

A
way
in a
Manger

A Way in a Manger

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Dedications

Jesus- most would expect to see your name here, but I know the real reason behind it. I know that without you, nothing worth anything is produced from my life. I also know how long the road was between there and here and it has been the joy of my life to have you as my Faithful and Endearing Companion. You are the love of my life.

John- to a husband who is far more than I deserve and far more than I could have ever hoped for. Without your loving encouragement and support this book wouldn't be a reality, and neither would this ministry.

Austin and Justin- my sweet "sons of encouragement", you guys rock. Thank you for the prayers you and your classes prayed concerning this book. You boys make my heart melt and skip with joy all at the same time.

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Mrs. Ethelyn – to my mentor who has prayed for me without fail and helped me to see my world through the eyes of a wiser woman, thank you.

Foreword

As a big lover of people, parties, and giving, Christmas has always been one of my favorite times of the year. But for a growing number of people, Christmas is no longer “the most wonderful time of the year.” Cramming more special events into an already overcrowded schedule can be overwhelming. Not to mention the enormous pressure to overspend with an already overdrawn bank account and maxed out credit cards. Many are let down by all the expectations and to-dos associated with the last month of the year.

And then there’s the growing politically “correct” (but Biblically incorrect) movement to totally strip Christ out of Christmas. Those who aim to take away the manger and leave the holly while destroying the holy in our traditional carols and traditions. Even with the best intentions, it’s easy to lose the very essence of Christmas in the rat race of Xmas.

That’s what I love about *A Way in a Manger*. Amy has created a dynamic devotional to help us rediscover the true meaning of Christmas and bring the relevance of the manger to the 21st Century. Through short daily readings for the month of December, she helps us see that Christmas isn’t just the historical virgin birth of a baby over 2000 years ago. Instead, Amy vividly reminds us that the reason for the season is the celebration of the gift of abundant life that started in the manger but is still readily available gift to us today- not just for a happy holiday...but for EVERYDAY! The treasure of Christmas is found by unwrapping an entire WAY to live life in contrast to our culture... at a higher and much more significant level. It’s about discovering the unique, purpose-filled life that God especially custom tailored for each of us even before we were born.

You’ll love the easy to read, creative, and inspiring format that Amy has masterfully crafted. Just a quick five to ten minutes each day starting December 1st will leave you refreshed and refocused. Reading *A Way in a Manger*, Amy gave me a fresh glimpse of what my Wonderful Jesus adds to my life when I give Him permission to be my Counselor, my Mighty God, my Everlasting Father, and my Prince of Peace despite my circumstances.

There’s an uplifting verse each day that ties in with Amy’s down to earth topics. And she’s designed insightful questions to give us each something personal to reflect on throughout our day to further enrich our lives. Not to mention creative and inexpensive tips to help you give others the gift of YOU this Christmas.

A Way in a Manger is an excellent tool to bring back the joy to CHRISTmas for Christians and seekers alike. It’s a devotion that I highly encourage you to incorporate into your meaningful Christmas traditions for years to come. You’ll savor the insight and practical applications Amy gives that will make a positive difference in your perspective or for a loved one, friend, or co-worker long after you’ve taken down your Christmas tree and the holiday hype is forgotten. What a great read to lead into the New Year and a wonderful reminder of the ABUNDANT and purpose-filled life He came to give us!!!

Wishing You a Christ-filled Christmas and His Abundant Life every day,

LeAnn Weiss-Rupard



Introduction

Have you noticed that Christmas isn't exactly the joyful season that it used to be? It's hectic, rushed, expensive, exhausting and anything but peaceful. Whatever happened to Silent Night, Holy Night? Most of our Christmas celebrations are anything but silent. And holy? Well, not quite. With each passing year, I seem to be having more and more conversations with other women as to how quickly the Christmas season passes, how rushed we feel and how we know we aren't truly celebrating it in a way that remembers Jesus.

I began to wonder how we could stay connected to the purest meaning of Christmas while in the midst of this crazy season. Is it possible to celebrate this holiest and sweetest of holidays without all the hype and the extra nonsense? I believe it is and I have a theory. That theory is this: if we commit to take one moment of each day during the month of December to focus on Jesus, why He came and what that means for us today, we can experience a more meaningful Christmas than ever before.

I hope that this devotional will be a part of making that a reality for you. We are told in Isaiah 9:6 that Jesus would be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. But what does that mean today and how can it impact our Christmas season? I want to share with you over the next 32 days just what it means and how it was meant to impact not only the meaning of Christmas but the meaning of life as well. The daily entries aren't time-consuming and you should be able to do it in under ten minutes. Each day includes a *Passage to Ponder* which will be your focal Scripture for the day. There is also an encouraging devotional message designed to bring the Person of Jesus to life for you. Finally you will see a *Ponder This* portion which guides you in applying the devotional content in your daily life. Hopefully if anything, the time you spend reading your daily entry will be one time that day, you are guaranteed to be still and know that He is God; if even for five or ten minutes. I pray that it will be the fuel for your day and the hope in your season.

Perhaps when you are done with the book, you can put it on your bookshelf and pull it out next year to remind you once again of the truest meaning of Christmas. To me, the Christmas season truly is the most wonderful time of the year. I love it, I look forward to it and this year, I want to enjoy it. I hope you will as well. Thank you for including me in your holiday season and for allowing me to walk with you on this portion of your journey. Let me wish you and your family a Merry Christmas and a Christmas rich with meaning as you humbly rediscover *A Way in the Manger*.



Wonderful



1 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known what had been told them concerning this Child. And all who heard it were astounded and marveled at what the shepherds told them. But Mary was keeping within herself all these things weighing and pondering them in her heart.”
Luke 2:16-19
(Amplified Version)

PONDER THIS:

Choose a time in your day that you will set aside to ponder the purpose in the season. (pondering goes great with coffee or tea!)

Something about Christmas brings out the ponderer in all of us. I'm a ponderer by nature; at least that's what I like to call it. Some call it an analyzer, a brooder or on a bad day, a worry wart. At Christmas time however I find that I have a whole plethora of items to “ponder”. Where will we spend Christmas? Will we attend that party or pass this year? Is it rude to send Christmas cards *after* Christmas? Who should I invite to Christmas dinner? Do I have enough presents for my kids? Will the store get that item in on time for Christmas Day? Will the kids be scarred because their presents didn't make it under the tree until Christmas Eve simply because I haven't had the time to wrap? Am I putting enough emphasis on the real reason we celebrate? Am I spoiling my kids? Do my kids understand receiving more than giving? And the list goes on and on.

The past few years, this season of the year comes and goes. I'm not sure that I have slowed down long enough to take the time to reflect or ponder why we participate in this crazy, mayhem-like activity called Christmas. Honestly, it's no fun anymore. If I am unable to incorporate our family traditions with precision and skill, I feel guilty. If I don't take time to make sure the kids know it ain't all about Santa, I feel guilty. ENOUGH! Let's take our Christmas season back. Let's make it what it was meant to be. Let's take the crazy out of Christmas. Let's weigh and ponder the purpose of Christmas in our hearts, the way Mary did.

But how? You may ask. By shifting our focus. The entire purpose for this advent devotional is to help us deliberately focus and ponder the real reason we celebrate Christmas. By doing this we will develop a greater appreciation for the One whose birthday we are celebrating. We want to see that the birth of Jesus Christ was not just a one-time event worthy of celebrating. It is a one-time event that made us worthy. Worthy to have a direct relationship with God, our Father. Worthy of living a life with purpose and meaning. Worthy of all of the good God has in store for those who love Him. But as with most things in life, it is a choice. We can choose the rat-race, empty expressions of Christmas that our society has to offer us or we can choose the *Way* in the manger. We can choose to take time each day and focus our mind and heart on the Baby that changed the world forever. We can ponder how His coming not only fulfilled the purposes for His generation, but for generations to come, including our own.

I hope you'll choose to join me on this advent journey. To slow down, to re-shift, to re-focus, to re-charge, to ponder. And if you do, I think you'll notice something. I think you will finish this season and start the new year with a greater sense of why Jesus bothered to come to Earth for you and for me. I think this year meaning will replace the madness and you will have, without a doubt, found the *Way* in the manger.

2 December

What's in a name? In many cultures, your real name isn't determined until your character is revealed. At that time you receive a name befitting your character, whether that be good or bad. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a name is worth a lifetime of perceptions. Jesus is called many things in the Bible. He is called Savior, the Anointed One, the Chosen One. He is also called Lord, Redeemer, Deliverer. In John 1 though, He is called the Word. This is what John 1:14 has to say about why He came.

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

God, clothed in the skin of man, came to Earth to dwell and live among us for a while. He came to fully know the plight of man and fully pay our penalty of sin. That was the plan all along, not just an afterthought in eternity. It wasn't some sort of backup plan because things were going awry down here. All along God knew what humanity would do apart from Him and all along He knew it would take a sinless Savior to make us worthy of Him once again. The prophet Isaiah prophesied the advent or arrival of Jesus Christ hundreds of years before Jesus ever came on the scene. He foretold many details surrounding the birth and purpose of Christ. And in today's *Passage to Ponder*, he tells us the names that Jesus will embody and personify. They are names chosen by God to describe to us just how incredible our Savior is. They are also names that Jesus will prove to be true by the content of His character.

Interestingly enough, each of these names means far more than they appear to. They are words we have heard so often that their meanings have become dull and thus aren't easily defined. I have researched the origins and deeper meanings of each of these names and found incredible truth. I have seen how He fulfilled these names based on the Bible's accounts of him. I have also seen how He has the ability and desire to be the fulfillment of each of these names in our everyday lives. Honestly, if God isn't real in the trenches of your life, you'll never experience Him or know Him in the way He intended for you. God's primary focus is developing and continuing a relationship with you. His Son, Jesus made that relationship possible through His birth, death and resurrection. He wants to be as real in your life as your spouse, your friends or your family. And when He is, you will experience a depth and a joy in your life that is unparalleled in any of your experiences on this planet.

We will spend the next 30 days learning what it means for Jesus to be Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father and The Prince of Peace. I believe that you will never see Isaiah 9:6 the same way again. But most of all, my prayer is that you will never see *Jesus* the same way again. I pray that you will understand why He is worthy of your focus during a season created to celebrate the day "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6 (KJV)

PONDER THIS:

Do you truly believe you can have a relationship with God? If you do, what are you doing to nurture that relationship? If you do not believe this, why? Say your reasons out loud to God. He can handle it.





3 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"Jesus Christ
(the Messiah)
is [always],
the same,
yesterday,
today, [yes]
and forever (to
the ages)."
Hebrews 13:8
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

*What miracle do
you need God to
perform in your
life today, this
month or in the
upcoming year?
No situation is
too big or too
small. Tell Him
what you need.*

Do you believe in miracles? A miracle is defined as an extremely unusual event. Miracles can be viewed differently by people. Perhaps getting all the gifts bought by December 24th is going to be a miracle. Maybe a Christmas dinner without any burnt edges or subversive family remarks will be a miracle. Or possibly seeing your marriage last another year will be a miracle. A miracle may be that lump shrinking before you start chemo. Miracles are strange things. We tend to believe they are possible but we aren't sure they actually occur. Today let's look at a miracle that did occur and how the One who performed it isn't finished yet.

Think about it. God in human flesh. Now that's a miracle! The same Jesus that was present when God the Father spoke the world into existence is the same Jesus who left His heavenly home to come to Earth and be conceived in the womb of an unsuspecting virgin. Now that's a miracle! A virgin, who had never been with a man, was about to deliver a child born of the Spirit of God. That child would be born just as prophets hundreds of years before predicted. They predicted the town, the virgin, the reason. Now that's a miracle! They also predicted His life, His death and His resurrection. Every event, every detail fell into place just as God had intended. All for one purpose. Because God SO loved the world (you and me) that He was willing to give the only Son He had, and the Son was willing to go. Whoever would believe that the Son belonged to God and was sent by God as a ransom for their life, would never die but would have a perpetual and everlasting spiritual existence with God, even beyond the grave. Now THAT'S a miracle! An extremely, unusual event.

The good news is this: the same God that did all this for you, well, He's the same today as He was back then. He is always the same. The same as He was yesterday, the same as He is today and He will be that way forever. You can totally rely on God. He's not going anywhere. The same God that performed the miracle of Jesus is the same God that wants to perform a miracle in your life. Jesus Christ isn't just hope, He's the embodiment of it. Jesus Christ is not merely a fuzzy feeling or wishful thinking. He doesn't just offer hope. He's the embodiment of it. He is a constant, never-ending source of living hope.

On top of all this, it is His sheer delight to perform miracles in the lives of those He loves and who love Him. Don't just ask God for the ice cream in a cup. Ask Him for the cookies 'n cream milkshake with whip cream and a cherry on top. You can't ask Him for too much. If it's yours to have, it's His to give. Just ask. Go ahead. No problem, no disease, no pain, no hurt, no to-do list, no schedule, no broken relationship is to impossible for His intervention. And it's not too impossible for a miracle.

4 December

It was a divine intervention of miraculous and wonderful proportions. It was wonderful, it was a miracle. The Biblical meaning of Wonderful, is miracle. Interesting, isn't it? And the definition of the word miracle is "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs". Well, now, that just says it all. The birth of Jesus Christ was an extraordinary event and it was meant to be an intervention in every sense of the word. He came to hinder the hold and the power that sin had on the human race. He came to intervene in the affairs of human beings. He came to come between us and our despair, our depression, our rage, our immorality. He came to bring us spiritual *immortality* instead. As our *Passage to Ponder* states, He came to "save His people from their sins". That was the mission and thankfully it was not impossible.

The Amplified Version further explains this passage by noting that saving us from our sins entailed preventing us from missing out on the true purpose for our existence and the meaning of life, which is God Himself and a relationship with Him. The first purpose for the intervention was to send a Savior for the world. One who would pay the debt we owed to God. But it doesn't stop there. God wants to intervene in your life everyday. He wants to hinder the world's tug on your soul. He wants to come between you and everything that plagues you. Everything you suffer from and endure as a result of sin being in this world since the Garden of Eden.

He wants to walk with you through this illness. He wants to strengthen you to put down that pill. He wants to enable you to accomplish that task at work that seems impossible. He wants to coach you through this life in order to help you save your marriage, raise your kids, find your vocation, care for your aging parents, pay down that debt, find your purpose in life, choose your college, find your mate, you name it. And yes, He wants to intervene into your busy Christmas season and remind you that He can help you find peace in the midst of it. He wants you to discover that He is the answer to all that ails you and scares you in this life. He wants to offer you wholeness.

So what kind of human affairs do you have that need intervention? Do you need to be delivered from the pain of your past? Do you need to be forgiven for a wrong you committed? Do you need God's direction for your journey through this life? Do you need help with a teenager who thinks you don't have a clue? Do you need help learning to love your husband again? Do you need to forgive someone for hurting you? What is it that you need? What situation in your life is too big for you? My mentor says, "When it's too much for you, it's just right for God." Let Him intervene. Let Him manifest Himself in the affairs of your everyday life and watch Him be Wonderful.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"She will bear a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins [that is, prevent them from failing and missing the true end and scope of life, which is God.]"
Matthew 1:21
(Amplified Version)

PONDER THIS:

Jesus wants you to tell Him what you need. Matthew 20:32 says, "And Jesus stopped and called them, and asked, What do you want Me to do for you?" He cares and He's calling out to you. Say out loud what area(s) of your life need(s) an intervention and invite Him to intervene.





5 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"...the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

Psalm 118:23 (NIV)

Simply marvelous. The coming of Jesus Christ to our world was not just wonderful, it was not only a miracle. It was, in the words of the original definition, "a marvelous thing". When Isaiah 9:6 says that Jesus would be called Wonderful it is telling us that He would be our miracle. It also tells us that He would be a marvelous thing. Because the study of words has always intrigued me, I decided to dig a little deeper. I found that words like "supernatural, notably superior, eye-opening, inconceivable, rare and impressive" were a part of the definition for marvelous.

On that first Christmas long ago, the event that changed the world forever was indeed rare. God had never come to Earth to live as a man before. It was for sure impressive. I mean, a virgin birth? Angels in the sky? A star seen by wise men from thousands of miles away? It was eye-opening no doubt. Who knew the world needed a Savior so bad that God Himself would be willing to do the job? The fact that it was inconceivable is still evident today in the lives of those who think Jesus, a virgin birth and a heavenly Savior are just as much fantasy as Santa Claus.

But the definition for marvelous that most catches my eye is *supernatural*. I've always loved that word. It just sounds amazing. It sounds like something only God can do. Taking it a step further, a portion of the definition of *supernatural* is "a reality beyond the observable." That is exactly what the birth of Jesus Christ was. It was a reality beyond the observable. Just because we didn't see the Immaculate Conception does not mean it did not occur. Just because we didn't see the star guiding the wise men's way doesn't mean it did not shine. It was reality, a reality more real than anything we could have seen with our own eyes.

Could your life use some supernatural reality? Do you need for God to do something that is impressive and inconceivable? Do you long to see Him do a work in your life that is marvelous? A work that is notably superior to anything you have experienced before? An act of God that is both eye-opening and surprising? Yeah...me too. I have some concerns in my life that don't call for my very best or all that I can do. They call for much, much more. They are calling out for a supernatural, impressive, eye-opening work of God. I can't do any more than I'm doing. I can't change people. I am so limited. But not God...He's *limitless*. God showed me something several years ago. Look at the word capable. When you take that word apart you have "cap" and "able". He said, "Amy, there is a "cap" on what you are "able" to do. But I am more than capable of handling anything that concerns you. There is no "cap" on what I am "able" to do." Have you reached your "cap"? I have and I must be reminded of it daily.

Place your need for a supernatural work of God in His very able hands. Psalm 138:8 says, "*The Lord will perfect that which concerns me...*" And He will, but first you must release it into His hands. Beloved, God can do anything but fail. Trust Him and you will see for yourself. Then you too, will join the psalmist in saying, "*...the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*"

PONDER THIS:

What area in your life needs a supernatural work of God? Verbally tell him and then ask Him to help you release that area to Him.

6 December

I love little chocolate. The kind that come in small, shiny wrappers. Little candy bars, little truffles, little chocolate-covered peanuts. You know, little chocolate. For some reason it's just as indulgent for me as the whole candy bar, the bag of truffles or the bag of chocolate-covered peanuts. I actually smell the wrappers and the chocolate before I indulge. Some people call it an addiction, but not me. I prefer the word savor. I savor the chocolate for all that it is and all it has to offer me. I know, it's a serious problem. But it's one problem I'm not eager to have cured.

How often do we savor God like little chocolate? What kind of difference would it make in our daily lives if we stopped long enough to smell the wrapper and sniff the chocolate? We tend to focus on the glass that is half-empty, especially during this season. We notice what is left to be done, what is undone and what is humanly impossible to do. The wrapper and the chocolate can represent the good things in our lives we tend to ignore. The act of smelling the wrapper and sniffing the chocolate is an illustration of savoring your experiences.

This year savor the season. Don't just hang the decorations. Look at them, soak in their beauty. Recall memories that surround certain ornaments, a figurine, a photo or a traditional item you bake every year. Sit alone in the dark and enjoy the lights on your tree. Play that favorite Christmas CD that reminds you of sweet Christmases past. Email a friend you haven't talked to in a while. Read the story of Christ's birth found in Luke 2 and imagine you are there. Most of us don't need another present from anyone. So, think of ways to give of yourself. Make someone dinner or bake for them instead of stressing out about the "perfect" gift. Then write them a letter telling them why you appreciate their presence in your life.

Doing these kinds of things brings us back to the simple goodness that God provides for us everyday if we are willing to open our mouth and taste or open our eyes and see. God is not just good, he's unusually good. He's good to us beyond what we deserve. He gives to us the way a Father gives to his child, freely and sweetly. So don't mistake that parking space up front for luck. And don't mistake those sales and salutations as just the joy of the season. They are little gifts God gives each day in abundance. James 1:17 tells us, "Every good and perfect gift is from above...". Even little chocolate.

Take a minute and re-read the *Passage to Ponder*. "Blessed are you who run to Him." When the world starts to press in on you this season, and it will, run to Him. When you begin to feel overwhelmed with the pressure to create a perfect experience for those around you, run to Him. He's unusually good and He promises to bless you for running to Him. Let Him help you see His goodness all around you. Yes, life is hard. But God is good. Unusually good.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see— how good GOD is. Blessed are you who run to him."
Psalm 34:8
(The Message)

PONDER THIS:

Think back through your day. Ask God to help you catch some glimpses of His goodness that you may have overlooked and thank Him for being unusually good to you today.





7 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

“And the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found grace (free, spontaneous, absolute favor and loving-kindness) with God.”

*Luke 1:30
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

Take time to evaluate if you have a relationship with God through the acceptance of His gift of Jesus. This is the true meaning of Christmas. If you do not, pray and ask God to forgive you, be your leader in life and thank Him for His grace. If you have this relationship, but need to be forgiven of something, just ask Him. He delights to show you His grace. And ask Him to help you extend this grace to someone else as well.

Grace. One word, yet so many meanings. We use it to name a girl. We say it before we eat a meal. We ask for it when we travel. But what does God mean when He uses it as He did through the angel Gabriel in our *Passage to Ponder*? There are three dimensions of grace I want you to ponder today.

First I want you to see the dimension of favor. When God extends His grace to you and me, He is bestowing upon us a blessing that is an act of divine compassion. His favor shows us leniency. We are receiving assistance from God in order to bring about either a renewal or a maturity in our lives. That assistance is unmerited which means we did not do anything to deserve it or become worthy of it. God gives it because He loves us and *wants* to show His mercy to us. Which leads us to the next dimension I want you to ponder today.

This is the dimension of God's loving-kindness. It's a virtue of God that results in His approval of us. No one knows us better than we know ourselves. We may not feel like God approves of us. This is because we know deep down we don't deserve His approval. We know our inner thoughts, our inner feelings and emotions. We think, “Surely God who sees it too, couldn't approve of me.” But He does. Loving-kindness is God's way of tenderly and benevolently showing His affection for you. Deuteronomy 7:7 states, “The Lord did not set His love upon you and choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the fewest of all people.” God's love for you is based on Who He is, not on what you do. That makes His love unchanging and true.

The last dimension I want us to ponder is the dimension of pardon. To give grace is to pardon. It is basically the excusing of or the exemption of an offense without having to pay a penalty. God offers you His pardon, His immunity. He offers it in one of two ways. You need to examine for yourself what your response to His offer needs to be. First He offers this pardon as forgiveness for the offenses, or sins, you have committed. These are things that go against the guidelines of God. Or it can be the outright negligence of acknowledging the precious gift He sent you through His Son Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection occurred to act as your pardon. You must either accept it and allow Jesus to become the leader of your life or you will reject it and upon death you will be separated from Him forever. Second, He offers this pardon to you for the forgiveness of sins you commit once you have given your life to Him. When we become a Christian through accepting God's gift of Jesus, this doesn't mean all problems end and we no longer sin, we are still human. We still have much growing to do. For those times when we miss the mark, God offers a complete amnesty, if only we will ask. (see 1 John 1:9) So what will your response be? Will you treat the gift of God's grace cheaply and ignore it? Or will you embrace it and thank Him for it and allow it to reshape your life and bring you peace and joy? You can't out-sin God's ability to love you and show you grace. I'm living proof of that.



Counselor



8 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"...and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."
Isaiah 9:6 (KJV)*

PONDER THIS:

Make a list of the things that concern you the most right now. Ask Jesus for His advice and ask Him to help you to be aware of His counsel in your life. Remember, prayer and Bible reading are a great place to start.

Have you ever thought about how great it would be to have a personal counselor? Some people have personal trainers, personal chefs and personal shoppers. But the one I could use the most would be my very own counselor, to listen to me endlessly and give me great, godly advice. When God sent Jesus to Earth that first Christmas, one of the specific jobs He intended for Christ to fulfill was that of personal counselor. I want to take some time over the next few days to look at the different aspects of counseling God intended for Jesus to fulfill in our lives.

The first aspect of Counselor that Jesus was to accomplish was that of being our comforting counselor. A counselor is someone who advises us. They are a consultant of sorts. They are a confidant and usually someone we perceive to be an expert in the areas in which we need counsel. There are relationship counselors, financial counselors, school counselors, legal counselors, you name it. Knowing we need advice isn't the problem, figuring out where to get it from though can be the hangup. Jesus came to be a counselor in any and every area of your life.

The counsel He desires to give involves a compassionate, listening ear. It includes a great, big shoulder to cry on. And it always consists of comfort. When we go to friends, families or mentors for advice, the best they can do is listen and offer a word or two of encouragement. But they are human and limited not only in their understanding of your situation, but they are limited in their understanding of the unique purposes God has designed for your life. God, however, is omniscient, which means He is all-knowing. He knows your past, present and future and sees it in light of His grand design for your life. No other counselor on Earth can offer you that. And do it for free!

You may be wondering how Jesus can counsel you when He's not physically in front of you. Several of the most prominent ways are through time spent talking with Him (prayer), reading His guidebook (the Bible), and spending time with others who are a little further along in their Christian life than you are. Try not to focus on how He will do it, instead focus on believing He can and He will. He never expected you to be able to live this life and figure out the dilemmas and choices it presents all by yourself. If so, that would make you independent in an unhealthy way and God would much rather you be dependent upon Him. He knows that He alone has what you need to succeed in this life.

One more thing that makes His counsel so precious is that when you go to Him for counsel, He knows the root cause of your concern, because He sees your heart. This gives Him the ability to comfort you where you need it most and to reveal to you why you feel, think and act the way you do. He can give you insights like no other. He awaits your arrival in His office. He has a couch waiting just for you. Come on in, sit down. The Doctor will see you now.

9 December

Today's *Passage to Ponder* is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. I often turn to it in those times when I just don't have a clue. I love how this verse seems to assure me that when I come to that fork in the road and am not sure which direction to take, He promises to whisper to me which direction is the right one. Shew! I'm glad someone knows the way, because many times I become disoriented and lose mine.

In John 14:6, Jesus tells us something very important about Himself. He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He not only knows the way, He *is* the way. He is here to resolve our dilemmas concerning what direction we should go, in any situation. He is here to make our path in life more understandable and more clear.

Another aspect of His job as our counselor is to be a clear counselor. He's here to offer us clear and understandable advice that we can use in order to make the choices that will ultimately fulfill His purpose in our relationships, careers, finances, etc. Without the clear counsel of Jesus in our lives we will lose our way. We will also look at life with less than 20/20 vision. Going through your life without His input is like looking at a beautiful ocean sunset through blurry binoculars. It's like trying to read a suspense novel with foggy glasses. Or like looking into your loved one's face with impaired vision. When we look at that sunset through blurry binoculars, we miss the beauty of the way each color stands out and yet blends together; we lose our perspective. When we try to read a suspense novel with foggy glasses, we miss key facts and words that peak our interest and add to the excitement; we lose our hope. When we look into the faces of our sweet loved ones with impaired vision we can't see the truth in their eyes, the smile on their face and the familiarity that warms our heart; we lose our connection.

All these things happen as well when we attempt to walk through this life without the clear counsel of Christ. We have no perspective to see the big picture. We have no hope to see us through the difficult spots. We have no connection to give us a sense of purpose and greater worth. The whisper of God is often referred to as the still, small voice. Time spent with Him will fine tune our ears to hear Him. And next time we come to the fork in the road, we won't just take the one less traveled. We'll stop, listen to the breeze and tune our hear to hear the voice of our clear Counselor saying, "This is the way, walk in it."

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"Whether you
turn to the right
or to the left, your
ears will hear a
voice behind you,
saying,
'This is the way;
walk in it.'"*
Isaiah 30:21 (NIV)

PONDER THIS:

*Got clarity? If
not, you are not
alone. Clarity is
one of the greatest
struggles in life.
During this
season, it is
especially difficult.
Clarity is needed
for the biggest to
the smallest of
decisions. No
matter the size of
the concern, Jesus
awaits to offer
you clear and
understandable
counsel. Stop and
share with Him
the areas in
which you need
more clarity. Then
be still and listen
to His voice.*





10 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"I will bless the
Lord, Who has
given me counsel;
yes, my heart
instructs me
in the night
seasons."*

*Psalm 16:7
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

*Are you in the
Captain's seat of
your life? As
women we often
struggle with
control. We want
to be in charge.
We think having
control will ease
our fears when it
actually works
against the peace
for which we
strive. This is
one exception
where losing
control will be
the best thing for
you and everyone
else in your life!*

I remember the school guidance counselor. We had several at the schools I attended growing up. They had a variety of roles. They helped us pick our classes and they helped to settle disputes between students. Sometimes they just offered a listening ear to a student needing direction. They acted as a guide through the course of our stay in their school.

The word guide has many words related to it. One of those related words is the word pilot. "What does being a pilot have to do with being a counselor?," I thought. A pilot was described as one who offers "guidance over a dangerous and complicated course." They lead, they steer, they show the way to be followed. Every time I board a plane, I can't help but wonder what's going on in the cockpit. (Just like a woman, huh?) I visualize them doing their job and pray, literally, that they do it well. I can't think of a more dangerous and complicated course than one at 36,000 feet in the air! There is weather to take into account, there are other planes to watch for, tons of gadgets and gizmos to monitor and now there are lethal passengers to think about as well. What a job!

I know of another course that is just as dangerous and complicated. It's called Life. The more I walk with Jesus the more I realize I need help steering the course of my life. There have been times in my past when my life was outright dangerous and out of control. Now there are times when it is just downright complicated. There are no easy answers and no easy ways out. Sometimes though, I've learned that the easiest way out is through. But going through the dangers and complications of life takes courage and that is one virtue where I tend to come up short. Do you? I have a feeling I'm not alone.

The glorious thing about having Jesus as my pilot in this life is that when He gives me counsel and sees me through, I am better equipped for the next flight. I know which pitfalls to avoid, when to run to Him and when to hold up my hands and say, "I give!". Then when those dark moments come, my heart is full of His instruction and guidance and can guide me in the "night seasons". Jesus and His Words truly are as the psalmist says in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." When Jesus the Pilot is in the cockpit of your life, He acts as a lamp to your feet, giving you enough light for the next few steps. Other times He is the light for your path, giving you light to see further out to what lies ahead. In those moments when you are on a long, nighttime flight in your life and there is nothing but darkness ahead of you remember this encouragement from His Word also, "Even the darkness hides nothing from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You." (Psalm 139:12) You may see nothing but darkness and fear that you will lose your way, but God created the light and the dark and they are the same to Him. We may see darkness but He sees as clear as the day.

One other thing...instead of being the pilot of your plane, how about being the co-pilot? There is One who is much more qualified for the job.

11 December

“Caution, you are about to enter a no-spin zone.” This is a familiar phrase made popular by news analyst, Bill O’Reilly. Personally, I think it’s a great description of God’s counsel. With God, “the spin stops here”, as Bill would say. God is not interested in telling us what we want to hear. He’s interested in telling us what we need to hear. Often that information, though perhaps painful at first, can lead to great transformation in our lives. When God performs the role of counselor in our lives He is acting as our adviser in every sense of the word.

A third aspect of counselor that Jesus was sent to fulfill in our lives is that of a cautious Counselor. To advise means to caution, warn, inform and urge. It also denotes one that acts as a coach, a mentor, a teacher, a tutor or an instructor in general. But it also means, and I love this, to clue-in. Jesus was sent to help us clue-in to what He desires for our lives. He was also sent to help us clue-in to what it will take to make us truly joyful in this life. One would have to be without a clue in order to be clued in and there are many days, I feel clueless.

We must never underestimate the duty of our Lord to caution and to warn us concerning dangers that lie before us in this life. Or to inform us of attitudes, mindsets and dispositions that will cripple our pursuit of happiness and wholeness. Just as a parent with a child, a lack of boundaries means a lack of love. For if we truly love our children, we will be concerned for every aspect of their safety and draw up guidelines and boundaries to ensure they stay safe within our care. We know the dangers that lie in wait for them in this world, they do not. God has not set up boundaries in our lives to keep us from enjoying it. He has set up boundaries so that we can have life and have it to the full. Like a parent He knows the dangers that lie in wait out there for us, and we do not. We only think we do. He’s knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

When Jesus offers us His cautious counsel, let’s decide ahead of time to hear it. Hear it not just with our ears, but with our heart as well. Let us receive the instruction He so wisely gives and accept any accompanying correction that comes with it. For if we do, we will be wise now and in the future. A level of deepening maturity will begin to rise up within us.

Don’t forget to listen to His cautious counsel in every area of your life. Sometimes we need to listen to His counsel about how busy we are - which activities are fruitful and which activities are frustrating. We need to always make sure that we listen to the counsel Jesus offers us above the counsel of others. For others will always tend to have their interests or their opinions in mind when giving advice or counsel. Only our Heavenly Father continually has our best interest as His only interest.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*“Hear counsel,
receive instruction,
and accept
correction, that
you may be wise
in the time to
come.”*

*Proverbs 19:20
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

*Do you hear God
speaking to you?
What thoughts
are coming to
mind right now?
What counsel do
you believe you
are hearing from
God? What
changes need to
take place in your
life in order for
you to not only
hear, but also to
receive and accept
His counsel ?*





12 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

“Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don’t try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God’s voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he’s the one who will keep you on track.

Don’t assume that you know it all.”

*Proverbs 3:5,6
(The Message)*

PONDER THIS:

Where are you trying to figure life out on your own? If your mind is constantly busy trying to figure things out, you will be too busy to listen to Jesus. This is why being still and resting is so important. Every fiber in your being will tell you to get up and do something, but you must resist the urge. Wisdom comes from stillness.

Know-it-all. Have you ever called anyone that? Has anyone ever called you that? Honestly, I’ve done my share of both. No one likes to be around someone who thinks they know it all. It’s arrogant, prideful and just downright aggravating to listen to. Why is it though that when I think that I know it all, I never consider myself to be arrogant, prideful or aggravating to others? Hmm. That’s something to ponder.

Our society has a hero-worship mentality concerning experts. If you’ve written a book, or been asked to share your opinion on television, you are labeled as an expert. I think we are all experts on something, we just don’t get publicized for it. For instance, I consider myself to be an expert on chocolate. I can tell you the difference between regular chocolate, fancy chocolate, European chocolate and exquisite chocolate. (Bet you didn’t know chocolate could be exquisite. Trust me, it can.)

You are probably an expert too, you know. An expert on raising kids or how to keep a toddler in a grocery cart for an hour. How to use your toes to pick up objects when your hands and under the chin are full. How to get to the mall when there’s a backup on the interstate. How to get your grandkids to prefer you over their own parents. You get the picture. At times though we begin to take our expert status to a whole new level. We convince ourselves that we have the best and only plan regarding a particular dilemma. We even begin to believe our plan is far more realistic than any plan God may have. After all, we’re here in the thick of it and He, well, He’s way up there.

Another aspect of the word and role of counselor is that of an engineer. Not the kind that drive a train, but the kind that find ways to avoid or overcome difficulties in achieving or carrying out a goal. My husband is a network/Internet engineer. He spends his entire day leading his team to find ways to first of all, avoid difficulties and second, to overcome them once they have occurred. He refers to it as “putting out fires all day long.” Jesus wants to show you ways to avoid difficulties in your life. He wants to show you how to avoid burnout, debt, divorce, rebellion, hurt and chaos. But He also wants to show you how to overcome the obstacles that often lie in the path of achieving a goal. He wants to show you how to overcome fear, shame, insecurity, anger, interpersonal conflicts and so forth.

No one wants to see you succeed more than Christ. Romans 8:37 tells us, “Yet amid all these things we are more than conquerors and gain a surpassing victory through Him Who loved us.” You can’t rely on yourself to figure it all out. You have to trust Him with all your heart and believe that He is capable of keeping you on track. You were made to be a conqueror in this life, but the only way you will gain a “surpassing victory” is through Jesus Christ alone.

13 December

One thing is for sure, a counselor is one who is very involved in the life of the one he/she counsels. Before studying for this portion of the devotional I have to say I viewed a counselor simply as someone who gave advice. But it is much, much more than that. A true counselor invests in the life of another. Jesus Christ came to be a true Counselor to us. He did not come just to tell us what to do, but to make sure that we had the guidance, the clarity, the discernment and the plan to succeed in the life He gave to us. But He also came in order to share with us the power of imagination. He brings with Him the authority to bring about certain experiences in our lives and regulate the comings and goings of our life encounters and adventures.

You could try with all your might, wish on any star, blow out a candle with any birthday wish in mind and you still would not be able to even begin to imagine all that God has in store for you if your life belongs wholly to Him. The future of your life may be a mystery to you but to God it is a surprise waiting to be revealed. And not just your Earthly future, for your eternal future would blow your mind if you were to even catch one glimpse.

Our God is the Creator God. He spoke the world into existence, He thought up multi-colored parrots that talk. He paints the sunsets orange, pink, blue and purple. He imagined the bird of paradise flower and the fragrant stargazer lily. He conceived the idea of a child growing and moving with life inside the womb of a woman. And He is the one who dreamed up the incredible, incomprehensible idea of coming to this Earth as a baby to live, breath, die and rise again. You can't out imagine God. He's the Master Artist. The Master Inventor. The Master Director.

He is also a very creative counselor. He has so many ways to counsel you and to get your attention. He knows just how to speak to you and just how to help you understand Him. I urge you to take a moment now and then and praise Him for being so good at what He does. Thank Him for even bothering to do so and for the love that He showers upon you everyday of your life in ways that probably go unnoticed most of the time.

Let Jesus restore to you this Christmas season the wonder of His birth. Take time to sit and marvel at all the events that took place thousands of years ago on that night we call Christmas. Think about the shepherds on a hillside, minding their sheep and suddenly experiencing the sight of thousands of angels scattered across the sky. Imagine what that must have looked like and how the silence must have been just as deafening once the angels were gone. Imagine a young woman giving birth to her first child and knowing that He was God in human flesh. And how, as the song says, "she kissed the face of God." Just stop and think of that. Amazing, isn't it? God is a creative counselor indeed. He is "above and beyond anything we could ever ask for or imagine." (Ephesians 3:20) Follow His lead and take time this season to imagine again.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"However, as it is written:
'No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived what
God has prepared
for those who
love him!'"*
1 Corinthians 2:9
(NIV)

PONDER THIS:

*Find a quiet spot
tonight in your
home, perhaps in
front of your tree
once everything is
silent. Play some
Christmas music,
turn on the tree
lights and sit and
wonder and
imagine.*





The Mighty God



14 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"Therefore the Lord Himself shall give you a sign: Behold, the young woman who is unmarried and a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]."
Isaiah 7:14
(Amplified Version)

"Behold, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel--which, when translated, means, God with us".
Matthew 1:23
(Amplified Version)

PONDER THIS:

Don't miss the magnitude of "God with us" this Christmas season. What love He has for you that He would go to such great lengths just to be with you! Ask God to help you feel His Presence with you now and the entire Christmas season.

God. With. Us. My heart is quiet within me just soaking in the meaning of that. The One, True God of the Universe, the Creator God, here, on this sod, with you and me. Oh, how I pray that I am not the only one smitten with the thought of this right now! I pray that this phrase sinks deep into the marrow of your existence, deep into the marrow of your day. When the pressures of this season press in, stop what you are doing, wherever you are doing it, close your eyes and repeat after me, "God. With. Us."

The only real thing in this life, the only thing we can take with us when we go is "God with us". I know that it's hard for us to grasp that concept, considering all that an American lifestyle has to offer. But trust me, everything will pass, eventually everything else will disappoint and fail, but not God. He is always and forever with us. His goal in coming to this Earth was to create the personification of "God with us". He succeeded and the world has never been the same and neither have I.

Isaiah 9:6, you will remember, tells us that Jesus would be Wonderful, and He is. That He would be our Counselor, and He is. The next holy adjective used in that verse to describe Jesus is The Mighty God. We have seen the tenderness of a Savior sent to gently and lovingly walk the path of life with us, guiding us all the way. But now I want us to see that He was and He is The Mighty God. I am excited for you to see how having a mighty God on your side can bring an enormous degree of strength and protection to your life.

I purposely gave you two *Passages to Ponder* today. I hope you were able to detect something very interesting. Did you see it? One passage is from the Old Testament, which is a record of all that happened before Jesus Christ came onto the world scene. The other passage is derived from the New Testament, which is an account of that which occurred once Jesus arrived here on planet Earth. It also tells of the impact His arrival and ministry made on His own country, Israel, and the world beyond. The passage from Isaiah predicts what the passage from Matthew 1:23 fulfills. Do you see that? Isaiah prophesies the birth of Christ and says this will be the sign: an unmarried, young virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and she will call Him Immanuel, which means "God with us." Fast forward a few hundred years to the account in Matthew. You will see the angel talking to a very reluctant Joseph and telling him that the baby Mary is carrying is from God and has been sent for a divine purpose. Then it says, "All this took place that it might be fulfilled which the Lord had spoken through the prophet." (Matthew 1:22) The "with-us" of God was so important to Him that He wanted to make sure we didn't miss it. He spoke through Isaiah hundreds of years in advance to give us a "heads-up" that help, that He, was on the way. What a loving God! The Mighty God in human flesh, with us.....what an incredible thought.

15 December

The strength of Jesus Christ is incomparable. Nothing can be compared to the power He holds for He is truly the Mighty God. Being mighty probably conjures up particular images in your mind. Perhaps you see a superhero or you think of someone or something that is larger than life. You aren't too far off from the truth. Mighty means to be powerful *and* to have great influence. It means to possess power, not just for the sake of having it, but to use that power to act or produce an effect. It also means to be great in the sense of having a magnitude and an effectiveness that is utterly remarkable.

Do you know that God wants your relationship with Him to be the most influential part of your life? I can say from personal experience that I am convinced that Jesus Christ doesn't just want to be a *part* of your life. Jesus Christ wants to *be* your life. He wants the time you spend with Him to make an impact in every area of your day. He wants His power to bring about a much needed change in your heart. He wants His peace to give you patience with your children or a co-worker (especially when you can't tell the difference between the two!). He wants to give you the power to love your husband when you just aren't sure he's worth it. He wants to give you determination when you need to finish that class, pay off that debt or see a relationship through a rocky point.

There are plenty of people in the world with power. Kings, Presidents, CEO's, Prime Ministers, politicians, mayors, principals, moms and dads. But it is a rare find when a powerful person can use their power to bring about a noticeable effect in the life of other people. The kind of noticeable effect that is positive and lasting. I'm not impressed with someone who promises to use their power to improve my life. I'm impressed with someone who *uses* their power to improve my life. So far, the only One who has ever been able to do this for me with lasting results is Jesus Christ. Sure, the Bible is clear that He does want us to honor Him, to love Him and to serve Him. However, I do not serve, honor and love Him because I desire to comply with a religious standard. I serve Him, honor Him and love Him because He has been the greatest force of influence and effectiveness upon my life; because no one has ever loved me the way that Jesus Christ has loved me. No one has ever tolerated me the way that Jesus has. No one has ever been patient with me the way He has. And no one has ever pursued me the way my sweet Lord has. Had it not been for the Mighty love and the Mighty power of Jesus Christ I would have no doubt perished in my sin and affliction as a wasted life.

I feel blessed beyond measure to love and serve a God who desires to invest in my life. A God who wants to be helpful and patient and loving. Who wants to see me become everything He intended for me to be. A God who desires more from me than just verbal praise, but who desires to shape me into a person whose life will become a living praise to Him because of His might and its effect in my life. "For the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name." (Luke 1:49)

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"Be exalted,
O LORD, in your
strength; we will
sing and praise
your might."
Psalm 21:13 (NIV)*

PONDER THIS:

*In what ways
have you seen the
mightiness of
God in your life?
How have you
seen the effective-
ness of His power
and strength in
the course of your
experiences? Take
some time now to
reflect on this and
to express your
appreciation for
His attentiveness.*





16 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"But I will sing of
your strength, in
the morning I will
sing of your love;
for you are my
fortress, my refuge
in times of trouble."
Psalm 59:16 (NIV)*

*"Who is this
King of glory?
The LORD strong
and mighty, the
LORD mighty
in battle."
Psalm 24:8 (NIV)*

PONDER THIS:

*When is the last
time you felt
protected?
Let down your
feminism a
moment if you
need to and be
real. Didn't it fill
a space in your
heart that goes
unfilled most of
the time? Share
with Him now
the areas in your
life where you
know that you
need Him to be
your fortress and
your high tower,
protecting you
from life's sieges.*

When I say, "Jesus", what kind of pictures play across the screen of your mind? Do you see a gentle Jesus with lambs and children at His side? Do you see a miracle worker healing the sick and giving sight to the blind? Perhaps you grew up seeing watercolor paintings portraying the tender and loving side of our Lord in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. He was indeed all of this, but just like the humans He created in His image, He is multi-faceted and has many character traits that make up who He is. I would venture to guess that you have probably never seen a picture of Jesus as a valiant warrior. I don't mean the image of Him turning over tables in the temple because a virtual flea market had taken up residence in the house of the Almighty and Holy God. I am talking about the image of Jesus as a fighter in battle. Allow me to introduce you to this side of Him, a side that has become one of my most beloved character traits of Christ, the brave and fearless warrior.

Mighty is the title placed upon Jesus that we are focusing in on for a few days. It may seem like one word, but it is chocked full of meanings and definitions lost when we approach it with just one mindset. Two definitions comprised in the word mighty are champion and valiant. I am a die-hard romantic. For some women in our modern-age that is an affront to all they believe we have accomplished as a gender. But I know who I am in Christ and as a woman and yet I am still a romantic. I love movies portraying medieval times where a woman is in need of rescue, not due to weakness, but due to an assault from without or an attack on her honor. She is rescued by one who sees her as worthy of honor and he swoops in to give her back what is rightly her own. This is Jesus the warrior, the original knight in shining armor.

He is our advocate and defender. He lives to do battle for our honor. He is a champion and He always wins. He is mighty in battle - swift, calculating and brave. He is our fortress in times of trouble. He is like a high tower (think Rapunzel here ladies), that lifts us up and keeps us safe and secure from the battle. He stands between us and the calamity that desires to lay siege on our hearts and minds.

He is also valiant. I love this word and I'll tell you why in just a moment. But first I want you to know the meaning of valiant. It means to possess bravery and boldness and to *act* with bravery and boldness. It means one who is heroic and does not feel or display fear. Jesus Christ is fearless. Nothing scares Him, nothing. No foe can withstand Him and just think, He's on your side. He is the ultimate bodyguard. Now let me tell you why I love the word valiant. I love it because it says to me that the one who is valiant is willing to defend me at all costs. He will never retreat and He will never grow weary in the battle for my life, my safety or my honor. The word valiant stirs in me a sense of safety and a comprehension that my God is not only the Lord and Love of my life, He is also the willing and able Defender of my soul.

17 December

He is indeed the King, head over all. I have to admit that trying to take the vastness of the Mighty God and put it into succinct daily devotionals has been a huge challenge for me. This concept of the Mighty God in human flesh is absolutely mind-blowing and very hard for my finite mind to conceive. There is a greatness and an unusual largeness if you will, to God and His Son Jesus that we just cannot wrap our brains around. Add to that the idea that someone so great and so large would want to commune with us and you have a prescription for a “brain freeze”, as my boys call it.

His powers go beyond that which is customary and usual. He is excellent in all that He does and He is the very best of everything. There is not one single thing in heaven and on Earth that does not belong to Him. You know that bank account that you guard? It's His. You know those children you hold tight? They're His too. That savings account and investment portfolio you trust to provide for you? It's all His. That is why tithing (giving God 10% or more of what we earn) is such a unique act. We feel as though we are doing the Mighty God, Owner of the Universe a favor because we are giving him a portion of our paycheck every month. In actuality we are giving Him back 10% of what He has loaned to us. It's all His.

When we acknowledge Him as head over all, it releases us from trying to be over it all ourself. What a relief to know it is not all riding on my shoulders. What a realization to find that it never really was. He is a capable, tough, enduring God. He can handle all that concerns you. You cannot bring to Him any problem that will shock Him, frustrate Him or cause Him to fret. I'm often reminded that when it's too much for me, it's just right for God. He's been there, done that and got the t-shirt. As a matter of fact, He created there, He conquered that and He owns the t-shirt company!

Honor Him as head over all. Honor Him with your words of praise, honor Him with your (His) checkbook, honor Him by releasing that grip of control you keep on every possible area and person in your life. And take time this Christmas season to honor Him in your home. Place a little more emphasis on Him than you have perhaps in years past. Make the real “reason for the season” a noticeable part of your holiday celebration. As you allow yourself to shift your focus this Christmas from your problems to Jesus, your Solution, I believe you will feel His Presence in a new, exciting and refreshing way.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

“O Lord, You have great power, shining-greatness and strength. Yes, everything in heaven and on Earth belongs to You. You are the King, O Lord. And You are honored as head over all.”

*1 Chronicles 29:11
(New Life Version)*

PONDER THIS:

In what areas of your life could you honor God more? What areas are not honoring to Him at all? Think of a few things you can do differently this year to bring honor to Christ in your home or office. Allow Him to be the special guest in your home this season. After all, He is the Birthday Boy!





18 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"The Lord God is my Strength, my personal bravery, and my invincible army; He makes my feet like hinds' feet and will make me to walk [not to stand still in terror, but to walk] and make [spiritual] progress upon my high places [of trouble, suffering, or responsibility]!"
Habakkuk 3:19
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

Do you find that the Christmas season is draining emotionally and physically? I do. Let's strive to spend time in God's Presence. You can do this by reading His Word or listening to music. You can even enjoy some coffee outside on a brisk morning while appreciating His creation. See if it makes a difference in the energy available to you for your day and for this busy time of year.

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It is rich with personal meaning and application for you and me. Let me share with you briefly what this verse says to me. First it says that God is my Strength. I don't have to come up with strength on my own, he has strength for me and it's His. He is also my personal bravery; I love this one. I am not always brave and have faced some real times in my life where I trembled with fear. I had to meet an obstacle head on but felt I couldn't because it required a bravery that did not exist within me. Then I read this and found that God is my bravery, my very personal bravery for those inward battles against fear. He is also my invincible army. He is incapable of being conquered. Which is great because I feel conquered many times before I even reach the battle line.

He makes my feet like that of a deer who is able to walk on uneven paths and climb steep hills without falling. He promises to make me walk, "not stand still in terror, but to walk". At times when faced with an uphill climb in my life I just freeze. I am terrified of what will be required of me to move beyond the mountain that lies before me. He will give me the strength and the ability to keep walking ahead. And last but certainly not least, He will help me to make spiritual progress while I'm in the middle of trouble, suffering or crushing responsibility. Ever feel like your life is just spinning in circles and going nowhere? God's strength and bravery are an absolute cure for this dilemma.

It is such an encouragement to know that we can make progress in life even when everything isn't going perfect. Likewise, it is reassuring to see that even our greatest suffering is bringing about spiritual progress in each of us. We can also gain strength during those times when we feel as if we are being crushed under the weight of various responsibilities. Because even then God is using those struggles to create progress in our lives.

The word power is tucked into the meaning of mighty. And it offers us a little nugget of truth to enhance the understanding of today's *Passage to Ponder*. It defines power as being spiritual ability and a source of energy. As you re-read Habakkuk 3:19, you can see that it is God's spiritual ability that makes the difference, not ours. He is the unending source of energy that can fuel us during the uneventful days, as well as those wrought with tragedy, trial and turmoil. Our society is always looking for a new source of energy. Vitamins, supplements, energy-bars, energy-drinks, you name it, we want energy and we know the value of it. If I didn't allow the emotional side of my life to drain me so, perhaps the physical side of my life might not feel so lethargic at times. If I didn't allow the emotional side of my life to drain me, perhaps the physical side of my life might not feel so lethargic. If we took time everyday to refuel in God's Presence, we would find energy we didn't know we had. In a season known for zapping us of our energy, let's invigorate our lives by sitting with the Savior. In doing this we will recapture and enjoy this beautiful and holy season, rather than simply enduring it.



The Everlasting Father



19 December

PASSAGE
TO PONDER:

"Your throne is set up from long ago. You have always been."

Psalm 93:2
(New Life Version)

PONDER THIS:

What experiences have you had in your life that cause you to doubt God's unconditional love and His unconditional Presence in your life? Ask Him to replace those hurts with a confidence in Who He is and the love He has for you, knowing that He will never walk out on you. Never.

My youngest son Justin asked me the other day, "Mom how did God get created?" A great question, huh? It's a question we've all wondered at some point. My oldest son, Austin piped up with great maturity and confidence and said, "Justin, we are humans. In our mind there is always a beginning and an end. We don't have the ability to understand that God has always been, because we still think He had to be created. We just can't understand it." Shew! Glad someone answered that one for me. To which Justin simply responded, "Oh, well, I guess I'll have to ask God to explain it to me when I go to heaven."

There is a comfort to knowing that God isn't new. He isn't a fad or a passing novelty. He is eternal. He has always been and He will always be. I find that as quite a relief. "As the heavens are higher than the Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55:9) This verse spells out why we cannot fully understand certain aspects of God, like His eternal existence. There is a perpetuity to the existence of God and His Presence in our lives. His reign as King and Father of all has been uninterrupted even before time as we know it began.

Because of Jesus you can enjoy something with God that some of you may have never had in your lives, a continuous relationship with a father. For some of you the thought of a father who doesn't leave is quite foreign to your wounded heart. But I am here to bring you great news! Jesus Christ is the Everlasting Father and He will never walk out on you. His care for your life is ceaseless. You can rest dear one in the very big, safe arms of your Heavenly Dad.

1 John 4:18 tells us that, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." You do not have to fear the loss of God's love. It is forever and always. Maybe you have been plagued with the unbearable burden for years that you are the reason your Earthly father or mother left. Beloved, trust me on this and please hear me. It had nothing to do with you. You are not the reason they left. They left because of the battle within not without, the battle with them, not with you. Anytime my boys have behaved in a manner they later regret and come to me to apologize, I always tell them, "Nothing you say or do will make me not love you." There is nothing you can say or do that will make God stop loving you. The other side of that coin is this; you can't do anything to make Him love you more. He showed you how much He loved you when He took your place on the cross. Your actions or inactions do not change the depth or constancy of His love for you. Rejoice in that. There is also nothing you have said or done that will make Him walk away. In order for God's love to be temporary and impermanent He would have to cease being Who He is and forgo His very nature. And based on the authority of the Word of God I can promise you that will never happen.

20 December

I am a Daddy's girl. I have been richly blessed with a man in my life who knew how to be a great Daddy. By the way, most Southern girls like myself call our fathers Daddy 'till the day we die, and I will be no different. Growing up I thought everyone's Daddy was as wonderful as mine, until I got older. I began to realize that not everyone had a Daddy like I had. Many of my friends didn't have a father who was present at all. Some had a man in their home that bore the title, but who were as distant and unfamiliar to them as a perfect stranger. Men too proud to engage, too busy to nurture or too wounded themselves to love. What a tragedy this is in the heart and life of a little girl, for it is her Daddy who gives her the first encounter with self worth that she will have. If he is physically absent or emotionally absent she will carry around questions about herself most of her life that she will seek to have other men answer. What goes without saying, because you probably know firsthand, is that she will also carry with her deep wounds of the heart.

In Psalm 68:5 God has promised to be, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows..." In fact there are hundreds of Scriptures concerning God's heart towards the fatherless. God knows that there will be those in life who do not take the privilege of parenting to heart and He will not allow them to have the final say in your life. He will be your Father. Let Him take that Father wound and heal it with His love. Words cannot express what a joy that would be to your Heavenly Father. He awaits with expectation for you to cry out to Him. He is using this devotional today to tell you that He desires to fill your void and heal your father wound. He can heal every wound your Earthly father inflicted. Every one.

Romans 8:15 encourages us by saying, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'." Abba means Daddy and it is a very precious expression of an intimate father-child bond. When you accept the gift of Jesus Christ and live for Him, you gain the rights of sonship or "daughter-ship" in the family of God. He sees you as His child and gives you the high privilege of calling Him "Daddy." The kind of Daddy who never leaves you and always protects you and always loves you, without fail.

One of the sweetest gifts my Daddy gave me was an understanding that God was my real Father. He would often tell me, "Amy, I'm just your Earthly father. But you have a father greater and better than me...He's God, your Heavenly Father. One day I will not be here, for whatever reason, but your Heavenly Father will never leave you and He will always be with you." As a child that conversation perplexed me for I knew it was true, but I didn't like to hear it. I couldn't imagine anyone greater than my Daddy. But oh, how I have grown to understand the truth He lovingly planted in my heart as a child. Jesus Christ, the Everlasting Father....forever mine, forever yours.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

No one else should carry the title of 'Father'; you have only one Father, and he's in heaven."
Matthew 23:9
(The Message)

PONDER THIS:

I urge you to allow God to heal any father wounds you may still bear. Seek God in prayer and ask Him to help you. Talk with a trusted friend, a pastor or a Christian counselor and permit your Heavenly Daddy to redesign the image of a father in your heart, mind and spirit.





21 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"
2 Corinthians 5:17
(NLT)

PONDER THIS:

Where are you resisting God's re-shaping process? Is fear a factor in your resistance? If so, what are you afraid of? Think it through deliberately. Knowing fear does not come from God, who would most benefit from you resisting God's renewal process in your life? Are you going to let him win? Resolve here and now to allow God to do whatever it takes to do away with the old and rebuild the new in you.

The world is full of fathers. You have the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates. Jelly Roll Morton is the father of jazz. Willis Carrier is the father of air conditioning. Floridians give this man a round of applause, please. There are the founding fathers, who framed our Constitution. And how can we forget the father of the television, Philo Farnsworth? Fathers are everywhere. A unique, yet often forgotten definition for father is one who is the author or creator of something. A father can also be an initiator, a founder, an establisher, a pioneer, an inspirer. One who breathes new life into projects, endeavors and people.

Jeremiah 18:4 says this, "But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him." In this beautiful Biblical metaphor of the potter and his clay we see a snapshot of our lives in the hands of a creator God, a creative Father. You and I are that lump of clay. In Scripture the human race is often referred to as clay or earthen vessels. And to say that we are often marred, well, that is an understatement for sure. I truly believe no matter how wonderful your life may have been in comparison to those who have endured one tragedy after another, we are all marred in some way. We all have our hang-ups, our issues, our hurts and our sorrows. So look with encouragement at what God the Father does with marred clay like you and me. He doesn't throw it away, he forms it into another pot. He starts over. He remakes it and gives that marred lump of clay a second chance. Knowing now that as Father He is an establisher, a pioneer and a founder, you can see that He is perfect for the job of shaping your clay into a form that seems best to Him!

Could you use a do-over, a second chance? Several years ago I needed a major do-over in my life and guess what I found? I found that Jesus Christ is indeed the Everlasting Father. As father, he became an initiator and an inspirer of something brand new in me. He created a second chance and offered it to me and I took it. He breathed into my weary heart and mind, new invigorating life. He forgave my past and helped me to forget it. I've had a few more do-overs since then, and each time I find the words of 2 Corinthians 5:17 to be true and trustworthy. We will often have to choose to believe we are a new creation, even when we don't "feel" it inside. Christ promises you and promises me that when we abandon our lives to Him, He will give us new life. The old is gone, unless we resurrect it ourselves.

Oh, how we often fight this painful process of being re-shaped! We desire the end result, but the process of being remade is difficult to endure. I urge you, as one who has been re-shaped, to yield your clay to the Potter. Allow Him to do whatever He needs to do to make your earthen vessel one of strength, beauty and usefulness in your world and His.

22 December

We Americans are huge fans of one-stop shopping. It's quick, convenient and meets a need for simplicity in our hurried lives. Meet God, the Source for everything you need or want in life, all in one Person. One-stop shopping Personified. If there is one message I try hardest to share with women it is that God and God alone is what you really want. It's not the better husband, the more obedient kids, the perfect job, the extreme makeover of a lifetime or a wardrobe to rival all, it's God. All of these desires are only symptoms of a greater and deeper need in our lives. In a few days when nothing is left under your tree but piles of gift wrap and tissue paper, you will not have found the source for what you long for in this life. You'll have a few nice things to make you "happy", but only things that are of God and that have eternal value will truly satisfy you. God is indeed the Source of all things and it is for His pleasure that we are given life. All things exist in and through and by Jesus Christ and God our Father.

The Bible is brimming over with Scriptures that declare God and His Son as our Source. I want to share just a few with you today. The first one tells us that Jesus is a Source of comfort and consolation. 2 Corinthians 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of sympathy (pity and mercy) and the God [Who is the Source] of every comfort (consolation and encouragement)". As I was preparing this devotional for today it occurred to me that even the times when a friend has comforted me or a song has consoled or encouraged me, that God was the source of that comfort. He simply used various methods of getting a message to me that He was there and that He understood.

The second Scripture I would like to show you is found in Hebrews 12:2. It says this, "Looking away [from all that will distract] to Jesus, Who is the Leader and the Source of our faith [giving the first incentive for our belief] and is also its Finisher [bringing it to maturity and perfection]." Often, we are misinformed when we believe that we are responsible for the faith we have. We are not the source of our own faith. Amazing, isn't it? God is responsible for the first incentive for our belief in Him. We can't take credit for that. Then He takes that faith and He matures it and perfects it. If you are lacking or lagging in faith right now, ask Him for it. Go to the Source.

The last verse I want to bring to light is found in Hebrews 5:9. "And, [His completed experience] making Him perfectly [equipped], He became the Author and Source of eternal salvation to all those who give heed and obey Him..." If you know you do not have an eternal relationship with Jesus and you know you need to be saved from your own sin and your life's meaningless path, this verse assures you that He is perfectly equipped to be your personal Source for eternal salvation if only you will heed and believe. You need look no further than Jesus Christ to find the only source you will ever need for comfort, faith, salvation and so much more.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"Yet for us there is [only] one God, the Father, Who is the Source of all things and for Whom we [have life], and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through and by Whom are all things and through and by Whom we [ourselves exist]." 1 Corinthians 8:6 (Amplified Version)

PONDER THIS:

Is God the source to which you turn for every need you have in life? If not, why? His resources are so vast, His love for you so deep, what Earthly sources could possibly compare?





23 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"And the Lord,
the God of their
fathers, sent to
them persistently
by His messen-
gers, because
He had compas-
sion on His peo-
ple and on His
dwelling place."
2 Chronicles 36:15
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

*I'd like to dedicate
today's devotional
to my sweet friend
Stephanie Wright
whose life was
perfected and
completed on this
day in 2005.
Stephanie's life
was one well
lived. She inspired
everyone around
her to love Jesus
more. She was a
beautiful, godly,
inspiring, precious
and dearly loved
young woman
who will forever
be missed. I am
better for having
known her and
honored to have
called her my
friend.*

In order for something to be everlasting, it must be persevering and tediously persistent. I have a mental image of tediously persistent. It involves my children. Children can be and usually are tediously persistent. Where do you think the character traits of persistence and perseverance come from? They come from God, for we are created in His image. Though many times persistence and perseverance have caused a strain in our lives when someone else is exercising their version of that trait, all in all it is a very positive thing to possess.

God is very persistent. He has a plan for your life and He will persist, in a way you can't even imagine, to seeing every detail through regarding His design on your life. How committed is He? Philippians 1:6 says, "that He Who began a good work in you will continue until the day of Jesus Christ [right up to the time of His return], developing [that good work] and perfecting and bringing it to full completion in you." He has committed Himself to have an unlimited and indefinite stay in your life. He sent His Son Jesus to lead the way in this endeavor and to develop, perfect and bring to completion all of the wonderful intentions He has planned for you. We get so caught up in thinking we must clean up our act, kick our habits or grow in Christ all on our own. It's just not true, in fact, it's not even the design. The design is for us to lean and rely completely on Jesus Christ to do this huge job of completion in us. Our part? We must remain available. We must keep our lives accessible to the Master Renovator.

He is also persistent in that He will continue to persist and exist despite any interference or treatment He may receive. When is the last time you showed that kind of persistence? I have to admit, persistence is an act of the will for me. When I give my all but run into obstacles or have to bear any unwanted treatment, I have a natural tendency to want to bail. I mean, "Who needs this?", I often think. "Forget it, I tried. Next?" But oh....am I so thankful, so deeply honored and grateful that my precious Jesus didn't respond to me this way. When I was interfering in the completion of His project through rebellion or stubbornness He persisted. When I often treated Him with disregard and felt I didn't need His help, He persisted. What determination! What perseverance! What love!

I once heard Bible teacher and author, Beth Moore, share a story that I could relate to so well. She said God had been so persistent in His love and desire to refine her that she was for sure her tombstone would one day read, "God got tired." I cannot tell you how many times that exact thought has in some way or another crossed my mind. Of 'course we know it isn't true, but it sure feels that way sometimes. Beloved of this one thing I am sure, the God who does not slumber or sleep, lives to tediously persist in the crossing of every "t" and the dotting every "i" in your life. And when He's done, He'll say, "It is very good." (Genesis 1:31)

24 December

Out of all of the days in this devotional book, today and tomorrow are the most difficult to write. Just like our holiday plans I feel the pressure of an expectation (more mine than yours) to make the devotions for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day something extraordinary. I want them to be packed with meaning because the days they represent are laden with significance in our emotions and our spirits. I am aware however that the amount of details and expectations associated with Christmas time pale in comparison to what countless friends, families and individuals must endure during this time of year. Though the season is most often set aside for memory-making, joy, peace and comfort, I realize that for some, Christmas is a time of great sadness and despair. The losses of the past year and years past become acutely painful during the holiday season.

Knowing we cannot often repair or resurrect the losses we incur in this life, perhaps it would bring some comfort on this day of silent night to focus on something that we can never lose, God's love. Today and tomorrow are all about God's love. That is the central message of Christmas. We can draw many wonderful life lessons from the gift of Jesus and we should, but in the end it was a faithful God expressing Himself through love that ultimately prevailed. It prevailed in providing for the world, a **Way** in a manger. Jesus was as He said in John 14:6, "...the **way** and the truth and the life." He was the **Way** on that silent night thousands of years ago and He is still the **Way** today.

Let's make a conscious choice to rejoice today, if even for a moment. Not only in the gift of God's love through Christ's birth, but also in the reality that nothing can separate us from His love. He does not give love with conditions and expectations, as the world does. He gives His love freely and lavishly. Death cannot separate you from His love. Life's trials and mistakes cannot separate you from His love. Your past and your present cannot separate you from His love. No angels, demons or powers on Earth or below can separate you from His love. You cannot reach a height of achievement or a depth of depravity that can separate you from His love. Nothing, NOTHING, in all of creation can separate you from the love of God.

What a glorious realization worth celebrating! No matter what losses life has brought your way, no matter what losses you have brought upon yourself, you cannot be disconnected, severed, segregated, blackballed, ousted, detached or discharged from His love for you. God is the manifestation of love and His love is never interrupted and it has no end. He will never leave you, forsake you or die. I can promise you based on God's Word that He is one beautiful constant you will have with you each and everyday no matter what each year may bring. Celebrate His love today!

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"For I know that nothing can keep us from the love of God. Death cannot! Life cannot! Angels cannot! Leaders cannot! Any other power cannot! Hard things now or in the future cannot! The world above or the world below cannot! Any other living thing cannot keep us away from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord."
Romans 8:38-39
(New Life Version)

PONDER THIS:

*Ask your sweet Heavenly Father to give you a great sense of His love for you today. If you are hurting, ask Him to continue the healing process and to give you a greater measure of His Presence. Ask Him to give you peace and a sense of comfort to strengthen you while you go through this difficult time. And know that I'll be praying for you as well.
Merry Christmas!*





The Prince of Peace



25 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*“Glory to God
in the highest,
and on earth
peace, good will
toward men.”*

Luke 2:14 (KJV)

PONDER THIS:

*“Hail, the
heaven-born
Prince of peace!
Hail the Son of
righteousness!
Light and life to
all he brings,
risen with healing
in his wings.
Mild he lays
his glory by,
born that man
no more may die,
born to raise the
sons of earth,
born to give them
second birth.
Hark! the herald
angels sing,
Glory to the
newborn King!”*

The smell of the tree, the cookies baking in the oven, the beauty of the decorations, the embrace of loved ones, Christmas Day is here! I realize we all react to this day differently. Some panic, some relax. But for this small, quiet moment, I want you to praise God. It may be the only moment you have today to fix your gaze on Him. Thank Him for His love to you through sending His one and only Son Jesus to be so much in your life that your heart can hardly contain it all. He is your Wonderful miracle, your caring Counselor, your Almighty God, your Everlasting Father and your Prince of Peace. No matter what is going on in your house today, these declarations are worthy of a few moments of celebration.

As your Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ comes to bring you peace and calm. I pray at least a little of that will find its way into your home and your heart today. Let's look at the word peace and gather a fresh bouquet of understanding from its core meaning. Peace is defined as “a state of tranquility or quiet; freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions; harmony in personal relations”. Yep, that sounds about right.

The peace of Jesus was also meant to give us freedom from “disquieting thoughts”. There are moments when the thoughts in our head and the emotions in our heart can feel frantic and overwhelming. These thoughts and emotions, ever in the forefront, precede all we do and color everything we see. Here is what Jesus wants you to do with those “disquieting thoughts” today. “Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down.” (Philippians 4:6,7)

Our Lord's peace is also one that brings harmony to our personal relationships. Not all relationships will be mended this very instant, though it is certainly not impossible for God. Most of the time there are many steps in the healing process of broken relationships. But on this day of His peace you can certainly give Him the gift of your willingness. Holding onto the hurt of a fragmented relationship will only destroy you and your peace.

The advent of our Lord Jesus was meant to bring peace to this war-torn, hurting, mixed up, crazy world we call “home”. As Prince, Jesus is the keeper of peace. He's also the master and ruler of it. In other words, it's His. It belongs to Him and He came to bring it to you. Perhaps the chances of experiencing “quiet” are slim today. Rejoice anyway, because someone out there would give everything they own for a house full of noisy people celebrating Christmas together. If you find your home too quiet for lack of activity, put on some music, sing some carols and ask God to fill your empty home with a tranquility that will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6,7) This is the day the Lord has made. Make a decision to rejoice and be glad in it, no matter what circumstances are surrounding you.

26 December

As the “heaven-born Prince of Peace”, Jesus Christ has been declared the sovereign ruler of the Universe. Heaven-born because He left His home to be placed in the womb of a virgin. Prince of Peace because Isaiah 9:6 tells us this title was part of His mission to Earth, and He chose to accept. Sovereign because He is the Lord and He does as He pleases (Daniel 4:35). Ruler because He is a heavenly monarch and He rules with a supreme authority.

As a ruler and a prince we can glean that Jesus Christ is to be our leader. He is the captain of the ship, the boss, the CEO, the supervisor, the head of the household. He wasn't sent to this Earth to follow us, He was sent to this Earth to be followed. Matthew 16:24 reminds us what Jesus says concerning this, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” In order for Christ to lead us we have to be willing to be led. You know the old adage, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.” It's true with horses and it's true with humans as well.

Jesus is overly qualified for the job of leading your life. That's not usually the issue though. The issue is whether or not we will allow Him to have the job of leading us. If our hearts desire is to follow after Christ there are three steps revealed in Matthew 16:24 that we must take in order to be a disciple of Him. First, we have to deny ourself. We have to put away our hopes, our dreams and our way of doing things and make ourselves open to His desires for us.

Next we must take up our cross, just as Jesus Christ did on the way to Golgotha, where He was crucified. Taking up our cross means we accept that we will have burdens, trials and difficulties to bear in this life. Just as Jesus Christ endured the cross, for the joy set before Him (and we are that joy), we endure a life of difficulty bearing in mind that Jesus is the joy set before us. (Hebrews 12:2)

Lastly, we must follow Him. Sound simple? Well, as you may know, it's not. Distractions, busyness, and struggles often get in the way and we find that this simple command of “Follow me” is the hardest thing we'll ever do. Following Him is a lot easier when we take time everyday to acknowledge Him as leader and ruler in our life. You can do this through prayer, through time reading the Bible or both. Staying vitally connected to Christ is a crucial component of being a good follower of His. Think of it as “follow the leader” for grown-ups.

One final thought: notice in the last part of our *Passage to Ponder* today, that Jesus not only came to bring us peace, He is our peace. The actions we consider attributes in people are entire personalities of God. He's not just loving, He is love. He's not just truthful, He is truth. He doesn't just give life, He is life. And so it is with peace. He doesn't just give peace, He is peace. It is not just an action, it is a part of Him. When we pray, let's go beyond asking to see God act through a particular attribute. Let's dare to ask for more, as Moses did in Exodus 33:18, when he said to God, “...show me Your glory.” Dare to ask God to reveal to you all that He is, not just all that He can do.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*“He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”
Micah 5:4,5 (NIV)*

PONDER THIS:

Are you playing “follow the leader” or “hide and seek” in your relationship with Jesus? Let Him show you where you need to let Him lead and where you need to follow.





27 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end."
Jeremiah 29:11
(KJV)*

PONDER THIS:

*Which view of peace and safety do you tend to have? The world's view or God's view? Tell Jesus where it is that you feel most vulnerable and unsafe. Then ask Him for the peace that passes all understanding, that it may guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7)*

I am not a great airplane passenger. I mean, I behave and all, but I'm usually a bundle of nerves. I've gotten better, but for some reason this last trip had me all in a tizzy days and weeks before I boarded. Not that there isn't cause for concern these days when it comes to airline safety, but my fears were boarding on the edge of loopy. It was ridiculous. Finally, after much prayer and multitudes of others praying for me, I concluded that Satan was about the only one benefiting from this fear and I let it go. What will be, will be and my life is in God's hands, no matter the outcome. Jesus as my Prince of Peace had a whole new meaning to me after this little exercise in trust.

As our Prince of Peace, Jesus offers us safety. In John 14:27 Jesus said that He doesn't give to us as the world gives. Look at the typical view of safety from the world's vantage point. Webster's states that safety means, "free from harm or risk; secure from threat of danger, harm or loss." If that's the truth then realistically what are the chances of any of us truly being "safe"?

I want to share with you two examples of Biblical safety found in Proverbs 1:33 and Psalm 4:8. Proverbs 1:33 says, "but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm." Psalm 4:8 states, "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety." The word safety in both of these passages denotes a place of refuge, meaning we have a place of refuge in God or a sense of safety. It also denotes having a sense of confidence and hope.

Interestingly, further study reveals that this word also has a meaning with regard to fact (security) and feeling (trust). The fact of safety results in security and the feeling of safety results in trust. First, safety and a sense of ease come to us when we listen to God. We understand that God is at the helm and we don't anticipate bad things happening to us or our loved ones. Not because we don't believe they can, but because we know that ultimately our lives are in the able hands of our God and His purposes will prevail. We know that He is indeed capable of managing our security but we trust Him more importantly with the management of our life.

Second, we acknowledge that God alone makes us dwell in safety, whether the sense of safety is a fact or a feeling. Our safety is not dependent on a lack of terrorist plots, a safe plane, someone checking our baggage, a vehicle that is number one in crash testing, a great retirement plan or watching our kids' every move. Our perception of safety which ultimately leads to our sense of peace must be grounded in the knowledge that God has a plan for our life. He's not scheming up ways to bring evil to your life, He has thoughts of peace toward you. He has an expectation for your life, a final product if you will. He realizes that this world will hurl many heartaches, pains and tragedies your way, but He promises to protect you from their destruction and to take these things and use them to bring about good in your life. All the while offering Himself to you as a refuge.

28 December

This *Passage to Ponder* could not fit today's theme any better. Today I want to introduce you to the thought of Jesus, Prince of Peace, as your Protector. It may seem redundant with the themes of other days, but we'll look at it with a bit of a different slant. Right off we see that this verse refers to guarding and keeping. It's a textbook definition of what protectors do, they guard and keep.

I found a very interesting definition for "keeper". It says that a keeper is "a person who takes care of a property sometimes for an absent owner." Think of your body or your life as the property. Ever been an absent owner? We have all had times in our lives where we were AWAL, absent without a leave. We were like soldiers in retreat, running from the battle. Or times in our life where we have mentally, emotionally, physically or spiritually left the building. When we do that, and we all have or will at some point, God will be your caretaker. He will continue to water the grass, check the mail and keep the property of your life secured until your return. Because you aren't there, you will often wonder if He's showing up or stopping by, but just because you can't see Him due to your absence, doesn't mean He isn't there. He's the Faithful God. "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love..." (Deuteronomy 7:9)

Peering once again at our *Passage to Ponder*, we see that as guardian of our soul, God will keep you in perfect and constant peace, but there is a catch. In order for Him to do His part, you have to do yours. What is your part? Read it and see if you can figure it out. Your part is to keep your mind, its propensity and its nature, stayed on Jesus Christ. What a difficult task this is! It means that as Philippians 4:8 says, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." We must make a conscious choice to constantly redirect our thinking, take captive every thought that does not honor God and fix our minds on things that are true and right and pure. By the way, only time spent with God in the reading/studying of His Word will equip you to know what thoughts are "excellent and praiseworthy".

A final examination of today's passage tells us we make this conscious choice to keep our mind stayed on Jesus Christ when we have committed ourselves to Him, rely on Him and hope with the utmost confidence in Him. Commitment is almost a thing of days gone by. People can't commit to volunteer, show up for a meeting on time, say yes to a dinner party or stay in a marriage. Lack of commitment seems to be our way of keeping our options open in case something better comes along. But if you are going to fix your mind on Christ in order to obtain His peace, you are going to have to be committed. It will take hard work but you and those around will benefit for many years to come.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"You will guard him and keep him in perfect and constant peace whose mind [both its inclination and its character] is stayed on You, because he commits himself to You, leans on You, and hopes confidently in You."

*Isaiah 26:3
(Amplified Version)*

PONDER THIS:

*Where do you struggle the most to keep your mind stayed on Jesus? Please take time today to read and ponder
Philippians 4:4-9.*

I think it will equip you tremendously in committing to rely and hope in Him.





29 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"Behold, I will bring it health and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth."
Jeremiah 33:6
(NKJV)*

PONDER THIS:

Where do you need Jesus to heal you? Have you been abused, neglected, abandoned or betrayed? Do you need to heal from a divorce, a miscarriage or the loss of a loved one? Your Prince of Peace awaits, let Him remove your brokenness and put wholeness in its place.

Have you ever seen a car windshield that is shattered but the pieces of the glass are intact? It may have resembled the "cracked glass" look that is so popular in home décor these days. Keep that image in mind and you'll have a pretty good idea of what my life was like at one point. I had been growing in Christ for quite some time having finally heeded His call to come home. But there was a work left undone in my spirit, in my soul. It involved a healing that needed to be done deep down inside of me. A healing that I had avoided because I wasn't sure I could face the wound. I looked intact and for the most part felt intact, but inside, way down where you can't see, I was shattered.

That shattering happened at the tender age of 4 when someone opened my little spirit to things no child that age should experience. I pushed that monster way, way down and worked hard to keep it all together. Not because I didn't want anyone to know, but because I didn't feel strong enough to seek help.

Needless to say the word "whole" means something different to me today than it did even four years ago. Since that time, God has done a work in my life that has brought me deep healing. He made me whole again. He was to me Jehovah Rapha, the Lord my Healer. Just as Jeremiah 33:6 says, "He healed me and then revealed to me the abundant life found in having His peace in me and having His truth prevail in my life".

As Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ extends to you the awesome experience of being made whole. But so many people, including myself at one time, have bought into the lie that the pain of dealing with our scars is somehow greater than the pain we are in. It's just not the truth! In fact, it's an all out plot of the Enemy to keep you from being made whole, from being filled with peace, from knowing the truth about who you really are and from being happy. Please take it from one who has literally walked through the valley of the shadow of death emotionally, the pain you are in is far greater and will last longer than any walk through that valley. Will it be hard? Absolutely. Will it be painful? Yes. But can I tell you something? During that time of my life I felt Him closer to me in a way I have never felt before. I can testify to you, HE WILL NOT LEAVE YOU. In times of sorrow, Jesus will be closer and more real than ever.

I want you to become whole again. You don't have to wait until heaven for God to replace your shattered heart. I want to encourage you to take a leap of faith and allow God to heal you. You will be astounded at the freedom that will be yours at the end of that journey. You will mature in ways you never imagined. You will know Him in such a personal way, He will become your everything. You can do this. Remember, if He's called you to it, He'll bring you through it. He has promised you health, healing, peace and truth. "My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life." (Psalm 119:50)

30 December

Bread of Life, Living Water, Son of God, Teacher, Master. These are just a small sampling of names the Bible uses to refer to Jesus Christ. During His visit on Earth He spent a great portion of His time teaching those He would leave behind. He was a master teacher. He achieved that mastery the way any human being does; through life experience. He honed His knowledge during the time of temptation in the wilderness, the rejection of those He came to save and many hours in prayer alone with His Father. All of these experiences and many more qualified Him to teach others how to master and conquer life's temptations and trials.

God has many ways of using Jesus to teach us valuable lessons. A recent lesson came to me in the experience of fear. You may remember a few days ago when I shared with you how I don't particularly look forward to flying. As my trip grew closer I was searching for peace like a lost set of keys. I became convinced the only way it would come was if my plans were canceled altogether. But that was simply not an option. Then Jesus spoke to me through a book I was reading. He told me that peace was not a by-product of the right set of circumstances. Peace is a frame of mind, a state of being. Real peace comes from within, not from without. Real peace is present no matter what the circumstances are, because peace can never be determined by surroundings. Surroundings are too unpredictable and volatile. True peace must come because of the reality of Christ in me.

Jesus left His peace as a valuable resource in times of fear and uncertainty. He gives His peace when we need an extra measure of assurance. Here is an example of the way the world gives peace: "Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?" (Ezekiel 13:10-12) When we place our trust in the world's idea of peace, we will be left disappointed and disillusioned. For the world tells us there is peace when there is not. It builds makeshift walls to give us an illusion of peace and then it whitewashes it to cover the truth. The truth is it really has no peace to offer us at all. What does God say? The wall *is* going to fall. When rain and hailstones (the hardships and trials) come, that false wall *will* collapse. Often instead of re-examining the wall itself, we just ask for more whitewash!

Choosing His peace is a choice we have to make almost daily in the world we exist in today. You cannot place your trust in anything this world has to offer you. Jesus tells us not to let our hearts be troubled and to not be afraid. He is reminding us that with His peace at the center of our existence there is no need to be worried or fearful. True peace has only one Source and that's Jesus Christ.

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give peace to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."

*John 14:27
(New Life Version)*

PONDER THIS:

Don't buy into the world's fleeting and temporary moments of peace. You don't need lavish vacations, financial security or even homeland security to experience peace in your life. You'll know you are experiencing the reality of Christ's peace when you can stare danger and disaster in the face and feel unmoved in your spirit.





*Jesus,
The Alpha and Omega*



31 December

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."
Revelation 22:13
(NIV)

PONDER THIS:

Are you ready to start a new year or would you rather hide under the covers? You can't move forward looking back. As you anticipate the next year, try this approach: "Don't just go through it, grow through it." Squeeze it for every lesson and blessing it has to offer, knowing Jesus has you in His sight and in His care.

Ah....the eve of a new year. This day, unlike any other on the calendar, holds within it the potential for a buffet of emotions. You may feel excitement about the next year, sadness due to an unrealized goal or the realization of how fast life is going by. Maybe it was a great year for you and you wish it didn't have to end. Or on the contrary, you may be literally pushing the year out the front door with an exclamation of "Good Riddance!" It's even easy to feel a little fear concerning what the next year holds in store for you. No doubt each year, like each day, has enough challenges of its own. Each year also holds an abundance of opportunity for personal and spiritual growth.

Whatever the past year has brought your way, one thing remains...Jesus Christ. We are told in today's *Passage to Ponder* that Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega. He is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. I want to give you a little glimpse into what this means for you. But I'm going to do it in reverse. Today because we are ending a year and preparing to begin anew tomorrow, we will look at Jesus the Omega. Tomorrow we will look at Jesus the Alpha.

Omega is the last letter of the Greek alphabet and it means figuratively, the finality. It is a title so befitting our Christ. In all situations, in every circumstance, in every happening we encounter He is the final word, the final say. No one has the final declaration in your life, but Jesus Christ, the Omega. Your children don't have the final word in your life. Your spouse doesn't determine your destiny. Your boss doesn't have the ultimate say on your career. Your parents don't hold your final outcome in their hands. And the hurtful words and demeaning titles placed on you by others does not determine who you really are. God has the final word on all of these areas of your life and more.

The Bible begins with Jesus and ends with Jesus. Genesis starts off with Him present at the creation of the world and ends with the expectation and assurance of His return and a life spent in eternal joy with Him. Whatever transpired this year does not have to act as a prediction for the next. Nothing is impossible for Jesus Christ our Lord. He can turn around any situation, bring hope to any despair and right any wrong. This is a Savior who could not be kept down by death. He was crucified, but He rose again. He overcame the grave, not even death had the final say. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

He is alive and lives to intercede and bring about the final and last word in your life. The authority to bring finality to anything in your life has been given to Him and no one else. Philippians 1:6 tells us that, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Completion of any project takes time and patience and it is not different with a human being. Jesus tells us that the Father is always working. If you don't feel completed yet, it's because you're not, He's still working on you. So be patient and rest in knowing that whatever this year held and the next one holds, you are in good hands. Jesus is the author of new beginnings and will always have in His view, the grand finale.

1 January

Welcome to the beginning of a new year! Excitement is in the air, resolutions are being made and we wonder what this year will bring. God wants to do something brand new in your life this year. Are you up for it? In order to fully receive all the benefits He has in store, you will have to do one thing: leave the old year behind. "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:18,19)

God desires to do new things in you but you must forget the past and not dwell on it. Don't go over and over it in your mind, trying to figure it out or make sense of it. It's exhausting and you'll end up right back where you started. The mind is an interesting organ, for you cannot ruminate the past and move ahead at the same time. Moving ahead takes determination and mental energy and apparently our mind can only do one or the other, but not both. God says, "I'm doing a new thing, can't you see it?" If our eyes are in the back of our heads we can't see what God is doing right before our very eyes.

He is making a way in the desert of your circumstances and that Way is paved by Jesus Christ. He is also making streams in the your wastelands. And if you are thirsty, God has provided a source of refreshment and nourishment for your weary soul. That source is none other than Jesus, the Living Water. He's the God of new beginnings, second chances and fresh starts. Don't bother with resolutions. They rely too much on human effort. Instead, this year make a new beginning or a fresh start. Jesus the Alpha can help with that, in fact, He will start it and finish it.

Alpha is of Hebrew origin and refers to the first letter of the Greek alphabet. It means figuratively to be first. Jesus Christ was there when it all began, when God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." (Genesis 1:26) We also see in John 1:1-3 that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." Not to sound childish, but He started it. As the Alpha, the First and the Beginning, He was certainly qualified to do so. Through Him all things are made and re-made, even you.

This is going to be a great year. Thank you so much for sharing your Christmas and New Year with me. I have enjoyed the journey, I hope you have as well. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)

PASSAGE TO PONDER:

*"He said to me:
"It is done. I am
the Alpha and
the Omega, the
Beginning and the
End. To him who
is thirsty I will
give to drink
without cost from
the spring of the
water of life."
Revelation 21:6
(NIV)*

PONDER THIS:

*Walk into this
year holding the
hand of your
Savior. Make
this your prayer
today, "But one
thing I do:
Forgetting what
is behind and
straining toward
what is ahead,
I press on toward
the goal to win
the prize for
which God has
called me
heavenward in
Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 3:13)*

*Your destiny
awaits you.*



Things to Ponder:

Things to Ponder: