

# 20 Questions to Ask the Kids in Your Life

They like to dress up like super heroes and princesses. They are fascinated with things that spin, fly or crawl. They are small.

They dance like no one's watching.

They sing like superstars.

I love hanging out with them. I love talking to them.

I love their questions. Like the time when a little girl asked me, *"Do bugs sweat?"*

Or when another once asked me, *"How old is God? Is He 56?"*

**Children are bringers of joy.** I make it a point to have them around in my little world, even though I don't have my own children yet. I've been an elementary school teacher, a Sunday school teacher, a babysitter, a nanny, a tutor, a mentor and a ballet teacher (even though I don't know the first thing about ballet).

I spend time in the foster system regularly, and people sometimes commend me on this "labor" of spending time with them. But really, I just have to say that though there are some laborious moments, these kids share beautiful pieces of God's heart with me without even trying.

God's beauty is there, in their eyes and smiles and voices—and I love finding Him there, in the face of a child.

**For it is to these unique and precious little people Jesus has told us the kingdom belongs.** These who have been made weak and dependent. Who are tender and always learning. Who have faith built into them, eager to believe the outstanding.

And as one of these, Jesus came into the world, a light shining in the darkness. In humility, He took on the form of a helpless infant and grew up a simple child in the small town of Nazareth. In fact, a considerable portion of God's 30-plus years on the earth were spent *as a child*. Yes, to demonstrate the humble heart of God, but the astounding reality of the God-Man in a small, young frame also proclaims the profound value of a child.

*As a tender shoot, He grew up before us.*

From our Lord's very entrance into the world, He was declaring the abounding worth of a child, not skipping that season of human existence, *but becoming a little one Himself.*

**So maybe we could say children are some of God's favorites too.**

We need to listen to these young ones. Because they have things to say.

And ask them questions. Because they often have the most amazing answers. Maybe you're not sure what to ask. And if that's the case, I'll give you a few just to get the ball rolling. Ready?

- 1. Would you rather sleep on a cloud or slide down a rainbow?*
- 2. If the sky rained food, what would you want it to rain?*
- 3. What is your favorite Bible verse?*
- 4. Would you rather ride a giraffe or an elephant around town?*
- 5. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?*
- 6. What's your favorite song?*
- 7. Would you rather be able to fly like a bird or swim like a fish?*

8. *What makes you laugh?*
9. *What makes you sad?*
10. *If you could spend the day with one person and do anything you want, who would it be and what would you do?*
11. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*
12. *If someone gave you \$100, what would you do with it?*
13. *Would you rather be able to run really fast or jump really high? Why?*
14. *Who is your hero?*
15. *If Jesus came and sat down next to you, what would you say to Him?*
16. *If Jesus came and sat down next to you, what do you think He would say to you?*
17. *What's your favorite Bible story?*
18. *If it was Jesus' birthday, what gift would you give Him?*
19. *If Jesus gave you a gift on your birthday, what do you think He would give you?*
20. *What's something that you think God enjoys about you?*

So crouch down, get eye-to-eye with the little ones in your world, and discover, in their young faces, the heart of God. Let's let their joy, their simplicity, their outstanding faith, their poverty of spirit teach us some things that we tend to forget in our grownup-ness.

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# Why a Weary World Rejoices

This season always brings with it a message. Songs that remind our hearts to hope. A story that puts us in awe of what has been, and what is yet to be—*a story still unfolding.*

We remember the lowly birth of the highest King. We remember the night when choirs of angels sounded in the sky, but only shepherds witnessed the song. We remember a Babe whose cries revealed to the world what everlasting love sounds like.

**The birth of this One urges a weary world, and weary hearts, to rejoice.**

Here we are two thousand years after that miraculous night in Bethlehem ...

And a weary world and some throbbing hearts that feel a little (or a lot) removed from that Silent Night that unfolded millennia ago, groan for a King.

*These days, we stare at the news, watching smoke rise, hearing death tolls calculated, looking in despair as another law is passed that defies our God, listening to national leaders thrust out their arguments, witnessing refugees fleeing for safety— **but here and now, we must remember that Babe.***

*This month, I'm going to sit around the Christmas tree with my family, pierced by the grieving absence of one we love, my first Christmas without my dad ... **and in my grieving, I must remember that Babe.***

*This coming year, I'm going to look into the faces of foster children down the road, who have lived through the throes of abuse and neglect, who are without a family on Christmas Day,*

and every other day of the year ... ***and I must tell them of that Babe.***

***When the world is shaken, when our hearts are breaking, the truth is—our hope is—we need to draw near to the manger again.***

For that Baby is the Hope of the nations, the hope of every weary heart. He's the God who is faithful to fulfill every promise, the One who will return to us, the righteous Judge who will bring justice to the earth, the Bridegroom who will marry His church, the King who will rule the nations, the Lord before whom every knee will one day bow.

That Baby is the Resurrection and the Life. He lived, He died, *and He lived again.* And if He has been raised, all who die in Christ will be raised also.

That Baby is the living declaration of the Father's love, who came to bring orphans into a holy and eternal family, and to bind up our pained brokenness.

This Christmas, we remember our God who took on infant flesh, the Man who embraced the cross, the Savior who broke open the grave.

We set our hearts on the One, the only One, who can bring hope to a failing world and to a fainting heart.

**The One who revealed to us what Everlasting Love sounds like ...**

*It sounds like a helpless, holy infant, crying in a manger.*

*It sounds like a voice, beckoning undignified fishermen (and others, like us) to be His best friends.*

*It sounds like a tear, dropping to the ground, grieving with a friend over the death of her brother. And it sounds like a loud cry, calling the dead man out of his tomb.*

*It sounds like a groan, a prayer, a final breath.*

*It sounds like an earthquake, breaking open the grave.*

*It sounds like a promise to come back again.*

*And a day will come when it will sound like a loud shout, like a trumpet, ringing through all of heaven and earth, announcing our King's coming.*

**He was, and He is, and He is to come.**

And so we say, with longing hearts—*Come, thou long expected Jesus. Weary hearts and a weary world are desperate for Your return.*

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## **10 Gifts That Will Reach Right Down to the Heart**

Well friends, the Christmas tree is up, the Nativity is on the mantle, and “O Holy Night” is sounding in our house!

As we enter into this season, I’ve been thinking about what I want to give this year (particularly to my husband). He and I started a little tradition our first year of marriage of making each other a Christmas gift, or at least giving “a gift for the heart.” (Gifts for the heart = those things that will bless, minister to, or grow one’s heart in God in the months and perhaps even years to come.)

Today, just for a little fun, I wanted to share some of my

most recent favorite things with you that definitely fall under this bless-the-heart category of gift giving. Not only are they really sweet gifts—they are really sweet gifts that reach a deeper place.

So feel free to take some notes (and maybe drop some hints by passing this post along to friends and family who will be buying *you* gifts :)).

**I've narrowed it down to 10** ... and here they are, in no particular order. Ready?

**1. Art by Bethany Hackmann.** This woman's paintings are rich, and each one is beautifully birthed from the place of prayer and Scripture meditation. As you browse through her work, you will notice a few pictures of children in her collection—Bethany carries the Father's heart for the fatherless, and she daily steps into the lives of adoptive families and of foster children, reaching to be a witness of God's pursuing love... *and then*, as she goes into the place of prayer for these children, she often paints them! Stunning! (One more thing that's important to note—she does commission work, y'all. Imagine what a gift it would be to have a painting of your young ones hanging in your home...) Jump over here to view some of her work, or to inquire about commissioning her for a personalized painting.



**2. Hashtag Wallart.** When my dad passed away this summer, two friends of mine (who happen to be sisters) showed up at my front door with the piece of art pictured here, scribing the words to the beautiful old hymn. And needless to say, their gift reached my heart. These two sisters handpaint each of their creations using repurposed wood as their canvas. I want just about everything they make—it's all beautiful! You can

view their creative works at their etsy store.



**3. Cassandra Erin Jewelry.** A gift from Cassandra Erin jewelry is very precious. Cassandra is a metalsmith who can take some of your most prized memories (handprints, footprints, drawings from you children, handwritten notes from a loved possibilities are almost endless) shrink them down in size, and put them right onto a piece of jewelry.



**4. Created Art Studio.** If you live in the San Antonio area, count yourself blessed right now. This red-head (who is a sweet friend of mine, and an amazing artist) hosts creative sessions in her studio where followers-of-Jesus of all ages can come and *create*. All who walk through the door are given a blank canvas and invited to create from the place of intimacy with their Creator. I'm already brainstorming how I can get down to San Antonio with some of my friends so that we can *create* together.



**5. Hiding in the Light.** This is one of the most gripping stories I have ever read. It's a book that you truly cannot put down. This true story of stunning courage and God's redemptive power is a must, must, must read (in my opinion).



**6. Every Bitter Thing is Sweet.** This book is a beautiful gift to the body of Christ. Sara Hagerty unfolds her story of finding God in her pain, brings us right in, and provokes us to a deeper place of communion and intimacy with our Lord. I've truly lost count of how many of these books I've gifted to others, and the number is still climbing.



**7. Deep Unto Deep.** I once heard a friend of mine describe this as the most impacting book she'd ever read. Dana Candler writes from a rich history of seeking after the depths of God's heart, and she urges us to dive down far beneath the surface of our God and to discover the treasure that is found in His holy heart as we seek Him earnestly.



**8. Laura Hackett Park's Music.** Some of our most favorite songs to sing are "Laura songs." Actually, Jon sings her songs quite often when he leads worship. Her most recent album, *Love Will Have Its Day*, has sounded many a day in our house.



**9. Jon Thurlow's Music.** I know—it might not be exactly fair for me to put him on the list. But I truly love his music. I get to see the behind-the-scenes Jon, and I can say with sincerity that he's even more golden in the secret than he is on the stage. *Walking Through the Night* is perhaps my favorite among his albums, though of course, I love them all. Right now, his latest single, *Not Alone*, is free to blog subscribers—so sign up to get this one delivered to your inbox.



**10. Anna Blanc's Music.** If Jon Thurlow is my favorite, Anna Blanc is definitely in the running for second place. Her heart, her voice, her message is *gold*—and it all comes out in her music. You can visit her website to find her music and her book, *and* she is giving away her newest single, **Weak and Broken Vows** (one of Jon and my favorites), for free.



Much joy to you in your giving this season, friends!

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## **Remember These Children During the Holidays**

I stared into vacant eyes as I took my seat next to her nervous, guarded frame. She wore a zip-up hoodie, shorts, and flip-flops on this below-20-degrees December day.

Christmas was just around the corner, and while most kids love talking about all of the joys and lights and sweets and gifts that come with this time of year, this ten-year-old didn't.

While most kids had a Christmas tree lighting up their living room, she didn't. She didn't even have the living room.

While most kids had gifts from mom and dad that they were eagerly awaiting, she didn't. She didn't have anyone that she called *mom* or *dad*.

While most kids would wake up in their homes, with their families, on Christmas Day, she wouldn't. She was homeless.

The home and the family she used to know, way back whenever, had never been a supply of joy or lights or gifts. Not at

Christmas, not ever.

She'd been abused, so severely that her parents' rights to her had been legally severed. The government had pinned her with the title "ward of the state," and she was shuffled to and fro from foster home to foster home, from group facility to group facility.

Now, on a bitterly cold December day, I sat a table with her, bringing with me a heart and a prayer for one little girl, and a bottle of nail polish.

She shyly exposed her nervous habit, showing me nails that had been bitten down past the quick. Each finger was flushed pink with a few sores. But she wanted them painted. Orange. Her favorite color. And so we both got orange nails that day.

I came back the next week with a deck of cards. Then the next with some artsy-crafty things. Then the next with a couple of good children's books. And so it became a bullet point scheduled into my weekly routine.

▪ *Sunday from 1-2pm: visit Kacie.*

She lived in a group home with more than forty other children, all with similar stories. All needing a place to feel safe, to belong.

All needing someone to simply tell them that they matter, and they aren't forgotten; someone who would speak life into their darkness; someone who would bring words of truth into little worlds that had been filled with so many lies.

So I would paint her nails, and tell her how beautiful she was. I would look at the pictures she drew, and gush over her creativity. I would read her stories, and make comments between pages—*I enjoy spending time with you ... You're so valuable ...*

On Christmas Day, I got permission from her facility to take

her out for hot chocolate. I came with gifts in my hands, throwing the tiniest seed into the great chasm of her aching lack, praying it would multiply somehow.

Christmas Day was the last day I ever saw her.

The next week, she was moved. *Again*. It's what children in foster care do. It's one of the injustices they live under, among oh-so-many more. Permanence is ground these wanderers don't walk.

A taxi had picked her up. And she, a ten-year-old girl with a trash bag filled with a few belongings, rode alone with the driver-stranger to a city several hours away where she was delivered to her new group home.

Like this little girl, multitudes of abused and neglected children move through America's system, with more than **400,000** making their home in foster care this very day, and more than **100,000** of those in need of an adoptive family. Most feel like a lost face, a lost life among the masses. But among those masses, *today we single out one child, and we remember.*

**Kacie is not forgotten.**

She's one among many. *And let us remember still more.*

Look for that child in your church, in your neighborhood, in your child's school who needs a father.

Look for the group facilities scattered through our cities that house so many of our nation's unseen fatherless. Connect with your region's foster care agency and find these group homes, find ways to serve these children.

**We may not be able to embrace the masses. But we can embrace one.**

**We can't step into the lives of 400,000. But perhaps we can step into the life of one.**

And perhaps some of us—and prayerfully, many of us—can bullet point our schedules to give even *one hour a week* to visit one fatherless child in his distress and show him that he matters, that there is a good Father in Heaven, that his life is not forgotten.

**For this is pure and undefiled religion.**

*(\*Kacie's name and age were changed for her protection.)*

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## **When God Interrupts Your Devotional**

So you know the, “How are you doing?” question we all ask each other? It’s like a part of the American greeting ... “*Hi, how are you doin’?*”

We hear it from the salesperson when we walk into a store, from the cashier who’s checking out our groceries, from the person we pass in the hallway at work, from the person we shake hands with during the Sunday morning meet-and-greet at church, from the girl on the other end of the intercom at the Starbucks drive-thru.

We hear it from people we know and from people we’ve never seen before.

**“Hi! How are you?”**

This question has always been peculiar to me, because of course I'm not going to *really* answer that question to the guy I've never met who's scanning my bread and milk.

And really, most don't ask because they *want* to know the answer. We've just meshed it into a part of our "hello," somehow. Sometimes we even ask it in passing, giving the responder just enough time to deliver the standard, "I'm good," and then we keep going on with our business.

But sometimes, this question is pretty loaded. Have y'all ever had those instances when a good friend (who really *does* want to know the answer) gives the how-are-you-doing question, and when she asks it, you immediately feel a lump in your throat or start tearing up? Because it turns out, you're not doing so good, and though you could pretend with your grocery checker, a good friend sometimes has a way of popping the façade.

Not so long ago, I sat down at a restaurant with my husband. When the waitress came by with menus, she came with the *hi-how-are-ya* greeting. And for a few seconds, I began to consider—*what if I really told her?* What if I told her that the last few months had been the most challenging of my life so far, that I cried lots of days, that I missed my dad more than I could've imagined ...?

Well, I didn't tell her (and I wouldn't necessarily recommend you spilling your heart out to your waitress either). I spouted an "I'm doing OK" and then took the menu she offered me.

But what it did get me thinking about was just the simple reality that I couldn't get away with that "I'm OK" answer with God. His eyes peer right through any of my pretenses.

*And He wants the real me.*

But at times I've found myself mechanically moving through my routine during the day—even my "routine in God." Sunday

through Saturday, I pick up where I left off in my Bible reading, pull out my prayer list, and go for it. (For the record, I think having a Bible reading plan and a prayer list is a really great idea—it's a practical help in staying faithful to give God that sacred time, it's a tool to engage with His heart, it's a road map of how to use that space in our day wisely and not wastefully.)

But there are days, here and there, when the best way to walk closely with His heart is to actually step off the map we've made.

I remember a day in these recent months when I was plowing faithfully through my list of prayer requests ... but my heart was in some other place, *somewhere*, bleeding. I opened my Bible to pick up where I'd left off the day before, and my eyes glazed over the pages as my mind wandered and my heart numbed to the storm inside.

Right in the middle of my going-through-the-motions, I felt the Lord whisper to my heart—*Pause your routine with Me for a minute. And let's have a real conversation.*

He wasn't after my outward motion. *He wanted my heart*, right where it was in that broken, bleeding moment.

He wanted a heart that would come to Him in authenticity and in brokenness. A heart that doesn't shove down the real answer to the how-you-doing question, doesn't attempt to pick up its own broken pieces or hide its cracks—but comes unkempt. Imperfect. Vulnerable. Bare. *Real.*

And so I pressed pause on my routine. I unveiled the secrets of my heart to the One who already knew them, but who wanted interaction with me, ***because He's an intimate God.***

As a daughter before her Father, I told Him how I was doing, *really*. I told Him what hurt, I told Him what I didn't understand. I brought Him my questions, my wrestles, and my

disappointments. I released my tears before Him and poured out my buried aches.

I spilled out, cried out, and bled out.

Sometimes, it's in our hardest of seasons when some of our most precious and marking memories with God are made.

*They are the times when deep desperately calls out to deep*—when I search deep into His heart, determined to discover something, *anything*, that would sustain my soul ... and He reaches His hand into the deep of mine, loving to reveal.

Our aches are escorts into the heart of the Father, the heart of our Healer, the heart of our God.

Our wrestling questions are invitations to discover, mysteries meant to send us on a treasure hunt.

And ultimately, in the searching of Him, and in the discovering of Him, we end up falling more in love with Him.

**We've got to get real before God.**

And sometimes we've got to press pause on the schedule, and come before Him, a child before her Father—without all the right, put-together words, without an agenda, without a set routine. *But simply with hearts raw, desperate and hungry.*

Let's invite Him into those messy places we have a tendency to hide, let our heart spill out those unrefined questions and topics that we would rather bury.

Ask God your questions. Ask them in humility. Come to Him in your ache, in your confusion, in your bleeding.

*Just come.* For holy wrestlings awaken thirst, unearth our desperation, send us searching ... and lead us into a deeper knowing of Him.

Let your deep cry out to His deep, and *be you* before Him. Unveil your heart to God ... and just watch as He unveils His to you.

For these raw, heart-exposed, how-are-you-doing moments before Him are extraordinarily intimate.

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## When Hope Holds You Captive

The walls in my house are a witness. They've absorbed the sound waves of soft, wearied prayers and of bold, loud requests before God.

And with these walls, I wait for prayer's fruit.

Our hearts (*my heart*) want to dodge the subject of "unanswered prayer." We often don't have much to say about it, because mingled with the pain of delay is the reality that we simply don't understand why our prayers sometimes seem to go unheard.

We kind of feel like we're down there with Joseph in the pit, pleading for God's hand to rescue, to intervene, to break in *and to hear our prayer*.

But He leaves us there. And not only that, sometimes bad gets worse. As with Joseph ... from pit, to slavery, to dungeon.

And our hearts begin to pulse and ache with the question, "Does He really hear?"

There are things I have labored for in prayer for more than 10 years (and I'm only 32, so that's almost a third of my life). And there have been moments, even seasons of moments, when discouragement has pricked my heart so strongly, I've felt I might crumble under seeming futility.

At times, I've felt I've had only the smallest thread of hope, left over from unraveled dreams and tattered aspirations.

Still, *I find that I'm bound to that thread.* Where darkness and despair tries to crush, I've been hedged in with a groaning belief that He could still break through.

I've found that I have only two options in the pulsing ache, in the delay of God's move.

I can go to that raw, painfully vulnerable place of putting my bleeding heart into His presence and asking, again.

Or I can close up and give up.

My soul wrestles. But *hope* has enclosed me in a room of sighing, weeping and praying. And I just have to keep asking. *I have to.*

I'm held in desperation's grip—because if God doesn't break in, there is no other answer, no other hope.

History has told us some stories—stories that show us that sometimes God has a plan up His sleeve that we can't see.

Joseph made his pleas, offered his prayers and waited, not knowing *when* or *how* or *if* God would intervene. He didn't know God's storyline.

But in time, truth revealed that God wanted to do more than give Joseph a key to the dungeon's door. He wanted to test and refine a young man's heart to prepare him to save and lead a nation.

God had a bigger story than could be seen within the dungeon's walls.

When prayer "isn't working," we might find that God is actually working something down in the depths of our hearts.

We cannot fathom all that is in God's heart, or the intricacies of these chapters He's writing in our life stories. And there may just be a piece of the story that we can't see yet.

He urges our hearts to trust Him again.

So I come again as an intercessor with thousands of prayers having left my lips through the years—and I confess that there is still much I don't understand about prayer. But somehow I do understand—His Spirit has convinced me—that I can't quit.

I come to Him, held captive by *hope*. I come with sighs and groans and tears. With desperation, because only He can. And with hope, because He can.

I come before Him, broken because He has broken me open. I breathe prayers born out of the depths, out of my deep.

Friends, let's put courage in one another's hearts.

Let's come before the One who hears prayer *and ask again*.

*Open Your hand to me, God. On Your Word I again cast my hope, and I hang on to what the holy, ancient pages have told me—with You there is mercy, with You there is abundant redemption.*

*I again bring these prayers.*

*I wait for You, Lord, my soul does wait. And in Your Word I do hope.*

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## **When Life Leaves You Breathless**

Some of you may have experienced those more rare moments in life when you literally feel like you can't breathe, when everything in and around you crashes, when grief in unimaginable measure throws an unexpected blow and knocks you to the ground. It's a moment you can't conceive until you're in it, and with all your might, you wish you could turn back time and somehow make it all different. But you're helpless for change, though you literally groan for it.

I can't wrap adequate words around that moment when I received the phone call that told me that my dad was gone. It was a nightmare that still stings, that still brings tears, that still causes an ache to pulse in sudden moments as sweet memories of his life and pained memories of his death run together, hemorrhaging out of a broken heart.

I'm finding, in a really up close way, that grief truly is a journey, and I've been walking it a day at a time.

But that one-day-at-a-time, one-step-at-a-time journey is challenged by the fast-paced swirl of "normal life." We're still trying to catch our breath, but our busy schedules press; the spinning world that we wish would stop for just a few minutes, won't; that accusing inner-voice relates hurry-up-and-get-yourself-together whispers to our tired hearts.

The daily grind pulls us forward to where we're not ready to

go yet, tries to hurry us along that journey of grief, pushes us to run laps our legs are still too weary to run.

Even some religious voices tell us to stop weeping and “Rejoice!” because our loved one is in heaven. But for those of you who’ve mourned the death of one you love, you know that rejoicing is not the path your heart immediately, fully steps onto. You’re broken in a way that sometimes feels almost beyond repair, and rather than clapping, “He’s in heaven!” you’re instead throbbing under the crushing reality, “He’s not *here*. O God, he’s not *here* anymore.”

The reality is, we can’t hurry out of grief. We can’t go around it. We can’t go under or over it. *We have to go through it*. And our beautiful Lord, who is near to the brokenhearted, is waiting to take hold of our hands and lead us through that dark, dark valley.

**We’ve got to go through it, but we don’t have to go alone.** The road is grievous, and those pressures within and without urge us to move along and get on with our lives. *Quickly*.

But in the midst of a spinning world and a full schedule and lots of voices ... *take a breath*.

*If we try to skip ahead to a celebration or stuff the ache, we’re attempting to force our emotions into an unnatural place.*

**Because death is meant to be mourned.** *It is sorrow upon sorrow*, as Paul wrote. It’s an earth-trembling, heart-shaking reality, and it’s right to feel the sting of it ... because it is so *wrong* to our God.

**It’s not a part of His kingdom.** And when His dwelling is finally among us again, His all-consuming, magnificently invasive light will leave no room for sorrow, crying, pain, or death. He’s kicking *all* of those things out—because He never wanted them thrashing through His creation in the first place.

When the widow at Nain lost her son, Jesus didn't pass by the man's coffin and simply say, "*It was just his time to go ...*" No. Jesus, moved with compassion, demonstrated how He felt about death, and He foreshadowed what He would ultimately do about this painful reality that has gripped humanity. *He brought the widow's son back to life.*

Our Lord hates death, too. **So much that He went to unfathomable lengths to destroy it.**

*And He succeeded.*

He submitted Himself to that which He hated so that the perpetual hold it had on humanity—His prized ones, His beloved ones—would be broken. *Forever.*

And now, gloriously, death is not the end for those who are in Christ. Because He broke the grave open, we who have joined our lives to the heart of the Living One hold confidence in God's promise of our resurrection.

*The dead in Christ will rise – and when this mystery collides with the pounding ache we feel over death, gratitude becomes explosive.*

*We'll breathe our last ... but we'll never die.* We celebrate the hope of a coming day when Jesus will utterly demolish death. *Totally.* Once and for all.

*But for now, in this present age, death still has measures of victory—because people are still dying. Hospitals are still receiving the terminally ill and fatally wounded, babies are still dying in the womb, poor ones are still perishing in starvation and for lack of clean water, the innocent are still slain at the hands of unjust men.*

*Death still stings.*

**Things are not OK right now.**

And we *need* to mourn. It is right to mourn.

The death that sweeps away life's breath is evidence of the not-yet. Death is not yet swallowed up in triumphant life.

**... because Jesus is not yet here.**

That glorious declaration, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" does not come *until*...

***Until Jesus breaks open the sky.***

***Until His feet are back on this earth.***

**So as we mourn death, there is a sacred mourning for our hearts to touch—a place of mourning the absence of the One who has promised to obliterate it.**

Death's grief ushers us into deeper longing, into greater knowing and remembering, into holy groaning—we **need Jesus here.**

*And until He is, we mourn.* We mourn death. We mourn pain and sickness.

**Ultimately, we mourn His absence.**

When we try to avoid or bury death's sting to put on our brave or happy faces, we miss the opportunity to fall over into His heart, and to peer into what He's feeling.

We miss the sacredness of what Mary of Bethany got to touch when her brother died. We miss weeping with God, and letting our tears flow down with His.

And we miss our heart's healing—**because only those who allow themselves to break, who let their shattered pieces fall before the feet of Jesus, who let Him catch their unhindered tears, who let their brokenness bring them into the arms of the Comforter ... can be truly restored.**

We may try to hurry out of grief, or go over it, around it, or under it. But unless we go *through* it, those wounds won't meet their healer. Instead, they'll meet us again and again, down the road, when those "Band-Aids" we've put on fail to hold their stick and fall off to expose the old wound that still bleeds.

So we don't shut our hearts down. No, we run vulnerably into *His*—because that's where our hope and healing is found.

Have you lost someone you love?

***Give yourself permission to feel ... and to take your time.*** In a busy world, with busy people, and a busy schedule—remind your heart that it's OK to go slow. Take some breaths in His presence as you drive to work today. Listen for His voice. Whisper your prayers while you prepare dinner or fold laundry. Sneak away with Him to a quiet place and open up the Word that has the power to give life to a fainting heart. Do today with Him, and trust Him for tomorrow. Just one day at a time.

***Give yourself permission to fall apart ... and to weep.*** Cry it out with Jesus. Crumble on the living floor. And let Him hold you, right there, and keep your tears. Get vulnerable with God. Get vulnerable with trusted friends, invite them into your ache, and ask for their continuing prayers.

Really, it feels scary to go there. Because for most of us, the path of grief is uncharted territory. Because we haven't walked it before ... until we have to.

But when grief hits, let yourself go to the unraveling, crumbling, melting, breaking place before God.

Go there.

*Don't go there to sulk and drown in your despair.*

Don't go there to stay. Go there to take hold of the One who will lead you out.

**Go there with God.** Take this road into His heart.

Go there to lean. To talk to Him. To commune with Him in a very deep place.

Go there to weep with the God who never desired that His image-bearers would die. Go there to feel even just a piece of His holy, grieving heart crying out, "*Adam, O Adam, where are you?*"—when He knew that He'd lost His precious son, when He knew they'd be separated, when He felt the first-ever pangs of death sweep through His earth. Feel, *with Him*, the grief and the hatred that He Himself has over death.

Go there to feel His tears mingle with yours.

Go there to find your healing.

Go there to let your heart touch the reality that things are not OK *until* ... and so more fully enter into the cry, "***Come, Lord, Jesus.***"

*Go there.* And don't rush out. Find Him, *right there*—in the middle of your darkest night and greatest ache. **Because He's there.**

And surely, you're going to walk through *and* come out of this wilderness, leaning on your Beloved.

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# Do You Really Know Jesus? Really?

A few years ago, I received an email from a friend that was one of those messages that I just won't ever forget. Her words that day had been pretty unexpected. It was a day that marked me. I opened up my mail to find the answer to a season of prayers. And I instantly began to weep.

Several months before receiving my friend's message, I remember sitting with her over coffee one afternoon, just talking about life's surface—our jobs, our interests and so on. It was in that conversation when my friend asked me if religion was just kind of “my thing.” Like a hobby or something. Some people like sports or cooking or crafts, and I think she understood “my religion” (though I don't ever actually refer to it as that) as my chosen extra-curricular activity.

Oh, but I hope you know. It was, and is, far more than that. And I longed for her to see and know and understand. I prayed fervently for her.

She knew the story. The story most Americans would say they know: “Jesus died on a cross.”

We've all heard most Americans would say they are Christians, right?

Because we've heard it. Right?

**But do we *really* know Jesus?**

Or is He a familiar name, a familiar story with familiar buildings that people gather in on Sundays to sing familiar songs and to hear familiar messages.

We may know the story, but we've got to ask—has the story

known us?

It has reached our ears, but has it reached down into our deep, and ruined us with awe? Has it ever—and can it still—make us tremble?

**It's an old, old story, but it will never get old.**

And it should never, and can never, get old to us.

This isn't a religious framework or how-to guidelines for living.

This isn't a fallback plan for comfort when life gets hard.

This is the story of a real, living Person, whose real, living sacrifice was meant to bring us really, really close to Him. Close enough to feel His breath blow through our souls, close enough to bring our heartbeats into sync with His, close enough to feel the shower of His presence roll through and over our frames when we lift the eyes of our hearts to Him.

*He's real.*

*He's alive.*

*He's made Himself knowable, reachable and approachable.*

And He's near to the ones who've let their hearts sink into the deep and flowing red of His sacred story.

That day when I opened my email, my friend had written to tell me that Jesus, at last, had her heart. She'd let her heart sink into the story. And His story became hers.

We've heard the old, old story. But have you stared into Love's most terrifyingly beautiful display and known, and been pierced through in your knowing, that it was for you?

Have we looked into Jesus' pained, passionate eyes, zealous for our hearts, and have we responded, *really*?

Have we come up close to the bleeding skin of the God-Man and let His wounds heal us?

*Have we been ruined?*

**And have we been ruined, again and again?**

There's a question for each of our hearts that probes beyond whether we're familiar with His name or His story. It even reaches past whether or not we've ever prayed a "sinner's prayer."

This question is for both the church and the unchurched. It's the question that our very existence centers upon. It's the question we'll still have to answer even after we breathe our last breath.

**Do you really know Him?**

Or have we belittled the richness of His sacrifice, assuming that our familiarity with a story is the same thing as receiving it?

Truly receiving this story is transformative. For it comes with a divine exchange—when Jesus extends His heart to us, and we extend ours to Him.

To let yourself sink into this story is to surrender your life into the hand of another. It's our heart's looking way up, and it's our soul's bowing way down, as low as the ground will allow. It's the tears of our brokenness spilled out; our dirty, shaking hands held out; our dark, bleeding hearts reaching out ... to receive what we could never earn and do not deserve.

But He gives it to those who want it. To those who want Him.

And when we receive Him, people will know.

**We will look different...** because we have to let go of the

world's hands if we want to take hold of God's.

Readers, how many of us who are named Christians live our lives, day to day, giving little or no thought to Him? Have we accused Him of being boring and yet have been so full of the world's wine that we've yet to truly drink of the Water of Life? Devastatingly, His glorious grace has been degraded in our eyes when we think we can embrace both His cross and the world, when we think His blood drained out was unto making us comfortable in our sin, when we withhold from Him the very thing He died for.

How many of us live "good and clean lives," sit in church every Sunday, sing songs with the congregation—and yet our hearts have yet to fall in love with the One we sing about?

How many of us have heard His name, come to Him now and then when we need help, know a few things about Him ... but He's no more than a familiar stranger to us?

How many of us have never had that real moment before Him when we tell Him that we need His cross, that we need His forgiveness, that we need Him and that we choose and love Him back?

This is a small but earnest appeal to each of our hearts today, yours and mine. *Choose Him*—whether it be that you choose *again*, or that you choose for the *first time*.

**Love Him.**

***Abandon yourself to Him.***

His gift is free. But we can't take something that's free and fail to acknowledge at what unfathomable cost it came to the bleeding Giver.

Withhold nothing from the One who withheld nothing from you. Give Jesus the inheritance of your heart that He so desires

and deserves.

His flesh was torn open for us. Blood flowed from His marred frame until He breathed His last.

Because He wants us close. **He wants our hearts.**

And in this life that we walk (and sometimes trudge and crawl) through, how close has your heart come to Him?

How close is your heart to Him when things seem to be going well and your way, when no big trials are invading your camp, when all (or at least a lot) seems to be smooth sailing?

And how close is your heart to Him when it breaks, when things fall apart, when disease takes one you love, when your family ruptures, when those things happen that make you feel like your heart will bleed right out of your chest, when storms beat against your house?

How close is your heart to Him when your *world breaks*, when national laws are passed that defy God's law, when you read news headlines of children suffering and poor ones fleeing for a refuge, when nations are raging, when crises seem to only be escalating?

Do you know Him?

Do you know the One who came to heal the world's brokenness, and your heart's?

There is going to be an inevitable moment when you and I will lock eyes with Him for the first time. And if we don't know Him now, we will not know Him then.

Each of our lives is heading toward that very real moment. Life's times of joy, sorrow and tribulation are moving us toward an eye-to-eye encounter. And in that moment, all of life's sum will come down one thing, the only thing that matters.

*Do you know—deeply, personally and intimately know—Jesus?*

When you finally look into the eyes of the God-Man, will you be looking into the eyes of a friend? Will you know the depths of His heart and have let Him into the depths of yours? Will your heart have spent its days in wisdom, building a rich history with Jesus?

Or will you painfully realize, then, that He who has loved us, who has eternally desired us, who was pierced through for us, who was meant to be our nearest, most intimate Friend ... *is only a familiar stranger?*

**How close will your heart be to His in that moment His eyes stare into yours?**

This isn't a hobby or a mere fraction of life's whole. Jesus is Life. He gave His all, and by the grace of God, may my all, and your all, be His.

And may we be overcome, undone and astounded—again and again—with the wonder, the awe and the terrifying beauty of His story.

*“Listen, ye children of God, it is the old story over again, but it is always new to you. See Him giving His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that pluck off the hair. See Him as He hides not His face from shame and spitting, dumb like a sheep before her shearers, and like a lamb that is brought to the slaughter. ... See Him with the cross upon His mangled shoulders, staggering through Jerusalem's streets. ... See Him, ye that love Him, and love Him more as He stretches out His hands to the nail, and gives His feet to the iron. ... Behold Him as they lift up the cross with Him upon it and dash it down into its place and dislocate His bones. ... Stand, if ye can, and view that face so full of dolour. Look till a sword shall go through your own heart as it went through His virgin mother's very soul. Will you not love Him who did all that friend could do for friend; who gave His life for us? Beloved,*

*here are a thousand crimson cords that tie us to the Savior, and I hope we feel their constraining power. It is His vast love, the old eternal bond, the love which redeemed, which suffered in our stead, the love which pleaded our cause before the eternal throne; it is this which we give as a sufficient reason why we should love the Savior, if needs be, even unto death.” (C.H. Spurgeon)*

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## **When You're Trapped in Grief**

When I was 21 years old, my world shifted. I placed my feet on foreign soil and threw myself into the unfamiliar. As a college student, I packed my bags over summer break and joined a month-long internship in Russia where I'd be immersed in the orphan's world—looking into their faces, eating their food, living in their orphanages, and listening to their stories. I left the states with some interest and natural sentiment over the orphan. I came back gripped with a burden that would impact the rest of my life.

The very first day I stepped into an orphanage, a skinny, dark-haired little girl came and sat on my lap. She made her way right into my arms, leaned in close, and held on tightly to my hands, as if to say, “Don't let go.” And as it is, her memory has never let go of me. It was her nine-year-old life that was one of the first to grip me. I returned the next three summers to Russia, each time looking for her face among the crowds of children. But I never saw her. She, among a

number of others, left a lasting mark on my heart.

My fourth consecutive trip was my last. And though I didn't return to Russia again in that season, God had planted a burden in me for the orphan that encompassed more than one nation's children. Since those trips overseas, I've continued to get into the orphan's world, even right here in my city.

Just weeks ago, I sat down with another nine-year-old orphaned girl who lived in a nearby children's home. She reminded me a little of that Russian girl I'd met so many years ago. Same age. Same dark hair and eyes. Same pained countenance. I'd visited her three times, and each time I'd come, she'd walked into the room with a tear-stained face. I saw feelings of hopelessness press down on her little heart, and her sagging shoulders and downcast eyes bore the heavy weight.

She liked to color, to bring beauty into the bleak black-and-white. She liked to listen to good stories, ones that were different from her own. She ached for an escape—from her group home into family, from her bleak into beauty, from her pain into joy, from her hopelessness into hope, from her fatherlessness into a father's embrace. I never saw her smile, not once. But I witnessed her tears every time I visited her.

And when I left her, I let my own tears fall, feeling the fresh weight of my own fatherlessness.

She felt trapped in her grief. And I felt trapped in mine.

That's the perplexing, brawling ache that grief brings—*you feel utterly stuck*. Because it *feels like* the only thing that can take the pain away is to get back what was lost.

But I won't get my dad back. At least not in this age.

And that nine-year-old girl won't get the years back that were spent without a family and stuck in a system. She's lost both father and mother and has been bereaved of a portion of her

childhood that she can never regain.

So what is the way out when loss brings a grief that seems to shut and lock the door?

The day after my last visit with this little girl, I paced back and forth in prayer, throbbing inside—over the hurt in my own heart, and over the hurt I saw in hers. And as my feet shuffled their path along the carpet, I heard the Father whisper.

*“I’m going to bring you out with singing.”*

As I continued to pace, my prayers for my own heart mingled with my prayers for that little girl.

*“I’m going to bring you out with singing... I’m going to bring you out with singing...”*

**He was saying it over her.**

**He was saying it over me.**

His hand was reaching down—down through the cracks of my brokenness, down into my gaping ache, down into grief’s window—and He whispered into a deep, deep place: *“I’m going to bring you out with singing...”*

I felt His zeal to convince me, to tangibly, personally prove **that He can**. He can bring my heart out of the sorrow of fatherlessness. He can heal me. He can cause hope to shine in my soul.

**He can break through grief’s closed, seemingly impenetrable door.**

*He can bring me out with singing—* and He can do it for that little girl, too.

He can do it for any and every heart that grieves. *Because no grief could ever reach so deep that His infinite, outstretched*

*hand couldn't reach it.*

Desperation and hope meet together in a mourning heart that believes. We're desperate because *only He can*. And we have hope because ... **He can**. He can heal the broken heart and bring the soul out of despair.

He's healing me, and I'm taking my baby steps, day-by-day. My heart still bleeds, and my tears still fall. But He's infusing hope. He's fathering. He's working into the deep of me right now—so that I can, with assurance and authority and intimate conviction, declare—*He can!*

*In just a few days, Jon and I are stepping back into the nation where my burden for the fatherless was first planted in my heart. Over a decade has passed since my first trip to Russia, since I first held that little nine-year-old Russian girl whose life gripped me.*

This trip had originally been scheduled for early May, but to my initial disappointment, it had to be pushed back two months.

But as it turns out, had the trip not been rescheduled, I would've been overseas when my dad received his grievous diagnosis. I would have missed some of those last days with him.

I lost much, and my heart has had to wrestle with saying goodbye to this man who raised me, and whom I longed for my children to one day know. But God has woven his presence through my dark night. I got to sit on the edge of his bed during his last days and talk to him and pray for him and listen to his silly punch lines that he was so famous for, and that he mustered enough strength to deliver, even in his weakest time. He was always able to make people smile.

My family is walking through a crisis together, having to say

goodbye to him many years, even decades, earlier than we thought we would. None of us could have anticipated that we would lose him so soon.

And I would never have anticipated that I'd return to the place where my heart for the fatherless found its starting point, as one who'd recently become fatherless herself.

The timing of this trip feels very difficult. But, somehow, the Lord moves in especially close during our heart's most broken moments and does mysterious things. He sets us in places we wouldn't have expected to go, takes us through circumstances we wouldn't have predicted, puts us in front of people whom we wouldn't have imagined meeting—and He, *in the way He alone can*, reaches down through the cracks of our brokenness, down into our gaping, throbbing places, down into that vulnerable window that sorrow has opened, and He does a deep, deep work.

With my own fatherless wounds still fresh and bleeding, I'm going to look out on the landscape of the nation where my heart was first pierced for the fatherless. And I'm carrying a message in my heart for them (and for myself)—“*He can bring you out with singing.*”

***God can heal. He can infuse hope. He can father.***

For them, for me, for you. For the one who's lost that one you love, or those years waiting for that dream, or whatever *that thing* is for you—whatever our loss, grief, or trial—He is able, *more than able*, to bring us out, and to put a new song in our mouths. One of those songs that can only be forged in trial's fire. A song that He writes *in us* as we lean our broken hearts into His hand. A song of His faithfulness. A song of praise.

Yes, desperation and hope meet here. And this hope will not disappoint.

*"I waited patiently for the Lord, and He turned to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet on a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth, even praise to our God" (Psalm 40:1-3).*

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