

CMitchell Books

Because God Loves You

 **CONFIDENCE & COURAGE** 



— STORY-DRIVEN —

✦ **CHRISTIAN DEVOTIONS FOR BOYS** ✦

CONFIDENCE & COURAGE

Stories Kids Love. Devotions That Build Faith. Truths to Live By.

Being a kid comes with big feelings, hard choices, friendship problems, mistakes, and moments when doing the right thing is not easy.

That is why every story in this series begins with a Scripture-based Loved-by-God Truth, follows children through a warm and relatable adventure, and ends with a built-in Faith Guide that helps bring the lesson home.

Kids will:

Read the **Truth**. Enjoy the **Story**. Talk It **Through**. Live It **Out**.

Each Faith Guide includes a kid-friendly devotional lesson, three discussion questions, and a practical mission that helps children put their faith into action.

Most importantly, every story reminds them of one life-changing foundation:

They do not have to be perfect to be loved. They are loved by God first.

Scan the QR code inside to continue the journey with a 30-day digital companion devotional.

Wan to Discover
More Books?

Cmitchellbooks.com

Books for every season



Scan to Discover
The Series

★ GRATITUDE & GENEROSITY ★

▲ HARD TIMES & PERSEVERANCE ▲

● CHOICES & INTEGRITY ●

† SPORTS EDITION †

♥ BIG FEELINGS & SELF-CONTROL ♥

✿ FRIENDSHIP & KINDNESS ✿

Complete The
Spine Puzzle!



This Book is
Title 1 of 7



Building confident, kind, and courageous kids = one short story at a time. =

Cmitchell Books builds short Christian stories

Every book is built around one true thing:
kids are loved by God.

Every story is short, funny, and earns its lesson without lecturing. No filler.



If this book worked for your kid,
the rest of the series will too.

Turn the page. ➔

★ GRATITUDE & GENEROSITY ★



Stories that inspire thankfulness and giving from the heart.

★ CHOICES & INTEGRITY ★



Stories that help kids make wise choices and do what's right.

★ HARD TIMES & PERSEVERANCE ★



Stories about courage, patience, and never giving up.

★ BIG FEELINGS & SELF-CONTROL ★



Stories that teach kids how to handle big feelings with God's help.

★ SPORTS EDITION ★



Faith-filled stories inspired by sports and teamwork.

★ FRIENDSHIP & KINDNESS ★



Stories that celebrate friendship, kindness, and loving others.



Scan to see
all of our books,
free resources,
and special offers!

Stories to Grow Hearts
and Strong Futures ✨



Follow us for
updates & free stuff!



CmitchellBooks.com

♥ Thank you for supporting our mission
to inspire kids with faith-filled stories that last a lifetime. ✨

Every book comes with a companion devotional.

Inside this book is a QR code that opens a free companion devotional made for this collection. After your child finishes the ten short stories, keep the conversation going with short weekly readings, a Bible verse, and one simple thing to try together.

1



Read the book
Enjoy the ten short stories together.

2



Find the code
Turn to the back of the book and scan the QR code.

3



Grow together
Access the free companion devotional and keep the conversation going.



Turn to the back of the book to scan the code.

Your free companion devotional is waiting inside.

★ CMitchellBooks.com ★

Meet
C. Mitchell



C. Mitchell is passionate about creating meaningful stories that inspire kids through adventure, imagination, and positive life lessons. His books are designed to encourage confidence, character, and growth while creating fun reading experiences families can enjoy together.



Because you are Loved by God



*you have plenty of love
to share with others.*



*He hides small
treasures in
your day.*



*your value doesn't
change based on who
picks you.*



*He wants your heart
to feel free, not
trapped.*



*having a clean heart
is better than having
a shiny trophy.*

*you can have the
courage to open your
hands.*

95

*you are never
truly alone*

85

75

*you don't have to face
challenges alone.*

*He shows up for you
every single morning.*

65

*He wants to heal
your heart when it
feels broken.*

55



Intro

Being a boy is Hard Work. Grown-ups think being a kid is all about recess and ice cream. But if you are reading this, you know the secret truth: being a kid is hard work. Some days you feel like a superhero, but other days you feel invisible, angry, or scared. If you have ever felt those big, confusing feelings, this book was written exactly for you.

What Is This Book? Think of this as a Survival Guide for Your Heart. Life is like a camping trip—it has sunny meadows, but also dark forests. You need the right tools to navigate them.

Inside, you'll meet kids just like you. You'll meet Eli, who fights the dark; Max, who carries a heavy secret; and Luke, who learns to let go of anger. But mostly, this is a book about the most important friendship you will ever have: your friendship with God.



The Big Secret Here is the most important thing to know: God is not watching you from a distance.

He isn't sitting on a cloud far away. He is right there in the tent when the lights go out, and He is next to you in the cafeteria. God doesn't love you because you are perfect, win trophies, or get A's. He loves you simply because you are His. That truth is your anchor. When you know you are loved, you don't have to be afraid to be yourself.

How to Use This Book Read it like a storybook, or pick a chapter that matches how you are feeling today. Every chapter has four special parts:

The Story: An adventure starring a kid just like you.

The "You Are Loved" Truth: A secret password to carry in your pocket all day.

Field Notes: A quick guide to help you understand God's heart.



The Action Item: A mission—like a game or challenge—to help you live out your faith.

A Note to the Grown-Ups You are the co-pilot on this journey. Use these stories as bridges to talk about the hard stuff. It's easier to ask, "Do you feel like Max?" than to ask, "Why are you lying?" Read these stories together, laugh together, and answer the questions yourself. The best lesson you can teach your child is that you are still learning to trust God, too.

Are You Ready? Grab your flashlight and drop the heavy backpack of worry. You are braver than you think and loved more than you imagine. Turn the page—your adventure begins now.



*Because you are
Loved by God*

01

Because you are Loved by God

you have plenty of love to share with others.

It is more blessed to give than to receive.

— Acts 20:35 (NIV)





Noah and the Meatball Mission



Have you ever seen a sandwich that looked like it could win a wrestling match? That is exactly how Noah felt about his lunch on this specific Tuesday. In Noah's world, Tuesday meant only one thing: the day of the Mega-Meatball Torpedo.

This was not just a regular sandwich; it was a soft hoagie roll stuffed with three giant meatballs. It was smothered in secret red sauce and covered in melted mozzarella cheese that stretched for miles. It was the kind of lunch that made a boring school day feel absolutely special.

Noah sat down at the blue table, ready to eat the best meal of the week. He unzipped his lunchbox and pulled out the heavy silver package. His stomach gave a loud growl that sounded like a grizzly bear waking up from a nap.



He peeled back the foil wrapper, revealing the glorious red sauce oozing out the sides. But just as he was about to take the first massive bite, he looked up across the cafeteria. Sitting all by himself at the end of the long yellow table was a new kid named Caleb.

Noah remembered the teacher introducing Caleb this morning, and he looked small inside his hoodie. Caleb was staring at the table surface, tracing a scratch in the plastic with his finger. There was no lunchbox in front of him and absolutely nothing to eat.

Noah paused with his Meatball Torpedo halfway to his mouth, the steam rising up and fogging his glasses. He waited for Caleb to pull something out of his pocket or stand up to go to the hot lunch line. But Caleb just sat there, looking down at his empty hands.

Noah lowered his sub back onto the foil with a quiet sigh. The Mega-Meatball Torpedo suddenly didn't look quite as delicious as it did three seconds ago. A weird, twisting feeling started in his stomach, and he knew deep down it wasn't just hunger.



Someone else will help him, Noah told himself quickly, looking away from the lonely table. Surely the principal would come walking in with a pizza just for Caleb. Noah took a tiny bite of the bread, but to his surprise, it tasted like dry cardboard.

He chewed slowly, trying to enjoy the sauce, but his eyes kept drifting back to the yellow table. I'm a growing boy, Noah thought defensively, feeling grumpier by the second. I need this protein, or I'll be starving during kickball at recess.

He picked the sandwich up again, determined to just eat it and stop worrying. But he couldn't take the bite because a sudden memory popped into his head. He remembered his dad sharing the last slice of pepperoni pizza last week. "Love usually costs something, bud," his dad had said. "That's how you know it's real."

Noah looked at his Meatball Torpedo, feeling a sharp pinch in his heart. He realized that God loved that kid at the yellow table just as much as He loved Noah. He knew he couldn't enjoy his meatballs while his neighbor



had nothing. Noah hesitated for one last hard second, feeling the rumble of hunger in his own stomach.

He wrapped the foil back around the sandwich, carefully so the sauce wouldn't leak out. He stood up, and his legs felt heavy as he walked across the cafeteria toward the yellow table. The noise of the lunchroom seemed to fade away as he approached Caleb.

"Hey," Noah said, and his voice sounded a little squeaky. Caleb looked up, startled, and his eyes were red like he had been trying hard not to cry. Noah knew he needed to be careful so he didn't make Caleb feel embarrassed. "My mom packs way too much food," Noah said gently. He held out the heavy, warm foil package with a steady hand. "I'm not even that hungry, and I really want you to have this."

Caleb looked at the silver package like it was a gold bar. "Are you sure?" Caleb whispered, wiping his eye with his sleeve. Noah nodded and smiled, pushing the sandwich across the table. "Totally," Noah said. "It's a Mega-Meatball Torpedo, so you are definitely going to need napkins."





Caleb took the sandwich slowly and took a huge, messy bite. The look on his face changed instantly, like a guy who had just won the lottery. "Whoa," Caleb mumbled with his mouth full of cheese. "This is awesome."

Noah walked back to his seat and stared at his empty foil wrapper. He pulled out his apple, which was small and had a bruise on one side. His stomach gave another loud growl, reminding him that an apple was definitely not a meatball sub.

He knew he was going to be hungry during math and on the bus ride home. But as he crunched into the apple, something strange happened inside him. The twisting feeling in his stomach was gone completely.

In fact, even though his belly was empty, his heart felt oddly full. It felt warm and solid inside his chest. It was just like he had swallowed a cup of hot chocolate on a cold day.

Noah chewed his bruised apple and looked across the room. Caleb was wiping marinara sauce off his chin, and

A series of stars of various sizes and shades of gray (solid and outline) arranged in a slightly curved line across the top of the page.

he looked up and caught Noah's eye. Caleb smiled a messy,
red smile, and Noah smiled back.



FAITH GUIDE



Hebrews 13:16 reminds us not to forget to do good and share with others. Noah really wanted his Mega-Meatball Torpedo, but then he noticed Caleb sitting alone without lunch. Sharing was not easy because Noah was hungry too. But Noah learned that love often costs us something, and kindness can fill a heart in a way food cannot.

Sometimes helping someone means giving up something you wanted. You may share your snack, your seat, your turn, your time, or your attention. Noah did not make a big show about helping Caleb. He simply noticed a need and gave what he had. God can help you see people who feel left out or in need, then love them with real action.

- 1 When have you noticed someone who needed help?
- 2 Why can sharing be hard sometimes?
- 3 How can God help you be generous?

YOUR MISSION

This week, look for someone who needs help, kindness, or encouragement. Share something simple, like a snack, a seat, a turn, or a kind word.

02

Because you are Loved by God

He hides small treasures in your day.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.

— Psalm 107:1 (NIV)





The Hunt for the Hidden Gold



Have you ever had a day that felt like the universe was playing a massive, mean prank on you? That is exactly how Ben felt from the very moment his feet hit the cold floor on Thursday morning. It started when his alarm clock decided to take a nap and didn't wake him up until ten minutes before the bus arrived. He rushed around his room like a headless chicken, tripping over sneakers and putting his shirt on inside out.

The bus ride was a total disaster because the only seat left was next to a kid who smelled like he had eaten tunafish for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Ben tried to hold his breath until his face turned purple, but the smell was inescapable. When he finally got to school, he realized he had left his math homework sitting right next to his lunchbox at home. His teacher gave him a disappointed look that made his stomach shrink into a tiny, sad raisin.

Lunchtime was even worse because Ben had absolutely no food and had to eat the cafeteria mystery meat,



which looked a little bit like a gray sponge. He was carrying his tray carefully when a shoelace he hadn't tied sent him stumbling forward. A giant spoonful of red sauce landed perfectly on his white shirt, creating a huge, glowing stain. The entire cafeteria seemed to go quiet before a few kids started giggling at the mess on his chest.

The rest of the afternoon felt like walking through thick, sticky mud because the bad luck just wouldn't stop. In gym class, he tripped over a volleyball during the big game and skinned his knee on the hard floor. For a split second, Ben thought about asking God for help, but he pushed the thought away because he was too busy being angry at the floor. By the time the final bell rang, Ben felt like he had been wrestling a bear and lost badly.

When he finally got home, he slammed the front door hard enough to rattle the picture frames in the hallway. He stomped into the kitchen and announced, "This was the absolute worst day of my entire life." His mom looked up with a smile, but Ben just let out a loud groan and marched to his room.

He flopped onto his bed face-first and buried his nose



deep into his pillow to block out the world. He glanced at his Bible on the nightstand and felt a quiet, tiny nudge to pick it up. He knew deep down that reading it might help, but he pushed the thought away instantly. He didn't want to feel better right now; he wanted to stay mad because the day didn't deserve to be forgiven.

He decided he was just going to stay in his room until he turned eighteen. A few minutes later, his dad walked in and sat gently on the edge of the bed. "Mom told me you had a rough one," his dad said quietly, resting a warm hand on Ben's back. Ben sat up and unleashed a waterfall of complaints, listing every terrible thing from the tuna smell to the skinned knee.

He explained how God was unfair and how nobody understood his misery. His dad listened patiently, nodding his head without interrupting the flow of grumpiness. When Ben finally ran out of breath, his dad looked at him with a thoughtful expression. "That sounds hard, Ben," his dad said, "but I think you are wearing your Grump-Goggles."

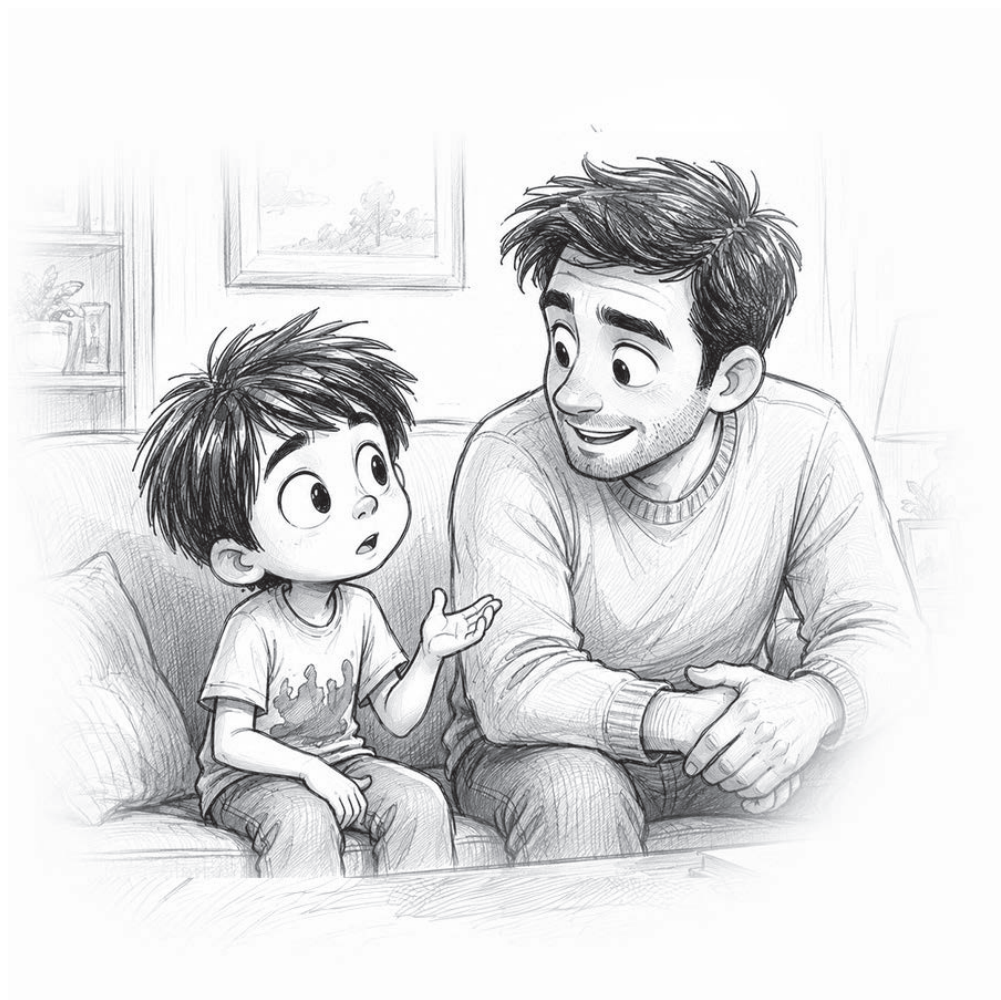
Ben frowned, asking what in the world Grump-Goggles were, even though the name kind of gave it away. "They



are invisible glasses that make your eyes zoom in on the bad stuff," his dad said simply. "When you wear them, you can't see the gold nuggets God hides in the dirt." Ben rolled his eyes because there was definitely no gold in a day involving mystery meat.

"There was nothing good today," Ben insisted stubbornly, crossing his arms. His dad shook his head and challenged him to play a game called "Find the Good." The rule was simple: Ben had to find three tiny things that went right, or he had to do the dishes alone. Ben groaned, squeezing his eyes shut to block out the world.

He wanted to lose the game just to prove how terrible the day really was. He scrunched up his face, actively trying to think of more bad things to list, but his brain suddenly got stuck. He wanted to stay grumpy, but a small, stubborn memory popped into his head before he could stop it. He remembered that his friend Andon had shared half a granola bar when he saw Ben had no lunch. That was a small thing, but it was actually really nice of Andon. "Andon gave me some food," Ben mumbled, admitting the first piece of gold against his will. "That is one," his dad said encouragingly. "Dig a little deeper."





Ben thought about the bus ride home and remembered that the bus driver had waited for him when he was running late.

He also remembered that his knee didn't hurt anymore because the school nurse gave him a cool bandage with a lightning bolt on it. "The nurse was nice," Ben said, feeling his shoulders relax just a tiny bit. "And I guess the bus driver didn't leave me behind." His dad squeezed Ben's shoulder, but this time he didn't offer a big explanation.

Dad just sat there quietly, letting Ben sit with his own thoughts for a moment in the quiet room. Ben looked at the cross on his wall and thought about the granola bar, the kind bus driver, and the lightning bolt bandage. He realized that God hadn't abandoned him in the bad day; God had actually been sneaking good things into his pockets the whole time.

It was like he had been walking through a field full of treasure, but he had been too busy staring at the mud on his shoes to notice the gold. God was right there in the nurse's kindness and in Andon's generosity. He felt a little silly for being so dramatic about a spaghetti stain



that would wash out anyway. "I guess it wasn't a total disaster," Ben admitted, wiping a smudge of dirt off his cheek.

His dad smiled and pulled Ben into a side hug that squished the air out of him. "Why don't we pray and thank God for the granola bar and the lightning bolt bandage?" his dad suggested. Ben nodded, realizing that he actually wanted to talk to God now. They bowed their heads right there on the messy bedspread.

When they finished praying, the room felt brighter, even though everything wasn't perfectly fixed. To be honest, Ben was still a little bit annoyed about his stained shirt, and his knee still stung. But the heavy, boiling anger in his stomach had cooled down into something that felt like peace. Ben realized that gratitude didn't magically change his day, but it definitely changed his heart.

He stood up and followed his dad out to the kitchen, where the smell of tacos was wafting through the air. "I smell tacos," Ben said, grinning as he realized this was definitely a fourth piece of gold. He sat down at the table, ready to eat and ready to find the good. The day had started out rocky, but with a belly full of tacos and a heart full of peace, Ben knew he was going to be okay.



| FAITH GUIDE



1 Thessalonians 5:18 tells us to give thanks in everything. Ben had a day full of problems, and at first all he could see was what went wrong. But when Dad helped him look again, Ben noticed small good things God had given him, like Andon's granola bar, the bus driver waiting, and the nurse's bandage. The day was still hard, but gratitude helped Ben see that God had not left him alone in it.

Sometimes a bad day can make you focus only on what went wrong. You may feel grumpy, disappointed, or sure that nothing good happened at all. Ben learned that gratitude does not pretend the hard parts are fake. It helps you notice the good gifts God placed inside the hard day too.

- 1 What is one good thing from today?
- 2 When do you feel grumpy or upset?
- 3 How can God help you notice good things?

➤ YOUR MISSION ➤

This week, when you have a hard day, find three small good things before bedtime. Thank God for each one.

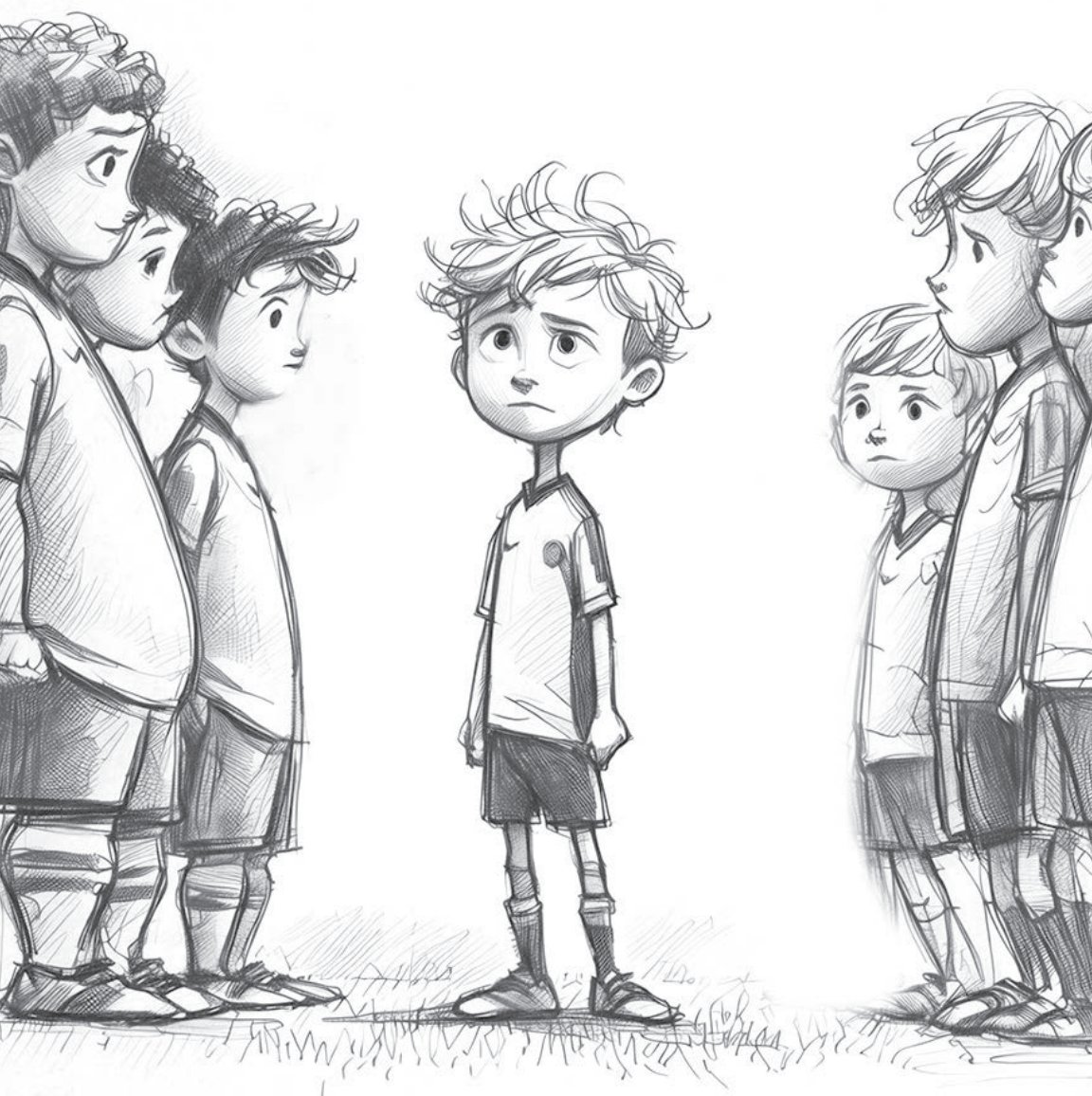
03

Because you are Loved by God

Your value doesn't change based on who picks you.

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that
we should be called children of God!*

— 1 John 3:1 (NIV)





The Boy Who Was Picked Last



Have you ever wished for a superpower like flying or turning into a giant green monster to scare your sister? Jonah certainly did, but right now, sitting on the edge of the blacktop, he felt like he had the worst superpower of all time: invisibility. It wasn't the cool kind of invisibility where you could sneak into secret bases or play pranks on your teachers without getting caught. It was the kind where you stood right in the middle of a crowded playground, and nobody seemed to know you were there at all. It felt like he was wrapped in a gray fog that made him disappear whenever something important was about to happen.

The recess bell had rung five minutes ago, unleashing a stampede of sneakers and shouting that sounded like a herd of wild buffalo. Jonah had run to the soccer field with the other boys, his heart thumping a frantic rhythm against his ribs because he loved soccer more than candy. He stood in the line of hopeful players, trying to



look tall and athletic so the captains would notice him. He even did a little hop in place to show off his energy, but inside, his stomach felt like it was full of angry butterflies.

The two captains, Tyler and Zach, stood with their arms crossed like playground kings deciding who was worthy of their kingdom. They started calling out names, picking the fast kids, the tall kids, and the kids with the cool neon cleats first. Jonah watched his friends get picked one by one, leaving the line until only a few stragglers remained on the grass. He held his breath, hoping against hope that someone would say his name, but the captains just looked right past him to pick the kid behind him.

Finally, the teams were full, and the boys turned their backs to run onto the field without a single backward glance at the leftovers. Jonah was left standing alone by the goal post, his hands hanging uselessly at his sides while the game started without him. He felt a hot sting behind his eyes, but he refused to cry in front of the entire fourth grade because that would be a disaster. It



felt like someone had stuck a giant sticker on his forehead that said "Not Good Enough" in bright red letters.

He walked over to the chain-link fence and gripped the cold metal diamonds with his fingers, watching the other boys chase the ball. He wondered if there was something wrong with him, or if he was just too small to matter to anyone important. The lie whispered in his ear that he was worthless because he wasn't standing on the field with the chosen ones. It was a heavy, ugly feeling, like carrying a backpack full of rocks that you couldn't take off.

As he stood there, Jonah remembered what his mom had told him the night before about how much things cost at the store. His mom said that an item is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it, which is why a diamond costs more than a pebble. Jonah thought about that and realized that God had paid the biggest price in history—His own Son—just to have Jonah on His team. God didn't wait for Jonah to score a goal or be the fastest runner before He decided Jonah was



valuable.

If the Creator of the universe thought Jonah was worth that much, then it didn't really matter what Tyler and Zach thought about his soccer skills. He realized that his value wasn't a prize he had to win by being picked first or wearing the coolest jersey. It was a gift he already had, like a golden ticket hidden inside his pocket that nobody else could see or take away. He took a deep breath and imagined the heavy weight of the "Not Good Enough" sticker falling off his forehead and dissolving into the dirt.

A warm feeling of confidence started in his chest, replacing the cold, lonely fog of invisibility he had felt earlier. He realized that he didn't need to beg for a spot in a game where he wasn't wanted because he already had a seat at the King's table. God saw him perfectly clearly, right there by the fence, and God liked what He saw. Jonah turned away from the big game, deciding that he wasn't going to let someone else's opinion ruin his recess or his mood.

He looked around the playground with his new





"God-eyes," looking for someone else who might be feeling invisible too. He saw a boy named Arthur sitting by himself on the swings, dragging the toes of his sneakers through the woodchips. Arthur was new this year and didn't talk much, and he looked just as lonely as Jonah had felt only a minute ago. Jonah knew exactly what he had to do because he knew how much it hurt to be left out.

Jonah walked over to the swings, feeling brave and solid in his sneakers, no longer worried about the soccer game behind him. "Hey Arthur," he said, and his voice sounded stronger and happier than he expected it to. "Do you want to pass the ball with me over by the brick wall?" Arthur looked up, surprised, and a shy smile spread across his face like the sun coming out from behind a heavy cloud.

Arthur jumped off the swing, grabbing his own ball, and nodded enthusiastically at Jonah's offer. They ran over to the wall and spent the rest of recess kicking the ball back and forth to each other. They laughed when they missed the ball and cheered for each other when they made good passes. It wasn't the big game with the



captains and the shouting, but it was actually way more fun because nobody was feeling left out.

Jonah realized he hadn't just found a teammate; he had found a friend who needed to be seen just as much as he did. He felt happy and important, not because he was picked by the cool kids, but because he did the picking. He had used his golden ticket to buy a little bit of happiness for someone else, and that made him feel rich. The recess bell rang to end the period, but Jonah didn't feel invisible anymore; he felt like a champion.



FAITH GUIDE



Ephesians 1:4 reminds us that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Jonah felt invisible when the teams were picked and no one chose him for the soccer game. That hurt, but being left out of a game did not decide his worth. God already saw Jonah, loved him, and gave him value that no playground captain could take away.

Sometimes you may feel left out, picked last, or not chosen at all. That can make you wonder if you matter. Jonah learned that his worth was not decided by who picked him for a team. God helped him remember he was already loved, then gave him courage to notice Arthur and include someone else.

- 1 When have you felt left out?
- 2 What helps you remember you matter?
- 3 Who could you include this week?



YOUR MISSION



This week, look for someone who may feel left out. Invite them into a game, a seat, a group, or a simple conversation.

04

Because you are Loved by God

He wants your heart to feel free, not trapped.

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

— John 8:32 (NIV)





Max and the Invisible Backpack



The sound was a jagged CRACK that made every kid in the room jump right out of their skin. One second, the art room was loud and happy, full of splashing water and friends laughing about paint mustaches. The next second, it was so quiet you could hear the clock ticking on the wall because everyone had frozen in place. Every single person at table four stared straight at the window with their mouths hanging open in shock.

The window wasn't smooth anymore; it had a cracked spiderweb pattern spreading right across the middle. On the floor beneath it lay a lump of gray, wet clay that looked totally guilty sitting there on the tiles. Beside Max, his best friend Leo looked like he had just seen a ghost because his face was completely pale. Leo had been trying to make a "three-pointer" into the recycling bin, but his aim was terrible, and now his hands were shaking under the table.



Mr. Henderson walked over with heavy boots that thudded against the floor like a drumbeat. He looked at the broken window, then he looked at the gray blob on the floor, and finally, he looked at the boys. "Who threw that?" Mr. Henderson asked in a low voice, which was actually way scarier than if he had yelled at the top of his lungs. Leo looked like he was about to cry, and panic started to buzz in Max's chest like a trapped fly.

Max knew he hadn't thrown the clay, but he felt just as guilty because he had been cheering Leo on the whole time. A wave of fear washed over him because he didn't want the fun to end or his parents to get a phone call. "I think it just fell off the drying rack," Max lied quickly, hoping his voice didn't squeak. Leo nodded quickly beside him, his voice trembling like a leaf in the wind as he added, "Yeah, it just fell."

Mr. Henderson sighed a long, heavy sigh, looking at the boys with a raised eyebrow that said he didn't believe them. He didn't look convinced, but he didn't have any proof to argue with them right now. "Alright," he said slowly, "get back to work while I call the custodian to



handle the glass." Max let out a huge breath he felt like he had been holding for ten minutes, thinking they had escaped the trouble.

But as Max picked up his paintbrush, a strange thing happened inside his chest. A heavy, uncomfortable weight settled right onto his shoulders, pressing him down into his chair. It felt exactly like he was wearing a giant, invisible backpack filled with heavy rocks that nobody else could see. Getting away with the lie didn't feel like winning the lottery; it actually felt like stepping into a trap.

At lunch, Leo whispered excitedly about how they were like secret agents who had tricked the teacher. Max tried to smile back, but it felt fake and plastered on, like a cheap sticker that wouldn't stick. He looked at Leo and felt a pit in his stomach, realizing that telling the truth now might ruin their friendship. The lie felt like a glass wall between him and his best friend, making him feel lonely in the crowded cafeteria.

By the end of the day, Max felt exhausted from carrying



the weight of his secret around the halls. He stood by the water fountain, realizing that while he could hide the truth from his teacher, he couldn't hide it from himself. As he stared at the water, he felt a quiet nudge in his heart, a gentle reminder that God was right there in the hallway with him. It wasn't a booming voice, just a steady feeling that God wanted him to be free, not trapped by fear.

Max realized that the truth might be scary, but hiding was way heavier and lonelier than facing the music. He knew Leo might be mad at him tomorrow, and the thought made his stomach do a nervous flip. But he also knew he couldn't carry the heavy backpack for one more minute. He took a deep breath, turned around on his heels, and marched back toward the art room.

Mr. Henderson was alone, sweeping up the dried clay near the window with a rhythmic swish-swish sound. He looked up with a curious expression and asked, "Did you forget something, Max?" Max stood in the doorway with sweaty palms, knowing this was the scariest and bravest thing he could do.





"It didn't fall," Max blurted out before he could change his mind and run away. "We were goofing off and it hit the window, and I lied because I was scared of getting in trouble." The room was quiet for a moment, and Max squeezed his eyes shut waiting for the yelling to start. He braced himself for the disappointment, or for Mr. Henderson to tell him he was a bad kid.

"Thank you for telling me the truth, Max," Mr. Henderson said softly, surprising Max completely. Max looked up, noticing that Mr. Henderson wasn't smiling, but he looked like he respected what Max had just done. "It takes courage to come back here," he said, "so you and Leo will just help me clean racks tomorrow as a consequence."

Max nodded, knowing that tomorrow might be awkward when Leo found out they had to clean up. Leo might be upset that the secret was out, and that part still felt a little scary. But suddenly, the invisible straps loosened, and the heavy rocks vanished into thin air. Max felt floaty and light, like gravity didn't work on him anymore because the pressure was gone.



He still had to face the consequence and the awkward conversation with his friend, but the crushing weight was gone. He walked out of the school blinking in the bright afternoon sunlight. The lie had promised to keep him safe, but the truth was the only thing that actually set him free. Being just Max the honest version, was finally enough.



| FAITH GUIDE



John 8:32 reminds us that the truth can set us free. Max thought lying would help him avoid trouble, but the secret felt heavy, like an invisible backpack full of rocks. The lie did not make him feel safe. It made him feel trapped.

Sometimes telling the truth can feel scary because there may still be consequences. Max still had to help clean the art room, and Leo might have been upset. But telling the truth helped Max stop carrying the secret alone. God can give you courage to be honest, make things right, and live free from the weight of hiding.

- 1 When has a secret felt heavy?
- 2 Why can telling the truth feel scary?
- 3 How can God help you be honest?



YOUR MISSION



This week, if you are hiding something, tell the truth to a trusted grown-up. Ask God for courage, then take one honest step.

05

Because you are Loved by God

*Having a clean heart is better than having a
shiny trophy.*

*People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord
looks at the heart.*

— 1 Samuel 16:7 (NIV)





The Run That Didn't Count



Have you ever wanted to win something so badly that your teeth actually ached just thinking about it? That is exactly how Sam felt as he stood in the batter's box on a bright Saturday morning. The championship trophy was sitting on a table near the dugout, gleaming in the sunlight like a beacon of pure gold. It was the biggest trophy the league had ever bought, and Sam wanted to hold it over his head more than he wanted his next birthday cake.

Sam was the captain of the Tigers, and he had led his team through a tough season of dusty uniforms, blistered hands, and endless batting practice. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked at his teammates, who were leaning against the chain-link fence, looking to him for hope. The score was tied in the bottom of the last inning, there were two outs, and a runner was on third base. Sam knew that one solid hit could change everything forever.



Suddenly, the pitcher wound up and hurled the ball toward home plate. Sam saw it coming and timed his swing, twisting his body to drive the ball into the outfield. But as he swung, the ball jammed him inside. It didn't hit the bat; instead, it thudded off his wrist and rolled past the pitcher's mound, landing on the infield grass. It happened so fast that it was just a blur to everyone else on the field.

Because the bat and his wrist were so close together, it sounded like a hit. Sam dropped the bat and sprinted to first base while the runner from third raced home. The umpire spread his arms and yelled, "Safe!" The parents in the bleachers erupted into a roar of cheering. Sam's teammates swarmed him in a pile of high-fives and hugs, screaming that they had just won the championship. For five whole seconds, Sam jumped up and down with them, letting the thrill of the victory wash over him.

But as the cheering continued, a cold, heavy rock formed in the bottom of his stomach and stopped the celebration in his heart. He looked at the scoreboard, which now showed the Tigers winning by one run. He



looked at the other team's catcher, who was arguing desperately with the umpire, pointing at his own wrist. Sam took a step toward the pitcher's mound, trying to force himself to believe it was a fair hit.

He looked at the shiny gold trophy on the table, but it suddenly didn't look bright and beautiful anymore. It looked dusty and cheap, and Sam realized that if he took it home, he would never be able to look at it without feeling sick. A trophy won with a lie wasn't a prize at all; it was just a heavy piece of plastic that would weigh him down forever. He knew it would sit on his shelf and remind him that he was a cheater.

Sam looked up at the sky and remembered a verse his dad taught him about walking in truth. He realized that God was watching the game of his heart, not just the game on the diamond. Winning the world but losing his honor was a terrible trade that Sam didn't want to make. He felt a tug in his chest telling him exactly what to do, even though his legs felt like jelly.

He stopped walking toward the dugout and turned



around, pushing his way back through his confused teammates. "Sam, where are you going?" one of his friends shouted, but Sam ignored him and kept walking. He ran toward the umpire, waving his arms to get the man's attention before the game was officially over. The umpire looked annoyed and pulled off his mask to silence the cheering crowd.

Sam took a deep breath, and his voice shook a little bit as he spoke up loud enough for the catcher to hear. "It wasn't a hit, Blue," Sam said, holding up his wrist with a trembling finger. "I swung, but the ball hit my wrist, not the bat. It should be a dead ball strike." The umpire stared at Sam with wide eyes, completely surprised that a kid would confess a call that would cost his team the win.

The cheering from the Tigers' parents died down instantly, replaced by a confused silence that blanketed the field. The umpire nodded slowly, signaled "Dead Ball," and sent the runner back to third base. Sam walked back to the batter's box to finish his at-bat, feeling the angry stares of his teammates burning into his back.





Nobody gave him a high-five, and his best friend kicked the dirt and looked away, clearly frustrated that the winning run was gone.

With two strikes now on the count, Sam stepped back in. The next pitch was a perfect curveball. Sam swung and missed. Strike three. The inning was over.

The game went into extra innings, and the Rockets carried the momentum. Their first batter hit a double, and moments later, they scored the real winning run. The Tigers had lost the championship, and the other team began celebrating wildly on the infield. Sam stood with his hands on his knees, listening to the cheers that were for the other team.

It hurt to lose, and for a long moment, Sam stood alone on the dirt while his teammates slumped their shoulders. He wondered if he had made a mistake, and the sadness of the loss felt like a heavy blanket. But then, underneath the sadness, he felt a foundation of solid rock rising up to meet him. The heavy, sick feeling in his stomach was gone, replaced by a clean, quiet peace.



His coach walked over slowly, and Sam braced himself, worried that the coach would be mad about the lost trophy. Instead, the coach put a heavy hand on Sam's shoulder and squeezed it tight, smiling down at him. "I have never been more proud of a player than I am of you right now," he said. Sam looked up and saw his dad giving him a thumbs-up with tears in his eyes.

Sam realized that he had lost the plastic trophy, but he had won something that couldn't be broken or lost. The drive home was quiet, but Sam felt a peace that was sweeter than any victory celebration could have been. That night, as he lay in bed, he didn't need a trophy on his shelf to know he was a champion.

He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, feeling light and free because he had no secrets hiding under his pillow. The final out of the game had ended the match, but the umpire of his heart told him he had really won.



FAITH GUIDE



Proverbs 10:9 reminds us that a person who lives with integrity can stand secure. Sam wanted to win the championship, and for a few seconds everyone thought he had won it. But Sam knew the ball had hit his wrist, not his bat. The trophy looked exciting, but keeping a win that was not true would have made his heart feel heavy.

Sometimes doing the right thing may cost you something you really wanted. You may have to tell the truth, give something back, admit a mistake, or lose a reward you could have kept. Sam learned that winning is not worth losing your honesty. God can help you choose integrity, even when the right choice is hard.

- 1** When has it been hard to tell the truth?
- 2** Why can winning the wrong way feel heavy?
- 3** How can God help you choose what is right?



YOUR MISSION



This week, choose honesty even when it costs you something. Ask God for courage to do what is right, even if nobody else sees it.

06

Because you are Loved by God

*He wants to heal your heart when it
feels broken.*

Bear with each other and forgive one another...

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

— Colossians 3:13 (NIV)





Luke and the Burning Hot Coal



Have you ever felt like you had a literal volcano erupting right inside your stomach? That is exactly how Luke felt on this specific Saturday afternoon, which was supposed to be the highlight of his entire summer vacation. He was standing in his driveway holding the remote controller for his prized possession, the Sky-Shark 3000 drone. This was not just a toy from a cereal box; it was a high-tech machine with four spinning blades and flashing green lights.

Luke had saved his allowance for six whole months to buy it, scrubbing dishes and raking leaves until his hands were sore. The drone hovered in the air perfectly, buzzing like a giant, angry hornet as it zoomed over the basketball hoop. Luke felt like a professional pilot as he carefully nudged the joysticks with his thumbs to make it spin. But then, he heard the stomping of sneakers coming down the sidewalk, and he knew his peace was over.



It was Jax, the neighbor kid who was always too loud and never seemed to listen to instructions. Jax ran up the driveway with sticky hands and a grin that looked like trouble waiting to happen. "Whoa, let me try!" Jax shouted, reaching for the controller with grabby fingers before Luke could even answer. Luke tried to turn away to protect his gear, but Jax was impulsive and grabbed the edge of the remote with a clumsy yank.

The Sky-Shark wobbled wildly in the air, spinning out of control like a confused duck caught in a tornado. Luke shouted for Jax to let go, but the drone was already diving fast toward the concrete. There was a sickening crunch that sounded like a bag of chips being stomped on by a giant. The drone slammed into the driveway with terrible force, and pieces of black plastic flew everywhere like sad confetti.

One of the propellers spun across the ground before coming to a wobbly stop right at Luke's feet. The flashing green lights flickered once, dimmed, and then went completely dark forever. Luke stared at the pile of junk that used to be his favorite thing in the world. Jax



didn't look happy, but he didn't look nearly sorry enough for what he had just done.

He shrugged his shoulders and wiped his nose on his sleeve, acting like it was no big deal. "Whoops," Jax said with a nervous laugh, kicking at a piece of plastic. "I guess that wasn't a very good landing, Captain Crash." He turned around and skipped back toward his house, running away from the mess because he didn't know how to fix it.

Luke stood there trembling, his face feeling as hot as the pavement under his sneakers. A heavy, burning feeling started in the center of his chest, spreading out like fire. It felt exactly like he had swallowed a burning hot coal that was sizzling inside his ribs. He wanted to run across the street and push Jax into the bushes for being so careless.

He gathered the broken pieces of the Sky-Shark and marched into his house, slamming the front door behind him. He went straight to his room and dumped the broken plastic onto his desk with a loud clatter. He sat



on the edge of his bed, looking at the mess and feeling the heat rise in his chest.

His stomach twisted into knots, and he realized he felt physically sick from the rage. He knew Jax was probably at home right now, eating a snack and watching TV, totally fine. Holding onto this anger was punishing Luke, not the kid who broke the toy. The longer he held the hot coal, the more his own hands were burning.

Luke looked up at the small wooden cross hanging above his light switch and took a deep breath. He remembered his dad saying once that forgiveness is just choosing to pay the cost yourself so you can be free. He thought about how Jesus loved people even when they made big mistakes, without waiting for them to fix everything first. Luke looked at the broken plastic and realized he had a choice to make.

He could keep holding the hot coal and burn his own hands, or he could drop it and stop the pain. He knew that forgiving Jax wouldn't fix the drone, and it didn't mean that Jax's clumsiness was okay. It just meant that





Luke was done carrying the weight of being mad. "God," Luke whispered into the quiet room, "I am really angry, but I don't want to carry this anymore."

He closed his eyes and imagined taking that heavy, burning feeling out of his chest and handing it over to Jesus. It wasn't easy, and he had to pray it three times before he really felt his grip loosen. But as he prayed, the tight knot in his stomach finally started to untangle. The heat in his face faded away, replaced by a cool, steady feeling of peace.

Luke stood up and swept the broken plastic pieces into a shoebox to deal with later. He looked out his window and saw Jax riding his bike in circles on the street, looking bored. A few minutes ago, that sight would have made Luke furious, but now he just felt a little sorry for him. He realized that Jax was just a careless kid who didn't know how to take care of nice things.

Luke walked out of his room, grabbed a basketball, and headed outside to the hoop. The drone was gone, but Luke's Saturday wasn't ruined after all. He dribbled the

A series of stars of various sizes and shades of gray are scattered along the top edge of the page. Some are solid, while others are outlines.

ball, feeling the rough texture of the rubber against his fingertips. He took a shot, and the ball swished through the net with a satisfying sound.



| FAITH GUIDE



Ephesians 4:32 reminds us to forgive others because God has forgiven us. Luke was angry when Jax broke his drone, and his anger felt heavy and hot inside him. Forgiving Jax did not fix the drone, and it did not mean what Jax did was okay. It meant Luke chose to stop carrying anger around like something that kept hurting him.

Sometimes people do careless, unfair, or hurtful things. You may feel mad, and that feeling can be real. But holding on to anger can make you feel worse inside. God can help you be honest about what hurt, let go of revenge, and choose forgiveness one step at a time.

- 1 When have you felt angry at someone?
- 2 Why can anger be hard to let go?
- 3 How can God help you forgive?



YOUR MISSION



This week, if you feel angry at someone, talk to God about it first. Ask Him to help you let go of revenge and choose one peaceful next step.

07

Because you are Loved by God

*He shows up for you every
single morning.*

*Dear children, let us not love with words or speech
but with actions and in truth.*

— 1 John 3:18 (NIV)





Buster's Secret Hero



Have you ever walked into a room that smelled like a mixture of wet fur, rubber toys, and pure excitement? That is the glorious scent of the "Happy Tails Animal Shelter," and to Leo, it smelled like his biggest dream coming true. He knelt on the concrete floor, staring through the chain-link fence at a golden retriever mix with floppy ears and a tail that wagged so hard his whole body wiggled.

This was Buster, a dog with big brown eyes that looked at Leo like he was the most important person in the entire universe. Leo turned to his mom with eyes as wide as dinner plates and promised that he would take care of Buster forever and ever. He swore he would walk him, feed him, and brush his soft fur every single day without being asked even once.

For the first week, Leo was the undisputed champion of dog ownership and took his job very seriously. He woke up early to fill the food bowl with the exact right amount



of kibble, acting like a scientist in a lab. He threw the tennis ball in the backyard until his arm was sore, cheering whenever Buster caught it in mid-air like a fuzzy superhero. Leo felt proud because he was responsible for a living creature, and it made him feel older and more important.

But as the days turned into weeks, the shiny new feeling of having a pet started to fade away like old paint. A new video game called "Galaxy Defender" came out, and Leo's attention shifted from the backyard to the TV screen. It was much easier to sit on the comfortable couch and blast aliens than it was to put on shoes and walk a sniffing dog around the block. Leo started telling himself that he would take Buster out "in just a minute" or "right after this level."

One Tuesday afternoon, Leo's mom walked into his room while he was in the middle of an epic space battle. She didn't say a word at first, but she stood by the door with a look on her face that made Leo pause the game. She pointed a finger at Buster, who was sitting by the empty water bowl, whining softly with his nose pressed against the metal dish. The dog looked restless and



thirsty, pacing back and forth because he hadn't been let outside in hours.

"It's not that big of a deal," Leo mumbled, feeling a sudden need to defend himself against the guilt rising in his chest. "He is fine, Mom, dogs are tough and he mostly just likes to sleep anyway." He tried to shrug it off, but his stomach gave a weird twist as he looked at Buster's sad, hopeful eyes. Deep down, Leo knew he was lying to cover up his laziness because he didn't want to pause his game.

His mom didn't yell, but she didn't accept the excuse either. "Being tough doesn't mean he doesn't need care, Leo," she said quietly. She explained that trust is like a bridge, and every time Leo forgot his job, he pulled a plank out of that bridge. Leo looked at the empty bowl and the pacing dog, and his excuse crumbled into dust.

Leo felt a heavy, hot weight settle on his shoulders that felt like he was wearing an invisible backpack full of rocks. He filled the bowl and watched Buster drink thirstily, realizing that his fun video game had actually hurt his best friend. He clipped on the leash and took

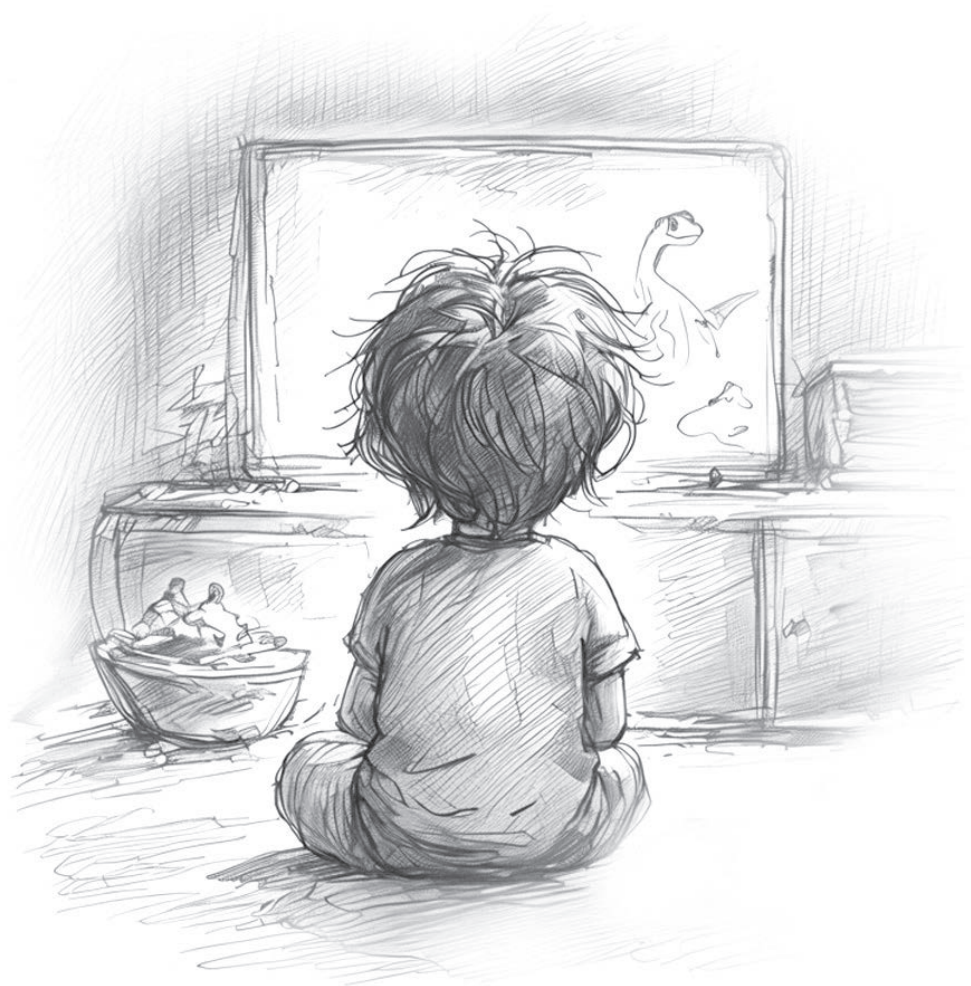


Buster outside, watching the dog happily sniff the grass. He went to bed that night feeling small and guilty, tossing and turning while Buster snored on the rug beside him. He realized that saying he loved his pet was easy, but actually loving him took work.

Leo sat up in the dark and looked at the glow of the streetlamp coming through his window blinds. He felt a sting in his heart, not because he was in trouble, but because he had treated a living gift like a toy. God had trusted him with something special, and Leo had dropped the ball because he was distracted. He remembered a verse he learned in Sunday School about how God is faithful every single morning.

He thought about how the sun always comes up, and how his own lungs kept breathing without him having to tell them to. God didn't just say He loved Leo; God showed up every single day to provide air, food, and life. Leo realized that real love isn't just a fuzzy feeling inside your heart. Real love is the action of showing up, even when you don't feel like it.

He closed his eyes and whispered a prayer that was honest and a little bit scary to say out loud. "God, I have been lazy and I almost hurt Buster because I only cared





about having fun. Please help me to be faithful like You are, even when the job is boring or tiring." He imagined taking off that heavy invisible backpack of guilt and handing it to Jesus. He realized that responsibility wasn't a punishment; it was a way to say "thank you" to God.

The next morning, Leo's alarm went off thirty minutes earlier than usual, buzzing like an angry bee. He wanted to hit snooze and curl back into his warm blankets, but he heard the click of dog nails on the floor. He jumped out of bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and marched straight to the kitchen to scoop fresh food. It wasn't fun, and he was still tired, but he felt a new kind of strength growing inside him.

He realized he was using his "faithfulness muscles," and just like in gym class, using new muscles burns a little bit. He grabbed the leash and took Buster for a walk in the crisp morning air before he even got dressed for school. He picked up the messes in the backyard, wrinkling his nose at the smell but did it anyway. Buster looked up at him and wagged his tail, his whole body shaking with pure joy.



Leo felt a warm glow in his chest that was way better than beating a level in a video game. He realized that this good feeling was the feeling of trust starting to grow back. Weeks went by, and Leo didn't miss a single feeding or walk, no matter how busy he was. His mom noticed the change, and one day she stood by the back door with a smile instead of a frown.

"Buster looks healthy and happy," she said, squeezing Leo's shoulder with a proud grip. "I can see that you are really taking care of what belongs to you." Leo beamed because he knew she wasn't just talking about the dog; she was talking about his character.

Leo looked at Buster, who was chasing a butterfly in the grass, looking like a king again. He realized that caring for something dependent on him had taught him something huge about God's heart. Being responsible wasn't just about chores; it was about protecting and loving the things that couldn't take care of themselves. Leo whistled, and Buster came running, safe and sound.



FAITH GUIDE



Luke 16:10 reminds us that faithfulness matters, even in small things. Leo loved having Buster, but he forgot that loving a pet meant feeding him, walking him, and caring for him every day. Buster could not fill his own water bowl or take himself outside. Leo learned that being trusted with someone or something means showing up, even when it is not exciting.

Sometimes responsibility feels fun at first, but later it can feel boring, tiring, or easy to forget. You may have chores, a pet, homework, a younger sibling, or something important you are supposed to care for. Leo learned that real love is not just saying you care. Real love shows up in what you do. God can help you be faithful with what has been trusted to you.

- 1** What is something you are trusted to care for?
- 2** Why can responsibility feel hard sometimes?
- 3** How can God help you be faithful?



YOUR MISSION



This week, do one responsibility without being reminded. Care for what God has trusted to you with a willing heart.

08

Because you are Loved by God

*you don't have to face
challenges alone.*

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

— Psalm 56:3 (NIV)





The Test God Took with Me



Have you ever sweated so much during a test that you were afraid you might actually slide right out of your plastic chair? That is exactly how Owen felt sitting in Mrs. Robinson's fourth-period math class on a very stressful Tuesday morning. The clock on the wall was ticking so loudly that it sounded like a giant hammer hitting a metal garbage can over and over again.

Owen stared at the paper in front of him, wiping his sweaty palms on his jeans for the tenth time, hoping nobody noticed that he was slowly melting into a puddle of panic.

Owen was not the kind of kid who slacked off or played video games instead of studying for important things. He had spent the last three nights reviewing flashcards until his eyes felt like dried-up grapes. He had memorized his multiplication tables and even practiced long division while eating his breakfast cereal every



orning. He thought he was totally ready to crush this test like a monster truck crushing a tiny sedan. But now that the test was actually here, his brain had decided to pack its bags and go on a vacation without him.

Question number four was a complicated word problem about a train leaving Chicago at midnight with a heavy load of watermelons. Owen read it three times, but his brain just couldn't figure out why anyone would leave Chicago that late with so much fruit. He felt a tight, squeezing feeling in his chest that reminded him of wearing a wetsuit that was two sizes too small.

He looked around the room and saw that everyone else was scribbling away happily, which made him feel even worse. It seemed like he was the only person in the entire world who didn't know how fast the train was going.

A sinking feeling settled in his stomach because he had specifically prayed for this test to go perfectly. He had asked God to help him get an A so he could make his parents proud and feel smart. Since he was freezing up,



he started to think that maybe God wasn't listening to him at all. He felt like he had let God down by not being smart enough to solve the train problem on the first try. The pencil shook in his hand as he realized he might actually fail the test he had worked so hard for.

The minutes ticked by, and the blank spaces on his paper seemed to be laughing at him with mean faces. He tried to do the math in his head, but the numbers kept slipping away like wet soap in a bathtub. He felt tears stinging the corners of his eyes, which was the absolute last thing he wanted to happen in math class. He wanted to crumple up the paper, run out the door, and hide in the janitor's closet until school was over. It felt like the floor was dropping out from under him, and he was falling into a dark hole of failure.

Owen closed his eyes to stop the room from spinning and tried to take a deep, shaky breath. He suddenly remembered a story his Sunday School teacher told about a boat in a scary storm. Jesus didn't stop the waves immediately; He just stayed in the boat with His friends so they wouldn't be alone. Owen realized that he had



been expecting God to take the test for him, like a magic invisible quiet student. But he understood now that God wasn't there to give him the answers; He was there to be the anchor that held him steady while he worked.

He took a deep breath and whispered a different kind of prayer inside his head, one that was honest and real. He didn't ask for the answers to the train problem or for a magical A plus on the paper. Instead, he prayed, "God, I am really scared and I don't know what to do right now. Please just help me not to panic and help me do the best I can." It wasn't a fancy prayer with big words, but it was the bravest thing he had said all day.

A strange thing happened as soon as he finished that short little prayer in the quiet classroom. The tight wetsuit feeling in his chest started to loosen up just a tiny bit, allowing him to breathe again. The numbers on the page didn't magically solve themselves, but they stopped looking so scary and impossible.

Owen realized that even if he got the question wrong, the world wasn't going to end. He imagined God sitting





in the empty desk next to him, just waiting to be with him in the struggle.

He picked up his pencil with a steady hand and decided to skip the train problem for now. He moved on to question five, which was just simple division, and he knew exactly how to solve it. He worked through the rest of the test one problem at a time, taking deep breaths whenever the panic tried to come back. He didn't fly through it like a genius, and he had to guess on two of the hardest questions. But he kept going because he knew he wasn't alone in the room anymore.

When the bell finally rang, he handed his paper to Mrs. Robinson with a shaky but genuine smile. He knew he hadn't gotten a perfect score, and he definitely hadn't crushed it like a monster truck. But he had finished the race without quitting, and that felt like a different kind of victory. He walked out of the classroom feeling like he had survived a wrestling match with a grizzly bear. The hallway was loud and crowded, but Owen felt a quiet stillness inside his chest.



A few days later, Mrs. Robinson handed back the graded tests with a smile on her face. Owen looked at the top of his paper and saw a big red "B-" circled in the corner. For a second, his stomach did a painful flop of disappointment because he had wanted that shiny star so badly. He felt a sting of sadness and wondered if he hadn't prayed hard enough or studied enough. But as he stared at the grade, the disappointment slowly faded away, replaced by a warm, steady feeling.

He realized that trusting God didn't mean everything would always turn out perfect or easy. It meant that God was right there in the middle of the B-minus, holding him up when things were hard. Owen shoved the test into his backpack and headed out to recess with his friends. He felt lighter than air because he knew his value didn't come from a number on a piece of paper. He wasn't melting into a puddle of panic anymore; he was solid, steady, and held by an anchor that would never let go.



FAITH GUIDE



Philippians 4:6–7 reminds us that we can bring our worries to God. Owen studied hard, but when the test started, he felt nervous and stuck. God did not magically write the answers for him, but He helped Owen calm down, breathe, and keep going one problem at a time. God’s peace helped Owen finish the test without letting fear take over.

Sometimes you may feel worried about a test, a game, a performance, or something important you want to do well. You might think God only helped if everything turns out perfect. Owen learned that God is with us in the middle of hard things, even when the result is not exactly what we wanted. God can help you feel steady, do your best, and remember that your worth is not decided by a grade.

- 1** When have you felt nervous about a test or challenge?
- 2** What helps you calm down when you feel worried?
- 3** How can God help you do your best?



YOUR MISSION



This week, when you feel worried, stop and pray one simple sentence:
“God, please give me peace and help me do my best.”

09

Because you are Loved by God

You can be brave.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

— Joshua 1:9 (NIV)





Backyard Blackout



The sound of a tent zipper is the loudest noise in the world when you are all alone. Eli pulled the metal tab up to his chin, sealing himself inside the orange walls of his shelter. He struggled to get comfortable on the nylon floor. His new sleeping bag was slippery, sliding off the pillow like a wet noodle every time he moved. The air inside the small space smelled like plastic and trapped summer heat, reminding him he was separated from the rest of the world.

This was The Big Backyard Sleepover, an event Eli had been planning in his head for weeks. He had prepared his supplies carefully: a blue water bottle and a fresh pack of cinnamon crackers. He whispered a quick prayer at dinner asking God to keep the grass dry. He also had his dad's heavy-duty yellow flashlight, which was big enough to feel like a shield against the night. He was ready to be the master of his own kingdom.



Earlier that afternoon, the backyard had felt entirely different, full of sunshine and familiar noises. Eli had marched around the perimeter of the fence, checking for rocks and sticks like a true explorer claiming new land. He had even tried to convince his dog, Buster, to join him, but Buster preferred the rug. Back then, with the sun high in the sky, sleeping outside felt like the easiest thing in the world.

But the night changed everything, transforming his familiar playground into something strange. The big oak tree didn't look like a tree anymore; it looked like a giant stretching branches to block the stars. Even the squirrels sounded different, stomping through the dry leaves like they were wearing heavy hiking boots. The temperature had dropped, making the tip of Eli's nose feel cold despite the warm air inside.

Eli clicked on the heavy flashlight to push the strange shapes back to the fence. The strong beam hit the orange fabric and made the whole tent glow like a warm, happy pumpkin. He took a deep breath, adjusted his slippery sleeping bag again, and told himself that he was



doing fine. He grabbed a cracker to celebrate his bravery, when the mood suddenly shifted.

Without any warning at all, the bright white light flickered once, then twice. A low, sickly buzz filled the silence of the tent. Eli frowned and tapped the plastic handle against his palm, assuming it was a loose connection. "Come on," he muttered, giving it a firm shake, but the buzzing only got louder.

The beam faded from a brilliant white to a weak, dying yellow color that barely reached his toes. The shadows in the corners of the tent seemed to stretch instantly, sliding closer as the light failed. Eli's heart started to thump against his ribs in a fast, tight rhythm that hurt his chest. He shook the flashlight hard again and whispered a plea, but the light only got dimmer.

He scooted forward and looked through the mesh screen toward his house. The back door was only fifty feet away, and he could see the golden square of the kitchen window. The light inside looked safe and happy, calling him to come back where it was easy. If he ran

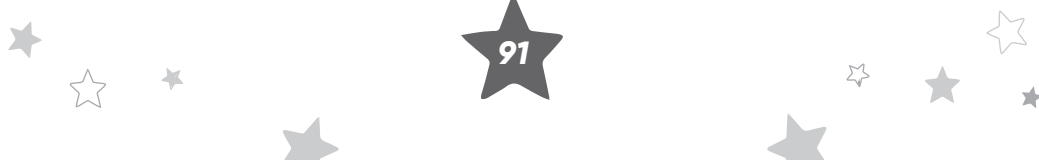


now, he could be on the couch in ten seconds, drinking something warm.

He imagined opening the back door and stepping onto the linoleum floor, leaving the dark behind. But he froze, his hand hovering near the zipper, feeling a heavy knot of disappointment in his stomach. He wanted to be the kind of kid who stayed, not the kind who quit when things got hard. Leaving now would feel like letting himself down, and that felt worse than the dark.

He gripped the dying flashlight until his knuckles turned white, feeling very small. He didn't want to leave, but the darkness pressed against the thin walls. In the quiet, a memory floated up through his panic, softer than his fear. He remembered sitting on the porch with his dad during a thunderstorm last summer.

He recalled the feeling of his dad's arm around his shoulder while the thunder rolled. His dad had said something about how being brave doesn't mean you aren't scared. It just means remembering who is sitting in the storm with you. Eli took a shaky breath, letting that





thought settle in his mind.

He pulled his legs in close and sat still on the slippery sleeping bag. He didn't need a battery-powered light to talk to God, so he whispered into the dark. "God, I feel really small right now, and I want to run inside." He paused, listening to the wind rustle the nylon walls. "Please help me be brave enough to stay."

He didn't hear a booming voice, and the backyard didn't suddenly light up with glory. But slowly, the frantic thumping in his chest slowed down to a steady rhythm. It felt like a heavy blanket had been lifted off his shoulders, allowing him to breathe again. He realized that God wasn't far away in the kitchen, but right here inside the orange tent.

Eli opened his eyes and looked at the flashlight, which was barely a glow now. It was just enough to see his shoes. The shadows were still there, and they still looked a little creepy, but they weren't the boss of him. The fear was still buzzing like a fly in the background, but he decided he could handle the buzzing.

A decorative border at the top of the page featuring various sizes and styles of stars, including solid grey, outlined grey, and white stars.

Eli laid back down on his pillow, wiggling until he found a spot where he wouldn't slide off. The squirrel ran through the leaves again with a loud crunch, sounding huge and clumsy. Eli smiled at the noise, closed his eyes, and listened to the wind shake the tent. He was still a little scared, but he was staying.



FAITH GUIDE



Psalm 27:1 reminds us that the Lord is our light when we feel afraid. Eli wanted to sleep outside, but when the flashlight started dying, the backyard felt much scarier than it had in the daytime. God did not make the tent glow brighter or fix the batteries right away. He helped Eli remember that he was not alone in the dark.

Sometimes fear can make something familiar feel bigger and harder than it really is. You may feel scared at night, nervous in a new place, or unsure when something does not go the way you planned. Eli learned that bravery does not mean you stop feeling afraid right away. God can stay with you, calm you, and help you take the next brave breath.

- 1** When have you felt scared in the dark?
- 2** What helps you remember you are not alone?
- 3** How can God help you feel brave?



YOUR MISSION



This week, when you feel afraid, whisper a simple prayer: “God, You are with me. Help me take one brave breath.”

10

Because you are Loved by God

*You can have the courage to
open your hands.*

*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap... and yet
your heavenly Father feeds them.*

— Matthew 6:26 (NIV)





Miles and the Bird Hospital



Have you ever found something so special that you wanted to hide it in your pocket and keep it a secret forever? That is exactly how Miles felt when he was exploring the tall, scratchy grass behind his garage on a Tuesday afternoon. He was looking for cool rocks or maybe a lost coin, but instead, he found a tiny bundle of gray feathers huddled in the dirt. It wasn't a rock or a stick, but a small robin that was breathing fast and holding one of its wings in a funny, crooked way. Miles gasped and knelt down in the mud, feeling his heart hammer against his ribs because he knew he had found a real treasure.

He scooped the bird up gently, making his hands into a warm cup to protect it from the wind and the scary world. The bird was soft and warm, and its tiny heart was beating so fast that it tickled the palms of Miles hands. He whispered a promise to the little creature that he would take care of it and make sure nothing bad ever



happened to it again. He knew right away that he was going to be the best bird doctor the world had ever seen. Miles rushed into the house and turned an old sneaker box into a five-star bird hospital with soft towels and air holes. He placed the box on his desk right next to his favorite lamp so the bird would stay warm and safe all night long. He named the bird "Barnaby" because it sounded like a distinguished gentleman's name, and this bird definitely looked important. For the next few days, Miles completely forgot about his video games because he had a much more important mission to focus on.

Being a bird doctor was messy work, but Miles didn't mind getting his hands dirty for his new best friend. He dug up worms from the garden and fed them to Barnaby, grinning every time the bird snapped one up. It felt amazing to help something grow strong, and Miles started to feel like the bird belonged to him more than it belonged to the wild. He loved the way Barnaby looked at him, and he felt like a hero every time he lifted the lid of the box.

A few days later, Barnaby started doing push-ups with



his wings and hopping around the cardboard box with a lot of energy. His crooked wing wasn't crooked anymore, and his eyes were bright and shiny like little black beads. Miles watched him flutter up to the rim of the box, balancing there while looking out the window at the big blue sky. Miles felt a sharp pinch of worry in his stomach because he knew that a healthy bird was a bird that wanted to fly away.

He gently pushed Barnaby back down into the box and put the lid on tighter than usual, leaving just a crack for air. He convinced himself that the backyard was too dangerous because of the neighbor's cat and the chilly wind. He told himself that Barnaby was happier inside the warm room with the endless supply of worms and the soft towel. Miles sat on his bed and crossed his arms, deciding that he was going to keep Barnaby forever because he loved him too much to let him go.

His dad walked in a few minutes later and sat on the edge of the bed, looking at the box with a gentle smile. "You have done a great job healing him, Miles," his dad said, "but have you noticed how God built him?" He



pointed out that God gave Barnaby hollow bones to be light and strong feathers to push against the wind. "God didn't design him to sit in a box, Miles; He designed him to belong to the sky."

His dad squeezed Miles's shoulder and walked out, leaving the question hanging in the quiet room. Miles looked at the box and heard the frantic scratching sound of Barnaby trying to get out. He realized that he had been acting like a jailer instead of a protector because he was scared of losing his friend. He thought about how God created the world to be free and wild, and how holding on tight was actually a way of saying he didn't trust God to take care of the bird.

He picked up the shoebox with shaky hands and marched toward the back door, but he stopped with his hand on the knob. A voice in his head whispered that he should just keep Barnaby for one more day, just to be safe. He stood there freezing, almost turning around to march back to his room where everything was safe and controlled. It was a war between what he wanted and what he knew was right, and for a second, he almost let





his fear win.

But then he remembered the scratching sound in the box and realized he couldn't steal Barnaby's song just to make himself feel better. He took a deep breath, turned the knob, and walked out into the bright sunshine of the backyard. The sun was warm on his face, and the trees were swaying in the breeze, calling out for a new singer to join them. Miles stood in the middle of the grass and asked God to give him the courage to open his hands.

He whispered a quiet prayer, asking God to watch over Barnaby and keep him safe from cats and storms. He realized that the bird had never really been his to keep; it had always been God's special creation on loan for a few days. Miles slowly lifted the lid of the box, his fingers trembling as the bright sunlight poured inside. Barnaby hopped up to the edge of the cardboard, tilted his head, and looked at Miles one last time with his shiny black eyes.

With a sudden whoosh of feathers, Barnaby launched himself into the air, flapping his wings stronger than ever before. He circled once around Mile's head as if to say



thank you, and then he shot up toward the branches of the big oak tree. Miles watched him go, shielding his eyes from the sun until the bird was just a speck in the green leaves. A tear rolled down his cheek, but at the same time, a warm feeling of peace settled over his shoulders like a blanket.

He realized that even though his hands were empty, his heart was actually fuller than it was before. He had done the hard work of caring, and then he had done the even harder work of letting go. Miles stood there for a long time, listening to the birds singing in the trees, wondering which voice belonged to his friend. He knew that Barnaby was doing exactly what God had designed him to do, and that made everything okay.



FAITH GUIDE



Psalm 24:1 reminds us that the whole world belongs to God. Miles loved caring for Barnaby, and he wanted to keep him safe forever. But Barnaby was not made to live in a shoebox. God made him with wings, feathers, and a place in the sky.

Sometimes love means holding something gently instead of holding it tightly. You may want to keep a pet, a toy, a friendship, or a special moment exactly the way it is. Miles learned that caring for Barnaby also meant letting him go when it was time. God can help you love well, trust Him, and do the right thing even when your hands feel empty afterward.

- 1** When has it been hard to let go?
- 2** Why can love mean doing what is best?
- 3** How can God help you trust Him?



YOUR MISSION



This week, care for something God made, like a pet, plant, or outdoor creature. Treat it gently and remember it belongs to Him.