

But God...

A week of prayer devotions

Day One

Meanwhile, I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. He is a true brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. And he was your messenger to help me in my need. I am sending him because he has been longing to see you, and he was very distressed that you heard he was ill. And he certainly was ill; in fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him—and also on me, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.
—*Philippians 2:25–27*

“When Paul wrote to his friends at Philippi, he told about Epaphroditus, who became ill, so ill that it seemed he would die. ‘Indeed he was ill, and almost died,’ wrote Paul, adding, ‘But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.’ With those words, ‘but God,’ despair gives way to hope, and literally, death to life. Over 40 times in the Bible you have those words, ‘but God,’ and almost every time you find them they bring an element of hope to a desperate situation. ...The darker the circumstances, the brighter the message of hope.”—*Dr. Harold J. Sala, founder of Guidelines for Faith*

God spared Paul “sorrow upon sorrow” by healing his friend. In the not so distant past, many of us have had occasion to thank God for saving a friend from illness or accident. Sadly, a number of us have had to accept the passing of a friend whom Jesus called home this past year. In Jesus, we have hope that we will be reunited with our Christian friends. As the psalmist wrote, “My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.”
—*Psalms 73:26*

Think about it—Have you given in to despair recently over a disappointment, a loss, or an illness? Remember how much the Father loves you and allow hope to rise again. If you have friends who need the comfort that only Jesus can provide, are you willing to recognize that God may offer that comfort *through* you?

Pray about it—Jesus can give you the peace and comfort that you need. He can also give you the wisdom and courage to share His love with others. Just ask Him.

Day Two

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ...But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)—Ephesians 2:1,4-6

We've recently celebrated the birth of God's son, our savior Jesus Christ. In his book *Come Let Us Adore Him*, Paul David Tripp writes,

Because we were dead in our sins, we were completely without the ability to rescue ourselves. ...Here you find the essence of the Christmas story. Here is where [Paul] preaches to us about God's abounding love and His amazing grace. Because we were not able to act for ourselves to change our condition, God acted on our behalf. And because He is boundless in love and plenteous in mercy, He acted *for* us and not *against* us. If God had acted against us His judgment would have been right—we deserved His wrath. But the birth of Jesus told the world of dead people that God was not going to act in anger, but in mercy. He wasn't going to mete out punishment but rather grace. He wasn't going to strike us with His holy sword of vengeance but rather gift us with His life-giving Son. ...The birth of Jesus is God acting radically in human history to give life to dead people. How would that happen? Well, the One who *was* life would take on all our sin and die so that we would not only have life right here, right now, but fullness of life with Him for all eternity.

Think about it—Have you ever given someone a gift you felt they didn't deserve? Did you do it out of obligation? How did they respond? Have you ever received a gift that you felt *you* didn't deserve? How did you respond? God has offered the gift of salvation that none of us deserve. He offers life and freedom from sin and death. Why? Because He loves you.

Pray about it—If you have already received Jesus, the gift of God's mercy and grace, thank Him. If you haven't welcomed Jesus into your heart, what are you waiting for? Do it now. Confess your sin, acknowledge that He died for you and invite Him into your heart.

Day Three

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ...God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.
—Ephesians 2:4–5, 8–9

The year 2020 was a challenging year. You don't need a devotional to tell you that. It was a year of sickness, anger, envy, rage—it's been a year that magnified the sin with which this world is filled. Maybe once or twice you were swallowed up by Satan's temptations; the fog of our world's spiritual war. ...But God!

We were dead in our sins, *but God* ...We were rebels against Him, *but God* ...We were enslaved by the devil and our sinful natures, *but God* ...These may be the two most welcome words in all of Scripture: "but God." God could have left us spiritually dead, in rebellion against Him and in bondage to our sins. *But He didn't*. He did not save us because of, but rather in spite of, what He saw in us. In addition to thanking Him for what He has done for us, we should also show humble patience and tolerance for others who seem unworthy or undeserving of our love and compassion. They may be spiritually dull, rebellious, and even antagonistic toward God. So were we; *but God loved us anyway*. Can we do less for fellow sinners?
—Life Application Study Bible footnote for Ephesians 2:4

Think about it—Were there times during the past year that you ignored someone who was hurting, judged someone who had an opinion you didn't share, spoke without considering the witness of your words?

Pray about it—We're not perfect. But we have a promise that we will become perfect when we leave this world to join our Savior. In the meantime, ask Jesus to fill you with the desire and the discipline to be more like Him in this life.

Day Four

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.—Genesis 50:20

You are probably familiar with the story of Joseph. His profile in the Life Application Study Bible says, “Perhaps you can identify with one or more of the hardships Joseph experienced: He was betrayed and deserted by his family, exposed to sexual temptation, and punished for doing the right thing; he endured a long imprisonment and was forgotten by those he helped. ...His positive response transformed each setback into a step forward. He didn’t spend much time asking why. His approach was ‘What shall I do now?’ Those who met Joseph were aware that wherever he went and whatever he did, God was with him.”

Joseph’s life is an encouragement and a story of forgiveness. In the end, he says to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people” (Genesis 50:20). His story is also an example of how God can use any person and any circumstance to help many people. As the Life Application Study Bible footnote for Genesis 50:20 says, “The experiences in Joseph’s life taught him that God brings good from evil for those who trust Him. Do you trust God enough to wait patiently for Him to bring good out of bad situations?”

Think about it—What difficult circumstance are you facing today that you need Jesus to transform? How can God use this circumstance to help your family, your community, your world?

Pray about it—Ask God to show you how the wealth of your life circumstances, both negative and positive, can be used for His Kingdom.

Day Five

He said, "Listen, all you people of Judah and Jerusalem! Listen, King Jehoshaphat! This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid! Don't be discouraged by this mighty army, for the battle is not yours, but God's.—2 Chronicles 20:15

Second Chronicles 20 begins with the threat of war: "After this, the armies of the Moabites, Ammonites, and some of the Meunites declared war on Jehoshaphat. Messengers came and told Jehoshaphat, 'A vast army from Edom is marching against you from beyond the Dead Sea.' Jehoshaphat was terrified by this news and begged the LORD for guidance. He also ordered everyone in Judah to begin fasting. So people from all the towns of Judah came to Jerusalem to seek the LORD's help" (2 Chronicles 20:1–4).

Jehoshaphat's prayer [verses 6–12] had several essential ingredients. (1) He committed the situation to God, acknowledging that only God could save the nation. (2) He sought God's favor because his people were God's people. (3) He acknowledged God's sovereignty over the current situation. (4) He praised God's glory and took comfort in His promises. (5) He professed complete dependence on God, not himself, for deliverance. To be God's kind of leader today, follow Jehoshaphat's example: Focus on God's power rather than your own.—*Life Application Study Bible footnote for 2 Chronicles 20:6ff*

As the enemy bore down on Judah, God spoke through Jahaziel: "Do not be afraid! ...for the battle is not yours, but God's." We may not fight an enemy army, but every day we battle temptation, pressure, and "rulers of the unseen world" (Ephesians 6:12) who want us to rebel against God. Remember, as believers, we have God's Spirit in us. If we ask for God's help when we face struggles, God will fight for us. And God always triumphs. How do we let God fight for us? (1) Realize that the battle is not ours, but God's; (2) recognize human limitations and allow God's strength to work through our fears and weaknesses; (3) make sure we are pursuing God's interests and not just our own selfish desires; (4) ask God for help in our daily battles.—*Life Application Study Bible footnote for 2 Chronicles 20:15*

Think about it—Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go." Where do you go before you turn to the Lord?

Pray about it—Is there a battle on the horizon, in your workplace or at your kitchen table? Ask God for His help.

Day Six

You also heard how I was far ahead of other Jews in my age group in following the Jewish religion. I had become that fanatical for the traditions of my ancestors. But God, who appointed me before I was born and who called me by his kindness, was pleased to show me his Son.—Galatians 1:15–16

Paul writes to the churches in southern Galatia that he was “fanatical for the traditions of my ancestors.” Paul, then called Saul, was at the stoning of Stephen. Saul was feared by believers of his day because of his zeal and dedication to squelching the early church. But God changed all that when Saul met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul’s conversion allowed the Spirit to use him to spread the Good News to the Gentiles and write many of the books in our New Testament.

Because God was guiding his ministry, Paul wasn’t doing anything that God hadn’t already planned and given him power to do. Similarly, God appointed Jeremiah to be His spokesman even before Jeremiah was born (Jeremiah 1:5). God knows you intimately as well, and He chose you to be His even before you were born (see Psalm 139). He wants you to draw close to Him and to fulfill the purpose He has for your life.—*Life Application Study Bible footnote for Galatians 1:15–16*

Think about it—Saul, who was persecuting Christians, never expected that the road to Damascus would lead to the opposite. Now he was to have a hand in spreading the Gospel throughout the world. In what area(s) have you been opposing God’s plan for your life?

Pray about it— What is God’s purpose for your life? God has had a plan for your life since before you were born. Do you know what your purpose is? If so, recommit yourself fully to Him. If not, ask Him to show you.

Day Seven

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.—Romans 5:7–8

There are many more “but God” verses to encourage us and give us hope. Consider the following.

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.—Genesis 8:1

David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.—1 Samuel 23:14

But now the LORD my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster.—1 Kings 5:4

But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.—Psalm 86:15

Yet I will have compassion on the house of Judah, and I will deliver them—not by bow or sword or war, not by horses and cavalry, but by the LORD their God.—Hosea 1:7

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit.—Jonah 2:6

Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”—Matthew 19:26

Think about it—What are some of the “but God” moments you’ve had in your life? Write them down.

Pray about it—Thank God for His faithfulness and ask Him for a greater awareness of His protection, provision and power.