

JANUARY 1

Chain of Love

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.

—ROMANS 11:17 (NIV)

SOME OF THE best dogs I have ever had were never mine. They were fosters. I was just a stop on their road to a forever family that would love and care for them in the way they deserved.

“How can you fall in love with them, get them back from their hard and difficult pasts, and then just let them go?” This is a question I’ve been asked on more than one occasion. It’s almost always asked with a measure of judgment.

But there is something special in being called to be the one who stands in the gap. As a foster family, we help the dogs work through the trauma in order to nourish and teach them that love can be more powerful than any horror. I remember Dobie, who needed someone to nurse her through heartworm treatment. When she left with her new forever person, she said goodbye in the sweetest tail wag, but she was just too happy to linger.

As I think of the many dogs who were short-timers in my life, I think of people who have been short-timers, as well. Have you ever tried to make someone a permanent fixture in your life only to realize you were really meant to be a bridge in a gap? Trauma, emotional and physical abuse, substance abuse, and heartache are really tough rivers to cross. Some of us throw out the lifeline to someone who is drowning, and someone else is called to open their arms and become that person’s home. But in between those two are those of us who are called to be the bridge. We open our hearts and stand in the gap, and I find that this is when a lot of love happens.

Letting go—of both animals and humans—may not be easy, but when love no longer needs the bridge, something beautiful happens. This chain of love has many links, and I realize the strength of the chain is in knowing what link I am with each relationship that comes into my life.—Devon O’Day

God, thank You for the short-timers You’ve brought into my life so that I can be part of their chain of love. Amen.

JANUARY 2

Friendship Sanctuary

A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.

—PROVERBS 17:17 (NIV)

WHEN MY FRIEND Susy wrote a book with an Irishman named Patrick, she introduced me to the fascinating world of donkeys and a special one named Jacksie. Patrick grew up in a family that ran a sanctuary for injured, neglected, and abandoned donkeys. To him, donkeys are like family. Jacksie—a young donkey that had been abandoned by his mother—came into Patrick's life when he was recovering from addiction and rebuilding his life.

The first time I saw Jacksie and Patrick was in a YouTube video that highlights their unique bond. I was spellbound. Patrick is so well acquainted with donkeys that he can bray like one, and Jacksie seems to think he is a human. When Patrick brays, Jacksie runs over and puts his front hooves on Patrick's shoulders for a hug. It wasn't until I read Susy and Patrick's book, *Sanctuary*, that I learned how that bond was formed—through Patrick's long night shifts in the barn at the donkey sanctuary. He got up every three hours to feed Jacksie, create a warm nest of straw for him, and snuggle him. At the time, Patrick needed Jacksie as much as Jacksie needed him, so they grew, healed, and were strengthened together.

Patrick's friendship with Jacksie resurrected my gratitude for the relationships that God orchestrated when I needed a sanctuary of healing. These friends saw me at my worst and helped me become my best. In some cases, I found out that my gift of a friend needed me as much as I needed her.

Just as Patrick did for Jacksie and Jacksie did for Patrick and many have done for me, I pray that I will be the kind of friend others can turn to when they need a sanctuary.—Jeanette Hanscome

Walk of Faith: Take a few minutes to thank God for the friends who became a sanctuary when you needed one. How did He use you to bless them in the process?

JANUARY 3

Bookworm

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

—PHILIPPIANS 4:8 (NIV)

KILLING TIME WHILE my wife and daughter went shopping for shoes—an activity I assiduously avoid—I strolled down the strip-mall sidewalk to a secondhand bookstore. For the better part of an hour, I trawled the dusty aisles, studied the titles, and thumbed through pages. In some books you could see the creases that marked the place where the reader stopped reading and dog-eared the page. I found the occasional underline and wondered what made this sentence so important to a long-ago reader.

Halfway down the Literary Classics aisle, I found a bookworm. I don't mean a person who loves books and reads a lot. I mean an actual bookworm—a worm that bores through books. A bookworm is not a true worm but the larvae of an insect—a beetle, a moth, a termite, whatever—which gnaws through the dry, starchy paper common in old volumes. There he was, a small brown worm tunneling through Tolstoy, making tiny pinholes.

When I was a boy, I was a bookworm. There was nowhere I would rather be than between the pages of a book. I would devour all sorts of books, like *Treasure Island*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Books about faith, heroism, American history. But in recent years my book reading has tapered off. It used to be, in reading books, I found myself diving deep into the important things of life. Now, too often, I just skitter along on the surface, making tiny marks like that bookworm.

There are so many good books, old and new, that would exercise my mind, enlarge my imagination, and take me places I've never been. I want to be a voracious bookworm again. Thank God for good books, and may they take us to places that God would have us go.—Louis Lotz

The more that you read, the more things you will know.

The more that you learn, the more places you'll go!

—Dr. Seuss

JANUARY 4

A Tiny Circle of Peace

He has redeemed my soul in peace from the battle that was against me.

—PSALM 55:18 (NKJV)

SHE LOOKS SO peaceful in her bed.” My mom’s Scottish terrier, Becky, had suffered through the flood that had caused my mom and her two dogs to be rescued by boat in the fall of 2021. A year later, I was sitting by the fireplace with my mom and her dogs, hoping they’d recover from their loss of serenity and security.

That year had caused much grief for my mom. Not only did her home get flooded, but she also lost her brother a few days after his eighty-fourth birthday and two of her four beloved dogs—one to seizures, the other to old age. The older dog, a black Shiloh shepherd named Katy, had been my mom’s soul-soothing companion. Losing her hit Mom hard and still caused her sadness.

While we rocked and crocheted by the fire, we chatted about how she missed Katy and would often talk to her before realizing she wasn’t there. Her current dogs helped ease the pain, but nothing seemed to fill the hole left by Katy’s absence.

Seeing how peaceful Becky looked, I snapped a photo with my phone and sent it to my mom, knowing she’d like it. Then, Becky repositioned herself, looking even more at peace. I quickly snapped another photo, brought it up to see if it looked much different from the first, and beheld a surprise that sent a shiver through me.

My mom’s photo in the tiny chat symbol on my phone was a picture of Katy. Because I’d already sent that first photo to her, the chat circle had appeared on my phone. When I took the second photo, Katy’s picture somehow showed up on it, as though watching over Becky—and my mom. I knew that Jesus used cell-phone technology to send me and Mom a tiny circle with a guardian angel of peace.—Cathy Mayfield

*Thank You, Jesus, for caring enough to use even my cell phone
to bring peace to a wounded heart. Amen.*

JANUARY 5

Elephant Connection

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

—EPHESIANS 4:4–6 (NIV)

WHEN OUR FAMILY goes out of town on vacation, we do our best to visit local zoos. On our first trip to Hawaii, we were thrilled to find the Honolulu Zoo not far from our hotel. After exploring the primates, birds, reptiles, and some animals from Africa, I was eager to check out one of my favorite mammals, the elephants. When we reached the elephant habitat, I noticed from the signage that they came from India, just like me! I watched the magnificent Asian elephants with awe and fascination. They moved around lazily and appeared to be smiling as they flapped their ears and scooped chunks of hay into their large mouths with their trunks.

I wanted to learn more about these gentle giants, so I read the information available about them at the exhibit. Mari and Vaigai were given as gifts to the children of Hawaii from the children of India. Mari, who was only a few years older than me, amazingly came from my hometown in south India, Hyderabad. Like me, she was far away from her homeland. As I spent some time watching Mari in her surroundings, I felt a strange connection with her.

Believers all over the world are connected to one another because of their shared identity in Christ. We are children of God and citizens of His kingdom with the same spiritual ancestry and origins. And we, too, are far away from our permanent home in heaven. I hope when I meet believers from other parts of the world, I can look past our differences and find solidarity as spiritual siblings belonging to one family.—Mabel Ninan

Walk of Faith: Pray for Christians all over the world by creating a yearly prayer calendar, remembering a country each day.

JANUARY 6

A Snowy Saturday

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

—PROVERBS 3:5–6 (NKJV)

THE COUNTRY ROADS leading to Foxwater Farm glistened with salt melting a fresh blanket of snow. Having grown up in Ohio, nothing about the condition of the winding pavement gave me pause. My tires held the road as I approached one of the most exciting meetings of my life. Up the final dirt lane and beyond an electronic gate, my Chevy pulled up to the heated barn.

“Here’s Snowy,” the breeder said as she handed me a wriggling, furry ball of energy. The white puppy snuggling in my arms became my first dog in adulthood. As I held her close, she burrowed her muzzle next to my face, indicating extreme trust and contentment.

While I signed the necessary papers one-handed, my host went over details of the purchase. She packed up a complimentary toy and a folder containing instructions and advice about feeding, veterinary care, and exercise. With my new golden retriever puppy safely in the carrier in the back of my SUV, we headed toward home. I promised the new member of my household a happy life and many fun times ahead. She listened quietly from the back of the car, only whining once as we turned onto the interstate. Perhaps she tried to ask, “Where are you taking me?”

As we arrived home, Snowy explored one room at a time. I looked on proudly as she played with a few of the toys I’d purchased ahead of time. Several potty breaks in the backyard and a mealtime behind her, she drifted off, cuddling a stuffed animal.

I learned the first spiritual lesson of pet ownership that day. In many ways, Snowy is totally dependent on me. Like me in my relationship with God, she must trust me and my understanding of the world. That night, I slept more securely, leaning on God’s wisdom and love—far superior even to my boundless love for Snowy.—David L. Winters

Lord, thank You for the gift of my pet, who reminds me that I rest in Your complete care. Amen.

JANUARY 7

Feline Babysitter

Because You, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

—PSALM 86:17 (NKJV)

LIVING ALONE SINCE my wife, Sandra, went to heaven, I face the challenge of being the single parent of two spoiled cats, Rudy and Hannah. They had initially moped around the house, missing their human mama, but eventually realized they had only me.

My days slowly filled with more time writing at my computer. The cats, though, felt they needed to assist me by sitting in front of my monitor, blocking my view. I shouted, “Sandra, can you call the cats?” With a tinge of sadness and frustration, I realized there would be no human rescue. I gave up and went to the living room to switch on the television. *What am I doing?* I thought. *I never watch during the day.*

Scrolling YouTube, I clicked on a listing for cat videos. I selected one, and images and sounds of squirrels and birds feeding and interacting flashed across the screen. “Why don’t you guys watch this instead of blocking my monitor?” As if on cue, they walked toward the television screen, sat down, and stared intensely at the creatures that flitted and fluttered. Rudy decided to be more interactive, so he batted at a squirrel. As a bird flew off the screen, Hannah ran to the back of the television to chase it. Thus began their daily ritual. I was proud of myself. I had discovered *Sesame Street* for felines.

Eventually, the cats caught on to the ruse and resumed their numerous visits to my office. I must confess I was pleased I had not been replaced by a two-dimensional cat sitter. I offered a silent prayer of thanks to these two creatures who keep me company and give me comfort. By blocking my view, they helped me see what was really important. —Terry Clifton

What greater gift than the love of a cat.

—Charles Dickens

JANUARY 8

Silver Wings

You will be like the wings of a dove covered with silver, and her feathers with yellow gold.

—PSALM 68:13 (NKJV)

WHEN MY HUSBAND, Tom, retired, we moved to another town, leaving all we had known for more than forty years. We left a large home with a spacious yard and settled into a small townhome with a tiny courtyard. A window in my dining area became my “window of inspiration,” where birds of various species visited the tall juniper tree behind the fence along the courtyard. There, on the other side of this glorious window, the Lord sent doves to visit me when I needed them most.

Mourning doves are native to Oregon. Their smooth fawn color is almost angelic, and their underside has a slightly pink hue. The single black spot behind and below each eye, black spots on its wings, and white edges on its long, tapered tail make this species unmistakable. Its name comes from its mournful, yet soothing, coo.

One morning last year, the sorrowful cooing I heard matched my spirit. I had just received news of the loss of a precious loved one, and I found it impossible to get a last-minute flight across the country. My broken heart stayed in prayer for my faraway family. In tears, I finally had to accept I could be with them only in spirit.

I lifted the blinds on my inspiration window, and within a few minutes, two mourning doves flew onto the fence by the bird feeder. They had often visited there, but this morning, they lingered longer than usual. I found comfort knowing the Bible reminds me what a dove represents: the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22), and that this bird, created by God, was an emblem of peace and hope to a hurting world.

In times of sorrow, I can trust Jesus—Man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3) and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). He understands this paradox and helps me take flight into His arms, where I find peace and rest.—Kathleen R. Ruckman

Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.

—Psalm 55:6 (NKJV)

JANUARY 9

At Home for Twiddle

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

—EPHESIANS 3:20–21 (NIV)

TWIDDLE, MY PARENTS' beloved cat, is smart and affectionate yet independent. So when they needed to move into assisted living and could no longer care for him, my sister said she and her husband would take him into their home. Though they have three dogs and knew there might be an adjustment, they wanted to help.

Once the sweet cat arrived in Nashville, he immediately took up with my brother-in-law in the “man cave.” I imagine Twiddle simply wanted to avoid the dogs at first, but Twiddle and my brother-in-law grew attached. Twiddle would follow him each time he headed off to watch games on TV and would perch on the arm of his chair.

The laid-back cat didn't miss a beat. Once he adjusted to their three dogs, he settled into a routine. He has now found a spot to park himself each morning to watch my brother-in-law eat breakfast. He joins the whole family—dogs included—in the evenings, dividing his time between the back of my sister's chair and her husband's chair. Despite facing a difficult situation, Twiddle has found his place in a new, loving family.

Like Twiddle, I find myself in difficult situations and wonder how I'll manage to get through them. But then I remember—God always provides. Not only that, but He also provides in exactly the way I need, just as God provided the perfect home for Twiddle. Though we wondered if our plan to move a single cat into a family with three dogs could possibly work, it turned out better than we ever imagined. Twiddle found a loving family, and my parents knew their cat was in good hands. God generously provided. —Missy Tippens

Great is Thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed Thy hand hath provided. Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

—Thomas O. Chisholm

JANUARY 10

Miracle Coral

LORD my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me.

—PSALM 30:2 (NIV)

I WAS SICK WHEN I stumbled upon the headline “Dolphins Line Up to Self-Medicare Skin Condition with Coral” and a picture of happy bottlenose dolphins swimming through a coral reef. Of course, I had to read the story. The article explained that zoologists from Zurich, Switzerland, had observed dolphins with a skin rash rubbing against a specific type of coral. The Indo-Pacific dolphins seemed to know exactly which coral to seek out—a variety that the zoologists eventually discovered had antibacterial and antioxidative properties.

At a time I was recovering from a virus that wasn’t going away as quickly as I hoped it would, I found it fascinating that dolphins knew exactly where to go when they needed healing. They knew which piece of coral would release the restorative balm that their skin desperately needed, just as I knew the Source of strength in my weakness, the Hope in my discouragement, and my Friend in isolation. I had learned to attach myself to Jesus in moments of need, just as those dolphins literally attached themselves to what they knew would make them well again. I imagined that, like me, they had learned from experience to seek out what would help most—spending time in the miracle coral, provided by their Creator, that restored them like nothing else.

That image of the dolphins swimming through a reef of healing coral stayed with me as I recovered. It became my reminder to stay connected to Jesus, not only when I’m physically weak, but in all my moments of need, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.—Jeanette Hanscome

*Thank You, Lord, for giving me constant access to
Your healing touch and care. Help me to run to
You more often as my Source of relief in all situations. Amen.*

JANUARY 11

An Opossum's Truth

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

—JOHN 16:13 (NIV)

PEARL THE OPOSSOM eats with the barn cats. They don't seem to mind. They don't actually seem to notice she isn't a cat. Pearl likes to keep a close check on what goodies we have each day. I really don't mind; she doesn't hurt anyone and is pretty good on the cleanup crew.

When I posted a picture of her on social media, I got a landslide of critical replies telling me she carried diseases and wondering how on earth I could allow her to eat with my other animals. Her nature is to be a predator, they said, to spread disease, and she should be out eating like the wild animals.

When God made her, as He made each and every one of us, did He instill within her a sense of right and wrong? Does she know she's eating the cats' food? Does she have a sense that it wasn't bought for her to consume? Or does she show up each night to a bowl filled with bounty and thank God by eating what has been provided?

Squirrels get tormented when they burglarize the bird feeders, but do they really know they are stealing? Or do they just think some human is trying to be nice? Blue jays are considered bullies, and starlings are thieves, but maybe they just show up at the restaurant we've provided and enjoy not having to forage quite so hard. The truth is the bounty IS for everyone. There is enough God to go around.

Whether a church or homeless camp, chicken or chimp, Christian or atheist, God doesn't limit His love and grace to those whom we feel are entitled to His supply. God fills all the feeders and all the bowls and all the churches and all the skid-row flophouses with His creation. When we realize that truth, we can truly be the hands and feet of Jesus.—Devon O'Day

*God, let me walk in Your shoes and share limitlessly
the open door to Your table. Amen.*

JANUARY 12

The Bed Thief

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

—LUKE 6:29 (ESV)

THE SOUND OF whining alerted me to a problem in the foyer. I hurried to see why my golden retriever, Thor, was crying. A smile curved my lips at the unexpected sight.

Simon, my cat, had stolen the dog bed. Poor Thor stood off to the side, staring at Simon and whining. He glanced at me as if seeking help. But Simon looked so comfortable curled up in the middle of the paw-print bed that I hated to move him.

After whining a bit more and fidgeting around the edge of the bed, Thor decided to take matters into his own paws. As one of the sweetest dogs who ever lived, Thor wouldn't dream of being rough with Simon or making him move. Instead, he carefully stepped onto the bed and painstakingly curled his large body into a ball so he could fit next to Simon.

I laughed at the scene of the seventy-five-pound golden retriever trying so hard to avoid disturbing a sixteen-pound cat. Thor was obviously bothered by Simon being on his bed and desperately wanted it for himself. But he went out of his way to accommodate Simon and share his bed.

It wasn't until later that I saw more than humor in this comical situation. When someone uses or takes something of mine without permission, my initial response is not kindness. My response isn't self-sacrificing either. I want to take back what is mine and make the thief pay. After all, I have a right to my things, don't I? Thor's response, though, is much more Christlike than my natural tendencies. The next time I'm inconvenienced, I need to think of Thor and Simon and remember that self-sacrificing kindness is the best response.—Jerusha Agen

All who have received grace should learn to be gracious to others.

—Watchman Nee

JANUARY 13

The Gentle Shepherd

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters.

—PSALM 23:2 (NIV)

MY SATURDAY MORNING Bible study group has spent the last few months in a book based on Psalm 23. Thanks to this study, we've learned a lot of fascinating facts about sheep. On the morning we focused on verse two, "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters," I could not stop tearing up. For the first time, I heard why a good shepherd chooses quiet water for his sheep; it's because sheep are timid creatures that startle easily. A rushing stream frightens them so much that they won't drink from it. So the shepherd purposely looks for gentle waters.

Instead of forcing His sheep to toughen up by drinking from a scary rushing river, the Shepherd of Psalm 23 had compassion and brought His sheep to a calm source that felt safe. I thought about the many fears I battled as a child and even as an adult and some not-so-compassionate responses that only made me more afraid or planted worries that my fears displeased God. The image of a timid sheep being cared for by the gentle Shepherd who considered her fears, instead of shaming her or dismissing them, revealed God's compassion for me in a new way.

I thought of those He has sent to walk with me as I've overcome my fears—kind, encouraging, considerate, and nurturing people. Through that lesson about sheep, I saw God as a Father who cares for my fears instead of being displeased by them—a Shepherd who leads me like one of His most precious sheep to the quiet stream of His compassion and rest.—Jeanette Hanscome

*Walk of Faith: Read Psalm 23. Reflect on what it reveals
to you about your kind, gentle Shepherd.*

JANUARY 14

Cutting Out the Cancer

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

—MATTHEW 5:30 (ESV)

THE BIOPSY FROM the abnormal tissue on Bo's paw revealed a locally aggressive cancer. The cancer had already caused distortion and pain in the poor cat's foot to the point where he wasn't bearing weight on it. As Bo's veterinarian, I explained to his owner there was no way to treat the cancer except amputation.

"Absolutely not!" she protested.

Owners often have an initial negative reaction to the idea of amputating a beloved pet's limb, so I tried my best to convince her that this option was the only way to stop the spread of the disease and give Bo quality of life. Still, she refused.

After exhausting all my arguments, I finally said, "May I ask why you're against amputation?"

"How would you like to have your leg amputated?" she replied.

"I would be fine if I had three other good legs to walk on and my cancer was gone," I answered.

"He's walking on three legs now," she argued.

"Yes, but he's in constant pain, and the cancer is only going to get worse," I said. "It could spread to other parts of his body and kill him."

Finally, after I told Bo's owner there was nothing more I could do, she relented and allowed me to remove the diseased limb. With his cancer gone, Bo is now a happy little tripod kitty.

I couldn't help but compare the cancer in Bo's paw to the sin of envy I have struggled with in my life. Allowing that sin to fester only caused pain and bitterness. Gradually, with God's help, I learned to cut it out of my life, like a diseased tissue. Just like Bo, I became healthier and happier. I am so grateful for a loving Father who cares enough to heal me from the disease of sin.—Ellen Fannon

Father, please continue to remove sin from my heart and mind and heal me with Your loving-kindness. Amen.

JANUARY 15

High Hopes

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

—2 PETER 3:13 (NIV)

OUR DOG PRINTZ loved cinnamon rolls. The first hint of that enticing aroma lured our bright-eyed Japanese spitz to the kitchen where he would settle himself patiently—at first—in front of the oven and wait with eager anticipation. As the delectable aroma grew more intense, Printz would lick his lips. His tail swished. He'd wriggle with excitement, knowing that once the goodies were out of the oven, he was in for a treat. Sometimes, I got the impression that Printz enjoyed the anticipation of the confection as much as he enjoyed the morsel itself.

Recently, I heard a radio sermon about Simeon in the New Testament. Luke records how the Holy Spirit had revealed to this righteous man that he would not die until he'd seen the Lord's Messiah with his own eyes. Surely, Simeon awoke each morning with eager anticipation, wondering, "Could this be the day?" The radio preacher went on to ask if believers today are looking forward to Christ's return with as much eagerness as Simeon looked forward to seeing Jesus when He came the first time. Christ entered the world and left it in very dramatic ways. A choir of angels announced His birth. Later, when Jesus ascended into the clouds, angels assured the awestruck disciples that He would return just as He'd departed.

The sermon made me recall Printz and his high hopes. I couldn't help pondering if I had high hopes too. Do I eagerly anticipate the Big Day? We don't know when it will be, but we do know that Jesus is coming back in clouds of glory. His return may take place years from now...or any day this week. Yes, I'm filled with anticipation. I hope you are too. Come, Lord Jesus!—Shirley Raye Redmond

I like to compare the holiday season with the way a child listens to a favorite story. The pleasure is in the familiar way the story begins, the anticipation of familiar turns it takes, the familiar moments of suspense, and the familiar climax and ending.

—Fred Rogers

JANUARY 16

Surprised by Joy

And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

—EPHESIANS 3:18 (NLT)

CHICAGO-AREA WINTERS CAN be brutal, so when a rare warm front came through our small Christian college campus that January, *everyone* was outside enjoying it—including the squirrels. As I walked home from class, basking in the unexpected balminess, a squirrel approached me. I stopped, intrigued. The squirrel paused at my feet and then, in short and sporadic movements, climbed up my pant leg, onto my jacket, and finally, onto my shoulder. I stood like a statue, scarcely breathing, feeling like a modern-day Saint Francis of Assisi (the patron saint of animals).

I wondered what it could want. I had no food with me, and to be honest, I didn't even particularly like squirrels. I didn't try to pet it or otherwise engage it. But here, for a few moments, I had a pet squirrel who, for reasons beyond me, had chosen to befriend me. After a few breath-holding moments, I must have moved or otherwise startled my curious furry friend, because it quickly scampered down and up a tree. My reverie was broken, and the world around me reemerged as if from a strange dream.

Why had the squirrel chosen me? When I lived in the Midwest, I often experienced the doldrums of seasonal affective disorder (SAD) in the depths of the region's gloomy, frigid winters, and that year was no different. At the time, and now in hindsight decades later, I can't help thinking that God gave me a little gift that day—an unexpected, unforgettable encounter with one of His beloved creatures that, for a few moments, surprised me with great joy. But why? Because He loves me just that much.—Jon Woodhams

Joy is the serious business of heaven.

—C. S. Lewis

JANUARY 17

Oysters

Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children.

—TITUS 2:3–4 (NIV)

WALKING ALONG THE shore, I picked up an oyster shell that had numerous smaller shells piggybacked onto it. The larger shell was quite heavy, and its built-upon layers were evident. It was intriguing to see the smaller ones covering its surface.

In the wild, oyster larvae float until they are attached to sedentary older oysters. These baby oysters need the calcium from the older oysters' shells to begin their own process of shell development. Once the babies are in place, they are known as "spat."

When I first joined our church, the friendship and support of the older women carried me as a young newlywed and mother. They supported me through babysitting, meals, coffees, and walks.

One of the benefits of Christian community is that we can learn from one another. It was through the support and stories of the older women that I was encouraged to grow in my faith. When I "set" myself to them, I learned from their layers of experience. I saw how they managed their households, treated their husbands, and nurtured their children. I heard them speak of God's goodness and grace. I learned how God worked through them in good and difficult times. They provided a sheltering and nurturing environment in which I could flourish.

Now that I am one of the older ones and have many layers of life under my belt, who among the women I know is floating about and looking for a safe place to grow? Is there a younger woman within my circle of influence who might need a mentor? I pray that as an older "shell," I may be used to help a younger "spat" grow in her faith.—Virginia Ruth

Walk of Faith: Pray that God would open your eyes to those individuals around you. Who can you invest in and build up?

JANUARY 18

The Cygnets

O LORD, You preserve man and beast.

—PSALM 36:6 (NKJV)

I HAD MOVED FROM Oklahoma into my Indiana condo in the middle of winter, after my wife, Sandra, went to heaven. I knew the large complex encircled a pond, but the frigid weather didn't encourage me to explore the grounds. That spring, I decided to restart the daily walk Sandra and I had always taken.

Following the path around the pond, I noticed two swans gliding across the water, with a bevy of four baby cygnets paddling behind them. I had a Sherlock Holmes moment and thought, *Aha, that's why my address is on Swan Street.*

I enjoyed seeing the swan family every day. After returning from a short trip, I resumed walking but saw only one cygnet with its parents. I knew that baby swans stay with their mother for at least a year or longer, so I was worried.

I had met many of my new neighbors in passing but didn't feel comfortable asking them about the swans. One morning, the monthly newsletter from the HOA was in my mailbox. The second story was about the three missing cygnets. They had not survived, but a resident in my building named Geoff had taken them to a local university veterinary school to find out what happened.

I avoided walking around the pond for a week, worried I would find the last cygnet missing, but my curiosity won out, and I returned. Geoff was standing by the pond, face in a broad smile. I was delighted to see the one cygnet propelling itself behind his parents.

"This one's going to make it!" he declared like a proud father. "The tests showed there was nothing genetically wrong and nothing toxic in the pond."

"That's wonderful what you did," I told him.

He brushed off my compliment. "It was nothing. You would have done the same thing."

Would I have? I thought, as I walked on. I resolved to take Geoff's declaration to heart if the Lord ever presented me with the opportunity to help one of His creatures in distress. —Terry Clifton

*Hear our humble prayer, O God....Make us, ourselves,
to be true friends to animals.*

—Albert Schweitzer

ALL GOD'S CREATURES 19

GRIDLINE SET IN 1ST-PP TO INDICATE SAFE AREA; TO BE REMOVED IN FINAL PAGES

JANUARY 19

A Doggie Named D-O-G

But now, O Jacob, listen to the LORD who created you. O Israel, the one who formed you says, “Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.”

—ISAIAH 43:1 (NLT)

WHAT'S YOUR FURRY friend's name?" my mom asked her neighbor. The man holding the leash smiled, then told her his dog's name.

Pronouncing it just as he had, Momma questioned, "Deogee? Hmm, that's unique. How's it spelled?"

The pup's master chuckled. "D-O-G."

It took her a moment, but soon Momma's eyes danced. "Oh, I get it." Then, turning to the prancing pooch, "D-O-G—what a great name!"

My mom loves to tell this story, and just as she did, her listeners often pause as the punch line settles. "Oh, 'D-O-G.' I get it." They usually reply with a chuckle, just like she did.

Having shared this story with my own daughter, Allie, recently, I watched the tween look up at me, confusion written in the wrinkles on her forehead. "I don't understand."

"The doggie's name is D-O-G," I explained.

"What? His owner didn't give him an actual name? That's mean."

My mind raced as I considered how best to clarify. "No, his name is pronounced just like the spelling of the word *dog*—with emphasis on the 'o.' D-O-G." I hit the middle letter with umph.

After a moment, "Ah, I get it! Like, instead of you calling me 'Allie,' you might call me 'K-I-D.'" She, too, emphasized the middle letter, indicating she understood. "That's funny."

And I can't help but think this makes God smile too—the One who's my Master, my Friend. After all, I'm His child, and He has a sense of humor. Though God's kind enough to call me by name, perhaps He sometimes teases me as well.

I can almost hear Him—"Come here, K-I-D!" —Maureen Miller

Faithful Father, thank You for knowing my name. I want to come when You call, then sit and stay awhile in Your presence. Amen.

JANUARY 20

Biting Success

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

—ISAIAH 40:29 (NIV)

OUR CAT, WASH, is nearly twice the size of his sister, Zoe. When he decides to eat, he positions himself so Zoe can't get near their dish. As a small, aging housecat, Zoe is not strong. Nor can she politely ask Wash to make room. But though she may be half his size, she's smart. When Wash hunkers down to eat, Zoe will get behind him and take up his tail in her teeth. Then she pulls with all her might, back legs firmly planted, front legs stiff. She can't drag him away, but her method is still effective.

"Reee-ow!" cries Wash, as he moves over. Then Zoe calmly settles in to enjoy her meal. My husband and I can't stop laughing.

Watching my little pet overcome her challenges encourages me to thank God for all the ways He helps me overcome my own. When confronted with any situation, good or bad, I have far more resources to draw upon for success than Zoe does. And yet there are still challenges that are well beyond my abilities, and I find more and more of them as I age. That's when I pray. I know God hears me and is faithful to give me the power I need to succeed. God strengthens me, especially when I'm weary.

Zoe, my weak little cat, does many things around the house as she contentedly lives out her days under my roof. My husband and I will be there for her to the end. In the same way, God, my Father in heaven, is there for me to the end. He will give me the strength I need to live out my days on earth until I join Him in heaven.—Marianne Campbell

*Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so;
little ones to Him belong; they are weak, but He is strong.*

Yes, Jesus loves me!

—Anna B. Warner

JANUARY 21

On the Fifth Day ...

And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

—GENESIS 1:25 (NKJV)

WHEN WE WERE looking for a puppy to adopt and train to become my granddaughter's emotional-support dog, we turned to my sister and her animal sanctuary, HearthFire Keep, for help in locating the perfect canine. After searching, she came back with a photo of what most certainly had to be a Chihuahua puppy, what with the apple head.

Having had many great experiences with Chihuahuas, my granddaughter excitedly agreed, and Oreo became a beloved part of our pack. Except there was a surprise in our future. Oreo was growing fast—or at least her body was. Her chest expanded, and she gained some serious weight. She doesn't necessarily look like it at first glance, but her body is rock-solid muscle. Lots of muscle. Seems that only one of Oreo's parents had been a Chihuahua.

Now that she's grown, it's quite obvious that she's half Boston terrier. That's right—she has a tiny Chihuahua head on a thick Boston terrier body. She's completely mismatched but absolutely adorable, and we all love her to pieces. Even before being trained as an official emotional-support service dog, she took to her role with gusto. Her little heart just seems to know when anyone needs special attention, from me (Granny) to the five-month-old baby.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I feel like Oreo. Time and a major surgery have not been kind to this body of mine. My head no longer matches my body. But God doesn't care about what I look like on the outside. He looks at my appearance on the inside. I hope He sees "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth" (1 Peter 3:4, NIV). Like Oreo, I want to be loved by others for my inner beauty and not just what people see on the outside.—Deb Kastner

Walk of Faith: When you look in the mirror, thank God for how beautifully He created you, both inside and out.

JANUARY 22

My Refuge

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!

—MATTHEW 23:37 (NKJV)

MY PARROT, LORITO, climbed to the top of his cage. I watched as he stopped to chew on the wood block and then walked across the papers to perch on the other side. Unfortunately, he tramped over his own droppings. Lorito had a cut on the bottom of his left foot that had become infected, and the area needed to remain clean.

I gathered Lorito and carried him upstairs to the bathroom. After warming the water, I placed him in the bottom of the shower. The tepid liquid sprayed behind him and ran over his feet.

Once I was sure his feet were clean, I turned off the water and put my hand out for him to climb on. Lorito stepped up onto my finger, and I pulled him close.

As I held him to my chest and petted his feathers, Jesus's words resonated with my heart. *"How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."*

It had been years since I cuddled Lorito. He had been living with my mom to ease her loneliness and had only recently returned home when caring for him got to be too much for her.

I visited Lorito at Mom's, but it wasn't the same. I longed to hold him close and have him with me. As he snuggled next to me, I felt a prompt in my heart: this is sometimes true of me.

I can get so caught up with *doing* that I'm too busy to be with Jesus, yet He longs to hold me close. I warmed Lorito in the towel and placed him back in his cage with clean papers. Then I thanked Jesus for bringing my parrot home and for the reminder to be still and rest in His presence.—Crystal Storms

He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler.

—Psalm 91:4 (NKJV)

JANUARY 23

Maya the Comforter

Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

—JOB 2:13 (NIV)

MY FRIEND SUSY and her family were snowed in without power and passing around a bug when she tripped on the stairs and broke her ankle. When I called to check on her, she told me a sweet story about her newest pet—a goldendoodle named Maya.

Susy was sitting at the bottom of the stairs in agony when Maya came over and sat with her. Susy reached out and hugged Maya for support. The dog stayed with her until help arrived.

I witnessed Maya's comforting superpower a couple of months later. Susy's daughter, Teddy, was having a hard week. Susy and I went over to comfort her, and along came Maya. While I struggled to find the right words to reassure Teddy, Maya sat at her feet, just as she'd done for Susy, and let Teddy hug her.

During the next getaway to Susy's, it was my turn to benefit from Maya. I was under a lot of stress at the time, which was why Susy invited me to her home, and woke up with a crushing headache. Maya appeared in my room as if she knew I was in distress and lay beside me until I found the strength to get up to find ibuprofen. Even after I started feeling better, she was my companion. Somehow, she knew I needed a buddy.

For Susy, Teddy, and me, Maya offered an example of what a hurting person often needs most—a comforter to just sit with them. No words. No dismissive comments or promises that "You'll be fine." Just presence, touch, and ability to stay near to someone who is in pain.

Job's friends were reflections of compassion when they quietly sat with him in the ashes. My new example of how to comfort the hurting or weary is Maya, the dog who is willing to just be there.—Jeanette Hanscome

*Walk of Faith: Who has been willing to sit with you in your pain?
If someone special comes to mind, send that person a note of thanks.*

JANUARY 24

Big Attitude

David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

—1 SAMUEL 17:32 (NIV)

ONE OF THE many pets in my home is a beautiful blue beta fish named George Neptune. When we first brought George Neptune home, he was such an excitable fish. He would always swim up to the glass of his tank, puff out his flippers, and try to look big. I had heard that betas were aggressive, but this was crazy. It was like George Neptune was challenging every one of us to a fight.

Obviously, it would not have been a fair fight between a tiny fish in his fishbowl and a human. If we really fought a battle, George Neptune would not stand a chance. And yet he was so confident and self-assured. His battle prowess and oversized attitude gave me such joy. Every morning I would just look at his posturing and laugh.

Watching George Neptune has made me wonder how many times I think I am bigger and tougher than I really am. Do I look as silly as George Neptune, shaking my fist at the world?

Most of us know the story of King David and his battle with Goliath. David was so small he could not fit into Saul's armor, but still he fought Goliath. Like George Neptune, David was not afraid. We remember how the Biblical fight ends: the tiny David kills Goliath the giant. Maybe George Neptune isn't so crazy after all.

I work to find myself somewhere in the middle, not wanting to be too big for my britches but not looking for a fight around every corner either. But I also don't want to back down when I am afraid. I hope that when challenges come, I will be like David, fearless with God on my side. With George Neptune as inspiration, maybe I can get there.—Heather Jepsen

God, help me to be brave in the world, even on the days when I feel so small. Amen.

JANUARY 25

Indiscreet Appetite

What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them.

—MATTHEW 15:11 (NIV)

DAISY, OUR FIFTEEN-MONTH-OLD German shepherd/English pointer mix, has an indiscreet appetite. At least that's what the doctor at the emergency veterinary clinic said. Despite regular feedings, Daisy finds far too many things to chew on and eat that she shouldn't.

Soaker hoses dug from the ground. A wading pool. Lizards, skins, and frogs. Plastic water bottles with the water still inside them. Ink pens, metal tins, and extension cords. Wooden bookcases and table legs. House shoes. One large buckle, all the suede, leather, and cork from a sandal. Two foot massagers, along with an assortment of toys. The sandal and second foot massager are what sent her to the emergency vet to induce vomiting.

It seems Daisy can't resist putting things in her mouth. It doesn't matter if the items are meant to be eaten or not. Our veterinarian said Daisy eats all these things for several reasons. She's intelligent, inquisitive, active, easily bored, and a huntress.

It is frustrating to find Daisy eating something she shouldn't, especially the things I know can make her ill or even kill her. If I'm honest with myself, I realize that, unless I'm careful, I can take harmful things into my mind, just as Daisy takes harmful things into her mouth. When I think about Daisy's indiscreet appetite, God reminds me if I don't think on what is true, lovely, admirable, noble, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4), I'll end up with an indiscreet appetite also. To make sure that doesn't happen, I must feed on things that grow the fruit of the Spirit in me—love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5).—Sandy Kirby Quandt

*Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more;
feed me till I want no more.*

—William Williams Pantycelyn

JANUARY 26

Brushing Benefits

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

—PSALM 51:10 (NIV)

BOOTHS CAME TO us later in her life. This gorgeous Akita had been orphaned by the death of a friend's mother. When Boots arrived in midwinter, our school-age children took to her immediately. The kids loved her fluffy fur, and she was often patient enough for them to use her as a pillow while they watched television.

Though we'd owned an Akita before, he had been an outdoor dog. I must have forgotten just how much fur the breed puts on in winter because when March came, I thought our hardwood floors had been replaced by a tan carpet. One day, I took Boots outside for a good grooming. Brush in hand, I gently combed her coat, taking off gobs and gobs of downy white fur. My wife brought out a grocery bag to collect the produce. I brushed some more, then called for another bag. And another. Satisfied with my progress, I stopped at three bags full of dog hair.

The next day, I brushed Boots again, producing another three bags of hair. A few days after that, I collected two more. I finally lost count of the number of bags. "Where do you *get* this stuff," I wondered. Boots was not entirely happy about being groomed, but she looked like a new dog, sleek and svelte, when it was over.

The experience made me ponder my own "coat," the protective shield I sometimes put on to defend myself against the cold, hard world. Seemingly little things like sarcasm, anger, judgmentalism, and pride accrue one little strand at a time. It's possible to acquire a thick layer of these sins without noticing.

Once in a while, the Spirit sits me down to brush out the undergrowth. It's uncomfortable, having the detritus scraped from the soul. Yet it feels so good to be groomed by Him.—Lawrence W. Wilson

*Search me, O God, and know my heart today; try me,
O Savior, know my thoughts, I pray. See if there be some
wicked way in me; cleanse me from ev'ry sin and set me free.*

—J. Edwin Orr

JANUARY 27

Blessed or Lucky?

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

—JAMES 5:16 (NIV)

IT HAPPENED IN a flash. I stepped from the warm white sand into the cool blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. As I did, my foot landed on something wet and supple. When it moved, I jerked my foot back. A stingray darted out of the shallow spot it had been napping in. The ray was slightly wider than a ruler, with a flat body, fins like wings, and a long tail like a whip. My heart pounding, I took another hasty step back. “Did it sting you?” asked a man hurrying toward me. I shook my head. “Wow, you’re lucky. That was a stingray.”

I nodded. I’d recognized the creature. But as I ventured into the water again, more watchful this time, I realized I wasn’t lucky—I was blessed. Before leaving on the Caribbean cruise with my husband, I’d asked two of my close friends to pray for our safety and good health. Both women are mighty prayer warriors. They also keep their word. When they say they will pray for me or anyone else, they can be trusted to do it. I felt certain that my so-called luck was really the result of their prayerful promise.

Not long after this incident, I became the prayer chairperson of a local Bible study group for women. I took my role seriously, recalling the words of the reformation leader, Martin Luther: “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.” I read several books on prayer, looking for fresh insights and inspiration so that I might serve others through prayer, just as my friends had served me. The incident with the stingray could have been a painful and dangerous one but for their prayerful hedge of protection around me.—Shirley Raye Redmond

Our prayers may be awkward. Our attempts may be feeble. But since the power of prayer is in the One who hears it and not in the one who says it, our prayers do make a difference.

—Max Lucado

JANUARY 28

Adventure Awaits

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—ROMANS 8:28 (NIV)

LUCY, MY DOG, loves to ride in the car. She'll hop in any car anytime with anyone to go anywhere. I love her sense of adventure. After a thirteen-hundred-mile road trip from Florida, where we adopted Lucy, to her new home in Minnesota, I assumed she would never want to set a paw in a car again. The next day, however, she hopped right in.

I love adventure too. I've lived in seven states, visited all seven continents, and been to more than sixty countries. But my sense of adventure disappears when an activity involves heights. When I climbed Diamond Head in Hawaii, I followed the steps of the person ahead of me. I wouldn't even peek at the magnificent view once I reached the top.

Like a good parent, God has provided me with adventures to help me grow as a Christian, even when they seemed wrong for me. I assumed He'd made a huge error when He moved me from working with elementary students to working with high schoolers labeled EBD (emotionally, behaviorally disabled). I tried to squirm out of it. Turns out it was the most satisfying job I've ever had.

Lucy's willingness to participate in any activity I provide is how I'd like to respond to God's calling. I need to remember that God always has my best interests at heart.—Linda Bartlett

Heavenly Father, help me to be open to Your leading. Let me follow You willingly, joyfully, wholeheartedly, so that I can experience the best adventure with You. Amen.

JANUARY 29

Foolish Questions

Wisdom is better than foolishness, just as light is better than darkness.

—ECCLESIASTES 2:13 (NLT)

KENAI RACED FOR the kitchen door, looked at his leash, ran to me, then about-faced back to the door. “Do you have to go out?” I asked. (Kenai’s reply: *Wow, didn’t I make it clear enough?*)

An hour and a half later, Kenai stared at me as I sat in my rocking chair, finishing my quiet time. A pitiful whine and a single wag of his tail alerted me. A glance at my watch showed it to be an hour past his normal breakfast. “I’m sorry! Are you hungry, Kenai?” (Kenai’s reply: *Um, do you see what time it is?*)

I can almost hear our dog’s thoughts when I ask these foolish questions. He knows I know the answers, and I know he knows I know the answers. Why do I even ask them?

It reminded me of a time we were visiting my mother-in-law. Our young daughter had done something she knew was wrong. I raised my eyebrows and asked her, “Do you want a time-out?” Her grandmother looked at me and asked, “Do you expect her to answer yes?” She continued, “Don’t waste time asking children if they want a punishment. Choose the consequences the act deserves and follow through.” Sound advice I tried to remember.

How often do I ask foolish questions of God? “Are You there, God?” “Do You even hear my prayers?” “Why did You let that happen?” Maybe it’s time to rephrase those questions into statements: “Please, let me feel Your presence, God.” “Thank You for hearing my prayers; let me be patient waiting for the answers.” “I know You have a plan and are in control of this situation.” —Cathy Mayfield

*“Are You there, God?” I cried out today. “Are you breathing, My child?”
I heard Him say.*

—C.M.

JANUARY 30

Road Trip Panic

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.

—PSALM 94:19 (NIV)

AFTER MY WIFE, Sandra, passed away, I didn't know how I would manage all alone. I sold our big house with too many memories and purchased a condominium near my sisters in Indiana.

The movers had come and gone. The reality of what came next was suddenly overwhelming. I would be traveling from Oklahoma for three days with my cats, Rudy and Hannah. We had done this before, but I had never done it alone. Sandra had always been the cat whisperer who kept them calm. How could I do this without her?

I was feeling proud of myself on the final day of the journey. I had gotten the two cat carriers in and out of the two motels without mishaps. As I approached Chicago on a congested highway, the weather got ugly—a mixture of rain, snow, and low visibility. I glanced in the rearview mirror and panicked. Hannah was out of her carrier. She had managed to unzip it and was now exploring the back seat. *What happens if she gets under my feet, and I can't control the car, I thought, and where do I stop?*

I had little choice but to pull over in the breakdown lane of the highway. I had the presence of mind to know that it was too risky to open a door. Hannah might bolt. I am not athletic, but somehow, I wiggled myself headfirst over the seat, miraculously grabbed Hannah, and not so gently dropped her into the unzipped crate, and closed it.

Back in the driver's seat, I heaved a sigh and thanked God for helping me along this journey. I slowly smiled, knowing whatever happened next, I wasn't alone. —Terry Clifton

Walk of Faith: Today, recall any stressful situation or problem the Lord enabled you to accomplish beyond your natural abilities. Send up a prayer of thanks for never being alone.

JANUARY 31

Expect Rewards

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

—HEBREWS 10:35–36 (NIV)

SNOWY SHEDS VERY little but needs regular grooming so his fur does not get matted or dirty. While our Maltese mostly enjoys being brushed, he feels uncomfortable when I untangle his matted fur or comb around his mouth. But he obeys my command to stay and patiently waits for the grooming session to end because he knows what comes next. A reward. As soon as I finish cleaning Snowy's fur, I shower him with praise. He runs to the pantry and waits for me to join him, wagging his tail furiously and shuffling his paws. "Snowy deserves a treat?" I ask, as I open the cabinet to retrieve his favorite dental chew. "Sit and stay."

When he obeys my commands again, I give him the treat. He takes it to his crate to enjoy his well-earned reward. My dog also gets rewarded after I clean his eyes with water and cotton balls twice a week. He needs to stay still in the bathroom sink so I can get rid of the dirt around his eyes. Snowy doesn't like it much and has come to expect a bone or cookie after we're done.

When I obey God's commands and serve Him with my time and talents, I, too, can anticipate rewards. Jesus urges believers to expect heavenly rewards when we follow Him (Matthew 16:27). Obedience and faithfulness, even in little things, does not go unnoticed by God. God takes pleasure in rewarding us, just as I take pleasure in rewarding Snowy.—Mabel Ninan

Dear God, help me to be obedient to Your commands. Help me to set my sights on heaven and look forward to enjoying my heavenly rewards. Amen.