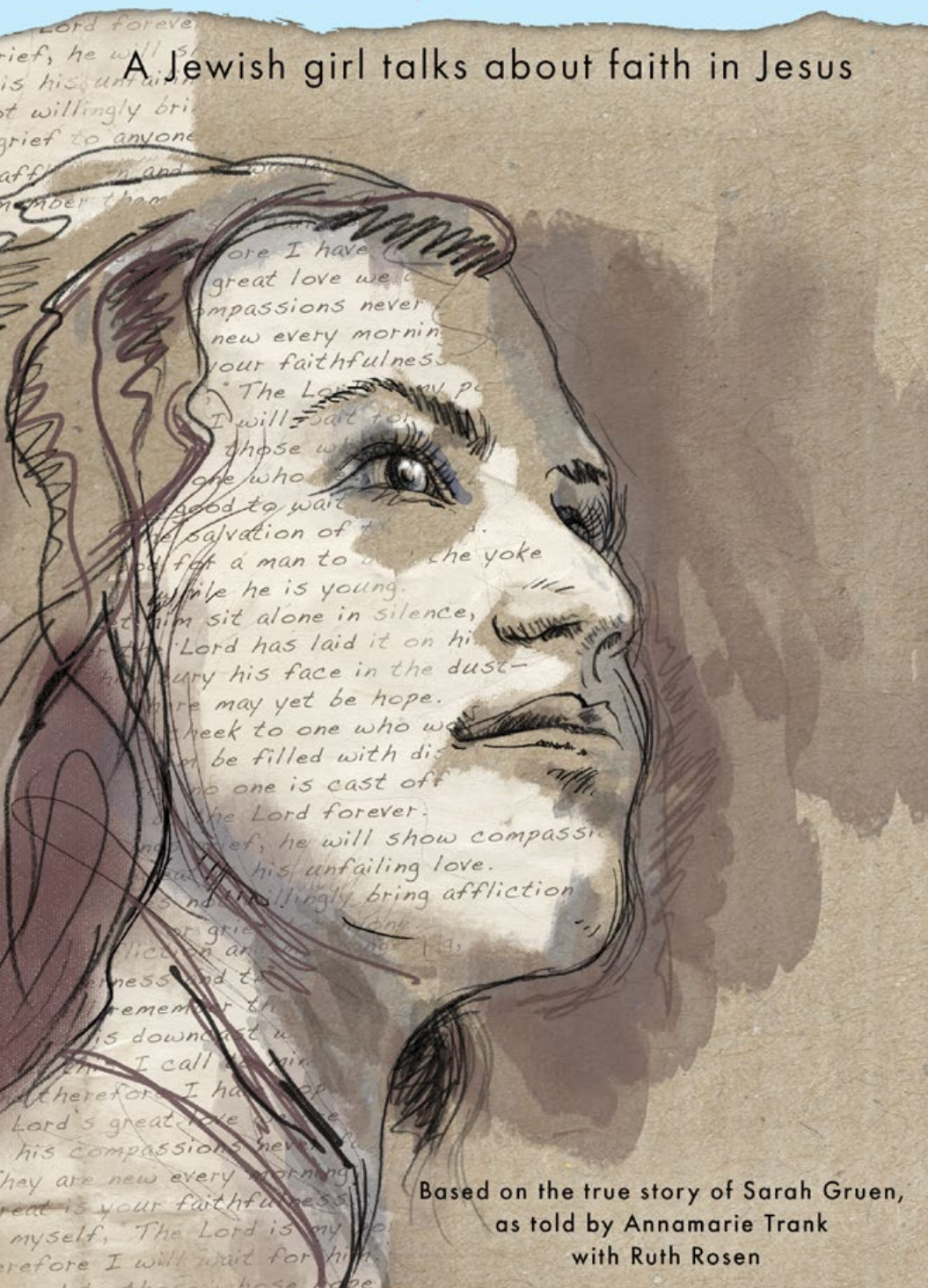


New Mercies

A Jewish girl talks about faith in Jesus



Based on the true story of Sarah Gruen,
as told by Annamarie Trank
with Ruth Rosen

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JEWS FOR JESUS.

This story is for people of all ages, but we have created a discussion/discipleship booklet for girls aged 8-12, whether you are mentoring one-on-one or leading a girls' small group.

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with Ruth Rosen

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CHAPTER ONE

The box is medium sized, big enough to fit a small desktop computer. I found it in my room when I came home and I have no idea what's inside.

"Go through it please," Mom had said, "And see if there's anything worth keeping."

I've just finished my junior year of college so I should be used to this, unloading and reloading my life at the beginning and end of every semester. But I don't remember this old cardboard box with its creases running up and down the sides. Thickly inked letters from a black marker warn, "Sarah's—do not throw out!" on the outside. Whatever's in this box, I must have thought it was pretty valuable when I packed it. I wonder if I'll feel the same way now.



The overwhelming smell of dust balls makes me sneeze as I remove the lid. Tissue paper is covering everything, lining the sides; wedged between carefully-wrapped objects.

In the center of everything is a book, cocooned in tissue paper. It weighs heavily in my hands as I pull it out of the box, leaving a trail of shredded paper. My hands tear at the tissue paper until I'm left holding a kid's Adventure Bible, one I used ages ago. I feel like I've been thrown back in time to a world long past, when my life was so different.

I AM NINE . . .

My hands are clenched around my backpack straps as I lean forward to smile at Mom.

“Hi Sarah,” she calls as I make my way across our big back yard.

I give her a hug. “I made a new friend at school” She shakes her head, her blond curls brushing against her shoulders.

“What have I told you?” she asks, “You haven’t made a new friend, you’ve made a new acquaintance.”

She’s speaking gently, but it doesn’t help me understand why she says this when I make new friends. I am nine-years-old and making friends just makes more sense than making acquaintances.

“I need your help to finish cleaning,” Mom’s voice interrupts my thoughts, “so the house will be ready when your father gets home.”

Dad gets off work early on Fridays, and always brings home *challah* and flowers. Mom enjoys them all the more after a day of cooking and cleaning the house. When she was little, there were no other Jewish families on her block, maybe even the whole neighborhood. My grandma worked hard to make sure that Mom and her brother had a Jewish way of life. Anyway, I bet Mom’s mom made her help clean the house, and that’s why she’s so good at it.

*My grandma worked
hard to make sure that
Mom and her brother
had a Jewish way of life.*

I follow Mom through the screen door into the kitchen. She peeks into the pot and the aroma of chicken soup fills the room. I grab the broom and start sweeping. She’s asking what I learned in school and I’m telling her.

Later, when the dinner’s all made and the house is clean, I hear the familiar sound of my father’s footsteps on the porch. The front door opens.

“I’m home.” I’m rushing towards him before he can even get the words out.

His arms are around me, as he pulls me up and spins me around.

“I missed you today,” Dad says, and puts me down.

He kisses Mom and hands her the challah and flowers he’s somehow managed not to drop. I can tell Mom and Dad will stay together forever. The thought alone makes me grin. I know a lot of kids whose parents are breaking up. Not my mom and dad. They met back in 1984 during a vacation at some place called ClubMed. They were who-knows-how-many-miles from home—where they discovered that they both lived in Queens, New York only fifteen minutes away from each other! When they got back to Queens they dated for two years—then eloped. My grandma on Dad’s side was so angry that they didn’t have a “real wedding” that she didn’t speak to them. . . but only for three weeks. Some people flare up like that. . . but not my dad. He’s really easy going.

“Hi Caleb,” Dad says approaching my older brother who has just come down the stairs. “What have you been up to today?”

We talk about our day until Mom calls us to the table. I take my place beside her, while Dad and Caleb stand behind their chairs. In front of us the *Shabbat* candles also seem to stand at attention, like they’re waiting. A flame sparks to life as Mom strikes a match, and holds it to one, then the other. Covering her face with her hands, she says the blessing.

“Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha’olam asher kid’shanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu l’hadlik ner shel shabbat.”

Dad picks up his glass, and Mom does the same. We sing blessings over the wine and bread.

The blessings are a Jewish thing. We’re saying them to God, yet it feels kind of like when we pledge allegiance to the flag at school. The pledge, like the prayer is memorized. Sometimes I think about the words and sometimes I don’t. The flag is so far away from us, which is how I feel about God. The difference is, God cares and the flag doesn’t. Why God cares, I don’t know; it’s interesting to think about though.



After the blessings, Mom ladles out chicken soup. I try not to slurp mine. I'm focused on grabbing another piece of challah when Mom says, "I believe in Jesus."

My father, Caleb, and I stare. I wait for her to laugh and tell us she's kidding. She doesn't.



"I believe in Jesus," she repeats, calming as she sets down her spoon. She looks at all three of us in turn, her green eyes searching our faces. The challah squishes between my fingers. I didn't realize I was squeezing it so hard. Dad's eyebrows are drawn together. This is serious. Really serious. "I believe Jesus, *Yeshua* is our Messiah,"

she clears her throat as she continues, "and that he's actually the son of God. I've prayed and . . ."

I keep hearing her voice, but her words aren't making sense. Nothing is connecting.

My hands aren't mine. They bring forkfuls of food to my mouth, but I don't taste anything. Eat. Chew. Swallow.

When Mom was in her twenties and working in Manhattan, someone wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt once handed her a bright yellow tract. It made Mom's blood boil. How dare someone claim that Jesus was a Jew, and that we should believe in him? Our ancestors were killed in the name of Jesus!

That name was banned in her house, and ours. Now *my* blood is boiling. Now I know how she felt when she got that stupid pamphlet! I can't believe this, why is she talking about Jesus?

We finish our dinner, and begin cleaning up. Mom starts trying to explain her new beliefs again, but I'm only hearing half of what she says. It's something about sin separating us from God so that we can't know him the way he wants us to. Then something about Jesus living a perfect life, being the only one who never sinned . . . and then giving his life to take the punishment for our sin. She's saying the proof that God was allowed Jesus take our punishment is that he rose from the dead. What???

The more she talks, the more confused I get. I just wish she'd stop.

It's dark by the time Dad and I make our way up the stairs to my bedroom. I still can't believe what Mom is saying. Why isn't Dad more upset about it? Okay, when it comes to being Jewish, mom has always been the stricter one. Still, I wonder what he thinks of all this.

I watch as he pulls down the covers on my bed, and waits patiently for me to climb in. Dad moves the blankets up and over me, tucking me in securely. At least some things stay the same; we've been doing this since I can remember. Dad's brown eyes shine as he looks down at me.

"Ready to do the *Sh'ma*, Sarah?" I bob my head up and down.

"*Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*," we're singing together, "*Barukh shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*."

Dad knows a thing or two about his Jewish heritage, even if Mom is the one who's always been more concerned about following traditions. He learned most of it from his step dad, an Egyptian Jew who was way more religious than anyone else in the family. My father loved his step dad a lot. I wish I could have known him, but he died long before I was born. But even though his step dad was pretty traditional, Dad didn't go to synagogue much after his *bar mitzvah*. His family kept some of the holiday traditions at home, and that was pretty much it.

Dad leans down and kisses my forehead. I always wish he would stay longer, but especially tonight. All too soon he's at the door, switching the light off. "Goodnight, Sarah."

"Goodnight," I murmur as darkness consumes the room.

My eyes flutter as I fight sleep. My mother must be crazy. I flip over, and stare at the stars pasted onto the ceiling. Mom and Dad helped design this room, this house. My mother and father worked their whole lives to make this life for us. Mom is like the perfect Jewish wife and mother. She told us that Jews don't believe all that stuff about Jesus. Only now she does.

I pull the covers tighter around my shoulders, and try not to shiver. You know that feeling of getting into a nice warm shower, and having the water suddenly turn cold? That's how I feel. Being told one thing, and then having just the opposite thrown in your face by the person you trust. I don't want to think about this anymore, I just want to sleep.

*I wake up the next morning wondering if it was all a dream.
It wasn't. Days pass and I'm still confused. Weeks go by,
then months . . .*

"We're going to church."

Yup, my mother goes to church now. It's been months since she started talking about Jesus, and now she goes to church as well as the Messianic synagogue she drags me to.

There are differences. My mom now reads the Bible, the "New Testament" as well as the regular Jewish Bible. She's gotten into the habit of saying her own prayers at the dinner table. They're in English and they're longer than the Shabbat blessings. Thinking about it makes my eyes roll up into my head. Mom started bringing Caleb to church. Dad didn't stop her. Now he wants to go too. It's stupid, we're Jewish and we have our own place to worship. If there's one thing I'll never do, it's go to church—ever.

It's an early Sunday morning; my father's frame fills the doorway.

"C'mon Sarah, don't make us late." I roll over in bed, and close my eyes.

This is a dream, my parents never make me go to church.

"You can't stay here alone," his voice is light, breezy.

"Go away," I groan.

"Your mom made popovers," My eyes are suddenly wide open. He's smiling his biggest, goofiest smile. Dad knows how to get me up in the morning.

Downstairs Caleb is already scarfing down popovers. Mom is pulling out a chair to sit down, and Dad is humming some funny song to himself. I can't believe he's agreed to go to church too.

"Sit and eat," Mom nods at a plate of popovers she's set for me.

"Why are we going to church?"

"I always go to church on Sunday."

"I mean us, me." I say, emphasizing each word.

"You can't stay here alone."

"What if Caleb stays?" I turn to him, "Are you going?"

He shrugs, bits of popover flying out of his mouth.

I cut him a look.

"Sarah, you can't stay here alone." Dad repeats. I don't bother to

tell him I wouldn't have to stay alone if he would stay with me. He now believes in Jesus too—yeah, that happened within months of my mom's big announcement . . . and there's nothing I can do about it.

I take a bite out of my popover. Fine, I'll go, but I won't enjoy it.

*We arrive at the church and it's smaller than I expected.
And though my parents said I couldn't stay home alone, I feel like I'm
alone here, in this strange place.*

The folding chair whines as I scoot it across the linoleum floor of the church kitchen. I've moved it twice since my parents dropped me off here.

"Are you sure you don't want to join us for church?"

I fold my arms across my chest, already bored. "No thanks."

My parents share a glance.

"Fine," Mom leans forward until she's at eye level with me, "you can stay in here if you want, or you can go help in the nursery."

"I'll stay here," I say, and grab a chair. My parents seem disappointed, but I don't care.

You know how you go to the grocery story to get food? Well, we used to go to synagogue to get God. It's something my mom learned from her parents. Mom felt like the Reform Temple her Mother took her and her brother to wasn't Jewish enough. . . . Soon her mother was schlepping her the extra miles to a Conservative synagogue and youth group—several times a week, more often than not.

Mom went to find God, who was always real to her, but kind of a stranger. She knew he was holy, whatever that means, and she worshipped him from afar. He could be approached, but it had to be the right way—inside the walls of the synagogue, through a series of rituals. That's pretty much how it is with us, my family. Synagogue is just something we do. Maybe it's not my favorite thing, but I do want God in my life.

I remember fidgeting in the synagogue's hard back wooden pew. My



family all sat together. My mother sat up straight, alert and focused, with Caleb beside her, while Dad slouched back, making himself comfortable like always. I sat next to him.

We'd go over the blessings, and sing. I still remember pulling on Dad's sleeve during the rabbi's talk.

"I need to use the bathroom," I complained, needing a reason to get out of there.

*I want to punch
someone. And not
just anyone. I realize
with a start that I
want to punch God.*

"In five minutes," he whispered.

I pulled on his sleeve again. "Dad, I really need to go."

I pretended to ignore the look in Mom's eyes as she watched us leave. Dad took me outside for a break from what felt like an eight-hour service.

If synagogue lasts eight hours, church lasts a million. I hear loud religious music coming through the walls.

Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee, How great Thou art, how great Thou art.

Ughh, why did they have to play that, and why was it so loud? Maybe next time I *will* help in the nursery. The kitchen is right next to the sanctuary and there's nothing to distract me from what's going on in there. I drag my chair across the room again; maybe the gurgling refrigerator will block the noise. I sit down hard, and grit my teeth. The music is still loud and irritating. I cup my hands over both ears.

I'm a Jew. I'm a Jew. I'm a Jew. This is wrong, and I'm a Jew. My parents are stupid. They don't know what they are, I can't trust them. Why are they doing this . . .'

*Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee,
NO. Stop.*

I'm gripping the chair cushion so hard my fingers are turning white. I want to punch someone. And not just anyone. I realize with a start that I want to punch *God*. I want to scream and shout at him for doing this to my family. It's his fault Dad collected all our *Harry Potter* books and sent them to the Goodwill. It's his fault our relatives are upset with us.

My grandmother on my dad's side is really angry. It's worse than when my parents eloped and I sure hope it won't last much longer. My

grandmother is the strongest person I know. She survived the Holocaust and to her, part of surviving is not believing in Jesus. As far as she's concerned, if you believe in him, you've abandoned Judaism. So it's no wonder she's upset. She's so angry with us, and it's God's fault, everything is his fault.

Beep, Beep, BEEP

My alarm goes off. I flip over and groan as I slap the snooze button. It's a school day, and all I want to do is stay in bed. My eyelids fall closed.

Beep, Beep, BEEP, the alarm insists. I switch it off, sit up, and look at the time. I'm out of bed in an instant. School is in thirty minutes! I rush down the hall and into the bathroom. I manage to brush my teeth, and I find a comb, and began working the knots through my brown hair. Back in my room, I grab my backpack, dump in my books and fling open my closet. The first thing I see is a gray top Mom just washed. That'll have to do. I grab a pair of jeans from my dresser, and throw them on with the shirt. I'm thinking about getting to school on time when it hits me out of nowhere . . .

I don't know how I got here, but I'm on the carpeted floor. On my floor, as tears began to pour out of my eyes, fogging my vision and. I've never felt anything like this. I'm alive and I should be going to school . . . yet I'm dead. So dead. I'll be late, but I don't care because I'm missing something, and I'm so empty and dead.

I manage to pull myself up onto my knees. Sobs are racking my body. I take a breath and concentrate on getting to my feet, but barely make it to the bed before a fresh wave of tears hits me. There's a clattering up the stairs, then Mom and Dad burst in at the same time. Their eyes are wide as they take in the scene. Without a word they take my hands, and lead me into the guest room.

"There's something wrong, something missing. I feel empty," I try to explain between sobs, choking on my words. How will my



parents understand what is happening to me? I don't even know what is happening. It's like God has come to me in my room. He wants me to know him. He cares about me. I never knew how much that means, how much I need and want him in my life. And now that I want God, I feel the emptiness of not having him in my life. Something is in the way, keeping me from God. My mother rubs my shoulder and asks, "Sarah do you want to ask God to forgive you and come into your life? Do you want to receive Jesus into your heart?" And suddenly it all makes sense. I nod.

I smile at the memory of that moment. Now, looking down at my Bible it's hard to believe just how angry I was. So angry, yet thankful. To this day I'm thankful that neither of my parents tried to tell me what to believe. I was confused and they waited patiently for things to fall into place. And it finally happened. I was just a little kid, yet God reached out to me.

One thing about looking back is, you find yourself reliving whatever mattered the most, the happiest times, and the times that are too sad for words.

CHAPTER TWO

I AM ELEVEN . . .

"I want to give you something." I love the sound of my grandfather's voice and the fact that he's always surprising me. Irving Liebowitz, my grandfather on my mother's side, lives in a small apartment that's cluttered with boxes. Polaroids line the walls: pictures my grandpa's taken throughout his life. It's fun to visit here, and listen to the stories behind some of the old photos.

"Sit down," Grandpa gestures to the kitchen table. "Wait here and I'll get it."

My curiosity peaks. What could Grandpa be bringing me? I always love his gifts. Last time I visited, he gave me his old water canteen—the one he used in the Second World War. It was dark gray metal etched all over with doodles, and names, each one reminded him of a different war story. Grandpa's full of stories and he often tells them to me over checkers—our favorite game. Last time we played, Grandpa told me that when he was young he would go to baseball games, and the whole day would cost him only thirty-five cents. I'm trying to think what thirty-five cents could buy today—not much—when he reenters the room.

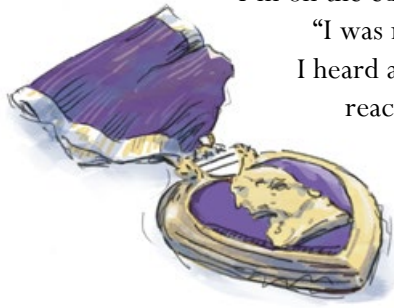
"I want you to have something. I haven't told anyone about it for sixty years, not my wife, children, or parents. I think it's time someone should know." He puffs out a breath, and holds up the object. Dangling from a thick purple ribbon is a gold heart with a raised image of a man's profile.

“Do you know what a Purple Heart is, Sarah?” I shake my head. “It’s a medal a soldier can earn. If a man did something brave and was injured or killed in battle, he would receive one of these. Not everyone gets one of these but this one’s mine and I’m going to give it to you. First I’m going to tell you how I got it.” He pushes his wire-rimmed glasses further up his nose.

“You know, when I was in my mid-twenties, I served in the Second World War. I was a medic. There was this one day when I was helping out on the battlefield. There were injured men everywhere. There I was, rushing around when, through the smoke, I saw a fallen soldier. I didn’t think. I just ran straight towards him. I had to get him back to the medical tent. I ran out into the middle of a war zone.” Grandpa pauses;

I’m on the edge of my seat, my eyes open wide.

“I was running through all this wreckage when I heard an explosion! I just kept running until I reached the man. I grabbed him and helped him back to the tent. That’s when one of my fellow officers pointed to the shrapnel in my leg. I was so focused on reaching the wounded man, so full of adrenaline, that I didn’t even feel it.”



He runs a hand over his head, as though searching for hair that’s been long gone.

“They made a big deal over the fact that I wasn’t thinking about my own safety, and that I was wounded in the course of rescuing one of our soldiers. They gave me this Purple Heart, and I want you to have it.”

He places it in my hands. Wow. I always knew Grandpa is the kindest man in the world but now I know he is also the bravest. Of course he would have been awarded a Purple Heart! But why is he telling me this now? Why didn’t my mother tell me? My confusion must be all over my face because Grandpa smiles and says,

“You’re wondering why I’ve never told anyone.” He shrugs. “Would you believe it, the day I got home from the war, not a single person showed up at the train station to meet me? I waited there, alone. When I realized no one was coming, I picked up my bags and walked home. The whole family was there, but they barely noticed I was back. They didn’t

ask me how I was or what I’d been through, so I clammed up about it. I’ve never said anything to anyone. I’m telling you because, you and me, we’re old friends. I want you to know something kind of special about your old grandpa that no one else knows.

A door opens, and my mother walks in with Caleb. My eyes snap up to Mom. She looks at the Purple Heart in my hand.

“What—?” She looks surprised and confused. I don’t know what to say.

“I was just showing Sarah my Purple Heart. I was awarded it in World War Two. It’s hers to keep.”

I think my mother is shocked and hurt that Grandpa told me, his sixth-grade granddaughter, this big important thing that he never told her. I don’t know how to feel about that. I’m happy and proud that Grandpa wanted to give me something that means so much to him, but I don’t want to see my mom’s feelings hurt. She loves her dad so much. She knows that I’m praying that Grandpa will believe in Jesus before he dies, even though he said he never would. Mom has taught me that with God, things that seem impossible can happen.

I know this is true because God stepped in when I was confused and didn’t know what to believe. When your parents tell you one thing and then they change their minds, what are you supposed to think? Were they wrong to begin with, or are they wrong now? That’s a tough call for a kid to make. Amazingly, God reached out to me in person to let me know that I needed Jesus. He’s been an important part of my life now for two years. He took away my guilt and my fear, and that made a huge difference in my life.

Okay, it’s not like I had major issues to be guilty or fearful about, but when you are little, every problem feels so BIG. I knew the difference between right and wrong and I knew when I messed up. And I just wasn’t the kid who could shrug and feel like it didn’t matter.

But now I know God’s purpose for guilt. Those feelings are supposed to be a signal I need to talk things over with God and anyone else I may have wronged, so I can admit I was wrong ask for forgiveness. Once that happens, the guilty feelings are gone. I know that God loves me so much that any time I’m truly sorry about something I said or did—or even thought—he’s ready to forgive me.

God has also been faithful to help me with my fears. I used to be

afraid of the dark. Seriously afraid. When the moon was shining through the window and the shadows came dancing across my bedroom in the dark, I was almost too scared to breathe. It felt like there was something in the room and I was terrified that if I moved it would see or hear me and attack me. I was literally paralyzed by fear.

Caleb and I had tried to invent ways to scare away whatever was frightening me. We couldn't do spells with wands like kids in the books we used to read, but we thought banging two sticks together would work. If anything, our attempts at "magic" made things worse. I didn't know at the time that the Bible warns God's people against trying magic. If I encounter something evil, the answer is not for me to try to take power over them. The answer is trusting God's power to chase away the

I can't imagine being someone's friend or really loving someone and not caring about whether they know Jesus.

evil. That really worked with my fear of the dark. Now when I'm scared, I focus on God's love, his power to overcome my fears, and I pray. And sometimes I open my Adventure Bible and look for the verses that remind me that God loves me and is bigger than all my fears.

I'm not afraid of the dark anymore, but within weeks of receiving Grandpa's purple heart, I am afraid for him. He's been moved to the hospital, too weak to live by himself. I find myself by his hospital bed as Grandpa gazes at me, his face drawn and ashen. A band of white tape is wrapped around his wrist instead of his gold watch, which is now laying purposelessly on the tray table next to a tray of uneaten food. My mouth is dry as I swallow hard and try to smile. He looks frail, but his voice is just as deep as ever when he says hello.

I take a step forward. The smell of disinfectant makes me feel kind of sick, but I try not to show it. I take his hand. It's so big and wrinkled. I've never really thought about just how old Grandpa is, but now, seeing him this way is like a slap in the face. I gulp away the lump that's forming in my throat.

"Hi Grandpa," I feel his grip on my hand tighten.

"Sarah," he says, "it's so good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too. How are you doing?" It's a question that

doesn't need an answer. He's not going to say, "Fine and how are you?" because he's not fine. Fine would have been if he'd been well enough to come to Caleb's bar mitzvah. I know he wanted to. And when it's time for my *bat mitzvah* in a couple of years, he won't be there. Even though it will be a Messianic service and I will acknowledge Jesus as my Messiah, I know he'd be proud hear me chanting the blessings and my Scripture portion in Hebrew. I plan to work hard and I'm already looking forward to my big day . . . and so sad that Grandpa won't be there. I squeeze his hand.

He closes his eyes for a moment, and then opens them. "As well as can be expected, not bad, not good, just somewhere in-between." He lets out a chuckle that turns into a hacking cough.

"Should I call the nurse?" I reach to press the call button.

Grandpa shakes his head. "No, no," he says between coughs. "Some water would be nice though."

I jump up and fill his empty cup with water. When I hand it to him, he takes a long sip, and his hacking subsides. He's such a big man, a gentle giant. I hate seeing him so weak.

A door creaks open, and Mom sticks her head in.

"Your father's in the waiting room Sarah; if you could join him, I'd like a moment with your grandfather."

I nod, and say goodbye to Grandpa hoping this isn't the last time I'll see him. After a while, Mom joins Dad and me in the waiting room. She looks like she's trying hard not to cry.

One way that I can see God working in my life is by just how important it is to me that people I care about know him. I can't imagine being someone's friend or really loving someone and not caring about whether they know Jesus. When someone I care about really listens to what Jesus did for me . . . and wants the same thing, it's the best feeling ever. I know we're supposed to obey Jesus and he says to go and tell people about him. But this isn't just obeying some rule. It's knowing that my life has a really special purpose. Receiving Jesus was like receiving clarity. My faith not only gave me a sense of purpose, it gave me a sense of urgency about sharing him with other people. But so far, Grandpa hasn't been too interested in what I think about Jesus. All I can do it pray.

As the days go by, Grandpa's health continues to get worse. I wake up one morning wondering how my parents' trip to see Grandpa went the night before.

The house is quiet as I pad downstairs and into the kitchen for breakfast. I grab a bowl and cereal and I'm pouring myself milk when I hear footsteps coming from the stairs and Mom appears in the kitchen. She's approaching me slowly with a strange look on her face.

"Sarah," her eyes are focused on mine, "I have some news. It's about Grandpa."

I wait for her to go on, scared of what she'll say.

"Last night he accepted Jesus into his life."

I jump up, almost knocking my cereal to the floor. This is one of the best days of my life. I feel like singing, and shouting, and dancing. I try all at once.

"But... that's not all," Mom says it slowly, and I almost don't hear her from all the joyful noises I'm making.

"Sarah."

I stop, and look at her.

"Grandpa died last night."

One moment I'm laughing like the world belongs to me, and the next I'm slumped against the wall, crying my eyes out.

My mother rushes forward to hold me tight, "But Sarah, he accepted Jesus before he died."

It's hard to hear her words with the pounding in my ears. She's saying something about a very special time she spent with him. Telling me how



he'd said he wanted to die but something or someone wouldn't let him.

She's telling me how Dad

explained the gospel one last time,

and prayed over him . . . and when Dad asked

again if Grandpa wanted to surrender his heart to Jesus, he said yes. He was peaceful then, and within an hour he was able to leave his frail body behind, like he wanted to. I'm glad he was peaceful . . . but I'm not. Tears are streaming down my face. He's gone, my grandfather. Memories of him

keep filling my head, memories of his generosity. He used to let me buy anything I wanted whenever we were out shopping. I asked him to buy me white Tic-tacs once, his favorite. I was going to give them to him, but he caught on to my plan and made me buy some other candy I actually liked. My grandpa was my hero and my friend and now he's gone.

The time between hearing about Grandpa's death, and going to his funeral is kind of a blur. There are only five of us at his military service: my mother, father, Caleb, myself, and my uncle.

I watch the men in their navy blue suits, their white military hats strapped under their chins. They're folding up an American flag, a flag for a veteran, for the next of kin, for Grandpa. There's a single soldier holding the folded flag with his arms outstretched, waiting for someone to claim it. I'm waiting for my mother to take it, my uncle, anyone; no one budges and I sense there's some confusion. The soldier remains still.

He won't move until someone goes up to get it. I feel a nudge from behind and then someone pushes me forward gently. I turn to see

Mom. She nods towards the guard. She

wants me to take the flag. It should be Mom. It should be my uncle. But no, it's me. I approach the soldier.

He's talking, thanking me for Grandpa's service. All I can focus on are his piercing blue eyes. I barely register the flag being placed in my arms. Somehow I turn myself around and walk back to Mom and I know she is proud of me, and proud of how much Grandpa loved me. I'm holding the flag in both hands and wondering what's happened to the bullet shells, the ones from the twenty-one gun salute the soldiers performed earlier.

They're folding up an American flag, a flag for a veteran, for the next of kin, for Grandpa.

The lump in my throat brings me back to the present, and I brush a tear from the cover of my old Bible. Here's the thing about tears; when you recall one sad thing, it often brings you right smack into another. I open the Bible to a familiar passage, but instead of reading, I stare into space and remember . . .

I AM NINETEEN.

Where are the stars? In another house, another life. I'm in my own bed, but my world is different. Instead of stars on the ceiling, there's only darkness. Maybe I should be glad for the darkness that covers the gloom of my small bedroom. Not much to see here, just boxes stacked against the wall waiting to be unpacked. My face is still damp from the last round of tears. Those boxes aren't mine, they can't be. This house isn't ours. But it is. I close my eyes as more tears began to pour out, streaking down my cheeks.

I know this is where we need to be. These tears aren't really for our beautiful big two-story house. They're for my father. He's the reason we had to move to this little apartment. His mitral valve—the one between the left atrium and the left ventricle of his heart—can't pump enough fluid and it's overloading his kidneys. First Dad couldn't work, now he can't even walk up a flight of stairs. If the doctors can't fix it, this will kill him.

We prayed that our house would sell before the bank foreclosed and God came through. The very first people who looked at it made an offer, and within twenty-four hours it was sold. They were nice people. I kind of hope they will be happy there. Mostly I wonder when *I'll* be happy again, or even if.

I take a stab at pretending, hoping that cheery thoughts of how life used to be will carry me off to sleep. My father is well and out of the hospital. We never had to sell the house. I didn't spend my whole spring break in our basement, throwing out my family's belongings. Things we treasured, things with memories attached to them tossed into the trash because we'd have nowhere to put them in the new place. I didn't go back to college broken and spent, angry at God. But, I did.

I push the tears from my eyes and roll over. And then I remember these words:

"Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

They're words from the Bible, the third chapter of a book called

Lamentations, which means mourning or weeping. I let the words wash over me, soothing me, turning my thoughts in a better direction and calming my fears. There's so much beauty in those words, so much life. It's one of my prayers. Where there's God, there's hope, and hope prevails even in the midst of what I wish were just nightmares.

I realize, I'm not really angry at God; I'm angry at sickness and death. Angry at the inevitable—that one day, maybe soon, I'll lose my father.

I know that when my father dies, he will be with Jesus and that one day I will be, too. And that gives me hope for the future . . . but it doesn't take away the hollow feeling or stab of loneliness over someone I'm not ready to lose. Yet the words from Lamentations give me comfort.

One thing I really appreciate about my parents is that they gave me tools so that I wouldn't be at the mercy of how I feel.

Back when I was about 15, I got pretty depressed. Instead of swooping in and trying to fix everything, my mom had me sit down every day in our living room, pick a Bible passage and then journal about it. It was mandatory. I wasn't totally thrilled about it, but it was during summer vacation so I had plenty of time. I got myself a small journal with a brown leather cover and a strap to secure it.

I had no idea how Mom's plan would end up changing my life. Through it, I developed my huge regard for Scripture and saw God in a completely new way. He became very real to me, and experiencing his presence every day drew me out of my depression. I'd been feeling angry and hurt and God opened his arms to me and received me with an overwhelming love that I knew was undeserved. I had asked Him, 'God are you there, are you good, do you even care?' and through His Word and the time I took to reflect on it, God responded with a resounding YES!

Knowing God is the greatest gift; it is such a privilege and brings the most perfect peace, comfort, and joy. And, as I lie in bed, contemplating what is happening to my father, I need that peace and comfort more than ever.



My father, the man who so graciously accepted my mother's faith from the start. He didn't even put up a fight when Mom starting taking us to a Messianic synagogue on Saturdays, but he did become uneasy, over time, about what it might mean for us kids.

Though he was concerned, before long Dad's natural curiosity led him to wonder just what was going on, and he decided to check out a service with Mom and Caleb to find out.

A month or so later, Dad was left on his own when Mom, Caleb, and I went down to South Carolina to visit Grandma. Maybe it was the fact that he missed us that started him thinking and feeling like something even more was missing in his life. On Christmas Eve, for the first time, he went to church by himself. That's when he realized that empty feeling was his need for God, and within a couple of months he also welcomed Yeshua into his life. At the time I was angry; it felt like Dad had abandoned me to hold down the family fort against all this Jesus stuff. But now I'm so glad, so thankful for the reassurance my Dad and the rest of us have because of our relationship with God. A relationship that Yeshua made possible.

As I look up at the starless ceiling of my bedroom I can hardly believe how just a few months before Dad got sick, I'd come across the Bible passage that I've been clinging to every day, and I repeat the rest of words from my "go to" Bible passage for the hundredth time.

Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!
My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.
But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."
Lamentations 3:19-24 NIV

The first time I saw those words, my breath caught and I started tearing up. I looked at the rest of the chapter and could hardly believe that this beautiful language about God had directly followed verses that vividly described how lost and hurt his people were. I was so overwhelmed at God's faithfulness in the midst of hardship, even though at this point my life, I really hadn't experienced much hardship yet! But then my father became terribly ill . . . and these verses became my fortress. I know that God drew my attention to them a few months before my father got sick for that very reason.

Throughout his illness, I learned that in the midst of the most painful things going on in my life, I still need to praise and thank God. I'm not saying I always wanted to, but that I need to. Sometimes I really don't feel as if God's goodness extends to me. I remember sitting in chapel that semester when Dad was so sick, silent as people around me stood and sang:

I sing because you are good and I dance because you are good and I shout because you are good, you are good, good to me,

My heart was so heavy. I couldn't sing, I couldn't dance, I couldn't even stand. I was sitting there in misery when a verse drifted into my mind: Psalm 137:4: "How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?"

"Sarah," Sandy, my best friend was staring down at me. She sat down and looked me in the eye, "I know there's a lot going on and it feels like the world's falling apart underneath you, but at least stand. If you can't do anything else, just stand. Stand before God because he is sovereign."

It took all my effort, but I literally forced myself to stand up. By the time I was on my feet, I was crying with my hands raised towards heaven saying to God, "You are good, good to me." God's goodness and his providence became clear to me. My world seemed to be falling apart, but God was still good, especially to me, especially in the midst of the troubles I was having. It's not that God needed me to praise and thank him because he's insecure. But when life is uncertain and I'm hurting, I find security and peace in his goodness. That day when my friend Sandy helped me to stand during worship, God took my simple act of standing and poured his goodness over me in fresh, new way.

From that time on, it was like I'd rediscovered the Bible. I spent more time reading the Word of God and seeing the truth in it, as I'd done when I was 15 and my mom insisted on my daily reading and journaling. And once again, I saw the power of God's Word to transform and comfort me.

Verses like Psalm 31:21 came to life for me: "praise be to the LORD, for he showed me the wonders of his love to me when I was in a city under siege." (NIV)

Even as I lie awake in this strange room recalling these things, I don't know how, but I can't help feeling that as awful as this time in our lives is, something good and beautiful is coming out of it. That by being faithful to God and praising him during this time, I'm going to see God do

*I start praising God
for victory before the
battle is even over.
And even though I'm
hurting so terribly,
I still feel like I have
already won.*

something amazing. I feel God fighting for me, helping me believe, helping me trust.

I remember 1 Chronicles 20, when the armies came upon the Israelites and they prayed to God, saying that they didn't know what to do, except their eyes were on him. God told them to send the "praisers" out first and it says "God gave them peace on every side." That's about it. I feel surrounded on every side and

I don't know what to do, except praise

God! I start praising God for victory before the battle is even over. And even though I'm hurting so terribly, I still feel like I have already won.

"Dad," I walk to the bed where he lies and sit down. It's the dialysis room and I'm really not supposed to be here. The nurse warns me I only have a few minutes. I find Dad's hand with my own and feel him try to squeeze in return. The pressure is so weak it makes my throat swell. Dad's looking at me with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. My heart feels like it's been broken.

"I wrote you something, do you want to hear?" I bite my lower lip

hard, trying to keep it from trembling, trying to hold the tears back.

"Yes," he murmurs; his voice gravelly and low. I don't let go of his hand as I rifle through my purse and pull out the words I've written for him. I had an assignment for speech class to give a commemorative talk about someone I admire. I grabbed the opportunity to make it everything I ever wanted to say to my Dad about how grateful and thankful I am that he's my father. Tears are already forming in my eyes as I begin to read.

After a few sentences I glance at Dad; his eyes are bloodshot and tears are falling onto his cheeks. Seeing him cry makes it impossible for me to hold it in. I'm trying to get the speech out, but my breathing is ragged as tears blur my

vision. When I finally manage to finish, my arms are around Dad and his around me. We're clinging to each other, knowing that this might be our last time together. The nurse does not tell me to leave.

The dialysis, which is supposed to be draining Dad's lungs, isn't working. The doctors want to move him down to Columbia in Manhattan, to try an experimental procedure. They tell us it might not work, and if it doesn't, there is nothing more they can do.

Dad is transported to Columbia where they keep him in the hospital for a little over a week. But by now he is so ill, no doctor will perform any surgical procedure on him; that's how sure they are that he'd never make it off the table. They want to move him into a hospice in the Bronx. I don't know what is worse, accepting the doctor's pronouncement that there is nothing they can do to save him, or seeing him in pain and not being able to help. In hospice, they will stop trying to keep him alive and instead do everything possible to keep him comfortable. And so my mom really has no choice . . . to hospice he goes.

When someone you love is in hospice care, your whole life goes on hold. You spend as much time in their room as you can. Even though Mom, Caleb and I would rather be anywhere else, there's nowhere else for us to go, because we want to be with Dad. It feels like we're pretty much always either with him, or on our way to see him, or on our way home from seeing him. We try to think of the good times we've spent

*When someone you love
is in hospice care, your
whole life goes on hold.*

with him . . . and not how someone we can't bear to let go of is slipping further and further away.

The days pass in a blur. Part of me really isn't sure this is happening. But the part that weeps knows it is all too real.

Riiiiiiiiing Riiiiiiiiiiiiing Click.

I hear Mom pick up the phone. I can't tell what she's saying but the way her voice is rising and falling, she's asking questions. Within a few minutes, she's in my room, the wireless still clutched in her hand.

"That was Caleb. Your father's not doing well. He might not last the night."

I can't believe it! We had been up at the hospice all week and had chosen this night, of all nights, to come home and rest. Moments later, we're in the car and Mom is staring straight ahead. Her mouth is drawn in a line, and I can't stop the worry that's bombarding my mind. It takes us forty-five minutes to get to back to Dad. His room is dark. From the doorway, I can see him on the bed covered with blankets. I feel like I can't breathe as I watch him struggle for air. My

feet feel like lead as Mom and I enter the room.

"Michael," Mom says. Dad doesn't answer, just continues to lie there, breathing in and out, in and out. "Michael?"

A nurse comes in and acknowledges us.

"Why is he unresponsive?" Mom asks.

The nurse looks from us to Dad, "It's the toxins," she says, "they've got nowhere to go. They're being released into his body now that he's not on dialysis."

I don't hear her words anymore. I think she offers us something to drink, but I'm not sure. Once she's gone, we all take seats around the room. Mom's holding onto one of Dad's hands, while I clasp the other. I hope he can feel our hands holding his. Caleb hovers close as we sing "I will bless the Lord; I will bless the Lord at all times; at all times." We read Lamentations three, the whole chapter. The chapter is so real to us



as it describes the gut wrenching pain God's people were experiencing. We pray, telling God we're hurting, yet praising him. Asking him to help us and to ease Dad's passage.

I watch Dad's chest move, up and down. Hear the beeping of the machines monitoring him. It could be minutes, it could be hours. I'm watching as his breaths come further and further apart. I watch until the end, until with one small shudder his chest stops moving, forever. All I can think is, I'm nineteen, this is the first dead body I've ever seen, and it's my father's.

The chaplain enters the room. Everything looks too bright, surreal. I know I should feel a terrible pain but all I feel is numb. I can't stop staring at Dad. Mom, Caleb and I are singing the Sh'ma and I just keep imagining Dad tucking me in, singing the prayer with me like everything is fine. But now, we're singing it to him here, on his deathbed, and nothing is fine. It feels like a twisted scene from a macabre poem.

At some point, Mom starts clearing our stuff out of Dad's room; I sit outside in the long hallway, nurses and doctors passing by in a blur. This is the first moment in my entire life I am without Dad. After what seems like forever, I drive Mom and Caleb home. A cd of worship music is playing and I can't stop thinking about that day in chapel, months ago, when I stood up and praised God in the midst of the loss I was going through.

Now that Dad is gone, I find myself sleeping a lot and it's a relief. Mom is the opposite; she's up for hours during the day and night, unable to rest.

She can't seem to sleep and I can't seem to stop.

The day of Dad's memorial arrives. I keep my head forward, my eyes planted straight ahead, watching as the service unfolds before me. I haven't turned around since the service started, and I don't plan to. I don't want to look behind me and find all the seats empty. The service is going on; a few people share some good memories of Dad. I don't want to think about this, about Dad being gone. The memorial service is drawing to a close; I take a breath and slowly turn my head to see how many people showed up. Every seat is full, every single one.

It's been two years since Dad's been gone. It seems like forever ago and it seems like yesterday, especially as I gaze down at my Adventure Bible, still open to Lamentations 3.

I'm breathing normally again. I'm thankful as I recall how my family was supported and loved throughout that terrible time. The chorus to Jon Foreman's, "Learning How to Die" is in my head; I listened to it the same day I read my speech to Dad:

All along thought I was learning how to take
How to bend, not how to break
How to live, not how to cry
But really I,
I've been learning how to die.

I take the Bible from my lap and set it beside me. Peering into the box, I remove several objects that are wrapped, leaving only the wedges of tissue and the shredded paper. Soon these treasures are laying on the bed next to the Bible: an old photo of Dad, Caleb and me, and another of



my mom. Grandpa's Purple Heart. Each one reminds me that from generation to generation, God is faithful. I'm so glad he didn't let me go on living without him, but interrupted my life with his presence. In every loss, even my father's death, God has been faithful.

"Lunch is ready," I hear Mom call from downstairs. I gather up my mementos and arrange them carefully on my dresser before heading towards the door. I open it, but pause to look back over my shoulder.

I can truly say, through the good times and the bad times, through the tears, the grief, and the healing, God has been there. His Word is a life raft in a sea of darkness.

The door shuts with a click, as I go down to Caleb and Mom. I don't know what happens next, but whatever it is, I can trust in the fact that God is faithful and his love endures forever.

Postscript from Sarah:

Thank you for reading my story. I'm so glad for the opportunity to share it with you. It's my sincere prayer that what we experienced can be used to encourage and uplift you.

I hope this encourages you to persevere in your faith or to consider faith in Yeshua if you haven't already.

Whatever your situation, I hope that you will take my experience to heart and consider that no matter where you are in life—Jesus is waiting for you. I pray that as you read these true words of my life's journey up to this point, that you would find as I have—that Jesus is worth it. Though there's hardship and difficulty and strife, there's joy in the midst of it, because he lives. I encourage you to surrender all to him and just see where he will lead you. Thank you, and may God bless you richly.

—Sarah Gruen

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LEADERS GUIDE

New Mercies

A Jewish girl talks about faith in Jesus



Based on the true story of Sarah Gruen,
as told by Annamarie Trank
with Ruth Rosen

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LEADERS GUIDE



JEWS FOR JESUS.

Digging Deeper

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Section One: **Finding Faith**

1. It can be hard for Jewish people to believe in Jesus . . .

Why was Sarah so upset when her mother announced she believed in Jesus?

What did Sarah's mother think about Jews believing in Jesus before she became a believer in Him?

Did either of them have issues based on what the Bible says about Jesus?

2. Wanting to know the truth is a huge help when we are confused.

Jeremiah 29:13 helped Sarah's mother when she was confused about what to believe that Jesus. The verse says: "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."

What do you think it means to seek God with all your heart?

What difference do you think it would make in your life, whether you seek God or don't seek him? Why?

3. What is faith?

The Bible says without faith, it's not possible to please God. Which of these statements about faith do you think are true?

Faith is when you believe something that you can't see.

Faith is when you believe something that you can't prove.

Faith is when you don't have any reason to think something is true but you believe it anyway.

Faith is different for different people.

Faith is something that God wants to give you.

4. God reaches out to us . . .

What ended up changing Sarah's mind about *Yeshua*?

How was this the same and how was it different from how her mom came to believe?

If you already believe in Jesus, how is your story similar or different from Sarah's? Her mom's?

If you're not sure whether you believe in Jesus, what do you think it would take for you to believe?

Talk to God about it:

Many things can stand in the way of wanting to know God. If we admit when we are having trouble seeking God with all our heart, He'll bless us for that truthfulness. He'll grow the part of us that wants to know the truth, if we ask Him.

Here's a prayer that may start you on that path:

"God, I want to know the truth about you and how to have you in my life, but I want other things that sometimes compete for my heart. Thank you

for understanding that this is hard for me. Please help me see your worth so I'll want you in my life. Please help me to seek you with my whole heart, to include you in my choices, and to have the joy of knowing you."

No one can have a personal relationship with Yeshua for you. That's between you and the Lord. If your parents and friends know that Jesus is the Messiah and they love and follow Him, that's a real gift that many Jewish people do not have. Maybe that's not your situation, but you want to know Yeshua. Either way, if you don't yet have that relationship with Yeshua and would like to, you can pray something like this:

Dear God, I know that at times, what I want and what I do is wrong. I am truly sorry. I believe that you love me, and that Yeshua came, died and rose from the dead to take the full punishment for everyone's sin, including mine. I believe and want to receive your offer of forgiveness from the wrong things that separate me from you. Please help me live my life with Yeshua leading the way.

Section Two:

Finding Transforming Power

When we receive the forgiveness and life God offers us through Yeshua, He promises to transform our lives in wonderful ways. As you think about how this happened for Sarah and her mom, think about how it has happened (or how you'd like it to happen) in your life.

1. Everyone has a problem with guilt . . .

Even at 9-years-old, Sarah sometimes felt guilty. Does that surprise you? Why or why not?

How would you describe your sense of right and wrong? Do you usually know when you've messed up before someone points it out?

When you know you've done something wrong, what do you usually do?

If you memorize certain “go to” verses, God will help you remember them when you need help to deal with all kinds of situations. For example, here's a Bible verse that reminds us that when God invites us into a relationship, He already knows all the ways we've messed up, and wants to forgive us.

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Messiah died for us.” (Romans 5:8 says)

And God promises that when we agree with Him about our sin, He'll always forgive us: “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Here's a prayer that may help:

“God you know everything about me, the good and the bad, and I'm so thankful that you love me and want to forgive me when I mess up. Would you help me to see and admit when I am wrong? And please, let me care more about what you think than what my friends might say when I have to make hard choices. Help me turn away from what is wrong and turn toward what is right. Please help me trust your promise that when I agree with you about my sin and ask forgiveness, you do forgive me, and take away my guilt.”

Here's a “go to” verse to memorize:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

2. Everyone is afraid sometimes, but you don't have to worry ...

What was 9-year-old Sarah's fear and how did she and her brother try to deal with it before and after she gave her heart to Yeshua?

Can you remember any attempts to deal with your fears in ways that didn't work or made it worse?

Do you talk to God about your fears? If yes, how does that work? If not, are you ready to try?

Talk to God about it:

God does not want us to be afraid, and if we trust His promises, His peace will fill us so there's no room for fear—but that does not mean that we won't have to face scary or painful situations.

Here's a prayer that may help:

“God I hate it when I'm afraid and I don't want fear to hold me back. Please help me trust your promises and your perfect love for me. Please show me that I can count on you for the courage I need in life. And then help me remember what you've shown me next time I am afraid.

Here's a “go to” verse to memorize:

Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”

3. Depression—ever feel that way?

Depression means different things to different people: sadness, loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, emotional heaviness or emptiness. There's also a big overlap between depression and anxiety. Just about everyone has these feelings at some time.*

Why do you think Sarah's mom told her to read and journal about the Bible verses of her choice, instead of giving her specific reading assignments from the Bible every day? What does that tell you about how you can approach the Bible?

Sarah tells how God's Word brought her out of her depression and gave her a huge appreciation for the Bible. She also tells how, during her depression, she asked God to show her if He cared. Do you feel free to ask God questions like that? Do you think He wants you to? Why or why not?

Would you be willing to commit to reading God's Word every day this week for at least ten minutes? If you do, you might be surprised by what you find!

Talk to God about it:

It may not seem important to tell God things He already knows, but if you talk to him about what's bothering you, it can draw you closer to Him and open up a channel for you to receive help.

Here's a prayer that may help:

"God right now I feel alone, unhappy, (or numb . . . or fill in whatever you are feeling) and unable to see much that's good in my life; sometimes everything feels heavy and dark, and I don't want to get trapped in those feelings. If the Bible can help me the way it helped Sarah, I want that help. Will you help me to see what your Word has to say to me? Will you shine your light on me and help me to know that you care? Will you pull me out of this pit?"

Here's a "go to" verse to memorize:

"Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105)

* While some amount of depression is common to most people, if you feel depressed to the point of despair, and not wanting to live, it's really important to talk about it with an adult that you trust.

4. Purpose—we all need it!

Many people live as though the whole point of life is to have as much fun and avoid as much difficulty and discomfort as possible. That kind of life lacks purpose—and a life without purpose is not satisfying for very long. It's good to enjoy life, but purpose comes when we put effort into something that serves someone besides ourselves. There are many meaningful ways to serve other people, including helping them to know Yeshua.

Talk to God about it:

God made us, knows us, and understands better than anyone what we need to have a life that is full of meaning and purpose.

Here's a prayer that might help:

"God I want to be the kind of person who makes a difference to other people. I hope to use the gifts and talents you've given me in ways that please you and help others. Will you show me what I can do—what I'm already capable of, as well as what I'll need to learn to serve you and help others? Will you help me recognize and take the opportunities you give for me to have the most meaningful life possible?"

Here's a "go to" verse to memorize:

Exodus 9:16: "But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."

Section Three:

Finding Help in the Hardest Times

Maybe you've already gone through times of terrible suffering and loss. Everyone goes through very hard times at some point in life. God wants to be with us through the hardest times, and He can help us get through them in ways that ultimately make us stronger and more joyful.

1. Who you're with matters

Being with other believers and being real with them puts you in a place of receiving help when you really need it.

When Sarah was heartbroken that her father was dying, it was hard for her to sit through songs about God's goodness. She didn't try to hide how she felt. What do

you think would have happened if Sarah had got up to sing in chapel and was just pretending to praise God so no one would see how she really felt?

Sandy asked Sarah to stand up, even if she couldn't sing, to recognize that God is sovereign (in charge of everything). Do you think Sarah felt judged? Why or why not? Are you surprised by how Sandy's advice worked out? How do you think advice like that would work out for you?

Do you have a friend like Sandy who might be able to help you in a similar situation? If not, how would you look to build a friendship like that?

Are you a friend like Sandy to someone else? If not, what would it take for you to be that kind of friend?

Talk to God about it:

He wants to be your number one support, but He understands that we need other people to help us and to receive our help. That's why he's put us in community and not on a desert island. He wants you to have that kind of support!

Here is a prayer that might help:

"God, I want to have and to be the kind of friend who can see when someone is hurting and offer truth in a loving way. Help me develop/keep close to friends who know you so they can encourage me and remind me of truths that can get me through hard times. Give me wisdom and compassion to be able to do the same for my friends."

Here's a "go to" verse to memorize:

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 "Now we exhort you . . . warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all."

2. There's power in praise

Sarah is not the only one to experience the power of praise in the midst of a really painful situation. Praising God is not easy for most of us when we are hurting, but pushing ourselves to do what does not come naturally can have great benefits. Praise is not a magic button we can press to make pain go away, but it can definitely change how those most painful situations affect us.

Why do you think Sarah talks about how God had the children of Israel send the "praisers" out to the front of the battle?

In what way(s) might praising God help you win your own personal battles?

What is your usual response when you are in the middle of difficult or painful situations? Does it usually help or not help?

Sarah found Lamentations, especially Lamentations 3, as her "go to" passage of Scripture. She hung onto it through the hardest of times. Does that passage speak to your heart? If not, how would you go about finding your own verse or Bible passage that you can cling to for support like Sarah has?

Talk to God about it:

Genuine praise is all about remembering the good things about who God is and what He has done. Any time you don't feel like doing this is probably the time that it would help you the most if you did. Telling God when you find it hard to praise Him can be a good thing, if you also tell Him that you want to be able to praise him.

Here is a prayer that might help when you are struggling:

"Dear God, I'm struggling with why you are allowing this painful situation and that makes it hard for me to see that you are good, or that you care for me. I know in my head that I still have a lot to be thankful for. I know that you've done so much for me in the past. I just don't feel it. God, please help me genuinely appreciate who you are and what

you've done in the past so that I can move toward trusting you no matter what is happening in my life, or the lives of people I care about."

Here's a "go to" verse to memorize: Lamentations 3:21-23 "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

3. Peace that passes understanding

How in the world is it possible to experience peace when you or someone you love is horribly sick? How can you be calm when it seems like the worst thing you can imagine either happened or is about to happen? Everyone faces situations where it's not "natural" to feel peace. Yet, believers can feel peace that goes beyond our ability to understand, even in the hardest of times.

Sarah said, "When life is uncertain and I'm hurting, I find security and peace in His [God's] goodness."

A lot of what we hear from many celebrities or from TV, movies, magazines and books tells us that we can find the goodness, strength and peace that we need within ourselves. Is that true? Why or why not?

When people don't know God and they can't find peace within, what are some of the things they might do?

Have you ever felt the peace of God in a hard situation? What was it like?

Have you wanted to feel God's peace in a hard situation, but were unable to? Looking back, what could you have done differently?

Talk to God about it:

Even though God knows your fears and concerns, when you talk to Him about them, maybe through journaling or just talking, you will not feel alone with the problem.

Here's a prayer that may help:

"God, you know what is going on with (your situation) but I want to bring it to you and tell you how I'm feeling about it. I really need your peace. Will you help me to focus on what I need to see in order to experience that peace?"

Here's a "go to" verse to memorize:

"You [God] will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You." Isaiah 26:3