



*When God  
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Near*

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the story of  
redemption

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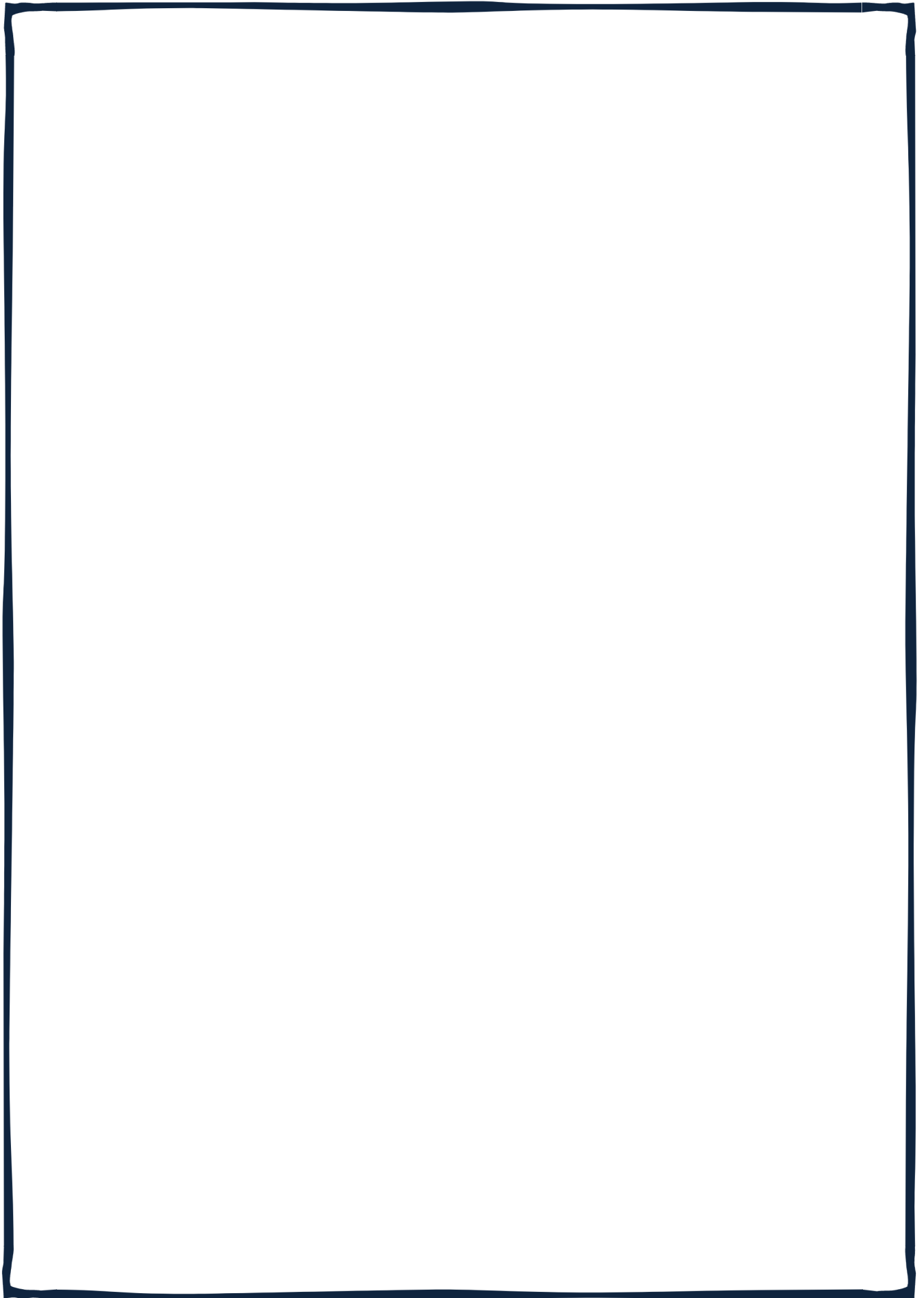
**When God Draws Near: the story of redemption**  
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# *I'm an Advent Failure*

Every year I have grandiose plans for Advent. Books to read, activities to complete, prayers to write. And every year one of two things happen:

**I don't get started until December 10<sup>th</sup>**

**OR**

**By December 10<sup>th</sup> I've missed so many days I am ready to give up.**

For the past few years I've owned my Advent failures and determined not to attempt so much and instead slow and be still more. Instead of adding to my December calendar, I subtract. I write less and expect less—of myself and of others.

This year marks my third year of the same Advent readings, the Gospel of Luke. Each morning I read one of the twenty-four chapters. There's something beautiful about starting December with Mary's Magnificat and beginning Christmas Eve by reading of the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ. The days in between are marked with familiar stories of miracles and raging seas, promises fulfilled and challenges offered.

Reading the whole of Christ's "Word-Made-Flesh" story during a month where we typically start with big plans and end with exhaustion, barely remembering to focus on the manger scene we set out to remind us, has changed me. It's changed my heart and my Christmas experience. In some ways, these readings have made my focus smaller, learning to see the day-to-day wonder in this month of bigger and brighter. In other ways, my Advent has gotten much bigger. I've begun to see the whole story. Not just a manger that led to a cross but the even bigger story . . . the wonderful redemption story of God with us, Emmanuel.

I'm wrapping myself up in the beauty of when God draws near. Just as I carefully choose the papers to adorn my gifts, I'm carefully choosing to offer my life as gift to Him. Like the ribbons that decorate the packages under my tree, I'm tying myself up in the redemption I have through Christ.

These devotions are meant for people like me ... advent failures, who never start on time and wonder how the days got away from them. Twenty-eight days of readings. If you start today, you'll finish on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Epiphany. If you don't start today or if you miss a few days, or more than a few, it won't matter. I promise.

Because this isn't simply the Christmas story, it's more. It's a journey to grasp the wonder when God draws near, to know the fullness of the story of redemption. This story didn't begin on Christmas Eve in a manger in Bethlehem and didn't end with the Magi's visit. So, join me, from the beginning of the story in Eden to the end of this story . . . eternity with Christ.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like  
Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to  
finish. John 1:14 MSG

# *Creation's Promise*

## **Reading: Genesis 1:27**

We were created in His image, patterned after the Creator. He didn't need us. The angels were there with Him in heaven, offering a continual anthem of worship to the One who is holy, holy, holy.

So why make us? Why create man from dust and woman from a rib? And, why give us the freedom to choose our own way?

He knew the hurt was coming, knew the betrayal was imminent. He knew the enemy would slither into our hearts and minds and offer us empty promises of something better than the perfection of Eden, better than the harmony of unbroken relationship with the Creator. He knew.

He knew our fall was on the way. He created us knowing we would choose empty over full, broken over whole, sin over obedience.

And yet He created us anyway. In His image. He made us the pinnacle of all creation—man and woman, human. Oh so human.

And while He waited to walk with Adam and Eve in the coolness of Eden's evening, He knew the sacrifice would be necessary. He called out to them. He met them where they were and shed the first blood to meet their need for covering.

It's beautiful, really. The provision there in garments made of skin is a greater promise. Blood would be shed, a sacrifice made. But there in those garments made of sin was the redemption promise ... just a hint of what was coming. Not garments made of skin but God Himself wrapped up in skin.

Can you feel it? Creation's promise of redemption?

**Holy Creator, just as you provided the covering for Adam and Eve,  
You provide the covering for me. Today wrap me in the wonder of  
creation's promise. Amen.**

# *Provided Lamb*

## **Reading: Genesis 22:6-8**

As a mother I find my insides wrecked by this account in Scripture. Waiting years and years for a baby, giving up hope, and then hearing the promise of God that a son would come. Sarah laughed about that, remember? (Genesis 18:11-12) But can you even begin to imagine how her mocking laughter became tears of joy when she held Isaac?

I wonder if she knew what Abraham was doing. She was a strong (bossy?) woman. The very idea of her sitting on her stool, measuring out grain or spinning thread while Abraham prepared to offer their son, HER son, as a sacrifice is hard for me to imagine. She couldn't have known. Abraham surely did not share what God has asked with anyone.

The weight of God's request certainly weighed heavy on Abraham's heart. And yet, even when Isaac asked about the lamb to sacrifice, Abraham trusted the God who had always been faithful.

"God will provide a lamb, my son," Abraham said.

Even now as I type those words, the tears well up in my eyes. God will provide a lamb. He will provide the sacrifice.

Centuries later, John the Baptist proclaimed, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) The Lamb walked on this dusty ground. He was hungry and thirsty. He felt angry and sad. He knew joy and celebration. He also knew sorrow and grief.

Because one day in heaven, God looked at His Son, and said, "I will provide the Lamb. I will give them You." And He did.

**You are our Provider in every way, the One who meets every need.  
The One meets our greatest need. Today I praise You for providing  
the Lamb. Amen.**



# *Greatest Love*

## **Reading: Genesis 22:9-14**

Abraham raised up the knife, prepared to offer his son, the promised son, his beloved son. He had tied up Isaac and laid him on the altar over the wood.

Abraham had told Isaac God would provide the lamb. But I wonder, in that moment with the knife raised above his head, did he have a doubt? Did he want to stop the madness and untie his son? What father wouldn't want to save his son? What father would willingly sacrifice his son?

Scripture tells us the angel of the Lord shouted at Abraham from heaven. The task was complete. Abraham's faith proven sure and steady. And the commendation from above was this, "You have not withheld even your beloved son from me."

Beloved. Every time I read or hear that word I am reminded of the transfiguration of Christ. God said, "This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him." (Matthew 17:5)

The redemption story required a lamb, the blood of sacrifice. God knew there was only one lamb, only one Lamb worthy to be slain (Revelation 5:12). His beloved Son was given in our stead, the scapegoat for our sins (Leviticus 16:10).

What kind of love moves a father to willingly sacrifice his son? Perfect, holy love. The greatest love of the God who IS love (1 John 4:16).

Redemption was coming. The Son again tied up and laid on wood. The beloved Son not withheld, but freely given.

**Perfect Father, You gave Your Son, Your beloved Son, the firstborn of creation. Placed on the altar and pierced for our sins, You revealed the greatest love the world will ever know. Today I'm simply humbled at the price of my redemption, the depth of Your love. Amen.**

*I AM*

**Reading: Exodus 3:13-15**

Moses and the burning bush a familiar story to most of us. I remember flannel board depictions of Moses taking off his sandals at God's admonition he was standing on holy ground.

Moses, who saw a bush on fire yet not consumed, chosen by God to deliver the Hebrews from the bondage of Egyptian slavery. When he wondered how to answer the question of who had sent him, God told him this:

**I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them, "I AM has sent me to you."**  
(verse 14)

I am the one who always is—incomprehensible, the eternal and infinite nature of God. Scripture begins with "In the beginning God ... " (Genesis 1:1 and John's Revelation reveals Jesus' own words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and End" (Revelation 22:13).

God is. Which leaves me, like Moses, incredibly aware that I am not.

God is holy and pure. I am wretched and sinful. God is perfect and blameless. I am weak and frail.

God is. I am not.

Five simple words to sum up the entire purpose of the redemption story. Just as He sent Moses to bring his people from Egyptian bondage, so He sent His Son to break us free from our own slavery to sin. I AM sent the One who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6). I AM sent "I am" to be our redemption, our rescue.

**You are holy, God. Today I find myself aware of my great unworthiness. I take off my shoes and worship You in the holiness of Your presence. Amen.**

# Passover Bread?

**Reading: Exodus 12:1-7, 13**

A few years ago I attended a Passover Seder at a Methodist church. As we participated in the centuries' old readings and tasted the bitter herbs, I was captivated by the traditions. But one part of the evening is etched in my memory.

A pouch with three pockets called the *Matzah Tosh* holds three pieces of *matzah* (unleavened bread). During the ceremony Jews have practiced for centuries, the middle piece the *afikomen*, is taken out. Then it's broken and wrapped in a white napkin, hidden from view. After a short time, it is brought back.

As the middle piece was returned, we were reminded of Jesus' place as the Son in the middle of the Trinity. Jesus, who was broken, wrapped, buried, and then raised again, brought back.

I sat there with tears streaming down my face at the plan of God revealed not just in the Passover Lamb He commanded but also in a rabbinic tradition, crafted by those who anticipated Messiah's coming.

The redemption story carved into Hebrew history and breathed into life for all of us.

Yes, Jesus is the Passover Lamb but He is also the bread of life (John 6:51) offered that we may live.

Bread seems so plain, so common. And yet the grains of which it is made are the foundation of nutrition and diet around the world. From tortillas to *matzah* and even my favorite homemade white bread, bread is a basic part of our daily sustenance physically. And Jesus, the living bread, is the requirement for our spiritual survival.

Today, God, as I go about the mundane and routine tasks that make up most of life, cause me to see glimpses of You. Cultivate in me a heart of gratitude for You, the very Bread of Life. Amen.

# *Kinsman Redeemer*

## **Reading: Ruth 4:1-12**

Thirty-nine percent of the illegal immigrants in our state live in my county. Every paper my daughter brings home from school is English on one side, Spanish on the other. She has friends whose parents do not speak English. Every day I'm surrounded by "foreigners."

These dark-haired, dark-eyed people don't look like the families who have called North Alabama for home for generations.

I sometimes find myself listening to conversations spoken in a language I cannot understand while I'm waiting in line at Wal-Mart. I wonder how hard it is sometimes to be the stranger, the one who doesn't belong.

Ruth knew what it meant to be a foreigner. She'd given up opportunity to go back to her old life with her parents and instead chose to travel to a new place, a town where she would be the outcast. If anyone knew about needing rescue, it had to be Ruth.

And there was Boaz, the kinsman redeemer. He chose to claim his title as redeemer, though he didn't have to do so. Another was ahead of him in line, so to speak. But Boaz saw the possibility in Ruth. Maybe because his mother, Rahab, had also be the foreigner, the one who didn't belong.

When he removed his sandal to "seal the deal," the townspeople offered him a blessing . . . a prayer for descendants like those of Perez, so of Tamar and Judah. {You need to read that story in Genesis 38.}

And so it happened, one day a child was born who was a descendant of Tamar and Judah, of Rahab and Salmon, and of Ruth and Boaz {Matthew 1:3-16}.

**Jesus, You are that child of promise . . . the One who became the fulfillment of the kinsman redeemer promise. Descendant of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and son of Mary. Today, Lord, I'm just amazed by the way You use us in all our broken mess Amen.**

# *Promised Kingdom*

**Reading: 2 Samuel 7:12-16**

David wanted to build the temple for God. In fact, he was desperate to do it. But God refused him the honor, offering it instead to Solomon. But here in the midst of God's denial of David's request, we find another glimpse of God's redemptive plan.

**"I will raise up one of your descendants, and I will make his kingdom strong. He is the one who will build a house—a temple—for my name. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (verses 12-13)**

David could only see the present but God was looking into the future. He knew the time would come when David's descendant (remember that genealogy in Matthew?) would reign forever.

God's promise to David wasn't about an earthy throne . . . this promise was eternal.

Centuries later, people wondered, "Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?" (Matthew 12:23) Those promises of a Messiah, breathed down and recited from generation to generation, would be wrapped up in flesh. A baby born in David's city, in Bethlehem, and people would ask if this was the Messiah they had long awaited.

The redemption story was woven into every stitch of the Jewish faith fabric, from Abraham to Jacob to David. They had long awaited this coming kingdom, though their expectation was far different than the reality God had planned.

But still they watched and waited for the promise revealed. I wonder, how many of us are watching, anxious for the day when Jesus returns?

**Lord, today, will you fill me with wonder at Your coming? Cause me to recognize anew the beauty of Your humble birth . . . and give me a deep longing for the day when You will return to bring the promised kingdom. Amen.**

# *Needed Mediator*

## **Reading: Job 9:33**

I've been teaching Job for the past several weeks to my Bible study group on Wednesday nights. To be honest, it's been more of a challenge than I thought it would be—and far more convicting. If you've never spent time really digging into Job's story, be prepared to come face-to-face with the reality of your own sin and lack of understanding of God and His power.

A few weeks ago we were discussing Job's response to his friend, Bildad. In a beautiful piece of Scripture Job says of himself and God, "If only there was a mediator who could bring us together, but there is none" (Job 9:33). Goose bumps! We all had goose bumps!

"If only there were a mediator" . . . how's that for the story of redemption spelled out in front of us.

If only there was someone who could intercede before God on our behalf.

Job said, "If only." But we, who live on this side of the redemption story, realize the truth of Paul's writing to young Timothy:

**For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and people. He is the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)**

Job said, "If only." But we have the Mediator, the Son of God, who has reconciled God and man. Oh the joy of knowing the fullness of God's redemptive plan—and living in the fullness Christ as brought to us!

**Jesus, You are our Mediator, the Reconciler of God and man. My prayer today is to live in the great joy of the redemption story. Fill my heart with gladness, for You are my Redeemer Amen.**

# *Living Redeemer*

## **Reading: Job 19:25-26**

The holiday season is not always joyous. In fact, for many people, Christmas is filled with grief and sorrow. For several years, our little family of three was blessed by the privilege of sharing Christmas Eve communion with elderly men and women who could no longer leave their homes.

We'd gather with these precious saints of God and share with them the cup and the bread—the sacrament of Communion, of remembrance. As we'd bow our heads to pray, our hands joined with hands that had long lost the callous of hard work and instead were soft as those of newborn babies. My husband would pray and as we said, "Amen," I'd look up to see eyes glimmering with tears and hope.

These are people who knew the Redeemer, knew the comfort of walking with Him, through life's difficult times, through tragedy and loss. But they also knew the joy of a steadfast relationship with Christ. In many cases, they'd been walking with their Savior longer than we'd been alive.

They'd thank us for coming, for sharing with them, for remembering them. We'd hug and offer them our simple gifts of fruit and tissues, of hard candy and word puzzle books. As our family piled into the truck, I'd find myself wondering what it would be like to spend Christmas Day alone, waiting on a phone call from a far-away daughter or son, wishing for just one more time to watch children open packages or cousins fight over the wishbone.

Christmas isn't always easy. Life isn't always easy. And so, we cling to words like Job's, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). Whatever life holds for you this holiday season, be sure of this: Your Redeemer lives!

**Oh great God of Comfort, for those who are just waiting for the holidays to end, I pray Your peace and presence in their hearts. Give me a willing heart to reach into the hurting world and share the promise of redemption. Amen.**

# *Great Provider*

## **Reading: Psalm 23**

We have a seven-year-old nephew and, as my husband says, "His want-er isn't broken." He can open any catalog, watch any commercial, or walk down the aisles of any store and share the litany of all his wants.

Of course, most of our want-ers are broken either, are they? We've got our own Christmas lists. They may not be full of super hero toys or the latest gadget, but the list is there. We all want something or some things. While there is nothing inherently wrong with Christmas lists, the Psalmist reminds us of a simple truth:

### **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1 KJV)**

Does this mean we can't wish for that new lens for our camera or enough matching forks for everyone? Of course not! David reminds us of something higher: We have a God who meets our every need. In the New Living Translation, Psalm 23:1 reads:

### **The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need.**

When you look around your home, your life, do realize you have everything you need? During this time of year, we collect coats and food for those without in our communities. We buy blankets and goats and sewing machines for those trapped in poverty around the world. We send money to build schools and dig wells to benefit communities who have nothing.

Friend, we really do have everything we need, given from the gracious hand of God, our Provider. Perhaps today you need to slow your pace and spend some time in gratitude.

**Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord who provides, today I simply say thank you. Thank you for the abundance in my life. Create in me a grateful and generous heart to use what You have given me to give to others. Amen.**



# Personal Refuge

## Reading: Psalm 62:1-8

On Christmas Even 2006, my husband was desperately sick. So sick in fact, he was unable to help assemble the gifts we'd purchased for our six-year-old daughter for Christmas. Thankfully, we had wonderful friends who pitched in to put together art easels and Barbie stagecoaches.

We had no idea that Christmas morning that within a month, Scott would be on life support, the doctor unsure if he would survive. Just a few days after we celebrated our most low-key Christmas ever, I found myself in an ICU room with my precious husband lying there in an induced coma while we waited to see what would happen next.

One night I was uncharacteristically without a Bible in my purse. All I had was a little red journal where I recorded the verses I was memorizing. In a dark hospital room, as I tried to get comfortable on the chair and get some rest, I turned to these words:

**"I wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him . . . Pour out your heart to him, for God is our refuge. (Psalm 62:5, 8)**

Tears pouring down my face, I learned a whole new truth about this God who draws near, this God who redeems: He is my only hope, my only refuge.

Perhaps you know someone who is facing Christmas with great trepidation. Perhaps that someone is you. Know this, no matter what the situation, no matter what the hurt or sorrow, this God, our Redeemer, draws near! And when we wait quietly, still our hearts and minds before Him, He reveals Himself in ways we could never have imagined on our own!

**You, O God, are my comfort in the midst of life's storms. You are my ever-present help, my refuge in the sea of uncertainty. Today I'm laying down my fears, my worries, and my broken heart and dreams. I choose to sit quietly before You, my refuge. Amen.**

# Public Praise

## Reading: Psalm 107:1-9

Each November people all over Facebook spend a moment each day listing something for which they are grateful. I love reading through my news feed and seeing the photos and words of gratitude and joy for the rich blessings in the lives of my friends and family.

But it makes the December 1<sup>st</sup> posts seem very uninspired. I've often wondered why we don't just keep speaking thanks once November 30 has passed. What if in December we just continued to give thanks and as January rolls in the new year, we kept sharing our gratitude?

The Psalmist writes, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others he has saved you from your enemies" (Psalm 107:1-2).

Our redemption is worthy of sharing! Why are we so quick to praise others on Facebook and so slow to offer our praise to the God who has saved us from the enemy of our souls?

I remember growing up in small country churches we'd have "Testimony Night" periodically. People would share what the Lord had done for them recently. Some told how He'd given needed rain for crops or provided medicines that healed. Others whispered praise for prodigal children come home or financial provision for unexpected situations. But my favorite moments were always when someone stood, with tear-filled eyes and a quivering voice to say, "He saved me."

Perhaps you need to have a "Testimony Night" of your own, to take the time to share with others the simple and overwhelming truth, "He saved me."

**Jesus, my Redeemer and Savior, give me courage and boldness today to share the joy of my salvation with others. Use my story to share the great story of redemption to the world. Amen.**

# Safe Passage

## Reading: Isaiah 35:1-10

We travel a lot. This year, there were 63 days when at least one member of our family was out of town. That's over two months! We've logged in a large number of miles in the car and in the air in 2012. Obviously, we've spend significant time praying for safe travel and return during 2012.

We realize the inherent dangers of travel, the unexpected issues that can arise. We know there are risks when we climb into the car or board the plane. But the truth is, life here on earth is risky.

As long as we are sojourners on this dusty Earth, the reality of sin and brokenness are with us. But God promises us a day will come when we can walk safely, with no fear.

Isaiah speaks of the "Highway of Holiness" (v. 8), a place only the redeemed will travel (v.9). He says,

**Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return to Jerusalem (Zion), singing songs of everlasting joy. (v. 10)**

These days of sorrow and fear, of tragedy and loss, of destruction and death, they are not forever! The promise of redemption is also a promise of safe passage . . . to a land God has prepared for us, where there will be no more tears (Revelation 21:4).

As we draw nearer to Christmas Day, our day of celebrating Word-Made-Flesh, let us also remember we who are redeemed have safe passage to eternal redemption! We will stand in His presence, the One who paid the price in our stead, and we will worship and praise Him forever.

**What an awesome promise, God, the assurance of safe passage into Your presence Today, give me an eternal perspective; fill me longing for the countless ages I will spend in Your presence, singing the song of the redeemed. Amen.**

# Freedom's Hope

## Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9

Jesus was God's chosen . . . promised to bring justice to the nations but also to be gentle. Jesus would not crush the weak but He would also fulfill His mission of bring truth and righteousness to all the world.

Isaiah prophesied of God's character revealed in the Messiah. My favorite verse in this passage is verse 7:

**You will open the eyes of the blind and free the captives from prison. You will release those who sit in dark dungeons.**

Do you ever feel like you are captive and bound? As moms, we face the mundane cycle of wash, dry, dirty, and repeat . . . everything from clothing to dishes to carpets require the same routine. We fix meals and broken toys. We fasten buttons on coats and loosen knots in shoelaces. We build routines and schedules and then strive to live within their boundaries.

But sometimes we are blinded by the monotony of daily life and need our eyes open to the wonder of God's work in us, around us, and through us. We have been freed from the prison of our lostness to live in the fullness of God's abundance. Even in our routines and mundane daily tasks. It's hard sometimes to find the hope of freedom and redemption when we are staring up Laundry Mountain but it's there! I promise! In all ways, big and small, we have been gifted with unblinded eyes and freedom from the prison of darkness.

We live in freedom's hope. The story of redemption is the story of recovery. God has recovered for us the abundance and joy we could never have reached on our own. Today, won't you live in it?

Lord, cause me see with unblinded eyes . . . to notice the beauty around me and to dwell in the freedom and hope of light, Your light Today, grace me with eyes to see past the temporary struggle of routine and glimpse the eternal story of redemption.  
Amen.

# *Promised Redemption*

## **Reading: Luke 1:67-79**

One of my favorite December traditions is to read the Gospel of Luke in preparation for Christmas. With twenty-four chapters, I read one each day through Christmas Eve. Reading Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's song of praise on December 1<sup>st</sup> each year are a beautiful way for me to begin the Advent season.

This year, as I read chapter one aloud with my daughter, I was explaining the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy. As we read Zechariah's song, I was once again overwhelmed by the redemption story, woven into every thread of Scripture.

**Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited his people and redeemed them! (Luke 1:68)**

Through a Baby in a virgin's womb God chose to visit His people, to offer them—us!—the hope of redemption. Zechariah continues with a reminder of the Davidic lineage of Christ (v. 69) and the promise of rescue (v. 72).

Take a moment today to read these verses aloud and contemplate the beauty of our redemption:

**Because of God's tender mercy, the light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guide us to the path of peace. (verses 78-79)**

On Christmas Eve we do end our anticipation of the light of heaven about to break down upon us! Won't you spend time today in personal worship?

Lord, today, I pray for a desire to slow . . . a yearning for quiet moments to reflect on Your coming. As I catch glimpses of the Christmas lights, cause my mind to contemplate the Light of the World, broken down upon us. Amen.

# *Messiah's Birth*

## **Reading: Luke 2:8-17**

Sometimes I feel so ordinary. Wife, mom, meal-maker, errand-runner, laundry-folder, dish-dryer. My days are filled with sameness. My life of homemaking and writing and encouraging isn't much different than that of thousands of other women I know.

I think that's why I love the shepherds in the Christmas story. They were just ordinary guys. They went out that night with their sheep just like they always did. They probably sat around the fire swapping stories of their children's antics. Maybe at some point in the night, they began to talk of deeper things, of left-behind dreams or wives they'd buried.

Somehow it's easier to talk of those more intimate things in the darkness, isn't it? To share of broken hearts and long-forgotten hopes seems less frightening when we cannot see the faces of those with whom we share.

I bet they'd built a bond, a brotherhood forged from long nights of herding sheep and sharing life. They knew each other, could recognize the snore of the one who never quite made it to dawn without a nap, easily identified the laughter of the youngest among them who still found humor in the wandering of little lambs.

They had no idea the extraordinary of heaven was about to crash into the ordinary of the hillside. "Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appeared to them ... "

These most ordinary men were the first recipients of the extraordinary story of Redemption's birth. That night, and even long before, God has chosen to use ordinary men, women, and children to share His extraordinary story of hope and redemption. In His hands, our ordinary lives become the context of His extraordinary grace.

**Lord, I offer You my very simple life. It's all I have to give as we celebrate Messiah's birth. But You delight in making extraordinary from the ordinary. Amen.**

# *Laid Down Burdens*

## **Reading: Matthew 11:28-30**

December 26<sup>th</sup>. We almost feel like it's a letdown after all the anticipation of Christmas Day. Suddenly the glistening lights and bountiful decorations are not as beautiful. The rich food we enjoyed as we feasted with family and friends is now simply "leftovers."

The troubles and trials of life we set aside yesterday have regained their place in our thoughts. Financial struggles, family discord, discarded dreams, broken hearts . . . it's all still there. The trappings and wrappings of Christmas have only delayed the inevitable return to "real life."

We're burdened and tired and now need a vacation from the hustle and bustle of Christmas but can't afford one because of the time and money we spent on the hustle and bustle of Christmas.

We're tired, weary. Burdened down and in need of rest.

Jesus speaks to that,

**"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)**

Good news for the mommas who spent hours cleaning up wrapping paper remnants and fixing the holiday feast yesterday! Good news for the widows who went to bed alone on Christmas night, missing the warmth of the husband with whom she had shared so many Christmases. Good news for the woman who is caring for a sick husband or parent or child and wonders how she'll survive another moment. Good news for all of us. He will give us rest.

**Jesus, You have promised us rest from the burdens of this world.  
Today I lay down the burdens I've been carrying and choose to take  
Your yoke. I need the rest only You can give. Amen.**

# Good Shepherd

## Reading: John 10:11-18

We have a friend who recently had a heart transplant. His wife is one of my closest friends and we knew the day was coming when Rick's heart would no longer be able to keep him alive. He'd need a new heart. But we also knew that meant someone else would lose a loved one. Someone's life would have to be lost so that Rick's life could be saved.

When we received word a heart was available for Rick, I was overjoyed. But also broken for the family who would say good-bye to one they loved and offer others the gift of life through their loved one's death. A life lost, a life gained.

**Jesus said, "I lay down my life for the sheep. I lay down my life voluntarily."**

There was only one path before Christ, only one road to our redemption. His life.

No plan B, no door number 2. Messiah sacrificed. His life for ours.

I wonder sometimes if I will ever really understand what that means. If I will ever grasp the magnificence of what Christ gave for me. His wasn't an accidental death or the consequence of His bad choices.

He knew, before He ever wrapped Himself in flesh so He could be swaddled in a Bethlehem stable, His life to be the final sacrifice. The eternal payment for all earthly sin had come.

The Good Shepherd was our Redemption.

**I'll never really grasp the fullness of what You have given, Lord.  
I will never know what it is to lay down my life to redeem the  
brokenness of all creation. But how I pray I live a life that  
brings honor to Your sacrifice Amen.**



# Future Hope

## Reading: John 11:25-27

Remember Martha? Of Mary and Martha fame? She always gets such a bad rap. But here, after her brother Lazarus has died, she has this beautiful conversation with Jesus where He assures her of our future hope.

**I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. (John 11:25)**

This is my first Christmas without my Pepa. He passed away in October at the ripe old age of 91. While it has been many years since I've spent a Christmas Day with him, I find it strange to think there will be no envelop in the mail bearing his handwriting this year. I looked through last year's cards and found the one from him. As tears rolled down my face, I just ached for one more hug.

But in the midst of my sorrow and loss, I know this truth: Though he died, he lives again. And one day, I will see him, and all the others who my heart will miss this Christmas, again.

That's the hope of the redemption story . . . there's more than this life! There is more than grief and loss and heartache. There is hope, the promise of Christ that He has prepared a place for us (John 14:2).

Our redemption story is not only here on earth, it's an eternal story! We have this hope, an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19), in the midst of life's storms. And we can say with the same confidence as Martha, "You are the Messiah."

Therein lies our redemption and our hope.

**Great Giver of all hope, thank You For You are the resurrection and the life and in You we know that though we may die, we will live again. Today I thank You for the confidence I have in Your plan for my future. Amen.**

# *Serving Love*

## **Reading: John 13:12-16**

Can you imagine how the disciples felt when Jesus washed their feet? What a humbling experience to have someone serve you in that way. Jesus said we're supposed to serve others like that.

A few years ago, our pastor washed the feet of several people in our church. As he did, he shared with each of them how their humble service had impacted our church family. As he tenderly poured warm water over their feet and carefully dried them, he prayed for them and thanked the Lord for the example each one was to him and to all of us.

After the service, I spoke with Mrs. Nora, one of those honored. She was in tears and explained how unworthy she was to have been recognized. She listed off several people who had done "bigger" things than she had and explained her own service in these words, "I just do what I can with what I have. That's all. It's nothing special."

Oh, Mrs. Nora, I'd have to disagree! It's something very special! What would happen if we all adopted her attitude about serving others:

### **I do what I can with what I have.**

What do you have? Maybe it's a penchant for writing notes of encouragement. Perhaps you can make the best chocolate cake. Maybe you are great at soothing fussy babies. Perhaps you can fix a leaky faucet. Will you use what you have—gifts, time, resources, influence—to do what you can?

Jesus washed the disciples feet and told them to serve others in the same manner. Humbly and without fanfare. Our call today remains the same. To serve others lovingly and generously.

**Lord, teach me to serve well. Open my heart and grant me a willingness to give and use what I have to do what I can. Guard me from thinking what I have is for anything less than Your kingdom's glory. Amen.**

# *Picked-Up Cross*

**Reading: Luke 9:21-25**

"It's my cross to bear."

We use that phrase so flippantly. The cross is not something small, something casual. The cross of Christ was heavy. It was torturous.

When Jesus told the disciples, "If any of you want to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me," He wasn't offering them an easy road.

The truth is, most of us never get past that first phrase—put aside your selfish ambition. We want credit for what we've done, acknowledgement of our hard work, recognition for our sacrifice. We want others to see and know . . . and to praise.

Before we can ever begin to pick up the cross, we have to first lay down our pride. Which means, we never draw attention to the burden we bear, the suffering we face, the cross we carry.

Carrying the cross is heavy, hard work. It's rooted in laying down our dreams and our plans, our desires and our goals, and choosing instead to pursue His kingdom. Carrying the cross means we use all our efforts, all our attentions, all our focus on pointing others toward Him.

The redemption story centers on the cross. The foundation of our faith is in Jesus becoming the sacrifice. And we choose to be called by His name; our part in the story requires bearing the cross He assigns to us.

Picking up the cross will never be the easy way . . .but it will always be the way we come closest to God.

**Father, today, as I do the tasks assigned me, I pray I point to You and not me. Loosen the hold pride and selfishness have on my heart and tighten the bond between You and me. Amen.**

# *Willing Ransom*

## **Reading: Mark 10:45**

One year as we were traveling during the holidays, we stopped at a hotel to spend the night. It was late and both my husband and I were exhausted. We parked as close to our room as we could and took our daughter, then about five, to the room and told her to wait there while we finished unloading the car.

As we quickly made our way back to the room, we realized she was gone. In that moment the greatest fear I had as a mother gripped me—that someone had taken my daughter. We searched high and low for her, calling out her name in the darkness, desperate to find her and wondering how she could have disappeared when we were right there near her.

In those moments I assure you, we'd have paid any ransom asked to have our girl back with us. There was no price too high for her safe return.

Our heavenly Father feels that same way about us. He'd pay any ransom necessary to have us back in relationship with Him. No price is too high for our redemption. In fact, He paid the greatest price, gave the largest ransom imaginable: His own son. Jesus knew that's why He came in flesh:

**For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give up my life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)**

He was the ransom for all the sin of everyone. His life, the price for our redemption.

We found our girl. She had gone to the car to get her blanket. She assured us she wasn't lost because she knew where we were the whole time. 😊

**I have no words for the price You paid for my sin. No way to express my gratitude for the ransom and my redemption. Today, I pray my life is evidence of my thanks. Amen.**

# Willing Sacrifice

## Reading: Matthew 26:26-28

The Last Supper, the final Passover Jesus spent with His disciples. I wonder how He felt knowing His time with them had come to an end. Knowing one would be betray Him, one would deny Him, and all would leave Him. I wonder if He questioned the Father's plan.

He joined that rag-tag group of men He'd chosen in the upper room that night. As they recited the centuries-old words of the Passover tradition, they ate the familiar foods and drank the customary wine. I wonder if any of them sensed something was different. I wonder if any of them had any idea what was ahead.

He had told them before that He would be killed. Even that night, He revealed what was ahead.

**“For this is my blood, which seals the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many.” (Matthew 26:28)**

Jesus wasn't like the Passover lambs they knew from their experiences. He wasn't caught and slaughtered while crying out. No, Jesus walked willingly into the courts of the High Priest, of Pilate, and of Herod. He stood there with all power to stop the beatings and the mocking. He remained on the cross though angels could have rescued him.

His sacrifice was willing, chosen, and intentional. He knew His purpose and He was prepared to follow the Father's plan for redemption . . . even at great personal cost.

I often realize I know nothing of true sacrifice. Jesus knew the fullness of sacrifice. And He gave Himself willingly.

**Lord, that You would willingly give Your life for my redemption is beyond me. I cannot fathom the depths of Your love. Today, reveal Yourself to me anew, that I may rejoice once again in the greatness of Your love. Amen.**

# Only Way

## Reading: John 14:6

The story of redemption has only one true sacrifice: Jesus. From the beginning of the story in Eden, Jesus' role was certain—to crush the head of the serpent.

Jesus is the only way to our redemption. His death and resurrection are the only path to our salvation. When He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me," He meant it.

In this age where tolerance is the highest value and the idea of only one way to know God is ridiculed and even reprimanded, we often find it difficult to share the redemption story.

We don't want to make others feel bad or be called narrow-minded. But we cannot let our fears keep us from sharing the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ!

He is the only way! And this is life and death . . . eternity does hang in the balance! As a new year draws rapidly closer, we need to recognize and act on the urgency of the gospel. Today is the day of salvation!

For the sake of those we love, for the sake of those Christ loves, for the truth that simply says,

**This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. John 3:16 MSG**

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God sent His Son, the only way for our redemption, our reconciliation with Him? If so, whom will you tell?

**Lord, give me strength today to share the gospel. Fill me with boldness and longing to tell others the promise of redemption made true in Jesus Christ. Amen.**

# *Sin's Price*

## **Reading: Luke 23:34-48**

And so it was, the Son of God was crucified. Raised up like the snake on Moses' staff for all to see and for redemption's plan to be fulfilled (John 3:14-15). The price for our sin was paid. Our debt was cancelled. The ransom received.

We call this day of Christ's crucifixion Good Friday. Far too often we are guilty of overlooking this dark day, the day when it appeared to all of earth that death had won. Just as we skip over the season of Advent, exchanging the call to preparation through confession and repentance for an easier, lighter experience of opening boxes and drawers for small treats or special activities, we tend to skip over Good Friday, looking ahead to pretty dresses and stirring melodies and Easter morning revelry.

But at what cost? What happens to our faith, to our understanding of the story of redemption when we never force ourselves to look at the darkness and despair of our lives outside of Christ?

It's far easier to celebrate a baby in a manger and an empty tomb than it is to come face-to-face with a bloody sacrifice hanging naked and battered on a cross.

But the manger and the tomb only have meaning through the lens of the cross. Without Jesus's death, the manger story is simply a sweet tale of a poor family on a cold night. Without the cross's sacrifice and Jesus' death, the empty tomb would never be.

The cross is the symbol of our redemption. It's where the perfect Lamb was placed to pay the final price for our sin. Don't skip the cross in your haste to the empty tomb.

**Lord, open my eyes to the necessity of the cross. Forgive me for taking lightly the price You paid. Amen.**

# *New Life*

## **Reading: Romans 6:4-11**

I imagine Saturday was a long day for those women who had watched Jesus' crucifixion. Undoubtedly Sunday morning couldn't come soon enough for them to get to the tomb to finish anointing His body.

I think often about Mary Magdalene and her encounter with Jesus in the garden that day. How she didn't recognize Him until He spoke her name. So like us, isn't it? To fail to see Him at work unless He beats with the proverbial two-by-four.

The resurrection story is filled with wonder and beauty and the joy of a promise fulfilled. The perfect sacrifice had been given. Sin's debt was paid on Friday. But life, eternal life, that was fulfilled on Sunday. Our promise of new life, eternal life, is real because of the empty tomb.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

**"Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may have new lives." (Romans 6:4)**

New lives. What a spectacular promise! Redemption doesn't just pay our debt; it gives us hope, promise. Newness.

To the church at Corinth, Paul said it this way,

**What this means is that those who become Christians are new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17)**

A new life has begun. When we belong to Christ, all that old junk is gone. We are not the same anymore, we are new. What a glorious promise!

**Is there a greater cause for praise than the simple truth that in You, I am made new? Thank you, Jesus, for new life Amen.**



# *Promised Return*

## **Reading: Acts 1:6-11**

Jesus left the disciples standing on the Mount of Olives. He's promised them power and the Holy Spirit and told them to go and spread the message of Good News.

And then He was gone.

**The angels told them He had been taken to heaven but that He would return. In fact, the angels said, "Someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!" (Acts 1:11)**

What a promise, that just as He went, He will return.

Zechariah prophesied of this second coming of Christ centuries before,

**On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives will split apart, making a wide valley running from east to west, for half the mountain will move toward the north and half toward the south. (Zechariah 14:4)**

Jesus is coming back! And when He does, He will place His feet on the Mount of Olives, just as they were when He left.

Oh my friend! There is such hope in this redemption story! Because our redemption is eternal, it's forever! And we can celebrate the sweet truth that He will return and all striving and heartache will end.

He keeps every promise. And He will return!

Lord, sometimes it is so easy to be consumed by the daily happenings here on this troubled old earth. I lose sight too easily of the redemption story and the promise of Your return. Today, keep my heart stayed on the promise that You will be back and You will usher in Your kingdom and it will last forever. Amen.

# *Eternal Life*

**Today is a little different. As you read the verses below, praise the Lord for His coming as a baby, His death and resurrection, and the sweet promise of eternity with Him.**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband.

I heard a loud voice shout from the throne, saying, "Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow, or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever."

And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making all things news!"

And then he said to me, "Write this down for what I tell you is trustworthy and true."

And he also said, "It is finished!" I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give the springs of the water of life without charge!"

"See, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me, to repay all according to their deeds. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."

He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon!"

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.

Revelation 21:1-7, 22:22:12-13, 20-21

# *When God Draws Near*

One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is John 15:5:

**Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me, you can do nothing.**

Abiding in Him . . . knowing the sweetness of His presence, the gentleness of His correction, the vastness of His love. It's there, tangled up in the vine, my life twisted so deeply in His, I've found the greatest peace, the greatest joy.

When I remain in Him, stay close, it's then He draws nearest. When I lay down my insecurities and plans, He pulls me into the refuge of His plan. When I trust Him with my brokenness, He fills me with His wholeness. When I push aside my accomplishments and abilities, He produces in me the fruit of His Spirit.

When God draws near it doesn't always look like we expect. It's not always a quiet moment in the early morning before sleeping babes awake. It's not always the hush of night when dishes are done and tired moms finally rest. Sometimes the sweetest times of God drawing near are in the chaos of daily life or the sorrow of loss.

You see, His redemptive plan for us is not just a "one and done" thing. He continually redeems us—our moments, our hearts, our dreams, our plans, our suffering, our whole lives. Nothing is left untouched by the redemption story . . . nothing is left unredeemed.

Live in the beauty of the redemption story! And experience the joy and peace when God draws near.

## About the Author



Married to her talented Worship Pastor husband and momma to a beautiful tween girl, Teri Lynne Underwood is living out her own happily ever after. Author of [Parenting from the Overflow](#) and [Prayers from the Pews](#), she's amazed at how God consistently uses ordinary people to communicate His extraordinary message.

Teri Lynne is learning a fresh perspective on life-exploring the way of living big without missing the small. She writes almost daily at [her blog](#) and loves playing on [Pinterest](#). She'd love to connect with you on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

You can find all of Teri Lynne's books on [Amazon](#). It would be a great gift if you'd leave a review and share how this book or any of her other works have encouraged you.