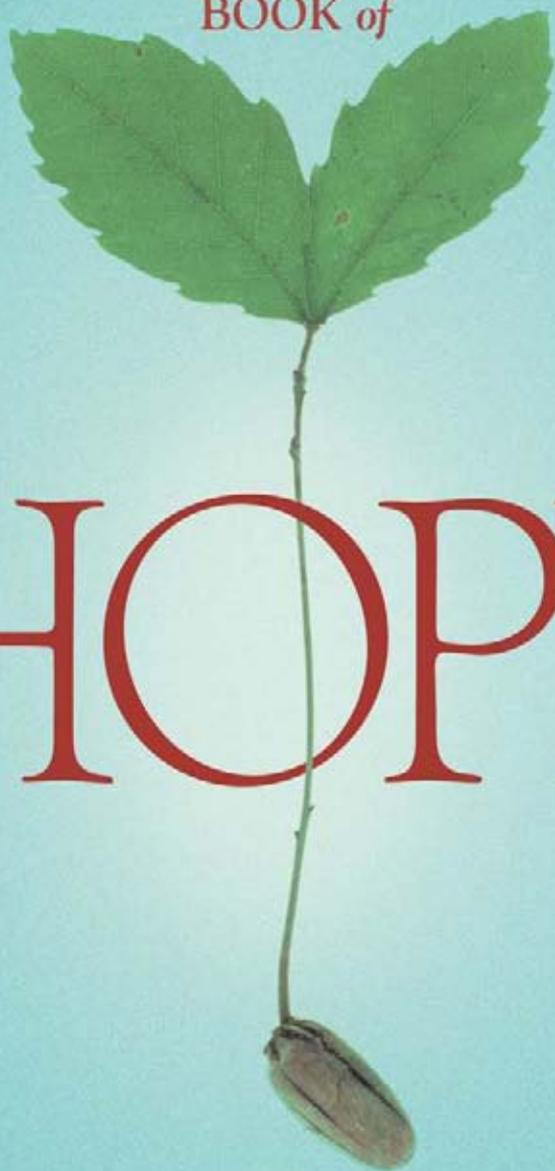


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# HOPE

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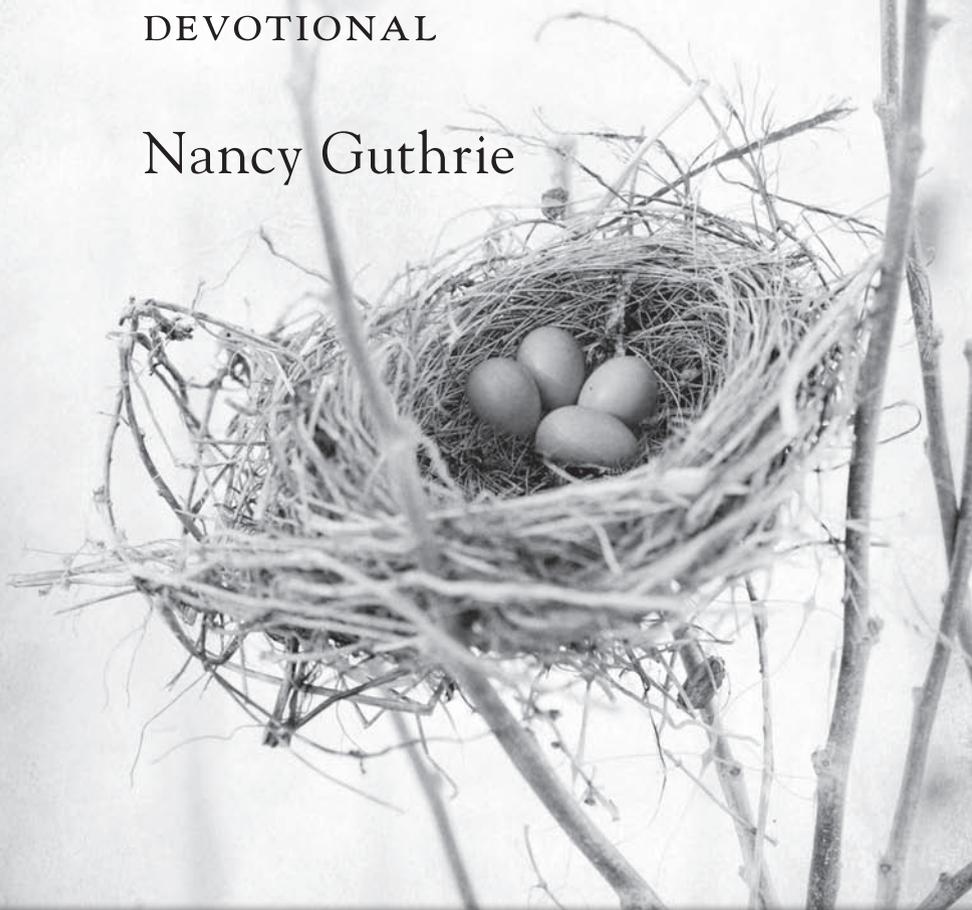
*The One Year Book of Hope Devotional*



# The ONE YEAR<sup>®</sup>

book of HOPE  
DEVOTIONAL

Nancy Guthrie



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

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*Comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it.  
If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end:  
if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—  
only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.*

C. S. LEWIS, *Mere Christianity*





# Dedication

With profound gratitude, I dedicate this book to three of the people who have faithfully taught me the Scriptures. You planted the seeds that have blossomed into this book.

*Dr. James Walters*, my Bible professor at John Brown University, my guide and companion in the fellowship of tears—

You sent me on a search for the glory of God, a journey I'm still on, a destination I'm still longing for. You opened my eyes to the adventure of searching the Scriptures, the gain from wrestling with its implications, the joys and sorrows of an authentic life.

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Friends who know I've worked in publishing for many years assume that I understand grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and all those pesky details required for communicating well, and that I should therefore be of great help to Matt with his homework. My editors at Tyndale—Stephanie Voiland and Lisa Jackson—know better. Thanks for all the valuable input, careful editing, and gentle nudges to do better. And thank you to Jan Long Harris and Doug Knox for coming up with the idea for this book over lunch and asking me to do it. I am privileged to have you and the rest of the Tyndale team in my corner.

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# Introduction

My friend, I don't know what may be causing you pain—it might be a broken relationship, a difficult diagnosis, a devastating disappointment, a death. It may stem from a sudden loss that changed everything about your life in an instant, or an ongoing situation that is wearing on you like a steady drip. It may be something that happened long ago but is still leaving its achy fingerprints on your heart, or a steady series of lesser hurts that just don't seem to heal. I want you to know that I would never presume to say that I know how you feel. I don't. Nobody can. But I do know what it is like to hurt. And I know where to find comfort when there are no words for the pain. I know because I've been on that search too, looking for answers to my questions, hope for the future, and companionship for the journey. I can't say that I've found *all* the answers. But I can say that I've found some, and I've chosen to embrace the Source for the answers to all the questions that taunt us in the midst of tears and keep us awake in the night.

Would you join me in pursuing him throughout the coming year in the midst of our pain?

## WHEN HURT INVADED MY LIFE

While you'll find snippets of my story throughout the devotions in this book, I want to share a bit of it with you before we begin our journey together. But honestly, I'm a bit hesitant to do so. I recognize that my pain is not especially unique or noteworthy. I'm well aware that many people have suffered in more significant and ongoing ways than I have. I share my background with you only so you will know that while I may not completely understand your suffering, I've tasted some myself—hopefully enough that you will see me as a worthy companion for the weeks and months ahead as we look for truth to comfort our pain together.

On the day that we had anticipated would be one of our most joyful experiences, hurt invaded my otherwise happy existence. That day in November

1998, my husband, David, and I, along with our son, Matt, welcomed our daughter, Hope, into this world. David saw the obstetrician and nurse exchange knowing glances shortly after Hope was born, but I was too oblivious to notice, too relieved to have had a successful birth, too overjoyed in holding my beautiful daughter that I had wanted for so long.

“She has club feet, but that is easily fixable,” the doctor said. “You’re going to want to have the pediatrician look her over, but don’t worry, it’s not Down’s or anything like that.”

That night our pediatrician came to our room with a list in his hand of all the “little things” wrong with Hope. She had club feet; she was lethargic and unresponsive; she had a large soft spot, extra skin on her neck, and a flat chin. She wouldn’t suck and wouldn’t hold her temperature. “When we see a number of small problems, they often add up to something bigger,” he said.

The next day a pediatric orthopedist put casts on both of Hope’s feet, and a geneticist examined her. He entered our room with another doctor, and with a grim look on his face, he shut the door. He explained that he suspected Hope had a rare metabolic disorder called Zellweger Syndrome—something we had never heard of—which meant that she was missing subcellular particles called peroxisomes that do the work of removing long-chain fatty acids from the cells. He explained that without peroxisomes, the long-chain fatty acids build up and become toxic, that there is no treatment and no cure, and that most children with the syndrome live less than six months.

He handed us two pages copied from a medical textbook that detailed in very medical language everything that is wrong in the body of a child with Zellweger Syndrome—including severe brain damage, the inability to see or hear, internal bleeding, and seizures. It described what these children’s lives and deaths are like and featured postmortem photos of babies with Zellweger. I couldn’t read it for about five days. It was too much reality for me, too overwhelming to take in.

After a week of learning to feed Hope with a tube we inserted down her throat, and after a battery of tests that seemed to reinforce the diagnosis of Zellweger Syndrome, we took Hope home. It wasn’t the homecoming I had anticipated. I knew I was bringing Hope home to die. And I was afraid of what it would be like for her—and for me.

Over the six months God gave us with Hope, we focused on keeping her comfortable and on enjoying her to the fullest. The reality was that her first day was her best and she was on a steady decline. She likely could not see or

hear, and she developed seizures that were difficult to keep under control. But honestly, I tried not to despair as things got worse every day, because I didn't know how much worse they were going to get and I knew I couldn't afford to fall apart yet. And I didn't want to spend her life grieving her death.

Hope slept in our room throughout her life. One night, David got up in the middle of the night to check on her and she was cold to the touch. "She's gone," he whispered to me. Though we had shed our share of tears during her life, and while I was hopeful that those tears would lighten my load of grief after her death, it didn't seem to work that way. In the months that followed Hope's death, I felt empty and disappointed, lonely and sad.

It seems to me that most losses aren't just one loss, but a series of losses. For a while I grieved Hope's death. Then I grieved her limited life. Then I grieved our loss of potential.

You see, to have a child with Zellweger requires that both parents be carriers of the recessive gene trait for the syndrome. So after we had Hope, David and I knew that we are both carriers and that any child of ours would have a 25 percent chance of having the fatal syndrome. Matt had hit those 75 percent healthy odds, but Hope had not. So we faced a decision: Should we take the chance of having another child? We decided that we simply couldn't risk putting Matt and our family and friends through such a difficult ordeal again. So David had a vasectomy.

Evidently it didn't work.

A year and a half after Hope died, we discovered that I was pregnant. We were shocked, to put it mildly. But we weren't just shocked. We were afraid. We still felt battered by the last storm, and suddenly another one was headed in our direction.

We kept the news mostly to ourselves until we could get the results of prenatal testing. Then the day came when the doctor called with the test results—positive for Zellweger Syndrome. We then knew we would welcome a second child with Zellweger Syndrome into our family, that we would love and lose another child.

It was the same but different, if that makes sense. It was strange to spend nine months carrying a child we knew would have a short and difficult life, strange to figure out how to respond to the well-wishes and comments of people we didn't know, strange to plan for both life and death.

Gabriel was born on July 16, 2001. We thought he would be with us longer than Hope because he seemed a little bit stronger than Hope was. But in fact,

he was with us a few days less. And once again, we were back to a family of three, feeling the loss.

In the days and weeks ahead, I'll share more of our experiences with Hope and Gabriel. It is only natural because it is the context in which so much of Scripture has come alive with meaning for me. And while I hope what I share helps you in your own journey, I want you to know that it is *your* pain I have had in the forefront of my mind as I have written these daily devotions. Of course, I can't know the specifics of every person who picks up this book, but in some sense, pain is pain—emotional, physical, or relational. And while my story takes up much of the ink in this book, it is your story that has prompted me to write, your loss that is heavy on my heart. My words here are wasted if your hurt does not find healing as you apply God's Word to your life.

## MANNA FROM HEAVEN

I'll never forget standing in my kitchen with my sister-in-law, Caroline, after Hope's memorial service. "How do you do this?" I asked her, wondering how I would get through that day and keep facing the days to come. Caroline knew what it was like to bury someone she loved. Before my brother came into her life, she had dealt with the devastating loss of her first husband when he was killed in a car accident two weeks after they got married. Her answer to my desperate question was simple: "Manna."

She explained that just as the children of Israel were dependent on God to provide manna to sustain them every day while they wandered in the wilderness, I had to depend on God to give me the manna I needed every day to sustain me as I grieved my loss. After she left, I found a note from her taped to my mirror that read, "Don't forget the manna." I kept it there a very long time. (I'm still grateful for those wise words, Caroline.)

She was right. Manna is what I needed. Every day. I needed the nourishment that comes from the hand of God, the words of truth that come from the mouth of God. In fact, I was desperate for it to soothe my emptiness and give me the strength to keep getting up in the morning. I discovered that nothing else really satisfies or soothes our suffering except the Word of God. Revenge, ritual, and retreat are all short-term solutions that bring no lasting comfort.

And the thing about the manna God provided to the Israelites was that they couldn't store it up. They needed a fresh supply every day—and so do we. Every day we need a fresh touch, a fresh word to nourish us and sustain us. Yesterday's manna, yesterday's insights may inform us, but every day we need something new to keep us moving forward toward healing.

## How To Use *The One Year Book of Hope*

Processing pain and embracing its lessons are daily endeavors. Every day we need a little more light to illumine our darkness. That's what I want this book to be for you—a daily dose of truth and comfort.

Daily is a good thing. Just as you can't eat enough food in one meal to last all week, you need a spiritual meal each day if you want to walk through each day in a transforming awareness of God. This book is designed to feed your hurting soul a little bit every day and give you something to chew on throughout each day. I've picked fifty-two themes—one for each week of the coming year—that have been especially meaningful to me in my grief and questions. If you choose to use it this way, there are devotions for each day of the week, Monday through Friday, and a guide for reflection, meditation, and prayer for the weekend.

But you may decide you want to sit down with this book once a week or occasionally and read through a week's worth of devotions on a particular theme and then spend time in prayer and reflection about what you've read. That's fine too.

The goal is for you to use this book as a resource over the coming year for insight and healing. If you're like me, if you think you have to keep up with assignments, you are tempted to quit when you get behind rather than feel like a failure. That's why I haven't used days of the week or dates in the book. I don't want you to feel guilty when a day or a week goes by that you don't get to it. I just want to welcome you back when you can open it again and pick up where we left off.

Each day's devotion includes a "Digging Deeper" question that will take you into God's Word for yourself. I think you will find that the treasures hidden there are worth your extra effort and a few minutes of extra study.

At the end of each week, there are some questions for reflection as well as a guide to meditation and prayer. You may want to write out your answers

to these questions in a journal or notebook, which will help you clarify your thoughts and determine your response to the truth you've read. The guide to meditation and prayer will help you focus on God's Word when it is hard to concentrate. It will help you pray when it's hard to find focus in prayer. You may have never developed a habit of private meditation and prayer before, and if so, spending the next year using this book as your guide will help you solidify this nourishing and restful practice in your life.

I've ordered the weeks in a way that I think makes sense for someone who is working through loss, but you may choose to go in a different order, following the themes that seem to meet your most urgent need. Feel free to skip around if that is your preference, working your way through all fifty-two weeks.

Just as no one can tell you exactly what path your grief will take you on or give you a timetable for feeling better, no one can determine the pace at which you are able to ingest the truth that will bring healing. But I encourage you to give it a try on a regular basis, even when you "don't feel like it"—perhaps especially when you don't feel like it.

I hope your hunger to hear from God in the midst of your pain will keep you coming back to him every day through the pages of *The One Year Book of Hope*. And while my prayer is that my words may add to your understanding of the Scriptures and provide companionship to you, I know it is only God's Word that satisfies and soothes. His Word is life. My words have nourishing power only as far as they capture and convey the truth of God's Word. I will be truly satisfied if they instill in you a hunger to search out more of God's Word for yourself.

I feel honored to be your companion during this tender time in your life, and I am eager to get started. There is so much I want to share with you in the days ahead that I believe will truly make a difference in your pain. There's hope and comfort to be found. What a privilege to discover it together.

WEEK 1

# Brokenhearted



Brokenhearted. Crushed in spirit. Does that describe the state of your soul? Are you wondering if you will ever feel good again, ever feel hope again? Are you desperate to find a salve to soothe the searing emotional or physical pain that has invaded your existence?

Your feelings may tell you that God is very far away from you right now. But the reality is that he is drawn to you. If you have invited God into your life, he is especially near to you now because you need him so desperately.

You may feel that no one wants to be around you. Deep down we know that it is not a lot of fun to be with someone who is sad. But God loves brokenhearted people. He doesn't avoid them. He is closer to you now than ever, waiting to talk with you, comfort you, and offer you hope and healing as you face the future.

## THIS WEEK'S PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION ∞

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.* —PSALM 34:18

## TELLING YOURSELF THE TRUTH

---

*I weep with grief; encourage me by your word. Keep me from lying to myself; give me the privilege of knowing your law. I have chosen to be faithful; I have determined to live by your laws. –PSALM 119:28-30*

When we are hurting, it seems like everyone wants to fix us. And advice is often free-flowing. Well-meaning friends and family tell us what to do and how to feel, only adding to our confusion. And then there's the voice inside our own minds speaking to us too. Oh, the painful thoughts that go through our heads when the hurt is deep! *I will never be able to be happy again. My life is over. I will be alone forever. God must not love me. God must be punishing me. I am such a failure.*

The psalmist must have recognized this voice and realized it is a voice that cannot be trusted. "Keep me from lying to myself," he said. In the midst of personal pain, he was desperate to hear the truth and live by the truth. He knew that emotions lie to us and people mislead us, but God's Word speaks the truth we are desperate for, even as we weep with grief.

So how do we keep from lying to ourselves in the midst of pain? Instead of believing the voice inside us that says, "God must not care about me," we gaze upon the God we see throughout Scripture who lovingly cares for his own. Even when our feelings tell us, "I will never feel good again," we hold tightly to the truth that God "heals the brokenhearted, binding up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

Am I talking about denying real feelings by quoting quips and clichés? Not at all. Honestly, I resent it when someone seems to pat me on the head with a Bible verse in a way that seems to devalue my genuine hurt and dismiss my deep questions. I'm talking about confronting our very real fears, feelings, and thoughts with scriptural truth. I'm talking about digging deep in God's Word to figure out who he is and what his purposes are in the world and in our lives. Truth soothes our fears, changes our feelings, and shapes our thoughts. The truth is what we need most when the hurt is the deepest. Would you walk through the Scripture with me over the year ahead in search of truth to soothe your soul?

*My Source for what is true, I desperately need the encouragement that I know can only come from your Word. Open my eyes to the truths that can dispel the doubt and discouragement I feel from the lies I have listened to.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read as much of Psalm 119 as you have time for, noting the benefits of studying and knowing God's Word when you're hurting. What does the psalmist ask God for that you also want to ask of God?

## YOUR TEARS MATTER TO GOD

---

*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. —PSALM 56:8*

I remember going up to the cosmetics counter a few weeks after my daughter, Hope, died and asking if the mascara I was considering would run down my face when I cried. The salesperson assured me it wouldn't and then asked with a laugh in her voice, "Are you going to be crying?"

"Yes," I answered. "I am." And I have. I used to rarely cry, but now tears are always close to the surface, just waiting to be released. It is as if there is a broken place inside me where tears are stored. Letting them out has been the only way to release the pressure of the pain.

Along with relief, there is also the uncomfortable loss of control that is a companion to tears, isn't there? Some see tears not only as a loss of control but also as a lack of faith. It is as if the physical manifestation of tears gives evidence of a spiritual deficiency—that if our faith was big enough or deep enough or developed enough, we simply wouldn't be this sad. It is as if we think our grasp of spiritual realities can erase the hurts of being human. But when you've lost something or someone who is valuable to you, when you have been forced to let go of a dream or live within a nightmare—that is something to be sad about. So let yourself be sad.

And know that God does not discount or dismiss your tears. They are precious to him because you are precious to him. In fact, when God reveals glimpses of the culmination of human history—in a future that will fully reveal and be fully worthy of his glory—he includes, as a centerpiece, this promise in Isaiah 25:8: "The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears." Picture in your mind right now the Lord of the universe reaching down to gently and lovingly wipe away your tears. He doesn't ignore them or tell you that if you really had faith you wouldn't cry. He wipes them away. And Revelation 21:4 tells us that not only will he wipe away tears, he will remove all of the sorrow that caused them. God's plan for the future is to destroy forever the evil that has brought you so much pain and then to live forever with you in a place he has lovingly prepared where there will be no more tears.

*My Tear Collector, sometimes you seem so far away, it's hard for me to grasp that you are sad with me. Give me the faith to see you now beside me and to see a future in which your hand will wipe away my tears forever.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read Psalm 56. Make a list of what David determined to do despite his tears.

## GUARD YOUR HEART

---

*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.* —PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

Broken hearts are very vulnerable; they must be guarded carefully. When your heart has been broken, it can either become more soft and pliable to the work of God, or it can become hardened toward God and the things of God. And it is a strong temptation to harden our hearts toward God when he has disappointed us and when it feels like he has deserted us.

If your heart is broken, are you willing to allow this hurt to serve as a softening agent that makes you more aware of God, more alive to his purposes, more sensitive to his Spirit at work on you and in you? Or will you let your heart become hardened so that you no longer hear his word, accept his rebuke, experience his mercy?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul explains how to keep our hearts from becoming hardened. “Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this . . . his peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” To nurture a soft heart, keep telling God what you need, even when you hardly know what to say or what to ask for or if he hears you. Thank him for who he is and what he has done, for all he has given you, and for the ways he is making himself known to you. Gratitude plows up the ground for God's peace to grow. This is the kind of peace in the midst of pain that is foreign and unintelligible to the world, and can only come supernaturally. Peace is a gift of God, but we prepare ourselves to receive this gift as we pray about everything, cultivate gratitude, and refuse to surrender to worry.

You can emerge from your days of sorrow with a heart that has been softened to the Spirit of God—what a beautiful and profitable experience that will be! Or you can allow your heart to be hardened by bitterness and resentment toward God, and rejection of his peace and grace—what a dark place that will take you to . . . a place far away from the loving embrace of God. “They are far away from the life of God because they have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against him” (Ephesians 4:18).

*Heart Mender, take this broken heart of mine and make it soft and sensitive to your Spirit. I want to stay close to you and soft toward you.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read Hebrews 3. What led to the Israelites' hearts being hardened? What were the consequences? From verses 12-15, what do you need to do or refrain from doing to avoid hardness of heart?

## BITTER BEYOND WORDS

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*He shot his arrows deep into my heart. The thought of my suffering and hopelessness is bitter beyond words. I will never forget this awful time, as I grieve over my loss. Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the LORD never ends! By his mercies we have been kept from complete destruction.* —LAMENTATIONS 3:13, 19-22

Sometimes I feel guilty about my grief. Not because I think there is something wrong or unspiritual about recognizing my loss and valuing my loss. I feel guilty because sometimes I think my grief is more about me than about Hope or Gabriel. I feel sad not just when I think about them and their difficult, limited lives, but when the mental snapshots remind me of the pain I felt, the fear I felt, the disappointment that swallowed *me*.

I remember when it first hit me. The depth of the cry bordering on a scream bubbled inside and then burst out of me. It scared me, and I know it scared David. I think that is when he first wondered if he'd ever get his wife back, or if she was gone forever, lost to sorrow.

I am well aware that so many have suffered in much more significant ways than I have, but there is no real comparison of pain. It all just hurts. And with the author of Lamentations, I would say, "the thought of my suffering is bitter beyond words." And I echo his words: "I will never forget this awful time."

But I would also echo the ray of light that peeks out of his next phrase: "Yet I still dare to hope." The memory of hope is as vivid as the memory of pain. What could have made him dare to hope? What could possibly give *you* the courage and confidence to have hope in the midst of your bitter suffering? Remembering the love of God. Rehearsing his past faithfulness to you. Choosing to think about the sufficiency and eternity of God's love. It may seem daring to make room in your mind for what you know is true about God, and honestly, it is difficult when it feels as if he has shot his arrows deep into your heart. But the truth of God's love transforms our thoughts and our feelings when we choose to remember and choose to believe.

*Lord, how the hurt lingers, making it hard to remember that your love is unfailing and eternal. Remind me of your love—my only source of hope for the future. Make the reality of your faithfulness more vivid than my pain.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read Lamentations 3. What phrases can you relate to in verses 1-20? What does the writer choose to do and to believe in verses 21-66 that generates hope?

## BUT I AM TRUSTING

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*I am dying from grief; my years are shortened by sadness. Misery has drained my strength; I am wasting away from within. But I am trusting you, O LORD, saying, "You are my God!" My future is in your hands.* —PSALM 31:10, 14-15

We had known I was pregnant with Gabriel for almost eight weeks and it had been three weeks since the prenatal testing, and we were waiting for the call with the test results. I wrote about it in my journal, the morning of January 26, 2001:

*I get a sinking feeling in my stomach when I think about knowing one way or the other, but today, I'm just ready to know, ready to know how to feel, how to plan. Mostly, I want to say yes to God in whatever he has for us. If someone had asked me when I was pregnant before if I wanted to experience what we did with Hope, I'm sure I would have said no. And yet it was the most profound experience of blessing we've ever had. She brought us so much joy. I would have been a fool to say no. So I find myself now wanting to say yes to whatever God has for us because I know his plans for me are better than I can plan for myself.*

That day the call came from the geneticist, who delivered the news that the child I was carrying was already suffering the fatal effects of Zellweger Syndrome. David and I stood in the kitchen and went over a list of Scripture verses to put on the letter we were preparing to send out to everyone we knew, looking for the verse that would best express the reality of our fear as well as our resolve. Then we found it: "But I am trusting you, O LORD, saying, 'You are my God!' My future is in your hands."

I would like to tell you that our desire to trust in God erased the fear we had about the future—but it wouldn't be true. What I will tell you is that we *determined* to trust God with the future of our family. And it wasn't a decision we made one day for forever. It is a decision we made again every day (or at least most days) and a decision we continue to make every day. It's the same for you. Will you trust God today even as your life feels shortened by sadness? Will you surrender your future into the loving hands of God?

*You are my God, and I want to trust you with the hurts of my past and the pain that may be in my future. Today I choose to trust you and believe you'll give me the grace to trust you tomorrow, too.*

### DIGGING DEEPER ∞

Read Psalm 40. On what did the psalmist base his choice to trust God? What kind of impact did it have on the people around him? What were his circumstances? What are the benefits of trusting God?

## WEEK 1

# *Brokenhearted*

### REFLECTION

What are some of the untruths you hear from others and from your own mind that you need to confront with the truth?

Have you determined to trust God with your future? How is that evident in your life?



### MEDITATION

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit.* —PSALM 34:18

Quiet yourself in the presence of God, and meditate on the comforting promises of this verse.

Express your brokenheartedness and crushed spirit to God, laying it all before him.

Ask God to make the closeness of his presence known to you, and open yourself to his rescue.



### PRAYER

Praise God that his hands are big enough and strong enough to hold you and your future, no matter what happens.

Thank God for loving you enough and caring deeply enough to keep track of your sorrows and treasure your tears.

Intercede for those you love, that God would use the hurt in their lives to soften them toward himself and keep their hearts from being hardened.

Confess your tendency to focus only on the bitterness of your suffering and to forget God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

Petition God to replace the lies you have told yourself with an ever-flowing fountain of his truth.

## WEEK 2

# Jesus, Man of Sorrows



I have a hard time accepting dramatic presentations of the story of Jesus. Not because I think they shouldn't be done—they usually expand my understanding of who he is and what he came to do. My problem is with the portrayal of Jesus in these productions. How can any actor capture the complex personality and passion of Jesus in an authentic way? Sometimes they seem too syrupy sweet, sometimes too casual or flippant, sometimes too serious-all-the-time. And when I look at the Gospels, I see so many different emotions and attitudes in the person of Jesus.

I see him teaching with authority, touching with compassion. I see righteous anger, courageous boldness, exhaustion, and determination.

But I suppose what we all want to see are the aspects of Jesus that meet our own unique needs and answer our deepest questions. And what *I* have needed to see is the sorrow of Jesus. Because in seeing his sorrow, I find comfort and companionship. I find guidance for dealing with my own sorrow and acceptance of my tears.

Perhaps the greatest comfort I find in seeing Jesus as a man of sorrows is the affirmation that tears do not reflect a lack of faith; indeed, they are a companion to authentic faith.

### THIS WEEK'S PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION ∞

*While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver him out of death. And God heard his prayers because of his reverence for God. So even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.* —HEBREWS 5:7-8

## ACQUAINTED WITH GRIEF

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*He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised, and we did not care. —ISAIAH 53:3*

It was Matt's last day of second grade, which was devoted to a big outdoor carnival. With Hope in the stroller, I was making the rounds, resisting the urge to tell everyone who stopped to greet us that their good-bye to her for the summer would likely be the last time they would see her.

One woman at Fun Day knew what that felt like. Several years before, Audrey had lost a son who lived only nine months due to a heart condition. As we discussed the realities of facing death and the awkwardness of discussing that reality with other people, she shared with me one of the most painful aspects of losing her son. It was when people didn't say anything to her after her son died. She said, "I wanted to tell them, 'How could you add to my pain by ignoring it?'" It was helpful for me to talk to someone who understood my fears and feelings, and helpful to know in advance that there would be those who would not—or at least appear not to—care.

The prophet Isaiah paints a picture of the coming Messiah as "a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Maybe Isaiah included this aspect of Jesus' character in his description because he knew that you and I would need the kind of comfort and companionship on our road of sorrow that we can find only with someone who has "been there." Does it help you to know that Jesus can relate to your sorrow? It helps me.

Jesus can also relate to your feelings of loneliness and betrayal when you feel that those around you do not care deeply about the hurt in your life, when they turn their backs on you at the moment of your greatest need. Have you thought that no one really understands your feelings of rejection and pain? Have you felt that no one cares? Jesus understands. Jesus cares.

*Man of Sorrows, I see you more clearly as this aspect of your character and experience comes into view. How I need your understanding companionship on this road of grief. Show me how to respond the way you did to those who seem not to care: with forgiveness.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read Isaiah 53, noting the numerous ways Jesus suffered, as well as how he responded to the suffering. Which of his sufferings can you relate to?

## WHY DID JESUS WEEP?

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*When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, he was moved with indignation and was deeply troubled. “Where have you put him?” he asked them. They told him, “Lord, come and see.” Then Jesus wept.* —JOHN 11:33-35

Have you ever wondered why Jesus cried at the death of Lazarus? After all, he knew he was about to raise him from the dead. He is the one who had said, “Lazarus’s sickness will not end in death. No, it is for the glory of God” (John 11:4). Then he is the one who said later, “Lazarus is dead. And for your sake, I am glad I wasn’t there, because this will give you another opportunity to believe in me” (11:14-15). So why the tears? What was it that troubled him? In this story, I believe Jesus reveals how he feels about death and about our response to death, and both are important for us to understand.

It troubled Jesus deeply when he saw Mary’s despair and the wailing mourners with her. Perhaps he could see in her weeping and hear in their wailing the unbelief that robbed them of being able to grieve with hope and left them with only despair. Perhaps his indignation was triggered by intense disappointment that they did not believe or value his words when he told them, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again” (11:25). Grief is different for the believer than it is for those who do not know Christ—at least it should be. Actually, death is the great revealer of what we really believe and of how much we value resurrected life after physical death.

But beyond his frustration over their despairing grief, I think Jesus wept because he was personally pained by the hurt that death caused to people he loved. His were tears of compassion for Mary and Martha, and tears of determination, perhaps, to finish the work he came to do, to win a victory, once and for all, over the power of death. It breaks the heart of God that death has so much power to hurt those he loves. Look here and see tears on the face of God, because he feels the hurt and emptiness that death leaves in its wake, and he longs with us for the day when death is destroyed forever.

*Brokenhearted Jesus, as I see the tears on your face in this story, I believe you weep with me, too. Help me to grieve with hope, believing that the eternal life you offer to those who are yours is far better than life on this earth.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read John 11:1-44. What statements does Jesus make? What instructions does he give? What questions does he ask?

## CRUSHED WITH GRIEF

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*[Jesus] took Peter and Zebedee's two sons, James and John, and he began to be filled with anguish and deep distress. He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me."* –MATTHEW 26:37-38

"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death." It may sound strange to say this, but I remember feeling relieved when I read this verse. I know what it feels like to be crushed with grief. Flattened out by it. Feeling that it is pressing the life out of me and stealing the air around me. I know what it feels like to wonder if I will ever be out from underneath it.

Whenever I read that Jesus was "crushed with grief," tears come. I feel a sense of kinship with Jesus' pain and a sense of relief that he understands what mine feels like. I can't receive instruction on living with pain from someone who has never hurt. I can't receive encouragement to hold on to hope for the future from someone who has never wrangled with death. But I can listen to and receive from this Jesus who knows what it feels like to be filled with anguish and deep distress.

And from the rest of the story recorded in this passage, I see that he also understands the loneliness of grief that has at times overwhelmed me. Even those closest to him could not stay awake and pray with him in the most agonizing hours of his life.

But it was not only his disciples who abandoned him. As he prepared for the Cross, prepared to drink the cup of the wrath of God, he anticipated the ultimate loneliness and abandonment that was ahead: when God would turn his face away from his Son. This would be a desperate loneliness that would cause him to cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

Do you know what it feels like for your soul to be crushed with grief to the point that you wonder if you can survive it? Have you felt forsaken and abandoned by those you hoped would be there in your most difficult hour? If so, Jesus understands. In your anguish and deep distress, find comfort in companionship with him.

*Abandoned One, it is such a relief to know that you fully understand from experience the grief that has overcome my mind and emotions. Will you also show me what it looks like to emerge from this place of pain into peace?*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Examine Jesus' instructions, requests, and repetitions in Matthew 26:36-46. What can you learn about what to do when your soul is crushed with grief?

## THE GREATEST TRAGEDY

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*As they came closer to Jerusalem and Jesus saw the city ahead, he began to cry. "I wish that even today you would find the way of peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from you . . . because you have rejected the opportunity God offered you."* —LUKE 19:41-42, 44

"Tragedy" seems the only way to describe some of what we see around us, doesn't it? When we read about floods or earthquakes where masses of people die, we can't help but think of it as a tragedy. It's how I felt when recently a friend lost her husband just as he prepared to retire. Their dreams of traveling and growing old together came to an abrupt end. It felt tragic. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines tragedy as "a dramatic, disastrous event, especially one with moral significance." But I wonder, *What would God label as a tragedy?*

As Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, a crowd surrounded him shouting out, "Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Luke 19:38). You might think he would be happy as they spread out their coats for him and welcomed him. But he began to cry.

Jesus saw beyond that day to the time quickly coming when the shouts of the people would become "Crucify him!" He could see beyond their words and into their hearts. And what he saw was hardness toward God, superficiality in their words of welcome, rejection of God's offer to replace their religiosity and ritual with a relationship that would be soul-satisfying and spirit-saving.

What is it that moves God to tears? It is not just physical death. It is eternal death. He looks over the people he created, and he weeps over their rejection of the opportunity to experience his love and to know him in a life-transforming, death-overcoming way. He weeps because it is not just a tragedy; it is the ultimate definition of tragedy. There is no tragedy in being ushered from this life to the next when that next life is spent in the presence of God. The only real tragedy is a life that ends without that hope. When a person rejects the free gift of eternal life God has offered through a relationship with his Son, *that* is a tragedy. That brings God to tears.

*Weeping Father, while I often label losses in my life and in the lives of those around me and those around the world as tragic, help me to see the bigger picture—that the ultimate tragedy is a life that ends without hope in you.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

What was Jesus' response to two tragedies recorded in Luke 13:1-5?

## WRESTLING WITH GOD'S PLAN

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*While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver him out of death. And God heard his prayers because of his reverence for God. So even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.*

—HEBREWS 5:7-8

One of the hardest parts of trusting God with my own experience has been reckoning with the fact that God had the power to make my children healthy, and yet he chose not to. How can I love him and believe he sorrows with me if he had the power to change it but chose not to?

I suppose it was the same faith struggle Rabbi Harold Kushner faced when his son died of premature aging. In his popular book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, which looks at the story of Job, he concludes that the following cannot all be true: (1) God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens. (2) God is just and fair, giving everyone what they deserve. (3) Job is a good person.

Kushner concludes that since it is clear that Job was righteous, God is not all-powerful. He suggests that God hates suffering but is limited in his power to eliminate it.

I understand his confusion, because it is hard to accept that our loving God has the power to eliminate suffering and yet chooses not to. It was Hebrews 5:7-8 that helped me in my wrestling with this. I have clung to these verses in the lowest days of grief. In it I see the fully human, fully God Jesus facing the Cross and crying out to his Father, who has the power to make another way, enact another plan . . . but chooses not to.

And I see his submission to that perfect plan of God, a plan that included suffering and death. It helps me to know that even as he submitted to it, Jesus wrestled with God's plan to redeem the world through his death on the cross. It helps because I, too, have wrestled with God's plan for my life even as I have sought to submit to it.

Have you cried out to God in frustration, with questions about how he could have the power to heal and yet choose *not* to heal the one you love? Have you agonized in an effort to reconcile your understanding of a loving God with One who allowed the accident, the atrocity, the abuse? I have. And we're not alone.

*All-powerful God, I believe by faith that your plans for my life are perfect and flow out of your love for me, but parts of this life have caused me such pain! Show me how to submit, teach me obedience, and allow me to see your glory.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Read Hebrews 4:14–5:10. What good things result from God's plan? List the benefits you have experienced and will experience from this plan.

## WEEK 2

# *Jesus, Man of Sorrows*

### REFLECTION

Remove distractions from your crowded mind, and ask Jesus to reveal himself to you as a Man of Sorrows.

Enjoy his companionship in the loneliness of your grief.

Experience the comfort of Jesus, a worthy companion in sorrow.

Let him love you, and love him in return.

See him struggle with and submit to God's perfect plan that includes suffering, and seek to follow his example.



### MEDITATION

*While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver him out of death. And God heard his prayers because of his reverence for God. So even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.* —HEBREWS 5:7-8

As you read through these verses, picture Jesus praying and pleading with his Father. See his tears and hear his cries.

Allow yourself to feel the companionship of Jesus in your tears, in your submission to God's plan, and in your obedience to God's instructions.



### PRAYER

Praise God for his perfect plan of redemption that included the suffering and death of his Son.

Thank God for his tears of compassion and shared sorrow for those he loves who grieve.

Intercede for those facing the ultimate tragedy over the rejection of God's love and the refusal to repent.

Confess your own struggle to accept God's plan that has caused you pain.

Petition God to fill you with his Spirit so that you can forgive those who have abandoned you in your time of sorrow and suffering.

## WEEK 3

# The Father Heart of God



The word *father* conjures up a unique set of mental images and emotions for each of us. For some of us it is warm and secure, strong and sensitive. For many others it is cold and unstable, distant, or even abusive. Most of us would have to admit that it is a mixture of these things, because our images of fatherhood are shaped by our imperfect earthly fathers.

As children, we learned early whether or not our daddies were safe places to go and soft places to land when our knees were skinned, our feelings were hurt, or our dreams had died. Their response to us in our pain revealed their heart toward us.

In the pain you face today, are you wondering if your heavenly Father's heart will be tender toward you? Does he care? Will you find love or just a lecture? Acceptance or rejection? Let's look closely at what Scripture reveals to us about the Father heart of God.

### THIS WEEK'S PASSAGE FOR MEDITATION ∞

*The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For he understands how weak we are; he knows we are only dust.* —PSALM 103:13-14

## OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN

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*Your father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored. May your kingdom come soon. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.* —MATTHEW 6:8-10

Jesus said that your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him. In one breath, Jesus, our brother, tells us that the Father already knows what we need, and then he tells us to pray and shows us how to pray. So praying to our heavenly Father must be about more than asking God to meet our needs. Because if he already knows what we need, why ask? Surely he does not want us to go through the motions if prayer is not meaningful.

Notice that when Jesus is modeling for us how to pray, asking God for what we want is not at the top of the list! Praying according to Jesus' model begins with the recognition of our family relationship to God. By calling him Father, we recall that we are his children, with all of the benefits and responsibilities that come with being in his family. Then Jesus continues with three affirmations that emphasize the desire for God's agenda to be our agenda. What is important to him should be important to us—more important than getting what we want. And God's agenda is that every creature and all of creation celebrate and honor who he is and what he has done. Jesus wants us to anticipate and welcome God's Kingdom on the earth. He wants us to long for a day and a world in which God is praised and obeyed, a world where God reigns.

If God's will were to be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven, how would it be done, and who would do it? Psalm 103:21 says that armies of angels serve him and do his will. In heaven, the angels joyfully and quickly obey. If we pray as Jesus taught us, we are offering ourselves as obedient servants in a Kingdom where the will of God is done with great joy and without hesitation, just as it is in heaven.

Why pray? Because placing yourself in God's family and under his authority, welcoming his work and his way, and giving yourself to serve him completely—these are not just meaningless phrases or preambles to our list of requests. When we pray in the way Jesus prescribes, they are at the top of our list! Getting God's priorities into proper perspective changes our own.

*My Father, may my life bring honor to your name. May your Kingdom come even as I submit to your authority today. I want to obey quickly and joyfully.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

What does Matthew 6:1-18 reveal about what your Father knows, what he does, and what he will do?

## A FATHER'S JOY

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*He returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. "This son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found." So the party began.* —LUKE 15:20, 24

There was a time in my life when I longed for the comfort of being close to God, but it seemed as if I had been on my own so long and had tried so many times to find my way back, I wasn't sure how God would receive me. I dreaded the rebuke I knew I deserved. My understanding of repentance was very limited, and my picture of God was very harsh.

Many of the people of Jesus' day had misconceptions of what God was like based on the distortions promoted by harsh religious leaders. So Jesus used parables to draw a picture of God for them. He used the story of a father and his prodigal son to show them—and you and me as well—how God feels about rebellious, mistake-ridden, broken people—people who want to come home.

By asking for his inheritance before his father's death, the son in the story basically expressed his utter disregard for his father, almost as if he said, "I wish you were dead." And yet the father gave him his full inheritance, which likely required that he sell off parts of his farm. And beginning on the day his son walked away, the father began waiting and longing for his return. No resentment for the rebuff. No sense of "good riddance" or indifference to the void his son left behind. Just looking, longing, loving.

Finally, when the son came to the end of his resources and the end of himself, he headed home, practicing his speech for his father: "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you" (Luke 15:21). But he had no opportunity to give the speech because his father was so eager to forgive. With each gift the father presented to his repentant, returning son, he spoke acceptance, not judgment; restoration, not retribution.

This parable serves as an invitation to you if you have walked away from your Father's loving provision and want to come home. Our Father's heart is happy when he sees one of his own walking toward him. Won't you come home?

*Forgiving Father, I've often been afraid of your rebuke because I know I deserve it, and yet you wait to offer me forgiveness and welcome me home. Show me your loving Father's heart so I will run toward your embrace.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

What do the parables in Luke 15 tell you about God? Note the choices and attitudes of the Prodigal Son, the older son, and the father. Which do you best relate to?

## A FATHER GIVES GOOD GIFTS

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*You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him.*

—MATTHEW 7:9-11

Recently there was a prayer service for someone I know who is fighting a vicious cancer. How I would love to see God work a miracle and rid her body of the disease that is slowly robbing her of life! I love her and her family, and because I know firsthand how awful and painful it is to watch someone you love die, I don't want them to have to endure it.

Surely we can ask God for what we want. We can freely tell him that what we want is for those we love to be healed. We want a job. We want our marriages to be restored. We know he's our heavenly Father and desires to give good gifts to those who ask him. The problem is, because we are so limited in our understanding, we don't always know what is good.

I want to give my son, Matt, good things. But that is not always what he asks for. He wants chocolate Cocoa Pebbles, and I give him Shredded Wheat. I know, better than he, what he needs. He wants new basketball shoes and I want him to learn to be content with what he has. I have his long-term best interests in mind. I'm trying to shape his body and his mind and his character, so I don't always give him what he asks for.

And I recognize that as much as I might want God to give me what I ask for, I trust that my heavenly Father knows what is best. Sometimes his "good gifts" don't appear that way to my limited perspective. He gives me broccoli when I want ice cream. Sometimes he uses frustrating circumstances, unwarranted criticism, or disappointing delays to develop in me the good gifts of patience and humility. He calls me to trust him, to know that he is my wise and loving Father, and my ultimate good is his heart's greatest desire.

Would you be willing to stop pounding on heaven's door, to stop begging for God to give you what you believe is best, and to open your hands to receive the good gifts your heavenly Father wants to give to you?

*Good Father, I know you are committed to making me holy, more than just happy or healthy. Open my eyes to my greatest need—more of you. Open my heart and hands to receive the good gifts you want to give me.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

Look for the good gift the Father wants to give in Luke 11:11-13. How does this definition of a good gift change how we should pray to our Father?

## HEIRS OF THE FATHER

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*You should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family—calling him “Father, dear Father.” For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.*

—ROMANS 8:15-17

My brother, Tom, was adopted when I was in the second grade, and he is one of the best things that ever happened to our family. I can't help but think about how much it has meant to have Tom in our family when I read Romans 8. I am reminded of how beautiful it is when a child is lovingly taken in by a family and bonds at a heart level. To think that God has seen our neediness and made us his very own children by adopting us into his family, with all of its rights and privileges! Now we can be at home with God, free from fear and insecurity, filled with tenderness toward our Father and dependent upon him so that it is only natural to call him “Daddy.” The Holy Spirit enables us to talk to God this way, as he whispers assurances deep inside us that we are truly his child. One day by God's grace we, along with our brother, Jesus, will inherit everything God has for us.

Yesterday Tom called to tell me I owe him thirty dollars for my share of taking our dad out to eat for Father's Day. He lives near my parents and is always taking them out, helping them with projects, and doing all the other stuff the in-town kid is called on to do, so he likes to tell me and my sister that the eventual inheritance my parents leave is *not* going to be split evenly three ways! He's making his claim for the bigger share because he's done more than his share of parent care! (But you're really just kidding, right Tom?) I must admit that even though I haven't had the hassles or hardship, the inheritance sounds good. I suppose the truth is, I want the inheritance without the hardship.

Paul tells us that part of belonging to God's family is a willingness to share in both glory and suffering. You must be willing to suffer, not just as a victim of circumstances, but as one who chooses to endure persecution and hardship for the sake of the Kingdom. It is a result of obeying Christ in hard ways, ways that result in not just suffering, but sharing in his suffering by our identification with him. It is the painful privilege of being God's child, the hardship that comes with the inheritance.

*Brother Jesus, I confess that I want the inheritance without the hardship. I look forward to sharing in your glory, but I'm slow to share in your suffering. Give me the family courage and commitment so I can suffer and reign with you.*

### DIGGING DEEPER ∞

Compare Romans 8:15-17 with Galatians 4:1-7, looking for common truths.

## A LOVING FATHER DISCIPLINES HIS CHILD

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*If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children after all. Since we respect our earthly fathers who disciplined us, should we not all the more cheerfully submit to the discipline of our heavenly Father and live forever?* —HEBREWS 12:8-9

When we hear the word *discipline* we think about work and self-denial and maybe punishment. Many of us have experienced punishment that was delivered not out of love, but out of wrath, so we recoil from the very idea.

But God's discipline flows out of his love for us, not his anger. God is not out to get you. He does not want to hurt you. He does not lose his temper and lash out. God disciplines you as his own beloved child. The truth is, it is an uncaring and abusive parent who does *not* discipline his child.

Your Father is willing for you to hurt a little if it is needed to conform you more fully to his character or to equip you to carry out his calling on your life. And if you want to benefit from his discipline, you must submit to it.

My family loves to recall the time when my sister and I were in the back of the station wagon as toddlers. I don't know what my sister was doing, but my dad had threatened her a couple of times that if she did not stop, he was going to halt the car and give her a spanking. Sure enough, she didn't stop. He pulled the car over and opened the back of the car and grabbed for my sister to pull her out and spank her. But instead of grabbing her, he grabbed me by mistake! I was sound asleep in the back of the car and was awoken by an undeserved spanking!

God never makes those kinds of mistakes. His discipline is never too harsh or inappropriate, even when it doesn't seem right to us. Just as a child might think that going to bed with no supper is not fair or that a grounding would be better than a spanking, we do not always know what is the right discipline for us. But God does. He is the perfect parent who always does what is right with us. He does what is needed to shape our character and correct our course. And while his discipline is rarely pleasant at the time, when we learn from it, it makes us better.

*Father, I recognize how often I resist your loving discipline as I seek to satisfy myself and determine my own direction. Thank you for loving me enough to discipline me. Give me the grace to submit to your loving hand.*

### DIGGING DEEPER

According to Hebrews 12:7-11, what are the benefits of submitting to God's discipline?

Confess your slowness in doing God's will and your tendency to ask for your will rather than God's will in your prayers.

Petition God to reveal his heart to you so that you might love him more fully and accept his love more freely.