

Pure in Heart Stories

Issue #4



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Pure in Heart Stories

A Literary Magazine for Kids

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Letter from the Editors



Welcome to Issue #4 of *Pure in Heart!*

Hold on. STOP. Get comfortable. Like really, super, squishy, don't-want-to-move comfortable. Maybe get a pillow. Maybe three pillows. Are you comfortable yet? Ok, good! You're ready to read now... and that's good because we have a

pretty amazing collection of work here in our fourth issue.

Like what? (you might ask). Well, we have our first ever recipe to for you to try. But be careful, these cinnamon-roll-like confections are really hard to stop eating (we made them at home, and they are crazy good). Do you like games? We also have a game where emojis act out Bible scenes and you have to guess which ones. And, of course, we have lots of poetry. And stories. And art. And guess what? All were made just for you, to make you smile sillily, think carefully, love deeply, and stand in awe of our good God.

You're ready to dive in now—we can tell. So just a quick thank you to our wonderful poets, writers, and artists who made this issue come to life: Thank you! You are truly awesome.

And thank *you* for reading!

May God bless you and keep you,

Veronica McDonald

& Mia McDonald

Editors of *Pure in Heart Stories*



I Know

by **Fiona Halliday**

I know that you are with me, Lord,
Morning, noon and night.
I know that you love me, God,
Whether I'm wrong or right.
Today, while I am playing, Lord,
Let me be helpful and kind,
For Jesus is the best friend,
Anyone can find.

About the Poet

Fiona Halliday is an elementary school teacher in the UK. She has been a Christian since she was eight years old. A mother to two teenagers, Fiona enjoys sharing time with her family, reading, writing and playing the flute.

Dawn Song

by Steven Searcy

Mist in the west.
The east glows red.

Tired grown-up heads
lie still in bed.

Young hands and eyes
arise to play

with thumping feet,
to greet the day.



Spring Confetti

by **Steven Searcy**

The hill is solid green—
but if you amble slowly
and stop to stoop down lowly,
a miracle is seen—

vibrant blooms—lavender, yellow, white—
seen only from a child's height.

Kneel and watch the miracle abound—
tiny spring confetti on the ground.



About the Poet

Steven Searcy lives with his wife and three sons in Atlanta, GA, where he earns a living working as an engineer in fiber optic telecommunications. His poetry has been published in *Ekstasis*, *Reformed Journal*, *Fathom Magazine*, *Heart of Flesh Literary Journal*, and *The Clayjar Review*.

The Greatest Gift of All

by Pat Severin

Baby Jesus, you're so small
And yet I have been told
That you did really big, big things,
When you were grown up old.

My Grandma said when you were born
You didn't have a bed,
And so your Mama, carefully,
Laid down your little head...

Into a manger made for cows.
But it was soft and clean.
She said you were the cutest boy
That she had ever seen!

And shepherds saw some angels white,
All singing in the sky.
At first, they felt real scared inside,
Until they knew just why!

Those angels told them you were born,
Said they should go and see
That tiny baby for themselves.
How special that would be!

And fancy kings in golden coats
Came from so very far
To visit you because they saw
A bright and shiny star!

I wish I could have been there, too,
To see you as a baby.

And if your Mama said I could,
I'd come real close and maybe...

I'd pick you up so carefully
And whisper "I Love You."
I may not understand it all
But I believe it's true...

You grew up and became a man,
And died for everyone.
So someday I'll see you for real.
In Heaven we'll have fun!

Mom says I'll see my Grandma, too.
I loved her soft, soft face,
But Grandma won't have wrinkles there.
She says you can erase!

The same way you erase my sins
Because sometimes I am bad.
But I know that you forgive those times
And that you don't get mad.

When Mom says that she loves me,
She says you love me, too.
I wish I was in Bethlehem
And I could visit you.

My favorite story is about
Your birthday long ago.
I know that's why there's Christmastime,
So everyone will know...

That, Baby Jesus, you were born,
All soft and pink and small,
A Christmas present for the world,
The greatest gift of all!



About the Poet

Pat Severin, a retired parochial teacher and member of SCBWI, has been writing poetry for many years. Her poems are regularly featured in *The Agape Review* and *The Clayjar Review* as well as three of the Southern Arizona Press Anthologies. Her personal ministry is sending cards of encouragement to those going through difficult health struggles.

Oh Baby, Oh Baby

by Pat Severin



Baby, oh, baby, you're crying so loud!
 I sure don't know why Mom and Dad are so proud
 Of this pink screaming bundle, my sister, Louise,
 Who never seems happy. Stop crying, won't you please!

My ears just can't take it—I'm going quite nuts!
 Are you wet or need changing, you're hungry, that stuff?
 Whatever it is, I wish you'd be quiet!
 Some peace would be nice, now. Come on, baby, try it!

Then suddenly...

Oh, baby, oh, baby, the silence is great!
 I really do love you. It's your crying I hate.
 You are kind of cute with your little pink nose.
 And now that Mom's changed you, you smell like a rose!

I hope someday soon we can go out and play
 Some tag or some jump rope, some bright summer's day.
 But now, in the meantime, I'll be patient...maybe...
 And hope you'll grow up soon...baby, oh, baby!

Snowflake Kisses

by **Elizabeth Wrobel**

On my hand, a friendly pat.
On my arm, a kindly tap.
On my nose, on my chin,
Snowflake kisses slowly begin.

On my forehead, a soft brush.
On my cheek, a tender touch.
On my lashes, on my hair,
Snowflake kisses everywhere.



Dreams of a Snow Day

by **Elizabeth Wrobel**

I close my eyes so I can dream of snowflakes falling in the night—
Oh, so many snowflakes make a blanket that sparkles so bright.
I close my eyes so I can dream of snowmen like soldiers, standing guard—
All day long protecting the fort of snowballs in my backyard.
I close my eyes so I can dream of snowflakes falling down—
I dream of snowflakes covering the streets and treetops all over town.
I open my eyes so I can see if this is the absolutely most perfect day,
With snowflakes covering the street, and a bus that's not on its way!



About the Poet

Elizabeth Wrobel writes for both kids and adults in the Northwoods of Michigan. She's been published in books, magazines, e-zines, and online. Her latest poems have been published in *Pure in Heart Stories* and *The Dirigible Balloon*. When she's not writing she's reading and spending time with family.

The Sleepover

by Pat Severin

I can't believe it. Mom said, "Yes."
The gang sleeps here tonight.
I've got the greatest evening planned
For Tommy, Jim and Mike.

The sleeping bags will line my room.
My games will fill the floor.
We'll watch the movie that we got,
A Monster's in the Store.

The doorbell rings. Some guys are here!
"Hey, guys, just toss them there.
Come on with me, my room's all set.
Bring sleeping bags upstairs."

Still waiting till Mike's dad pulls up.
I hear the car. He's here!
"Come on upstairs," I shout to Mike.
"Who wants a cold root beer?"

We grab our pop and head upstairs.
We all spread out again.
We talk about important things,
Like baseball, school, and friends.

We make the pact we always make,
The one we call, "The Rule."
If we see someone dozing off,
We'll say, "Wake up. Not cool!"

And when eleven rolls around,
It soon will be the hour
Till everyone runs down the stairs,
Excited to devour...

The midnight snack that Mom has made
For all us hungry guys.
We check it out a hundred times
Before the time arrives.

And when it is that magic time,
I can't believe it's twelve.
Popcorn, pretzels, pizza, pop.
I tell them, "Help yourselves!"

And when we're stuffed and cannot move,
We waddle back upstairs,
Crash on my bed, the floor, the rug—
There's crashing everywhere!

We try so hard. "Resist!" we say.
"Don't close your eyes! Don't yawn!"
But then, just like our midnight snack,
All four of us are...GONE!



Read about **Pat Severin** on page 14.

And Yet You Love

by Mike Dailey

We test your patience, and yet you love
We test your patience, we push and shove
Others who we don't think enough of
We test your patience, and yet you love

We hear your message, yet we don't act
We hear your message, still we attack
Other whose thoughts we just can't back
We hear your message, yet we don't act

You taught us love, we turned away
You showed us love, and still we stray
We yearn to follow, just not today
You taught us love, we turn away

You preach of peace, we practice war
You preach of peace that we ignore
We might repent but not before
You preach of peace, we turn to war

We test your patience, and yet you love
We test your patience, yet you love
For love is all that you're made of
We test your patience, and yet you love



About the Poet

Mike Dailey is a fairly well-known poet in southeast North Carolina. He lives near Sunset Beach with his wife of 50 years and the occasional visits with his daughter and two grandkids. His poems have been published in several magazines and anthologies. He has had three books of poetry collections published; one based on cancer treatments he underwent, one based on his 30 years working as a civilian analyst for the US Army, and a book of spiritual poems. He is always putting together several collections and looking for publishers. Mike Dailey's poetry can be serious, topical, or very moving, but he is known more for his rhythm and rhyme poetry with a twist of humor.

For Whom I Pray

by **Mike Dailey**



I do not know for whom I pray
 I pray for those at war today
 I do not know and still I'll pray

Your children, Lord, this very day
 May not find the time to kneel and pray
 And so, dear, Lord, I'll do my part
 And pray for them with my whole heart

They have their minds on other things
 Bursting bombs and bullet stings
 How to stay alive this day
 So it's for them I kneel and pray

I know no names, nor even faces
 I can't define the time or places
 But you know Lord, what they would say
 So it's for them I kneel and pray

Give them hope Lord, give them peace
 May their faith in you increase
 Comfort them in your own way
 And it's for them I kneel and pray

I Nailed His Hands to the Wood

by **Bob Hicks**

I nailed his hands to the wood
I dropped the cross in its hole
And three days later Christ arose
and in love embraced my soul



About the Poet

Bob Hicks is a former Adult Ministries Pastor, now 64. He has studied literature extensively, and studied in Bible College and Seminary.

The Walk

by **Jeniya Mard**

He died for us, my father says
as he leads my brothers and I behind the Church

as the soft ground sends my heels sinking beneath me,
submerging the skin of my feet in mud
as the tears of the Lord cast down,
flooding the yard.

The rest of the parish strapped themselves into their cars,
warming their skin against the engines and drying their clothes
with flaps of their shirts and patting of skirts.

He died for us, my father repeats
as we walk around the outside of the church,
and they're afraid to get a little dirty.



About the Poet

Jeniya Mard is a writer from Metro-Detroit and has a passion for writing strange, thought-provoking pieces of fiction and poetry. She loves to push the boundaries of what traditional writing looks and feels like. Her writing has appeared in *Mistake House Magazine*, *Quirk Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, and others.

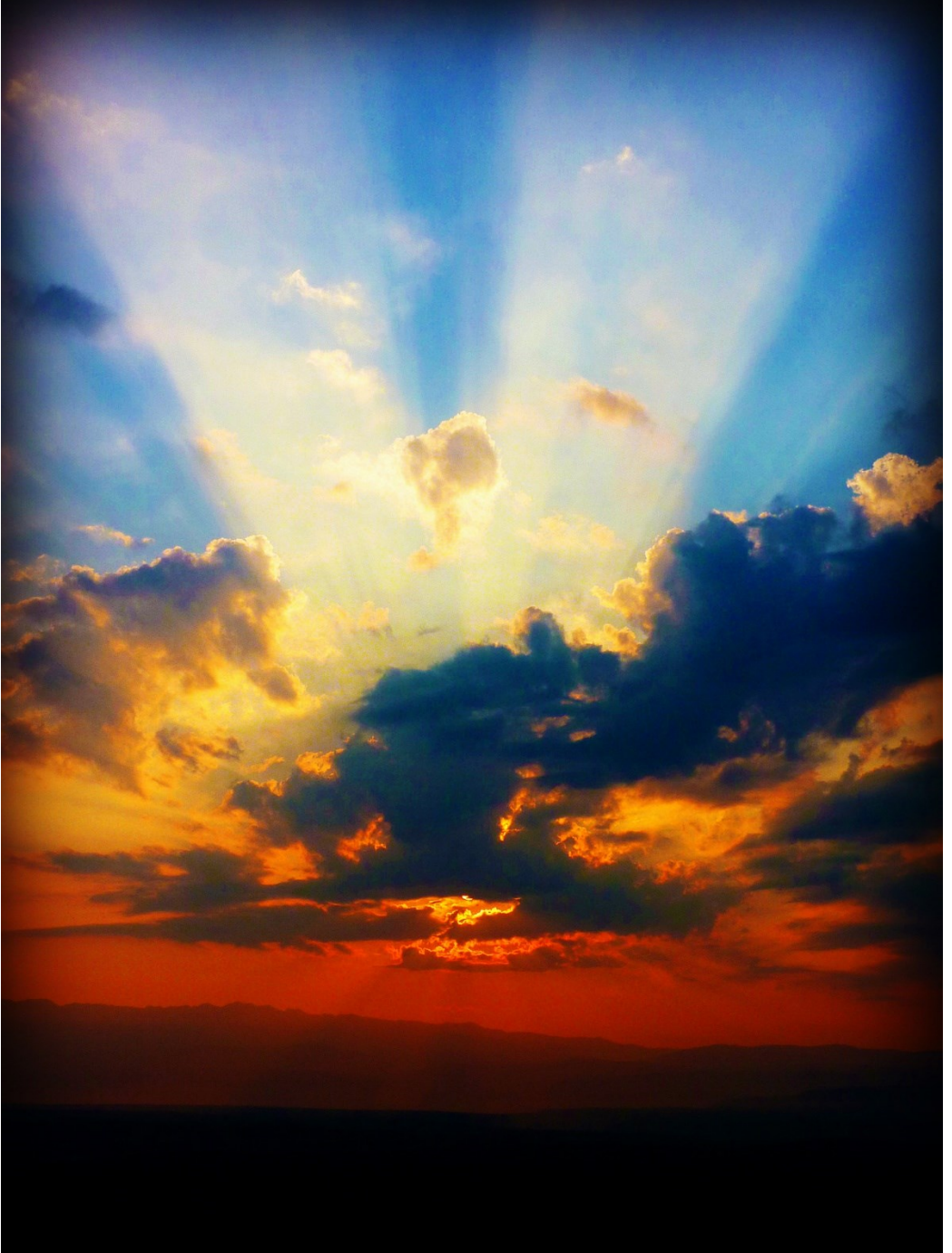
Come Join the Song

by **Steven Searcy**

Come join the song, sing praises loud and plain
to Christ the Lamb, who lives though he was slain.
He took the whip, spit, thorns, nails, jeers, disdain,
and utter isolation in his pain,
then dropped into the grave—but not in vain!
By death, he transformed loss into great gain—
what once was Satan’s boon became his bane.
Christ chose to die, to conquer death’s domain.
Our Jesus has destroyed death’s lock and chain,
and rises to his throne where he will reign
for good. No fear and sadness will remain,
and all his children join to sing the loud refrain.



Read about **Steven Searcy** on page 11.



Sing

by **Robert Funderburk**

Oh sing, for the long night is over
 Sing, for the day has begun
 Let darkness and doubt
 Give way to a shout
 Oh shout to the Lord everyone

Oh Praise God all battles are over
 Give Him praise for the end of all wars
 We've soldiered all night
 His dawn gives us light
 For our road home beyond all the stars

Oh sing, for the long night is over
 The towers of Heaven I see
 No sorrow, death, or hate
 Shall pass through the gate
 He's waiting for you and for me

Oh Praise God this old Earth has ended
 The Heavens rolled back as a scroll
 All evil has died
 As Jesus testified
 We're walking those streets made of gold

About the Poet

Born by coal oil lamplight in a farmhouse near Liberty, Mississippi, graduated from Louisiana State University in 1965, served as SSgt in USAFR from 1965–1971, **Robert** is now living with his wife, Barbara, enjoying the peace of their home on fifty acres of wilderness in Olive Branch, Louisiana.

His Mother

by **Michael D. Young**

The Savior of the World came first,
Into His mother's arms.
She tended to his hunger, thirst,
And kept Him safe from harm.

For though He was like no other,
Our Savior needed His mother.

To bless His mother in her need,
To show He was divine,
Christ showed a miracle indeed
And changed water to wine.

For though He was like no other,
Our Savior still served His mother.

Then when upon the cross He hung,
She knelt there in despair.
Though thorns and nails His body stung,
He saw first to her care.

For though He was like no other,
Our Savior sheltered His mother.

“Behold thy mother,” then He cried.
To her, “Behold thy son.”
For us, for her, he bled and died;
His life's work, gladly done.

For though He was like no other,
Our Savior so loved His mother.



About the Poet

Though **Michael** grew up traveling the world with his military father, he now lives in Utah with his wife, Jen, and their three children. He played for several years with the handbell choir Bells on Temple Square and is now a member of the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. He is the author of the novels in *The Canticle Kingdom Series*, *The Last Archangel Series*, the *Chess Quest Series* and the *Penultimate Dawn Cycle (The Hunger)*, as well as several non-fiction works, including *An Advent Carols Countdown*, *The Song of the Righteous* and *As Saints We Sing*.

Sister, Oh Sister

by Raelene Purtil

Gospel of John, Chapter 11, verses 1-44

Oh brother, my brother
 Lazarus has died.
 Oh, sister, my sister
 Martha, the mourners are arrived.

Oh sister, my sister
 Mary, I have sent word
 To our friend Jesus.
 I have summoned the Lord.

Oh sister, my sister
 Martha, shall we ever be consoled?
 Oh, sister, my sister,
 Perhaps we too shall never grow old.

Oh sister, my sister,
 Where is our Friend?
 Oh sister, my sister,
 Shall our hearts ever mend?

Oh sister, my sister
 Martha, can you see?
 The Lord has come.
 I knew that He would.
 Oh sister, my sister,
 Yes, Mary, but too late—
 Too late for Lazarus' good.

Oh Jesus, my Jesus,
 You say our brother's asleep.
 Oh Jesus, my Jesus,
 Then why do you weep?

My sister, oh sister
Martha, I weep over sin.
The sin that is Adam's,
Where death did begin.

Oh Jesus, my Jesus,
Why the delays?
Our brother is buried now
These four dreadful days.

My sisters, oh sisters
Martha and Mary,
Don't you see my delay
Is to show you God's glory?

My sisters, oh sisters,
Have I not said
That my voice can also
Be heard by the dead?

My brother, my brother
Lazarus, wake up from your strife!
Come out to Me,
The Resurrection and Life.

Oh sister, my sister
Mary, dry your tears.
The Lord has raised our brother
And banished our fears.

Oh Saviour, my Saviour
I do now perceive
That you are Messiah,
And so, I believe.



About the Poet

Raelene Purtil is an eclectic writer of poems, short stories, essays, and scripts. She is studying Creative Writing and Publishing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia. She hosts a monthly writing group and has been on the editorial committee of a local anthology. She enjoys writing on Christian themes and bringing scripture to life through her writing.

Butterflies

by Clara Klein



Lord, send butterflies
 To teach us of change
 Chrysalis emergence becoming

Lord, send butterflies
 To show your beauty
 Unchanging and ever-living

Lord, send butterflies
 To pollinate our minds
 With Your spirit and Your strength

Lord, give butterflies
 To those who are stuck
 Lift them up with powerful wings

Lord, make us butterflies
 To be one thought of You
 Unfettered and gliding on truth

About the Poet

Clara Klein has been a freelance writer for over 30 years, often writing about nature and Christian spirituality. With her prayers and poetry, she hopes to inspire others to see God in our world.

To a Candle

by **Teresa Burleson**



How small you are,
One flickering flame
Against the all-encroaching night.
Yet you laugh at the gloom.
You are lost in worship,
Caught up in the dance
That began
Before there was time.
Unabashed,
You keep reaching
For the Most High,
The Light Himself.
And so one small candle
Dispels the darkness.

About the Poet

Teresa Burleson is a free-lancer in Central Texas with writing credits in over 45 magazines. In 2003 she published *The Pilgrim's Lyre* and her chapbook, *Rose Without Thorns*, came out in 2013. It is her desire to communicate the truth in a clear, fresh and compelling way.

Not the Gardener Original Bubbles

by **Rachel Michelle Collier**

GOD THE FATHER

Original. Imagine the smiley-face before it was a face.
A white-hot, never-ending light who laughs
outside of lines, outside of dots, outside of time.

GOD THE SON

Not the gardener—! A cute lamb with a fearsome roar!
Copypat! Curtain ripper! Alphabet!

GOD THE SPIRIT

Bubbles: see-through, with a sheen; yet shadowless.
And pickles. And very close, like a glass vase
near an elbow in a tight space.



Eleanor Wants More

by **Rachel Michelle Collier**

Eleanor is tired of being poor.
Eleanor wants more.
She walks with her dad to the corner store,
 the one with the broken sign.
She takes her hand out of her dad's,
 and walks around to the candy aisle.
Eleanor looks around.
She doesn't see anyone.
Eleanor is tired of being poor,
 tired of not eating candy.
Eleanor reaches out.
Eleanor takes two.
Then she takes two more.
Stuffs the candy bars into her pockets.
There.
Now she has more.
She feels excitement in her heart, because
 Eleanor wanted more.
And more is what she got!
Eleanor turns around.
Her dad is watching her,
 and there are tears in his eyes.
Eleanor gasps.
Eleanor stands very, very still.
Eleanor hangs her head.
Eleanor panics.
She feels like she can't breathe.
She feels like the roof is caving in on her.
Eleanor was tired of being poor.
Eleanor only wanted more.
Her dad hurries over to her.
Eleanor sits on the filthy floor.
She puts her head between her knees.
Her breathing turns into a wheeze.

She sits with her dad in the corner store,
 the one with the broken sign.
Her dad is also tired of being poor.
He understands that Eleanor wanted more.
He pulls her in very, very close.
The man behind the counter watches.
The man saw Eleanor take four.
The counter man used to be poor.
The counter man understands wanting more.
Eleanor stands up.
Eleanor apologizes to her dad.
Eleanor apologizes to the counter man.
Eleanor offers the candy back.
The counter man smiles at her.
Eleanor is confused.
She thought the man would yell.
Eleanor feels hope.
The counter man looks at her dad.
Her dad nods to the counter man.
The man takes back two candy bars,
 and leaves her a surprise:
Sweetheart, keep two.
Eleanor has more!
Eleanor wipes her eyes.
Eleanor smiles at him.
She goes with her dad back to their home,
 the one with the broken stove.
Her dad lets her eat one candy bar for dinner.
Eleanor is tired.
Eleanor goes to bed.
Eleanor sleeps well.
Dad makes a phone call.
Dad gets a visitor late.
The visitor stands in the door.
Dad's visitor is not poor.
The visitor gives Dad more.
Eleanor wakes up.
Eleanor yawns.
Eleanor stares at her second candy bar.

She feels like she's in a wonderful dream.
 She feels like her room has turned into a castle.
 Dad lets her eat her candy bar for breakfast.
 Eleanor grins very, very big.
 She has a chocolate smile!
 Eleanor gets dressed.
 Eleanor hugs Dad.
 Eleanor goes to school.
 Dad goes back to the corner store.
 He pays the price for what Eleanor ate.
 Dad understands his Eleanor.
 Eleanor only wanted more.



About the Poet

Rachel Michelle Collier is from Mississippi, and has also been published in *Fathom Mag* and *Ekstasis Magazine*. She wants you to know that you are loved. Twitter: @CollierRachelM

On Weekends

by Ann Privateer

I skirt the farthest corners
 Of the empty schoolyard
 Its perimeter grows weeds
 And other cast-off things
 While I am mainly interested
 In the soft soil underfoot
 There's always something new
 A flower, a puddle, and weeds taller
 Than the week before
 Weeds gone fallow or to seed
 Flowering near an empty
 Chocolate milk carton.

To the east, the redwood grove
 To the west, chinning bars
 To the north, a chain link fence
 And neighbor's backyards
 To the south, the school's facade
 And eventually my home.



About the Poet

Ann Privateer is a poet, artist, and photographer. She grew up in the Midwest and now resides in Northern California. Some of her photography has appeared in *Third Wednesday*, and poetry in *Voices 2022*, to name a few.

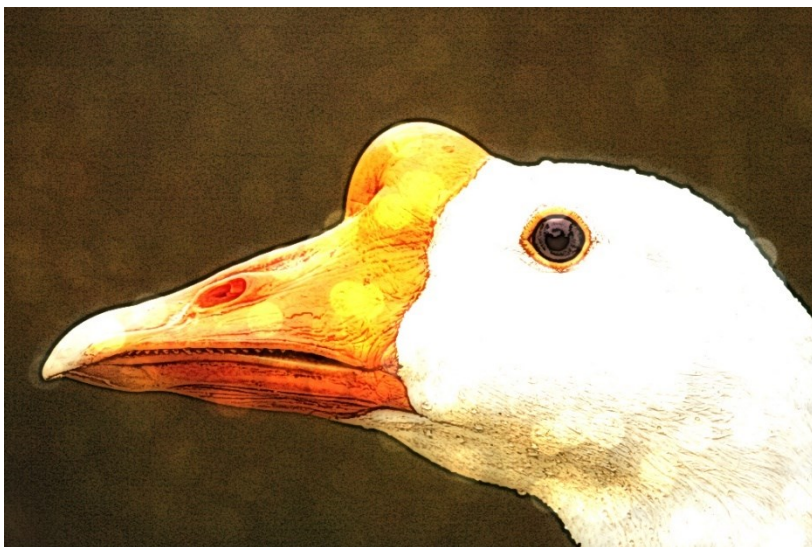
He Is Real

by Adesiyan Oluwapelumi, age 17

Everyone keeps saying I am hallucinating
every time I tell them about my friend.
They say He is not real, but He is.
He comes to my room's window every
night and He talks to me.
Mom and Dad keep saying I am hallucinating
but I am not.
He calls my name through the window
and knocks when I act like a sleepyhead.
When I awake,
He asks about my day,
some silly questions about my friends,
my parents.
I tell Him everything
even about the grumpy old Geography
teacher at my school,
who keeps calling me a dullard.
I tell Him of Sarah
and He teases about it.
We chat for a little
till about 2 am in the morning,
then He kisses me goodbye.
Yes, His lips leave a wet stain
on the window.
I have shown everyone
but they keep saying I made it.
What of you reader, do you
believe He's real?

The Christmas Goose

by Bryant Burroughs



The goose jerked its head. The voices that awakened him were more odd than disturbing because few travelers stopped at the little inn during the middle of the night.

As the night turned quiet again, the goose shivered with joy when he saw the little girl, her black curls wrapped in a white cap, slipping out to the shed to talk. He couldn't understand the girl's soft words nor did the little girl understand the goose's honks, but they loved each other. They were each other's companion and secret keeper.

"Did you hear all that?" asked the little girl as she fed the goose some crumbs of bread from her hand. "It was awful! Papa had to turn away a man and his pregnant wife. Too bad every room is filled."

The goose honked his thanks for the bread and nuzzled the little girl's hand. She patted his head as she gazed at the bright stars.

"Poor thing, too. She wasn't much older than I am. She looked so tired... so scared. I wonder what they'll do now?"

The goose honked his sympathy. Sensing that the little girl was distracted, he climbed into her lap and nuzzled her chin. She absently stroked the goose's head and beak.

"She reminded me of my mother," she whispered, talking to herself as much as to the goose. "Or at least how Papa describes her. I curl up with her blanket every night, hoping I'll see her in my dreams. But even in my dreams I can't see her face."

The night sky glittered with pinprick stars, singing of a world unimaginably beyond the little inn, and beyond even the little girl's heartache. One star, in particular, seemed much closer than the others, closer even than the moon that shone on the other side of the inn. The bright star perched low in the sky above the hills just beyond the shed.

The little girl stirred and pointed to the star. "What is that?" she asked the contented goose. "And I can hear singing from the hills. Can you hear it?"

The goose looked up, and the little girl smiled. "You're right," she laughed. "Hills can't sing."

"Hey! Are you up for an adventure?" she exclaimed. "Maybe we could walk to that star. It looks so near, doesn't it?"

The goose honked, causing the little girl to smile again.

"Yes, you're right. It's too far for you to walk, but I have just the right thing." She jumped to her feet and grabbed a rucksack hanging on the shed wall. "This is perfect!" she said as she looped the strap around her neck with the bag next to her chest. "Here you go," she said as she gently lifted her friend into the

bag. He purred like a contented cat because his two favorite pleasures were being close to the little girl and avoiding a walk.

The little girl walked with the goose in her knapsack through the gate behind the inn and into a field of patchy grass. She walked this path almost every afternoon, greeting the cows and donkeys and sheep in the field and then climbing the slope to her special place, which was no more than a ledge with an overhanging roof.

A little girl who has lost her mother carries within her heart a special measure of loneliness. She loved her Papa, but he missed his wife too much to talk about his loss. So each afternoon she sat alone in her safe place in the hills, lost in sadness and trying to recall the face of a mother she had seen only in the first hour of her life.

Walking the path at night, however, was scarier than in daylight, but the moon to her back and the star to her face lit her way. She noticed that the strange star was blazing even more intensely, and its light danced on the rocky hills.

Shadows took shape to her left and right, and nearby a big shape moved with a clanging sound. The little girl froze, looking to the goose for comfort. It was purring as it slept in the rucksack, happy, warm and safe. *Well, no help there*, she thought. The clanging shadow drew closer as it moved toward the hills in front of her. She stood perfectly still. Suddenly a loud “Honk!” came from the rucksack. She frantically shushed the goose, but it was too late. The big, clanging shadow veered toward her. When it was only feet away, the shadow let out a “Mooooo!” The goose honked a greeting as the clanging shadow approached them.

“Whew, Sharda, you gave me a fright,” exhaled the little girl. “What are you doing out at night? Bell-cows should be safe and warm at home.” Sharda licked the goose’s head, then resumed its slow walk toward the hills. The strange star had grown larger and brighter than a full moon, and the little girl could see that

the shapes were cows, sheep, and donkeys moving through the field and up the slope of the hills, which were illuminated by the star as if it were an unimaginably powerful lantern.

The little girl marveled at the astonishing scene in the field. The goose was looking around, too, from its perch in the rucksack. After a moment, it looked up at the little girl and honked.

“You’re right,” she responded. “Let’s go.”

So the little girl and the little goose joined the cows and sheep and donkeys, and a few dogs and even a housecat or two, and walked up the slope toward the spot where the odd star was pointing. Birds great and small raced above them.

The caravan followed the very path the little girl walked every afternoon. She knew it well, but she kept her eyes down to step carefully around rocks and holes. She couldn’t see ahead anyway because Sharda and two of her sisters were walking in front ahead of her. The goose fussed in its rucksack, but the cows ignored his honked pleas to walk faster.

After climbing the slope, the parade of animals in front of the little girl slowed and fanned out beyond both edges of the rocky path. “Look!” she gasped to the goose. The animals had gathered around a ledge with a small overhang—her ledge. And on the ledge, illumined by the star blazing directly overhead, were the man and woman she had seen earlier that evening. The man was adding sticks of wood to a small fire, and next to him lay the woman.

Moved by curiosity and a sense of empathy that she couldn’t explain, the little girl crept toward her ledge. The animals gave her room to squeeze through until she stood only a few feet from the flickering fire. She was transfixed by the shining eyes of the woman, who looked pale and tired, yet happy, as she lay beside her newborn, who was wrapped from toes to chin in a rough covering.

All the animals and birds took in the mesmerizing scene of the man, the woman, and the infant. The swaddled newborn seemed aware of the witnessing animals, its eyes roaming from side to side as if to greet each one. At first, the only sound was the crackling of the fire. Then, as if joyously greeting the newborn, the animals began to moo and baa and meow and bark and bray and chirp and caw.

The little girl looked at the goose, her best friend in the whole world, and spoke the words she had said to it every day: “I love you, little goose.” The goose bowed its head when it heard the little girl, and then it said, “Honk,” which meant, “And I love you.”

The woman whispered a few words to the man, who emptied another of their rough bags and handed it to her. She wrapped it around her bright-eyed baby for added warmth.

Two housecats—a golden tabby and the other gray-striped—stepped from the crowd. They lived in the baker’s shop, rolling on the floor at customers’ feet to be admired and petted, then spending warm afternoons sleeping atop the wall that ran behind the inn and the bakery. All the animals stopped chattering as the two cats reached the woman. They nuzzled the woman’s arm for a moment, then flopped down, one on each side of the baby, stretching and plastering themselves to it, purring with joy to be sharing their furry warmth with the newborn.

The little girl and the goose realized at the same instant that they wanted to help the infant, too. “Come on!” the little girl exclaimed. “He needs something soft and warm to lie on.”

They ducked under cows, dodged between horses and donkeys, and leaped over sheep and dogs. “We have important work to do for the baby!” the little girl called behind her as she rushed down the slope toward the field.

Breathing hard as she ran through the gate to the inn, she put down the rucksack and gasped, “Wait here. I have just the thing

for the baby.” The goose honked and squirmed in the rucksack. The little girl thought his honk meant, “OK, I’ll wait here,” but instead the goose meant, “I have something to get, too. I have just the thing for the baby.”

The little girl dashed back a minute later, cradling in her arms the blanket that had rested across her bed all her life. Its faint fragrance of her mother warmed her body and soul. The blanket was her treasure.

The rucksack was empty! “Silly goose!” she called out. “Come on! There’s no time to eat your grain!”

With a loud honk, he waddled from the shed, dragging with his beak a tufty wad.

“What is that?” she asked, stooping to feel the material. She looked at the goose in wonder. “But that’s your down from your nest!” she exclaimed. “You can’t give it away. You need it.”

The goose looked into her face and then at the blanket she held neatly folded in her arms.

“Okay, I get it,” she laughed. The little girl stuffed the goose-down and blanket into her rucksack, grabbed the goose under one arm, and dashed out the gate toward the ledge.

The exhausted young mother warming her newborn beside the fire was wide awake. Wonder was all around her. The gleaming star made the air sing like the sound of thick falling snowflakes. The throng of creatures rumbled in conversation. The two cats purred next to her infant. Dogs and wolves had rushed away to retrieve scraps of brushwood for the fire. Calves skipped up and down the path. Lion cubs and ewes happily wrestled and tumbled with each other. And a dozen local shepherds had rushed through the crowd of animals and, drunk with excited amazement, had related a story of singing angels. The woman grasped her husband’s hand.

“Here she comes! She’s coming through now!” The cry echoed through the crowd of animals, and they hushed and made a corridor for the little girl with her rucksack and goose. The woman sat up and smiled.

The little girl stepped to the woman and stood with her head down, dark curls hiding her face. She usually knew what to say, but not this time. The goose looked up and honked soft encouragement. The woman beside the fire reached up and squeezed the little girl’s hand. Finally, she blinked, swallowed, and began speaking very fast. “I’m so sorry that you have to be out here in the cold,” she said to the woman. “But I’m glad that you found my ledge—well, it’s not really my ledge. But I climb up here every day.” The goose interrupted with a honk. “Oh, sorry,” the little girl said. “WE come here every day. But it’s a colder and scarier place at night, even with that strange star.”

She paused for a breath and looked at the goose. “Well, we thought your baby might need these.” She pulled the goose down and blanket from her rucksack and held them out to the young mother. The woman didn’t take them. Instead she smiled and nodded toward her newborn babe. The little girl knelt and gently lifted the baby’s head to slip the soft goose-down underneath. Then she spread her mother’s blanket over the newborn. The baby looked into her eyes and smiled.

Life is about growing up and growing old. The little girl grew into a young woman. She and the little goose visited their ledge every day and marveled at that night of a dazzling star, gathered animals, and a wondrous baby. And the little girl wondered about her mother’s blanket.

A goose is not given as many years as a little girl, and the day came that the little goose passed into the time beyond reckoning. The young woman held the goose in her arms for hours at the end, weeping and whispering words of love. Then she placed her dearest friend in the worn old rucksack and gently placed it

in the back of her ledge. She stacked stones around and on top of the rucksack, marking the spot as a hallowed place of memory and love. There were twenty-four stones, one for each year they had shared a life. The memorial glowed softly against the dark wall of the cave, as if the twenty-four stones had absorbed the piercing light of the star on that strange, magical night.

The years passed and the young woman's life became happily filled with a husband, two children, and the inn. She walked every day to her ledge on the craggy hill, where she sat quietly and felt the presence of her goose-friend. On warm days she invited her little ones to walk with her, and she knew her goose enjoyed their chatter and singing. As she returned to the inn, she would stop briefly in front of a nearby cave in which she had buried her dear papa next to her mother. She had learned that life brings each person a measure of joy and sorrow.

A day came that as she returned through the field toward the inn, she heard her husband shouting for her.

"What's wrong?" she called as she ran to him.

"There's a man here to see you!" he cried. "He must be important because there's a crowd with him. But we don't have a room."

As the young woman with dark curls bent over to catch her breath, the man who had asked for her stepped out of the inn. Her eyes widened as she saw the familiar folded blanket that he held against his chest as if it were a treasure. Then she looked into his eyes. He smiled the very smile she remembered from long ago and placed the blanket into her arms.

"Little girl," he said. "This belongs to you."

About the Writer

Bryant Burroughs is a writer who lives with his wife Ruth in Upstate South Carolina with their three cats. His work has appeared in online literary sites such as *Foreshadow*, *Agape Review*, and *Faith, Hope and Fiction*.

A Lady Today

by Alysia C. Anderson



Sunni stared out Momma’s bedroom window. That Saturday morning, the backyard resembled a church congregation, except no one was singing and falling out in the aisles. People were there to help Momma with food, flowers, and blessings.

Sunni turned around and sat hunched over on a stool, looking at Renée. Renée was getting married, and that meant it was her last day at Momma and Daddy’s. Renée was moving to Johnny’s house, leaving Sunni alone in a house full of brothers.

“Everything’s gonna be perfect,” Momma said to Renée.

Renée's hair was nearly impossible to work with that morning. Momma fought with Renée's hair, trying to make the perfect curls she wanted, but not much could be done with her short frizzy hair. When Momma suggested plaits, Renée hollered and screamed, storming out the room in her white dress.

When Momma turned to Sunni, she smiled to disguise her frustration. "I pray to God you don't be acting that way on your wedding day," she said, walking over to her. "I never had no trouble with your brothers. They just do and be done with."

Momma was right. Her older brothers were no fuss, wearing anything they wanted, not caring what they looked like. Renée liked ribbons, bows, dresses, and lace. Ladies ain't meant to be dirty.

Momma lifted Sunni's chin up. "Time to get you ready before your sister come back and see you not ready," she said as Sunni hopped off the stool.

Sunni followed Momma and sat down in the chair her sister occupied before her fit. Staring at herself in the mirror, she didn't feel as pretty as Renée, even though her Momma told her many times that she would be someday.

Like her sister, Sunni's hair was impossible to work with. Braided tight to her scalp, the two rows go down to her neck with the end pieces curl up and out, making her look like a bug. She could hear her friends, Jimmy and Teat, repeat, "Bug girl, bug girl," annoying her every time she heard it. After a few hard punches in the arms, they stopped, but they never learned anything.

"Stop moving, Sugah," Momma fussed, as she unraveled Sunni's braids. After endless swearing, Momma brushed out Sunni's hair. Picking up the straight iron, she began to work some magic, taking small pieces of hair at a time. The heat from the straight iron burned Sunni as the steam hit her neck. She tried to pull away, but Momma pulled her right back into place.

After fifteen minutes, Momma finished Sunni's hair, curling it under. "There you is," she said relieved to be done fighting the short, thick mess of hair.

Sunni looked at herself in the mirror as Momma stepped back. She felt the same, but just a bit different. Her hair was longer than she thought. Running her fingers through it, she was amazed feeling all the knots were gone. For once in her life, her hair held a curl. Lowering her hand, she glanced in the mirror, still not feeling as pretty as her older sister.

Standing behind her, Momma placed her hand on her shoulder. "I'm gonna get your dress, Sugah. Then, you be done with," she said, touching the short curls.

Sunni nodded, watching her in the mirror as she disappeared. She took another look in the mirror, hoping to see something different, but she was just the same—arms and legs with a head, but she no longer looked like a bug.

Sunni admired her older sister. As the youngest of seven, everyone experienced things before she could. Renée got to be a lady first. While Sunni wasn't quite sure what that meant, she knew it was a good thing. Renée could do grown-up things. Sunni spied on her once when she came back from a date with Johnny. They stood on the porch, and Renée giggled as he kissed her on the cheek. Sunni had never been kissed yet, but she imagined that kiss went right down to Renée's toes. Today, Renée was marrying Johnny. The people gathering at the church would say how beautiful and grown-up she was when they see her. Sunni wondered if one day people would see she was more than the little girl standing in the background.

"Here it is, Sugah," she heard Momma say. The pink dress reminded Sunni of roses in her grandma's garden.

"Don't dawdle," Momma said as she hugged the dress tight. "Hurry up and get that on."

Sunni unbuttoned the dress and stepped in it, pulling it up over her hips. She slipped her arms in the sleeves and reached in back, trying to button herself up, but her arms weren't long enough to reach. "I need help," she said.

"Come here," Momma replied, pulling Sunni over to her. She buttoned the dress and smoothed it out. As Sunni sucked in a deep breath, she tied the ribbon in the back. When done, she checked her hair. "There," Momma sighed. "At least one of you is done." She stepped back, taking a good look at her. "You's a lady today. I'm going to go look for your sister. Don't be running off, getting dirty, or nothing like that."

"I won't," Sunni replied as Momma kissed her forehead.

She stood in front of the mirror, not out of vanity but of gratitude. God had a unique way of changing her.

About the Writer

Alysia C. Anderson is an English instructor at Southeastern Louisiana University, where she teaches freshman composition and American literature. Her short stories have been published in *Tulane Review*, *Louisiana Review*, *Pure in Heart Stories*, and *Country Roads Magazine*. She lives in Folsom, Louisiana with her husband, son, dog, and farm animals.

The Wileys' Horses

by Maggie Nerz Iribarne



One day, we looked out the kitchen windows to see the Wileys' horses standing in our backyard beside our basketball court. The smallest one, Astral, the one with the big star on her forehead, was not there. There were usually three.

The Wileys fancied themselves farmers. Along with the horses—Inky, Ruby, and Astral—they had a pack of dogs, a flock of chickens, and a hoard of cats. They had a barn tucked down below the hill where their small house stood, but the horses were often out wandering, standing solemnly in different places all over their property, and often on ours.

They appeared and disappeared in our yard like ghosts, or the Scottish kelpies we read about in our picture book, gnawing and nosing at shorn grass, their tails whipping flies or blowing in a breeze. In winter, they'd be knee deep in snow, frozen in lack of activity, nothing tasty to nibble.

A Wiley horse sighting was always a source of excitement for us kids, but Mom didn't think so and repeatedly phoned Mrs. Wiley to complain. "Dixie, your horses are here again," she would exhale, exasperated, hanging up before Dixie could reply.

Tim was the 17-year-old son of Mr. Wiley's dead brother. The Wileys took him in, since it was the right thing to do, but they treated him like an employee and not a son, a kind of Harry Potter without the promise of Hogwarts. Every day, we watched him come home from school and head out to haul garbage, shovel snow, clean gutters, and rake leaves. The three horses were just another overwhelming burden, so he left them to fend for themselves, just as he did for himself.

When Nora and I saw Tim from time to time, sitting on his stump at the border of our properties, we'd run over from our playhouse to talk to him. Usually he'd give us something, like an old blue bottle and tell us it was 100 years old or something. Not long after we noticed the missing horse, we approached him, but he stared off into space, barely noticing us.

"Hey, Tim, where's Astral?" Nora said.

He took his red handkerchief out of his back pocket, wiped his face, and said, "Dead."

Just like that.

When we delivered the news of Astral's mysterious death, Danny and our parents reacted the same way, with that grimace one makes when one can't decide whether to be amused or disturbed. Mom said it first, "Well how? Where is she?" We were fairly consistent spies of the Wileys, keeping tabs on our neighbors just because they were interesting to us, and we kids had not much else to do. We thought for sure that one of our many pairs of eyes would have seen the disposal of a horse, although we didn't know what that would entail.

The next time Nora and I saw Tim, we asked what became of the animal, and again, in the same emphatic way, after a big gulp from a can of orange soda, he said, “Buried her. Back there.” He jerked his head over to the left and let out a huge burp. “Told them she ran off.”

At dinner that night, Mom said, “I would think the Wileys would be a little sad about the loss of one of their horses. I would think they’d wonder how the animal died. I would think there’d be some curiosity or concern about the whole thing.” But none of us wanted to make Tim’s life any worse. Though we couldn’t condone horse *murder*, we couldn’t blame Tim for being angry and desperate. Our conversations on the topic ended in silence and a numbed feeling overall, like the cold mashed potatoes on our plates.

Sometime after the alleged death of Astral, we awoke to the smell of smoke. I came downstairs in my pajamas and bare feet. Mr. and Mrs. Wiley were there, in our dining room, and the Wiley girls, Sue and Sam. No Tim. Mom was pouring coffee. There were soggy boxes lined all around our dining room. Mrs. Wiley was semi-sobbing, “I just woke up because of that smell. I can smell fire miles away. I just know. I gathered up all the pictures.” Mr. Wiley put his arm around his wife.

“Dixie had a fire in her house as a girl. Traumatized,” he said.

“Well, I hate to say it, but I am glad it was just the barn,” Dad said.

Everyone shrugged.

“What about Tim? What about the other horses? Where are they?” Danny blurted.

“We think whatever Tim did to Astral, he did to the others, and burned the barn. He always had it out for us,” Mr. Wiley said bitterly.

“Well, I think Tim had his reasons,” Danny said, his voice raised, before he walked decidedly out of the room, leaving us with just the ticking of Mom’s Regulator clock.

Three years later, at Stanhope farm’s big pumpkin patch, people gathered by a fence with a horse on the other side. I left my cluster of friends to take a look. The horse had Astral’s familiar star between her eyes. In fact, aside from her well-fed body and shiny coat, she looked exactly like the Wileys’ horse. I walked around to the side and discovered healthier versions of Inky and Ruby nosing a patch of grass. Excitement welled up inside of me, a hunch that had lingered since the fire finally found its resolution. I couldn’t wait to tell my parents, Nora, to call Danny in New York City and give him the news: Tim did have it out for the Wileys, but he did not kill the horses. Of course he didn’t.

Tim *sold* them. He set them, and himself, free.

That night, I gazed from my window, observing the Wileys’ yard and house, imagining Mr. and Mrs. Wiley inside, having their dinner, happy to be rid of Tim. I could see his stump in the yard, long abandoned. I pictured him working as a mechanic, or doing landscaping, or even in college, like Danny. I hoped with all my heart he found something better for himself than the Wileys’ farm.

About the Writer

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

A Christmas to Remember

by **William Sirls**



Winifred Tucker sat quietly as she stared out the window of Carter's Diner. She wasn't quite sure why she was there, but watching all the people in the busy parking lot took her mind off the pain in her lower back and neck.

"GG Winnie, you didn't eat all your ham," said the little girl beside her.

Winifred turned to stare at her. The little girl wore a beautiful pink dress trimmed with a wide, white ribbon. Winifred sneaked a quick peek across the table. She still didn't recognize the woman sitting there, but the stranger had come with the little girl to pick Winifred up from The Woodlands Nursing Home.

“Granny, do you want some water?” the stranger across the table asked, holding up a Styrofoam cup with a straw poked through its plastic lid.

“It looks better out there,” Winifred said, tapping a crooked and age-spotted finger at the window. “It’s like new.”

“What’s like new, Granny?” the stranger asked, glancing out at the parking lot.

“All of it,” Winifred said, wondering why the stranger kept calling her Granny. “It’s just so beautiful outside today.”

“Maybe ’cause today is Christmas,” the little girl said, resting her head on Winifred’s arm. The little girl slipped from her chair and squeezed behind Winifred’s to peer out the glass beside her. “Do you think God makes Christmas days prettier than others?”

“I ’spect so,” Winifred said.

“I remember you telling me what Christmas was all about when I was little,” the girl added.

“You’re not all that old now.”

“GG Winnie, I’m ten!” the girl said, shooting her an indignant look.

Winifred smiled and glanced back out to the parking lot. “So, if you’re so old and wise, and I told you about Christmas, tell me what it’s all about.” She congratulated herself for her quick thinking. Because now, Winifred had no earthly idea what Christmas was. But it was just right there, right in the corner of her mind...

“Jesus came into the world,” the girl said, giving her a little frown.

“Oh,” Winifred said. “That’s right. And he also died and arose.”

Winifred meant to call the young girl by her name because the name came to her for an instant, then went away. So many things came and went, but what she did remember was the young man she was looking at. He was the same one she had spotted earlier. He hadn’t moved a lick. He was just standing out there amongst the parked cars. And goodness, look at all the cars. There were so many of them out there, and they all looked so different. There were small cars, big cars, a motorcycle, even a Cadillac—an old Cadillac, like the one her Isaac used to drive. There were new pick-up trucks and old pick-up trucks—just so many of them. And look at all the people. They’re everywhere!

“My goodness, but this place is popular,” she mused.

“Because it’s Christmas,” the little girl said.

Winifred’s eyes moved back to the cars, more arriving by the moment. She looked over at the old Cadillac. “Isaac needs his medicine,” she said. She frowned and put her hand flat on the window. “He has a bad heart.”

“Not anymore,” the little girl said. “Great-Grandpa Isaac’s all better now.”

“He needs it every day, Mallory,” Winifred answered, looking at the girl. *Yes, that’s it...her name is Mallory.* “Isaac depends on me to remember his medicine.”

Mallory lowered her head back to Winifred’s arm and grinned. “You don’t have to do that anymore, GG. He’s with God now, remember?”

Winifred stared at her, panic seizing her heart. “No, I see his car. Please take me to him,” she pleaded. “I miss him so, and he needs his medicine.”

“But GG,” the girl said, her small hand resting on Winifred’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Mal,” the stranger across the table said.

“I really wish someone would take me out there to see Isaac,” Winifred said, shaking her head and watching as a young couple helped their three children into a white minivan. Not too far from them, a young man...the same young man...was still just standing there. There wasn’t anything special about his appearance; in fact, he looked rather plain, but Winifred sensed something about him. Something special. *I know him*, she thought. *I know him from somewhere...Think, Winifred. Think.*

“What are you looking at, Granny?” the woman across the table asked.

“It’s him,” Winifred said in wonder, still staring at the man in the parking lot. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she smiled. The man returned her smile and nodded. *He’s looking at me*, Winifred thought. *Why is he looking at me?* She put her hand back up against the window and opened her mouth slightly before nodding back at him. She then turned to little Mallory.

“I’m going to see Isaac today!”

“GG Winnie,” little Mallory said sadly. “Great-Grandpa Isaac isn’t out there. He really isn’t.”

“I know that, silly!” Winifred said.

“But—”

“Mallory,” the strange woman interrupted. “Let GG think what she wants, honey.”

Winifred lowered her hand from the window and smiled again. “Ladies, I know I’m going to see Isaac today!”

Mallory slipped back into the chair beside Winifred. “Mommy, look at GG smile!” She clapped and wrapped her arms around Winifred’s shoulders and hugged her. “I love you, GG Winnie! I haven’t seen you smile like this in so long! I’m so glad you’re happy!”

That night, back in her small room at The Woodlands, Winifred sat on the edge of her bed and gazed at the framed photograph on top of her nightstand. Her back was throbbing, but at least her neck pain had eased up.

She reached over and picked up the frame from the nightstand, and her hands trembled slightly as she held it up in front of her face. The picture was of her daughter, Connie; her granddaughter, Carolyn; and her great-granddaughter, Mallory.

“Yes!” Winifred said. “Carolyn was the other one that I had brunch with today. She was the one sitting across from me.” Winifred was glad she remembered.

Then there was someone else she recalled—the young man from the parking lot who’d been looking at her. There was a quick knock on the door and Winifred knew it was Nurse Hyacinth, who checked on her just about every night.

“Come in, honey,” Winifred said.

“Did you enjoy your Christmas, Winnie?” the nurse asked, peeking around the door. “How’s your back feeling tonight?”

“It was the best Christmas ever,” Winifred said, pulling a quilt toward her—one that Carolyn and Mallory had made for her. “And the Lord is going to make my back like new.”

“I pray for that all the time,” Hyacinth said. “If you need anything, you know what to do.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

The nurse nodded and closed the door. Winifred glanced over at the far corner of the room and could see the silhouette. She knew who it was. It was the man from the parking lot.

There was something else she remembered about him.

“He arose,” she whispered.

Winifred draped the quilt around her shoulders. She clicked off the lamp, cradled the photograph to her breast, and laid her head carefully down on the pillow. Connie, Carolyn, and Mallory—how she loved them! And she knew they loved her, too. It felt good to remember. To not struggle to remember, after so long...

“I’m ready,” she said, her neck and back already feeling better.

Little bubbles of excitement fluttered throughout Winifred’s belly. It was the happiest she had been in a long, long time. She smiled and closed her eyes, thinking about Isaac and how she truly missed him.

A little over two hours later, Winifred Tucker died in her sleep.

About the Writer

Over the course of his life, **William Sirls** has experienced both great highs and tremendous lows—some born of chance, some born of choice. Life lessons involving faith, grace, patience, and forgiveness are evident in his writing. The movie adaptation of his novel, *The Reason*, was released by Universal Studios in 2020.

Dear Nana (Nonfiction)

by **Laura Plummer**



Despite being your first grandchild, I didn't feel close to you as I was growing up. I lived two hours away and only saw you a couple of times a year on holidays. You were a mythical figure, like the characters in my picture books. You hid dollar bills in our Easter eggs, baked elaborate cakes, and gave the best hugs. But I never had a genuine conversation with you.

When I was 13, Mom had moved out, and I was desperate for female guidance, someone I could tell about my new feelings and experiences. These were the days before email, and talking on the phone made me nervous. So I sat down at my dad's computer and typed you a letter. The next day, I mailed it out, unsure what to expect.

A week later, I received your handwritten response, and my heart did a cartwheel. "I was so delighted to hear from you," it

began. And suddenly, I had a pen pal and an outlet for my teenage angst. You showed such an interest in my life, my goals and my dreams. I could tell you anything without fear of being judged. In retrospect, you were my first therapist.

Your legendary warmth came through in your words: “I just know you’re going to do great in school this year.” You dispensed practical advice: “Don’t overload your schedule” and “Make sure to wash your whites separately.” And you offered your unconditional support: “If you ever need someone to talk to or have a problem, I will always be here for you, no matter what.”

Your letters were the high point of my week, a welcome distraction from homework and babysitting my sister. Every day after school, I rushed to the mailbox to see if it contained an envelope with your distinctive handwriting and your signature smiley face on the flap. When one arrived, I hurried to my room, eager to discover its secrets.

You never failed to write a thorough and thoughtful response to my previous letter, despite your declining health. A lifetime of putting others’ needs ahead of your own had caught up with you. You described hearing loss, dizzy spells, and fatigue. Dialysis three times a week. But you bore it all with tremendous grace, writing, “Life isn’t always easy, but I love life and thank God daily for all I do have.”

Even while suffering, you expressed limitless gratitude for your Creator. “He has given us so much,” you wrote. “I talk to Him all the time.” You spoke of God as a wise and gentle parent, and encouraged me to cultivate my own relationship with Him: “God loves you at all times and will always be there for you.”

You planted your tulips before the ground froze and looked forward to watching them bloom the following spring. “I love that time of year,” you wrote. “Flowers start to come out from hiding all winter. The birds start coming back.” In one of your

last letters, you discussed your plans for Thanksgiving and Christmas—holidays you wouldn't live to see.

Twenty-four years later, I still visit your letters from time to time. They are a testament to a relationship that almost never existed. Over eight months, we went from virtual strangers to friends who shared a unique bond transcending age and distance. I will forever consider our correspondence a divine gift that allowed us to forge a friendship before it was too late.

About the Writer

Laura Plummer is an American writer and poet from Massachusetts. Her work has been featured in numerous print and online publications, including *The Sun* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. Read more at lauraplummer.me.

Faith of a Little Girl

A Short Story by Adesiyan Oluwanifemi, age 12



I woke up early in the morning to prepare for my uncle's birthday. My mum also woke up early. After preparing for the party, I went to my room, took my Bible, and opened to a verse saying, "Let God arise, and His enemies be scattered; Let those who hate Him flee before Him" (Psalm 68:1*). But before I could read the next verse, my mum called me and asked if I was ready for the party. Then I told her that I was almost done. I took my Bible, wore my dress, and packed my bag. I went to the dining table and ate the food my mum had prepared for me. After finishing, I packed my plate, washed it, and entered into the car.

On the way, some men with guns asked us to stop the car! I was afraid and hid behind my mum's seat holding my Bible tightly. We were asked to come out of the car, but I kept holding my Bible. Then a man (their leader) threatened to shoot us if we did not reply to their demands. I remembered the verse I read in the morning and recited it.

Unknowingly, some policemen were passing by not quite long after I finished reciting the verse. The thieves, or should I rather call them the "bad gangs," tried to escape, but they couldn't. They all got caught and were arrested. One of the policemen took us home because mummy was too afraid to drive.

The next day, it was a Sunday. I woke up earlier than before in order to meet the testimony time. When it was testimony time I rushed to the altar and shared my testimony. Everyone was shocked and amazed seeing the wonders God had done for us. After church service, we went home.

Not quite long after we had gotten home, my dad got a call from his boss and was told that he had been given a promotion in his workplace. On hearing the news, my mum and I jumped in excitement.

**HAVE FAITH IN GOD AND RECEIVE WONDERS TODAY,
JUST LIKE THE LITTLE ME.**

Fill My Cup

by Ariana Biggs

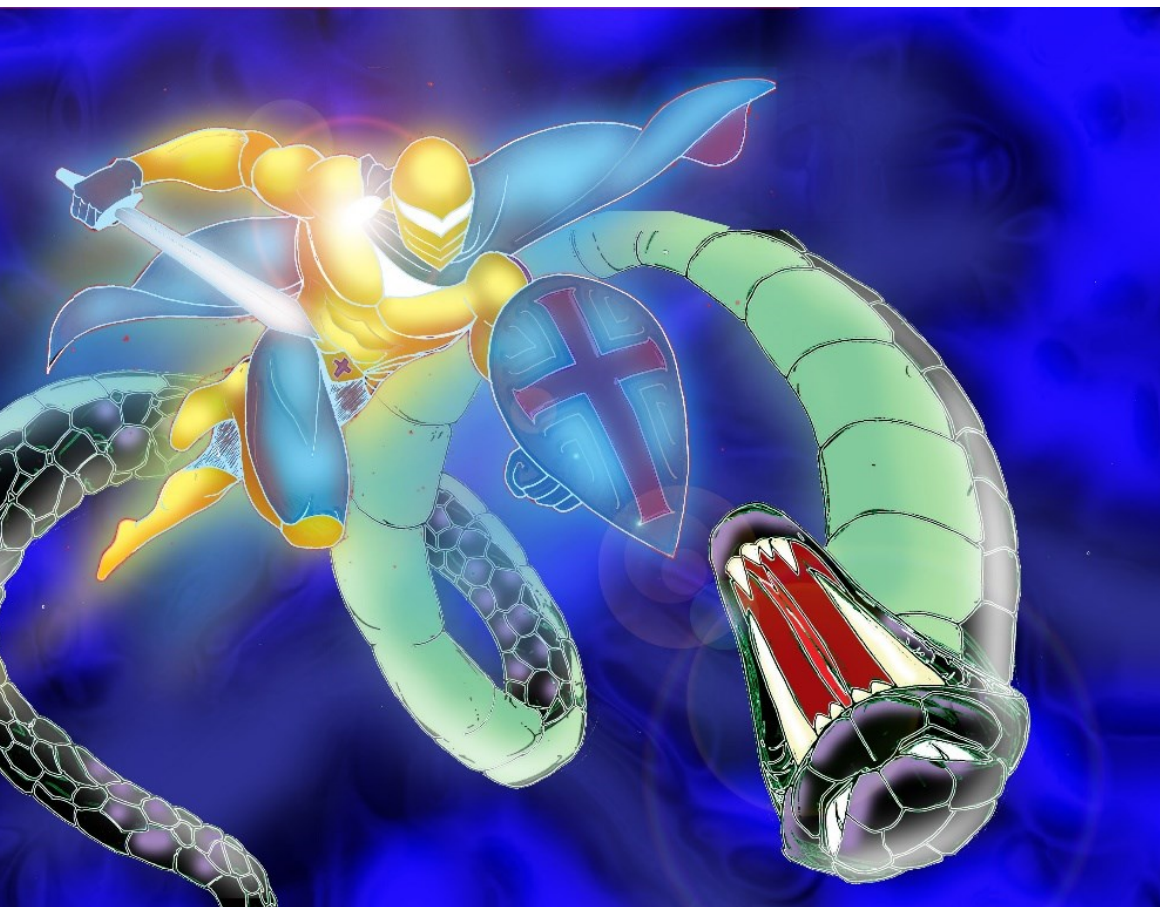


About the Artist

Ariana Biggs is 38 and has been married for almost 18 years. She and her husband have a nine-year-old daughter, who they have been homeschooling for the last three years. Ariana always thought she couldn't draw well and would get very self-conscious about her abilities; however, she has drawn several things recently that she's quite proud of, and she has also recently realized that her creativity comes out in different ways.

The Test

by **Jason Hendrickson**



About the Artist

Jason Hendrickson took to art at an early age. Before graduating from the University of the West Indies with a Bachelor of Arts in the Visual Arts, he worked for some of his country's well-known advertising agencies and specialised in the country's many visual art forms. Mentored by some of Trinidad and Tobago's Visual Arts masters, he honed his skill in perfecting the human body and landscapes...his writing is just a wonderful addition.

Two Photographs

by **Carl Scharwath**



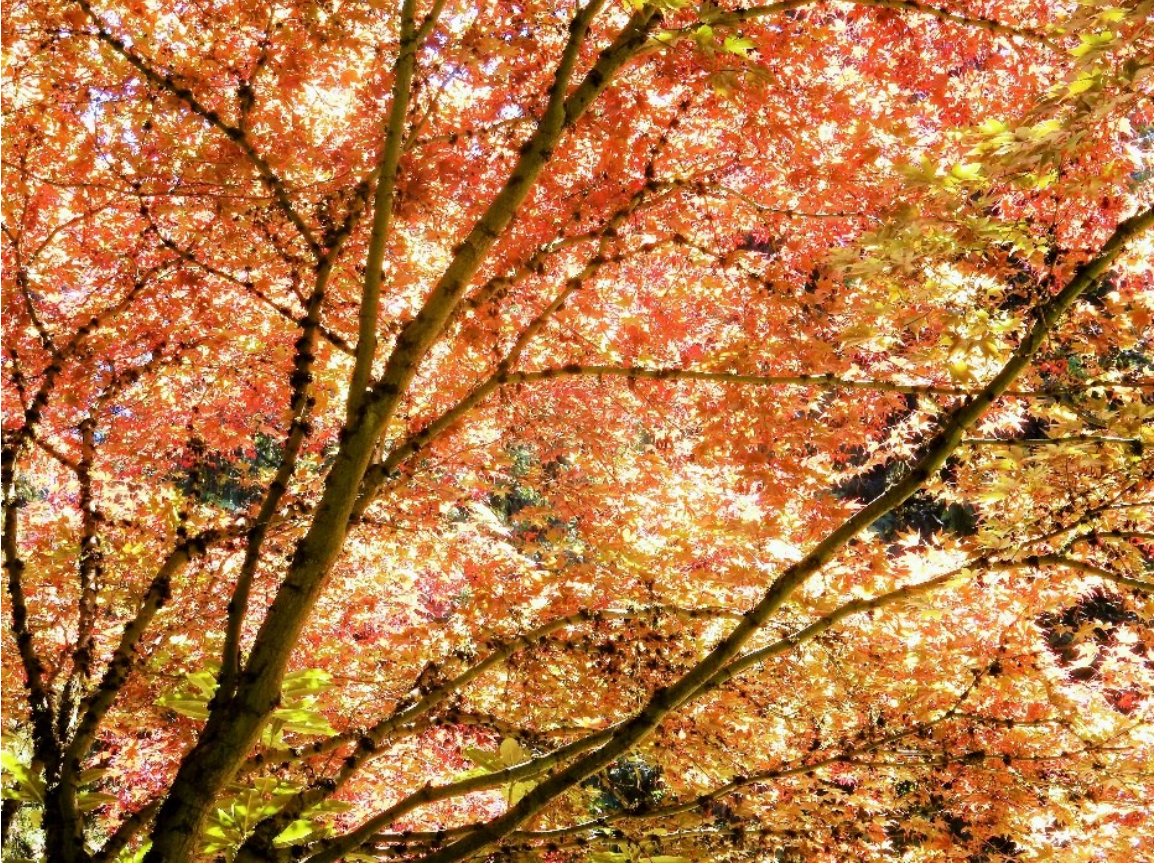


About the Photographer

Carl Scharwath has appeared globally with 175+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book, *Playground of Destiny*, features poetry, short stories and photography (Impspired Press). His two photography books were published by Praxis in Africa. His photography was also exhibited in the Mount Dora Center for the Arts gallery and The Leesburg Center for the Arts. Seven global poets have also selected his photography to grace the covers of their published books. Carl was the art editor for *Minute Magazine* (4 years), is a contributing editor for *ILA Magazine*, was nominated for The Best of the Net Award (2021) by *Penumbria Magazine*, and was a finalist for the Mary Cassatt award for photography. He is also a competitive runner and a 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

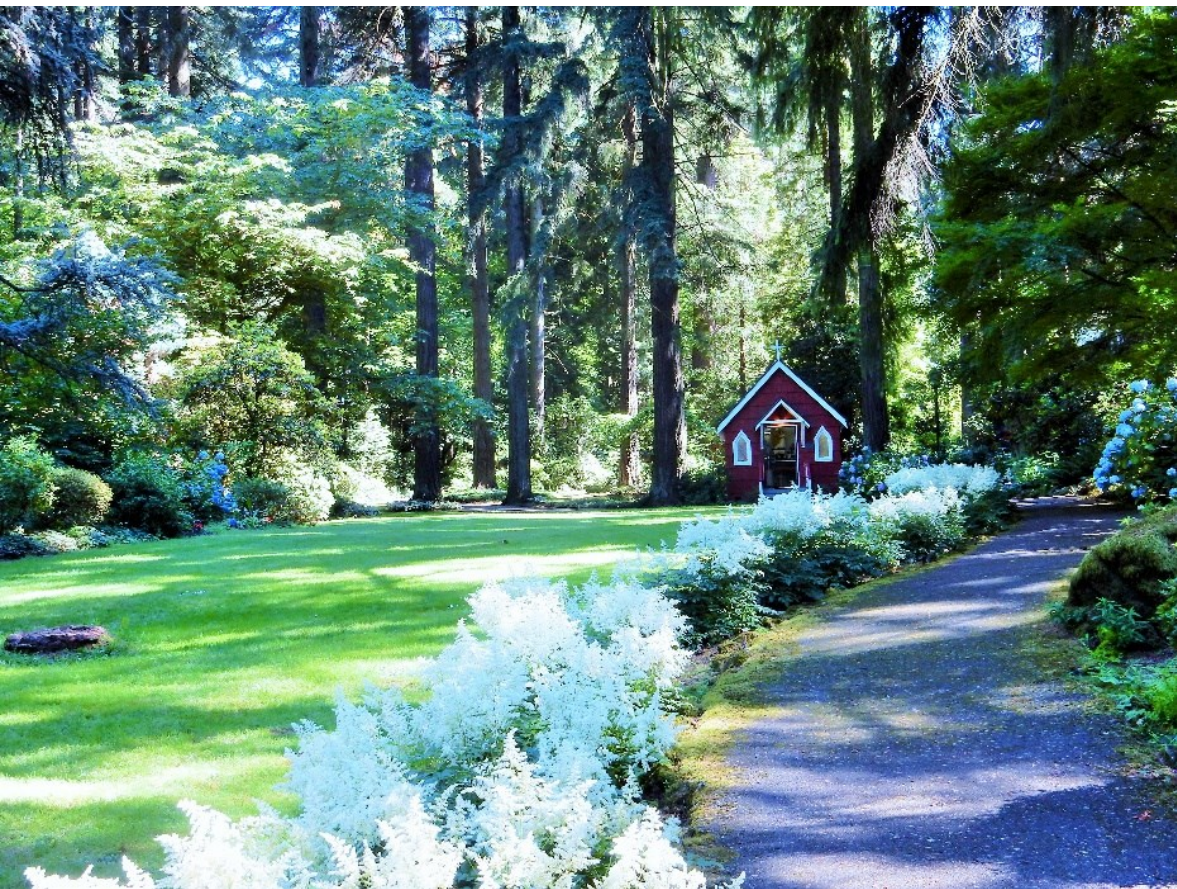
Fall Leaves

by Clarissa Cervantes



Hope

by Clarissa Cervantes



About the Photographer

Clarissa Cervantes is a poet, photographer, physical therapist, and researcher. Clarissa strives to create beautiful and meaningful Christian images and articles to inspire and uplift readers. Clarissa holds a B.A. in Physical Therapy, where she found her vocation to help as well as to deliver comfort to people all over the world through her images and words. For Clarissa, every image captured represents her faith, which is a gift from God to be shared with others and to encourage one another to find beauty and gratitude in their daily lives.

Game: Emoji Bible Stories

Directions:

Guess the Bible story based on the emojis. Once you solve them, challenge your friends and family!



Find the answers on page 81.

Recipe: Resurrection Rolls



These yummy, easy-to-make cinnamon rolls have been around for decades under many different names. They have often been called “Resurrection Rolls,” or “Empty Tomb Rolls,” and are used to create a picture of Christ and the empty tomb after His resurrection—the marshmallows (symbolizing Jesus) are wrapped and buried in the “tomb” only to disappear after the rolls are baked! Resurrection Rolls are especially popular at Easter, but contain a good (and tasty) lesson for any time of the year.

This recipe makes 8 rolls. You can easily make up to 16 rolls with the same amount of mixture by using 2 cans of crescent rolls and 16 marshmallows.

Ingredients

- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 can (8 oz) refrigerated crescent rolls
- 8 large marshmallows

Getting ready...

- Preheat oven to 375°F.
- Melt the butter in the microwave (about 20–25 seconds) in a small bowl.
- Mix the cinnamon and sugar together in a separate bowl.
- Spray the muffin tin with non-stick cooking spray.

Steps

1. Separate dough into 8 triangles.
2. Roll 1 marshmallow into the melted butter, then roll it in the cinnamon-sugar mixture.
3. Place marshmallow on shortest side of dough triangle and roll it up to the opposite point. Completely cover marshmallow with dough, then pinch all edges and seams tightly to seal.
4. Dip 1 end of roll in a little butter, then place in muffin tin, butter-side down.
5. Repeat steps 2–4 until you've made all the rolls.
6. Sprinkle a little extra cinnamon-sugar on top of the rolls once they are in the muffin tin.
7. Bake 12–14 minutes, or until golden brown.
8. Wait for rolls to cool (about 5 minutes), then take a bite and see that the “tomb” is empty!



Emoji Bible Stories – ANSWERS

1. Noah's ark.
2. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit.
3. Daniel in the lion's den.
4. Samson and Delilah.
5. The birth of Jesus.
6. David and Goliath.
7. Jonah and the whale.
8. Jesus tempted in the desert by Satan.
9. Jesus feeds the 5,000.
10. The 10 plagues of Egypt.

Who is God?

Do you have questions about who God is? You're not alone. All of us at one time or another have wondered about the mysteries of our existence.

Here is what the Bible tells us about God:

God is real. He created the universe, the Earth, and everything in it (including you). He is the creator of life. As your creator and designer, He knows you, your mind, and your heart. He knows everything about you. He loves you (*He is love*), and He wants a relationship with you.

Here's the problem: there is distance between us and God. This separation exists because, whether we know it or not, we choose our own way of living instead of God's way. This is called sin. Sin is choosing to say, think, or do things that are against God's will. Everyone sins, without exception, and it keeps us from getting close to a good, pure, and perfect God. We cannot get rid of our sinfulness by our own efforts—not by trying to be a good person or doing good deeds. But sin must be dealt with in order for a relationship with God to begin.

So, in order to restore the broken relationship with humanity, the Author wrote Himself into His own story...

God came into His own creation, and lived as a man. As a human, He helped us to know His character and showed us how to live. He shared in our humanity, but never sinned. After teaching people about the ways of God, He allowed Himself to be falsely accused by religious leaders and arrested by Roman soldiers, then executed. He did this to make Himself a sacrifice, so that all of the sin of humanity (past, present, and future) could be placed on His shoulders and be punished once and for all.

After He died, He came back from the dead three days later. This miracle proved that He had power over life and death, and

confirmed the truth of all His teachings. He told us that whoever trusts Him will be given life—real *life*—and will one day live with Him forever in a paradise untainted by the sin that corrupts our world. He made a relationship possible again. His human name is Jesus (*Yeshua* in Hebrew). Many people often call Jesus their “savior” because He literally saves us from the consequences of sin—which are destruction, death, and separation from the love and goodness of God.

If you want to know the God who loves you, there’s nothing you have to *do*. You don’t have to go to church first and you don’t have to start making promises to be a good person. Just come to Him as you are, imperfections and all. Talk to Him, wherever you are. While you’re talking, recognize who He is. Ask Him for His forgiveness for your sins. Ask Him to take your life and make it new. And because He loves you, and because He is good, He will do just that.

Bible References:

- “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)
- “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8)
- “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)
- “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)
- “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23)

- “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)
- “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

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