

# The Quiet God

## Read Psalm 121:1–8

*As a deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.*

Psalm 42:1 (NIV)

One day during my regular walk through a wooded area, I looked up to find myself about 30 feet from a deer that was feasting on some sort of plant. I was startled by how suddenly it seemed to appear. This deer didn't seem to be afraid of me. Quietly it ate and then gently moved on. I was deeply moved by the deer's beauty and serenity. Its unexpected appearance made me realise that God is always nearby, watching over me.

When anxiety, fear and doubt slip into my heart and mind, I sometimes forget about God's power. I don't feel confident that I know God's plan for me, and I don't understand when it seems that God is not responding to my prayers. Then I stop to consider that, as Romans 8:28 says, God is working, moving, shaping and using everything in our lives for ultimate good, and my perspective changes. I realise that God is neither bound by my inability to see or trust nor frightened by my doubt, fear and flaws. Instead, God quietly invites me to draw near; that's where God wants me to be.

**Prayer:** *Dear Father, awaken our senses to recognise your presence wherever we go today. Help us to be convinced that because you love us you are with us. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Where has God appeared quietly in my life?

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*Randi Perez-Helm (Michigan)*

# A Three-legged Stool

## Read 1 Timothy 6:12–19

*[The Spirit says,] 'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.'*

Revelation 2:10 (NRSV)

When I was growing up as a farm boy in Minnesota, I had to milk the cows by hand each day. It didn't take me long to appreciate being able to sit on a three-legged stool that provided a firm foundation for my work.

As Christians, we also need a firm foundation in order to do our daily work for the kingdom of God. This foundation is our Bible-based faith. Three qualities of God make up the three strong legs of my foundation: God is love (1 John 4:8); God is holy (Leviticus 11:44) and God is spirit (John 4:24).

If we put our weight upon one attribute of God to the exclusion of the others, we will surely slip and fall. Concentrating on God's love alone may cause us to lapse into permissive sentimentality. Emphasising God's holiness alone may cause us to become rigid, legalistic and judgmental. Focusing on God's spirit alone may motivate us for service, but we may easily burn out apart from the underlying support of God's love and holiness.

Our earthly task lasts until we die. Revelation 2:10 says, 'Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.' Being supported by God's love, spirit and holiness will make this journey possible.

**Prayer:** *Gracious God, open our hearts each day to your love, spirit and holiness, that we may be empowered to spread your kingdom everywhere. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Our faith rests on the foundation of God's love, spirit and holiness.

*Michael D. Thiel (Iowa)*

# Unexpected Conversion

## Read Mark 15:33–41

*When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'*

Mark 15:39 (NIV)

While I know in my head that Jesus died for all people, sometimes I am guilty of thinking there are people beyond God's reach. I taught a boy at school whom I subconsciously labelled as a person very unlikely to become a Christian. Even when I prayed for him, I don't think I really believed that God would answer my prayers. The boy seemed to be too emotionally distant, to have too many problems, and to be highly unlikely to stop and listen long enough for someone to tell him about Jesus. But I was very wrong.

Many of the students I teach hear the Good News of Jesus Christ, but this young man *believed* what he heard. Now I love to watch the way this boy's life is changing as he reads the Bible and strives to live the way Jesus wants him to.

God can change the most unexpected people, at the strangest times and in the most unlikely places. A number of people watched Jesus die, but as today's reading shows, the centurion realised that he was watching the death of the Son of God. No one is beyond the power of God's love. No matter how unyielding or difficult they may seem, Jesus loves them and died for them.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, thank you that no one is beyond the reach of your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** God's love has no limits.

*Joanna Ronalds (Victoria, Australia)*

# Staying Busy

## Read Galatians 6:2–10

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*

Isaiah 30:21 (NIV)

The morning after my father's death, I attended worship. I went to church hoping for comfort and perhaps sympathy. Then I heard the preacher's words: 'If you feel like working, then work. If you don't feel like working, then work.' He was talking about working in the kingdom of God, but his words conveyed to me the simple message of staying occupied as a way of coping with the grief that engulfed me. His words were 'spirit and truth' (John 4:23), and they proved to be a light for me in the weeks that followed.

When self-pity or depression gripped me, I worked. Staying busy led me to new activities and friendships. How priceless a friend God is, to love us toward healing! My grief didn't disappear instantly, but I was always aware that God was helping me. That made all the difference.

**Prayer:** *Thank you, God, for your faithful guidance. Thank you for your servants who speak words of life and peace. Help us to hear and obey your instruction. In your Son's gracious name we pray. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Even when we don't know how to pray, God is near and responds to our needs.

*Prudence Wells (Texas)*

# Anger without Sin

## Read James 1:19–21

*If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day.*

Ephesians 4:26 (GNB)

A few years ago, I was mugged on Christmas Eve. The thieves didn't get much for their efforts and I wasn't hurt. In fact, God seemed to be watching over me through it all. But I relived the experience in my mind over and over again. This one incident victimised me repeatedly because I was angry about it. Four young men pushed me, a 68-year-old man, down and got away with a wallet with only a small amount of money in it. By continuing to be obsessed with the incident, I was allowing those muggers to steal my peace of mind and my forgiving heart.

It wasn't until I prayed for these young men—whose foolish actions could get them imprisoned—that I was able to let go of my anger. Then I could thank God for protection and guidance—for them and for me.

Scripture offers us clear advice about the problems anger can create. The letter to the Ephesians reminds us that it can lead us into sin. The goal of life is to love even those we consider our enemies. Prolonged anger can distort our lives and lead us into actions we will later regret. But God can free us from it and heal us.

**Prayer:** *O Lord, there is much in the world to be disturbed about. Help us to turn our anger into constructive actions that establish justice, right wrongs and heal wounds. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Nursing anger can poison our lives.

*Richard E. Woodard (Washington, DC)*

# Enough for Today

## Read Matthew 6:25–34

*Jesus said, 'Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.'*

Matthew 6:34 (NRSV)

In my garden is a small pond that I made a few years ago. I decided to direct some of the rainwater that runs from the roof of our house to the pond, using a plastic drainage pipe. The pipe was 100 feet long and would need to be buried underground. I did not want to spend the money to rent a digger, though the ground was full of roots, making the job difficult. After an hour of digging with a pick and shovel, I realised that I didn't need to dig 100 feet all at once. I could do a few feet each day and, eventually, I would complete the job.

I have often found that a particular task seems too great when I look at it in its entirety. However, when I break it down into smaller parts and do just what I can do today, I can complete the task over time.

Jesus encouraged us to deal with today's concerns and to trust him for the rest—for all that we need in the future. When I trust God for one-day-at-a-time strength, what at first seems impossible becomes more than possible. It becomes accomplished!

**Prayer:** *Dear Jesus, give us the strength we need for today. With your help, we will trust you for the strength we need for all our tomorrows. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Just for today, God will give me what I need, and tomorrow God will do it again.

*Mike Smoot (Virginia)*

# Spiritual Fitness

## Read Psalm 119:89–104

*Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is valuable in every way, because it promises life both for the present and for the future.*

1 Timothy 4:8 (GNB)

At the start of each new year, I take stock of my lifestyle, looking for ways to improve myself. Like many people, after a holiday season of indulgence, I vow to exercise more and eat healthier foods. I have decided to take up daily walking for the winter months when my activity level is lowest. A brisk walk around the block every morning and evening seems to be an elixir for me.

While I was proud of my new physical regimen the first time I saw results in the mirror, I realised that I might have been neglecting my spiritual life as well. So I made a commitment to set aside 20 minutes each morning as devotional time. I am rereading parts of the Bible to gain a better understanding of God.

Some parts of my daily readings I am tempted to skip over, especially if the meanings are unclear. However, I pray for the strength to continue, knowing that studying God's word is worth the time and effort. Just like my walking, it gives me many rewards. The more I understand the Bible, the better I can live my life and bless those around me. Could there be a better way to begin a new year and a new life?

**Prayer:** *Dear God, help us to commit ourselves to listening to you and learning from your word. Amen*

**Thought for the Day:** Regular spiritual nourishment gives us a fuller life in Christ.

*Terri Meehan (Surrey, England)*

# Small Group Questions

## Wednesday 6 January 2010

1. What is the most involved task or project you have tackled? How did you go about doing it? What did you learn about yourself in the process?
2. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that the Holy Spirit transforms us 'from one degree of glory to another' until we are conformed to Christ. How have you experienced God shaping you degree by degree—in very small ways, over time?
3. Have you ever experienced God transforming you suddenly? What brought about the change, and what was the change?
4. What helps you when you face a situation that seems too big to tackle? As you think about what God wants for us and for the world, what need or task seems overwhelming? What one step can you take today to begin to address it?
5. What do you worry about most? How does the verse quoted for today affect you as you think about your main worry?
6. When we are tempted to worry, what strategies can help us when we are tempted to worry to instead turn our minds to God?

## Wednesday 13 January 2010

1. Judith Hupp states, 'My attitude determines whether advice is helpful or hurtful.' Have you found this to be true? Does some responsibility for the effectiveness of advice rest with the one giving it? Why or why not?
2. What commands given in the Bible do you most struggle to obey? Why?
3. Which passage do you consider the best advice the Bible contains? What other passages offer good, practical wisdom? What good advice have you received from Christian friends?