst of trials, she says, has been inspiring and instructive.

May you be blessed by the wealth of comfort and care available in God's Word, in God's healing presence, and in the community of believers who call on God's name.

*Bonny Mulder-Behnia is a pastor in Bellflower, California, with 25 years of experience in church staff, educational, congregational, and pastoral ministry. She is married to Jahan and has two adult children and a grandson.*

**NEWS THAT DEVASTATES**

*I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.*

—Psalm 77:1

The phone call. The knock on the door. The doctor's words. The death pronouncement. Many of us can remember times in our lives when we received news that we immediately knew would change the course of our future. Waves of dread ran through our bodies, and we could barely stand. "Oh, God!"

For followers of Christ, calling out to our God—the source of our life and strength and hope—is a natural response to shock, fear, disbelief, and grief. Sometimes "Oh, God!" is all we can say as our mind races and our world blurs. It's our 911 call to the God of the universe.

One of the wonderful things about the Psalms is that, by example, we are granted permission to cry out to God in desperation. It's human to fear death when we're diagnosed with cancer. And it's human

to *want to die* when we lose a precious child or spouse. God's people are not required to be stoic in difficult times. Instead, we are invited to collapse into the arms of God, who will hold us tightly, catch our tears, and carry us through whatever lies ahead.

The writer of this psalm does not rush to resolution but lingers in the distress and sleeplessness of overwhelming grief. He merely asks God to help and to hear. And that's more than enough.

Oh, God, sometimes life hits us with such hard blows that we can barely breathe. Thank you that when we feel overwhelmed with fear or grief, you hear our cries and come near to us. Amen.

**WHEN WAITING FEELS UNBEARABLE**

*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.*  
—Psalm 130:5

One of my favorite pastors used to warn, “Never pray for patience; you will not like how God teaches you.” Most people are not very good at waiting, whether it’s for food to be served, a traffic light to change, or test results to arrive. In our fast-paced world, waiting is usually an irritating inconvenience.

As a child, I eagerly anticipated Christmas. As a teen, I counted down to graduation and leaving the nest. As an adult, the longest weeks I ever experienced were those leading up to the announcement that I was accepted into a three-year clinical trial for treatment of my second bout with cancer. My life depended on it.

When the psalmist writes that his “whole being waits,” perhaps you—like me—can relate to that feeling. His heart and soul long for a sign from God,

a flicker of light while hanging out in the depths of darkness. He wanders back and forth between calling out to God and reminding himself of the goodness and faithfulness of God.

Fear creeps into our waiting when there’s a possibility of bad news—and that can make the situation feel unbearable. Like the psalmist, we must keep our eyes fixed on God, the source of hope for this life and forever. There is no outcome that God will not help us handle.

Dear Lord, we cautiously pray for patience as we deal with irritating little things and major, life-altering, fearful things. Thank you for your infinite mercy. Infuse us with unshakable hope in your Word. Amen.

## FEARS FOR THE FUTURE

*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.*  
—Isaiah 41:10

What scares you? When we ask children this question, they will often mention fear of the dark, or spiders, or getting lost. Teens and adults are more experienced and tend to mention bigger risks, such as mass shootings, a natural disaster (often called an “act of God”), or anything that could rob us of life—either our own or that of a loved one.

Our Creator God knows how we are made and how fear can cripple us. In the Bible the message “Do not fear” occurs some 365 times, in one phrasing or another. The prophet Isaiah, speaking God’s words to God’s chosen people, encourages Israel to trust God—even though they will suffer in captivity—and not to fear, because God has an amazing rescue plan.

When we lose our job, learn that we have a serious illness,

face a big financial loss, or watch a family member make dangerous choices, we naturally experience fear for the future. What is going to happen to us—or to them? How will we get through this?

God’s words in Isaiah invite us to look at the big picture, the overarching story. Our God promises, in effect, “I am with you; I am your God; I will strengthen you and help you. My right hand will take hold of your right hand, so do not be dismayed.”

Great I AM, how can we ever be afraid, knowing all that you have done and promised? Calm our fears, increase our trust, and help us to loosen our worried grip and let your hand take ours. Amen.

## WHY ME, LORD?

*[God] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*  
—Psalm 103:10

Is cancer a punishment for sin? Does God authorize our suffering because we haven't faithfully followed his law? This ages-old question plagues people who wonder if God follows a cause-and-effect policy: You sin, you suffer.

In the Old Testament we read of a man named Job who loses nearly everything but his life in a test of faith in God. Job's friends accuse him, saying he must have brought this on himself by sinning against God. Job even asks God, "If I have sinned, what have I done to you . . . ? Why have you made me your target?" (Job 7:20). And God responds by showing him that God's ways are higher than human ways.

The psalmist declares that God "does not treat us as our sins deserve." Instead, God uses a sin-removal policy based on his everlasting love: God pays

the price of our sin. If God let us pay for our wrongdoing, every living person would be stuck forever in a slimy mud pit of their own making.

Some people have come to me as their pastor, tearfully taking the blame for their own health diagnosis or life challenge. I have confidently assured them that God does not operate that way. Even so, when my cancer returned, I, too, wrestled with whether God was displeased with me about something. And God reminded me of his abounding love and grace that is greater than all our sin.

Lord, thank you for your mercy, compassion, grace, and forgiveness. Your love is as high as the heavens. When we suffer, may we not doubt but stand firm on your promises. Amen.



## IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

*Then [Jesus] climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down.*  
—Mark 6:51

Storm winds were raging as Jesus' disciples fought to keep their boat afloat. Jesus saw their struggle from afar and walked out to them on the wild waves. When they saw him, they were terrified, thinking he was a ghost on the stormy sea.

Jesus could have remained on the shore and commanded the winds to tame down. At the very least, quieting the sea first might have made his walking out there easier. But instead Jesus joined his disciples in the turbulence, took the most difficult route, and then climbed into the rocking boat to be with them. "Don't be afraid," he said before calming the storm.

In this story, Jesus demonstrates the heart of God that still comforts us today as we battle life's storms. Jesus sees our struggles, comes near to us, and goes through the storm

with us—whether or not he decides to calm or stop it.

The night before my doctor called to tell me that my cancer had returned, I had written a skit about this story. I soon realized that God had prepared me for what I was about to face, for he saw what was approaching even before the first cloud appeared.

Have you felt the presence of Jesus in your storm? Listen closely as he whispers to you, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Jesus, thank you that you don't stand at a distance when we are struggling against the storms of life. Instead, you come before we even call. Please calm our fears as we cling to you. Amen.

## THE GIFT OF PEACE

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

—Philippians 4:7

Can I just have a little peace?

This could be the plea of a family member trying to escape the chaos of home life, a teacher bombarded with active children all day, or a medical patient caught in a whirlwind of tests, scans, appointments, insurance questions, and uncertain results. Stress takes its toll.

When the Bible speaks of “the peace of God” that can guard our hearts and minds, this is much more than the absence of noise or busyness. God’s peace—shalom—gives assurance that all is right in your soul, even if you can’t resolve all the issues affecting you or predict the outcome of anything at this point. God’s peace provides the assurance that God is still in control.

How do we find this peace? The apostle Paul encourages followers of Christ to look

above and beyond the problem: to simply pray about everything, thanking God for listening and answering according to his perfect will. We can then set our minds on the blessings around us—whatever is true, right, pure, lovely—and we can let go of our worries.

That may sound too good to be true, like the catch phrase “Let go and let God.” When someone offers superficial sayings to a person who is suffering, it feels like salt in a wound. But God promises to give peace to all who ask. Don’t even try to understand how it works; just pray.

God of peace, we want your gift of peace. We need your shalom. Grant us deep peace that transcends understanding as we trust in you. Amen.

**LORD, HAVE MERCY**

*Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief.*

—Psalm 31:9

Sometimes the suffering of life feels overwhelming, as if we are under attack and can't find any relief. We may be debilitated by the grief of losing a loved one. Or maybe we are sick from a medical condition or treatment. Whatever the case, there are days when we feel the weight of the world on us. Lord, have mercy.

The psalmist here is feeling besieged by relentless human forces, along with the abandonment of his friends. He uses words like distress, anguish, groaning, affliction, forgotten, and terror. He fears that he will die at the hands of his enemies, and he cries out to God in agony. Lord, have mercy.

Perhaps you can recall a time you felt that way, when the walls and ceiling seemed to be closing in on you. While my personal suffering pales in com-

parison to that of people with chronic illness, I *do* remember feeling particularly burdened when—a few weeks after my second surgery for cancer—my husband had a heart attack and also needed surgery. In his recovery room, a compassionate nurse prepared a bed beside him for me to rest in as well.

Looking back on turbulent times, we can see how the Lord was with us and delivered us. God answers the cries of his people and shines his loving face on us, lighting up the darkness.

O God, you are my God, and I trust you. "My times are in your hands." Help me not to let my life's troubles cloud my vision of you and the hope that is found in you alone. Amen.

## WHEN IT'S HARD TO PRAY

*Some men came, bringing to [Jesus] a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.*  
—Mark 2:3

We have a little quiz we use when we teach middle schoolers about Jesus. We list some scenarios, such as moving to a new school or losing a grandparent, and we ask the children how likely it would be for them to invite Jesus to help them deal with it. The point is that they can call on Jesus in *every* situation.

But what if a person feels too broken, too sorrowful, too stressed, or too sinful to reach out to Jesus for healing? I knew a dear woman, now with the Lord, who struggled with debilitating depression. There were times when she just couldn't pray, and her pastor assured her that it was okay because many people were lifting her up by name to Jesus.

Today's Bible reading tells of a man who couldn't get to Jesus on his own because he was paralyzed. His friends decided

to make a way through when they could find no other way to reach Jesus. So they climbed up on the roof, made a hole in it, and lowered their friend on his mat to meet Jesus.

The first thing Jesus did was to heal the man's soul by forgiving his sins, and then he healed the man's body so that he could walk. Jesus knows exactly what we need. When we just can't bring ourselves to Jesus, the family of God can carry us to him in prayer.

Dear Jesus, thank you that when broken people like us are placed at your feet, you touch us in ways we couldn't imagine and you heal us in places only you can see. Thank you for making a way. Amen.

## HELP ME BELIEVE!

*"Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"*  
—Mark 9:23-24

This is both a beautiful and a dangerous story about Jesus casting out a demon. Jesus both challenges the boy's father to believe in him, and Jesus rebukes his disciples for not believing enough.

The beauty of the story is that Jesus demonstrated his power over demonic influence and sickness to heal someone. We believe the same power of Christ lives in us! The danger with this story, though, is that some people interpret it to say that when a person is not healed of a serious illness, they do not have enough faith. But that is not the truth.

We believe that God is all-powerful. We believe that Jesus still does miraculous healings. We also believe that—on this side of eternity—sickness can lead to physical death. Jesus did not heal everyone while he

walked the earth; Jesus doesn't heal everyone today. But Jesus *does* promise eternal life for all who believe in his name (John 3:16). This is the truth.

My daughter got a tattoo that says "Believe" when both her father and I were battling cancer at the same time. Rather than succumb to worry, she chose to believe that God was in control, no matter the outcome. Sometimes when our circumstances feel overwhelming, our prayer can simply be "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Jesus, we believe in your power to heal both our souls and our bodies. We trust that no matter what happens to our bodies, our souls are secure in you forever. Thank you. Amen.

## IN THE STILLNESS

*The LORD Almighty is with us. . . . He says, "Be still, and know that I am God."*  
—Psalm 46:7, 10

When we ask children to be still, our goal is that they stop talking or crying and listen to what we have to say. Sometimes we must stand and shout this with authority, and other times we can just cradle them with a gentle "Shhhh."

In this psalm, God is using both an outdoor voice and an indoor voice to assure his children that there is nothing too big for the Lord to handle. We need not be afraid—regardless of the surrounding chaos—because God is right there with us in times of trouble. He both lifts his voice above the uproar (verse 6) and draws us close with the quiet whisper "Be still, my child; I am here."

There are days when the pain level is so high, the disappointment so deep, and the fear so crippling that we can lose sight of the God who is our refuge and strength. Desperation can

drive us away from God, and we can find ourselves craving his commanding, large-and-in-charge presence along with his intimate words of assurance.

When Jesus' disciples cried out to him in the midst of a raging storm, Jesus stood up, rebuked the wind, and told the waves, "Quiet! Be still!"—and all was calm (Mark 4:39).

What do you need Jesus to calm in your mind and heart? Pause for a moment, and hear him inviting you into the stillness of God's presence.

God, you know our every thought and how we let our worries crowd you out and take over. Please still our racing minds, and draw us close with your assuring embrace. Amen.

## GATHERING FOR PRAYER

*Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.* —James 5:14

When I learned that my cancer had returned, it was just a few days before a significant youth event that I was coordinating at our church. So I decided to keep the news close, in a small circle, and not distract people from the ministry event. My colleague, however, pleaded with me to let the elders and the church family pray.

For many people who receive bad news about serious illness, their first instinct is to try to handle it on their own. But that is not God's design for the body of Christ. Instead, James instructs us to call the set-apart leaders, bring the people together, confess our sins, anoint with oil, and pray for healing.

The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective, and the prayer of faith can help make the sick person well. We believe God can heal—and often does—and yet we also

know that faithful people can become terribly sick and die. How do we reconcile this reality with the promises of this passage?

Perhaps the wellness of the sick person and the effectiveness of the prayer go deeper than the physical condition. When I allowed the elders to lead a healing prayer service on my behalf, I felt loved, secure in God's presence, and comforted that I had partners for the journey ahead.

You do not have to endure your suffering alone; reach out for prayer.

Lord, thank you for the family of faith. May we pray in faith for you to work mightily in whatever way you will. Amen.

## HANGING ON BY A THREAD

*As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered.*

—James 5:11

A friend of a friend called me: “Pastor, I can’t do this anymore. Would God really want me to suffer like this, day after day, with no relief?” His illness was tormenting him, and he was looking for permission to end his life. He wondered if God would be angry with him.

Suffering is not God’s will. It is part of life in this broken world; God’s light has broken into the darkness, but we still long for the complete fulfillment of God’s plan. Jesus is coming again to restore *everything*. Meanwhile, life can be excruciatingly difficult, and we—as God’s people—are called to persevere. Hold on tightly to hope.

James reminds readers of the perseverance of the prophets and of Job, a man who suffered greatly when he lost all his children, all his possessions, and his health. Yet he did not

lose hope or give up. God was there with him and eventually restored his possessions and gave him abundantly more.

The point of Job’s story is not that he regained possessions but that he persevered in his faith in God and that God demonstrates compassion and mercy.

This is the only reply I could give to the friend who was almost ready to give up: Your life is precious to God. Hang on until God says it’s time to come home.

Jesus, you know agony and suffering, and you empathize with us when we struggle to face yet another day of pain and uncertainty. May we feel your loving arms surround us as we push forward. Amen.



**STRENGTH FOR TODAY**

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?*  
—Psalm 27:1

Before my Grandpa Mulder died, he compiled a list of Bible passages for the pastor to give to the grandchildren at his funeral. Thus his name is written alongside Psalm 27 in my Bible. It encourages me to think about how God gave my grandfather the strength to endure the difficulties in his life.

The Lord was Grandpa's stronghold when one of his children died at age 11, when their family could barely make a living during the Great Depression, when his wife died at age 55, and when leukemia later drained him of life. The image of him looking to heaven as he sang a hymn in his hospital bed is one I will not forget.

When God's people are besieged by an army of challenges in life—grief, financial struggles, illness—we can endure because God is our stronghold.

God's grip never loosens, even when we feel as if we are slipping away. David the psalmist writes that "in the day of trouble" God will "keep [us] safe in his dwelling" and then "set [us] high upon a rock" as a sign of victory.

This psalm is packed with words of comfort: light, salvation, confidence, beauty, safety, joy, help, mercy, and goodness. Memorizing this psalm, and repeating it throughout the day in times of difficulty, can be a sure source of strength for anyone who is suffering.

"Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. . . . You have been my helper." Give me strength to face whatever comes my way. Amen.

**BRIGHT HOPE FOR TOMORROW**

*May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.*  
—Psalm 33:22

When I say, “I hope my cancer doesn’t come back again,” it’s both a wish and a prayer. But when I say, “God gives me hope for the future,” that is confident assurance in the promises of the God who has never failed me.

Most people hope for a long life, lasting relationships, good health, and happiness. Yet we know that in a matter of minutes life can be turned upside down and inside out, and it can feel like our hopes are dashed.

For the people of God, hope is drawn from a deeper well. As the psalmist explains, we cannot rely on our own armies and horses—our own resources—to deliver us. The beautiful image is that of the God whose eyes are locked on us, whose love never fails, who is our help and shield. God paints a positive picture of our forever future.

When our hope and trust are firmly connected to our unchangeable God, we know deep in our souls that God’s love will sustain us through this life and into eternity. This means that even if our struggles return, our hope in God remains. This kind of hope is contagious. Maybe you know someone who needs to hear these words of hope today: the Lord sees you, loves you, and will sustain you.

Lord, sometimes our hope falters as we face troubles and heartaches. Renew our hope, strengthen our trust, and help us to embrace your unfailing love and share it with others. We love you. Amen.

## NEW MERCIES EVERY MORNING

*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. . . .*

—Lamentations 3:22-23

Lamentations is not light-hearted reading; it's a collection of desperate cries from the bottom of a pit. The author laments the suffering of God's people during their time of captivity, which left them trapped in misery for years.

But in the middle of the book, a glimmering light shines through the darkness, as the weeping writer lifts his head and proclaims hope in the God of love and compassion. We witness the progression from a downcast, bitter soul (verse 20) to an upright, resolute warrior refusing to be consumed by the troubles of life (verse 22).

The rallying cry of confidence is that God will ultimately save his people.

This passage is a favorite of my Aunt Ruth, who has become increasingly paralyzed over the past 45 years from a debilitat-

ing disease. For months at a time, she was unable to speak because of tracheal stenosis, and she has endured more than 30 surgeries. In those quiet seasons, she would still whisper to her soul, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (verse 24).

Aunt Ruth is one who knows that problems don't disappear overnight, yet she testifies that God's mercies to her are new every morning. We too can find God's blessings in big and small ways each day if we make a point of looking for them. Great is God's faithfulness.

Lord, we often allow the darkness of night to overshadow our daytime. Shine the light of your love on us each day so that we can see your blessings. Amen.

## GRIPPED BY GOD'S LOVE

*[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
—Romans 8:39

Have you ever watched a movie in which a prisoner is being tortured at increasingly horrible levels of pain until they either give up a secret or give in to death? This is what comes to mind when reading the apostle Paul's dread-list of the worst things that could happen to God's people. Which of these might cause them to doubt God's love?

In this passage Paul was naming some of *his own* hardships and then confirming to his own soul, and to ours, "No, not persecution. No, not famine. No, not that, or that, or that." Why? Because God's love is unshakable, and God gives us the strength not only to face but also to conquer the enemy's attacks. How? Through the finished work of Christ's victorious death and resurrection.

Paul says neither the present nor the future shall threaten

our confidence in God's loving grip on us. This passage has been a stronghold for my Uncle Ivan over the past 45 years since his wife, Ruth, woke up one day and was unable to move. Her increasing paralysis changed their future dramatically, but they have trusted in God every step of the way.

Is there anything in your life that feels too overwhelming to handle? The power of the living God guarantees a strong grip on you as you face your hardship head-on. Never give up.

Lord, we are weak, but you are strong. When the troubles of life pummel us, help us to find comfort in your love that never lets go. Help us to keep looking to you. In Jesus, Amen.

## MORE THAN A PLATITUDE

*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

—Romans 8:28

Christians sometimes have the best intentions but say the wrong things. In attempts to comfort someone who is grieving the death of a loved one, we have been known to offer platitudes like “God had a plan” or “She’s in a better place” or “His suffering is over.” All true, but perhaps we should simply imitate the Spirit with “wordless groans,” offering a hug and ongoing prayers.

The greater the degree of suffering on this earth, the more we long for the day when we will be with Christ in heaven, free from the tyranny of sickness and sorrow.

In this passage, the apostle Paul seeks to encourage God’s people with both strength to get through today and a glorious vision of the future. He tells us that in all things God works for our ultimate good and his

purpose. This does not mean all things are inherently good but that God redeems the pain and blesses us.

My Uncle Leon quotes Romans 8:28 as a text that has comforted him and his wife, Shirley, since losing both of their sons in early adulthood. Through tears and a shattered heart, he still expresses confidence that God will use his scars to bless others in similar circumstances. This verse is more than a platitude; it’s a promise based on God’s enduring love.

Lord, in the midst of our deep suffering and crippling grief, may your Spirit begin to heal our hearts and translate our tears into something that is ultimately good. Amen.

## NO FEAR HERE

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me.*  
—Psalm 23:4

When I help young people prepare to profess their faith, I try to instill in them the importance of learning Scripture. For example, we have them memorize Psalm 23 because we want it stored deep in their souls for times of trouble.

Everyone will eventually experience a dark valley in which they will especially sense the need for Jesus, the good shepherd. This psalm speaks of the shepherd who leads us to comfortable places, refreshes our souls, and lavishes us with love and blessings. And when we face times of suffering caused by disappointments or devastating blows, our protector comes to help and comfort us.

Our friend Sid had a massive heart attack recently after running with his granddaughter. A security guard revived his dormant heart with CPR. For weeks, Sid was in an induced

coma on the brink of death, but by the grace of God and two heart surgeries, he recovered. Sid's testimony is that reciting Psalm 23 in the midst of pain and sleeplessness brought healing to his soul.

When we enter the darkest valleys amid serious illness, stress, loss, worry, and other struggles, we can find much comfort in the prayer of Psalm 23. We have the blessed assurance that God is with us and cares for us. We have no need to fear.

Lord, you know how fear can grip us when we face the shadows and dark valleys of life. Assure us of your presence that leads us and protects us when we can't see an escape route. Amen.

## WAKING UP THIRSTY

*Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you.*  
—Psalm 143:8

Sleep can bring welcome relief from the worries of the day, especially when we leave our problems at the foot of the cross in prayer before closing our eyes and resting our minds. We can join the psalmist in his cry for mercy, his plea that God will not forget him in his distress. We can exhale.

But then we wake up, and after the grogginess wears off, the burdens we were carrying the day before can come back and load us down again. We may just want to curl up under the covers and hide from the world.

It can be as if we are in a parched desert and our souls are craving the living water that we need to have running through our veins to renew us. We spread out our hands to God in prayer, saying, “My tank is empty; please refill me.”

My stepmother, Marla, said mornings were always the hardest times of the day when she was going through past cancer treatments—and while she watched her first husband fade away from Alzheimer’s disease. Before long, she was also running out of options for treating yet another bout with cancer. But through it all, she testified that each dawn, God delivered a refreshing dose of his unfailing love as she lifted up her thirsty soul for a long, cool drink of living water.

Good morning, God. I’m ready.

Lord, may you be the first thing on my mind when I wake up each day so that the worries of the world fade away as I place my trust in you. Amen.

## POWERFUL WEAKLINGS

*He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*  
—2 Corinthians 12:9

Mental illness is often discussed in hushed tones, along with the request "Please don't tell anyone." Yet an estimated one in four people suffers from a mental health issue, according to a 2018 World Health Organization report.

My family knows firsthand the struggle of depression, as it was my mother's "thorn in the flesh" for much of her life. This was not easy for her, and it was often heartbreaking to live with her. At her memorial service, my father preached on the power of God's grace that was evident in their 60-year marriage.

Paul writes of his "thorn" that was obviously painful and permanent, even though he pleaded with God to take it away. In spite of this burden, Paul was still blessed with a powerful ministry and a rich legacy. Christ-followers are not exempt from suffering, but

God promises that his perfect power is more than sufficient to carry us through.

This was my father's testimony as he walked with my mom through her many health crises and rollercoasters of emotions. When they were at the end of their ropes, the resurrection power of God gave them strength to take yet another step—until she no longer could, and then God lovingly took her home with "Hallelujah" on her lips.

When we are weak, God shows up in full force.

Lord, I am weak, but you are strong. Help me not to fear weakness but instead to lean into you as my source of power and grace. I need you every hour. Amen.



## GOD'S SHIELD OF PROTECTION

*"When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned."*

—Isaiah 43:2

Have you ever felt that you just couldn't handle one more difficult thing? Have you wondered how you will get through the next days and months?

God knows the struggles of his people. Through Isaiah, God assured Israel as they were oppressed in exile. God reminded them of his power in the past, and God pointed to his sure presence for the future. The Red Sea had not swept over them as they left Egypt (Exodus 14), and in Babylon a fiery furnace would not burn Daniel's friends (Daniel 3). God promised, "You are mine," and "I will be with you."

The comfort in this passage—that God never lets go as we face all kinds of dangers and struggles—is for God's people both as a group and as individuals. Nothing can destroy the people whom God has called, so we need not be afraid.

In the summer of 2013 I was shocked and saddened by the death of my youngest sister. Two weeks later, I was diagnosed with melanoma that required surgery, followed by numerous complications. For a while it felt as though the waves of grief and flames of fear were too big to handle. But God did not allow me to be swept away or burned.

The almighty God personally promises to be our shield of protection as we navigate the fiery darts of the devil.

Great I AM, help me to trust you when life feels overwhelming and I am pummeled with problems. Thank you that I am precious to you and that your love is eternal. Amen.

## OUR SUFFERING SAVIOR

*During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears. . . .* —Hebrews 5:7

Jesus' life on earth was not easy, to put it mildly. He didn't have a home; some people wanted him to be a king; others rejected him as a heretic; one friend betrayed him; another denied him; all his followers abandoned him; and he was publicly crucified as a criminal. What's more, as he died for our sake, he took upon himself the punishment for all our sin.

Jesus understands our suffering. We read that Jesus prayed passionately "with fervent cries and tears," which is something many of us have done when facing difficult circumstances. We have pleaded with God to heal our disease, to save our job, to bring our children to faith, to rescue us from imminent danger, to extend a loved one's life.

How did Jesus pray in his time of need? With reverence and humble submission. "*Abba*,

Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

Our suffering Savior, who had the divine power to remove himself from the cross, chose to die so that we would have eternal salvation. God answered his prayers by raising Jesus from the dead; his submission translated into our victory.

When we kneel before God—with cries and tears—he listens because of the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Jesus for our sake. And we can echo Jesus' prayer to the Father: "Not what I will, but what you will."

Dear Jesus, thank you.  
Help us to submit our  
will to your perfect will.  
Amen.

## WORRYING IS A WASTE OF TIME

*"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."*

—Matthew 6:34

My 15-year-old grandson took a high school psychology class and began diagnosing each family member with a mental disorder. When I asked him about mine, he said, "Anxiety." I laughed because I'm generally a glass-half-full kind of person. I trust God for the future.

Yet I admit that I *do* secretly worry about what will happen when my three-year cancer treatment plan ends. I worry about my children who have already lost their father to cancer. I worry about my husband having another heart attack. I worry about my dad's grief and loneliness after losing my mom and then my stepmom.

What secret worries linger in the back of your mind?

We can imagine Jesus lovingly shaking his head at all of our what-ifs, and asking the rhetorical question "Can any one of you

by worrying add a single hour to your life?" Jesus teaches us not to waste time with such concerns but instead to "seek first the kingdom" of God. We can focus on living out the gospel, sharing it with others, and maximizing the time we are given.

Jesus challenges us to have faith and to trust that the Father knows exactly what we need. Rather than fret, we are invited to surrender our stress to Jesus. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened," he says, "and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Lord, we worry when we should just pray. Help us to bring the concerns of each day to you in faith, and empower us to trust in your providential care to sustain us and our loved ones. Amen.

## TEMPORARY TENTING ADVENTURE

*We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven. . . .*

—2 Corinthians 5:1

Generally the closest we come to realizing our human mortality is when we see the earthly remains of someone who has passed on to eternity.

The apostle Paul offers a fitting perspective on this passing. He points out that this life and body are temporary, and our whole being yearns for its permanent dwelling in heaven. When believers in Christ take their last breath, they are swallowed up by *life* and not death. Our camping adventure in these earthly tents is over, and we move into a new place that Jesus has prepared for us (John 14:2).

Life in these tents can be rich and full as God grants us joy in worship, relationships, work, and witness. But this is just a foretaste of the glory that awaits us, that the Spirit of God guarantees for our future.

My mother never much liked camping, and her earthly tent was often wracked with pain. As we gathered around her bedside in the days and hours before she passed away, we grieved for us but rejoiced for her. She would soon be taking up residence with God!

When we are faced with our own mortality, we naturally desire to stay with the people we love in this familiar world. But as Christians, we do not grieve as people without hope, for we believe the best is yet to come!

Lord, some of our tents are ripping at the seams and caving in. Prepare us for when you call us to be with you forever. Comfort us with that hope. Amen.

**BEEN THERE, DONE THAT**

*God . . . comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.*  
—2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Parents who have suffered the death of a child have a special understanding of one another's pain. The same can be said of war veterans, chemotherapy patients, abuse survivors, and recovering addicts. Empathy is a tie that binds.

The apostle Paul explains that there can be a higher purpose in our suffering: we can pass along to others the comfort we have received from God. In a world where the focus is increasingly on our individual needs, God's plan is that we would have compassion for one another. God wants us to look beyond ourselves to the needs of the people around us, being like Jesus to them.

The first time I was diagnosed with melanoma, I had to register with a large cancer center in Los Angeles. I felt sad and overwhelmed as I watched

dozens of other patients in the waiting room—many had lost their hair, were pushing walkers, or appeared frail and weak. I was now a member of a club I had never sought to join.

But now I am better equipped to comfort cancer patients with the same comfort I have received from God. I can testify that I've "been there, done that"—and God has never left my side, despite a recurrence.

Our comfort abounds in Christ, and in his strength we can pass along God's love and comfort to others.

Lord, you have been so good to us. In times of trouble, your Spirit comes near and comforts us. May we give generously of your comfort as we meet others who are hurting. Amen.

## GOD'S BIGGER PLAN

*"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place."*

—Jeremiah 29:10

Our reading today includes a verse that parents and teachers often use to encourage young Christians: "I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" It's a beautiful promise, but it needs a bit of context.

God's words just prior to that verse help us see that God is saying this while his people, the Israelites, are going into exile. So before these hopeful plans go into effect, the people will have to endure 70 years of captivity. And their bright future will hinge on earnestly seeking God, who longs to bring them back.

While we endure seasons of suffering, we ask the Lord to deliver us, to bring us out of exile. But often God's answer is that we must wait patiently

as we settle into this place for now. God *will* eventually release us, either through healing in this life or by a compassionate transfer to the next. Sometimes God's plan is for short-lived suffering, and other times God allows us to take a "scenic route" that builds our perseverance and character.

In my case, it's been six years of melanoma hanging over my head—but never without hope in God. We can make our plans, but the outcome is in God's hands.

Lord, thank you that your ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9). You always keep your promises. We pray that in times of trial we may trust in your rescue plan. Amen.

## WE DO NOT LOSE HEART

*We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

—2 Corinthians 4:18

John 9 tells a story about Jesus healing a man who was blind since birth. Jesus mixed his own saliva with some dirt, spread the muddy mixture on the man's eyes, and told him to go and wash in a pool—and the man received sight. For his entire life, this man had seen nothing but darkness, but Jesus gifted him with seeing eyes after proclaiming, "I am the light of the world" (John 9:5).

The apostle Paul advises God's people not to lose heart when the troubles of this life dim our outlook on the future. When we are discouraged by the sin and injustice of the world, a broken relationship, a tough situation at work, a grim financial outlook, a health crisis, and more, it can feel like we are sitting in a dark room. How will this ever be resolved?

It's all about perspective and what we focus on. We can sit around with mud on our eyes, or we can wash it off and see the light of Jesus. Paul says the problems we see are temporary, but the hope we have in Jesus—though unseen—is eternal.

The body you're sitting in was not created to last forever; mine is not expected to last more than a few years. But as Christians, we share a bright future in Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Lord, renew us day by day, from the inside out, even as the troubles of life skew our vision. Help us to see you more clearly as we bask in the light of your glory. Amen.

## THE GREAT I AM

*"I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you. . . ."*  
—Isaiah 46:4

God wants to get your attention. You, who are overwhelmed by the waves. You, who are feeling the heat of fire. You, whose body is wasting away. You, who are struggling under the weight of depression.

This is your Father speaking! This is the great I AM, who has proven himself again and again throughout history. This is the one who has been protecting you since you were swimming in the womb, growing up in the world, and even now as your hair turns gray and your skin wrinkles. God has always been here, and he always will be.

God sees your struggles, catches your tears, feels your pain, hears your prayers, and says, through the prophet Isaiah, "I will sustain you and I will rescue you," and "I am God, and there is none like me."

What is the problem that you think is too big for God? Place it before him and watch the great I AM, the maker of heaven and earth, take it over. God can do anything. God can stop my cancer, lead your child to salvation, heal your broken heart, and give us the peace that is beyond understanding.

One day, God will make all things new, and "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). Keep holding on!

Lord, help us to hold on to you when life tosses us to and fro. We know that you—the great I AM—are in charge and will sustain us and carry us through. Amen.



## JESUS THE OVERCOMER

*"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*  
—John 16:33

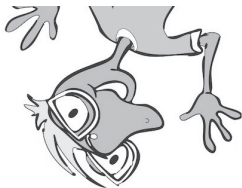
When I was a young teen, my father was critically ill with complications from a surgery. He asked the school to call me out of class and make him a poster saying, "Be of good cheer! I have overcome the world!"

At the time, I didn't realize how sick my dad was, but I tried to make the most beautiful bubble letters ever and fill them with glitter. He survived, and that poster hung in his study for years afterward.

When Jesus was about to submit himself to death, he tried to prepare his disciples for the grief they would experience, and to encourage them with the final victory they would witness. Jesus would defeat sin and death, rise from the grave, return to the right hand of God the Father in heaven, and ultimately overcome this fallen world.

This verse comforted my father as his life hung on the edge. It comforts me today as I near the end of a three-year cancer-treatment plan, knowing that the doctors give me a 50-percent chance of making it to five years. But I have deep peace in my heart because God controls my life and this world. Until he calls me home, I will continue to love and serve him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. His prognosis is eternal life!

Lord, we don't know what the future holds, but we know you hold the future. Thank you that you have overcome this world with its troubles and that we will reign with you forever. Amen.



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