A DEVOTIONAL FROM CHRISTIANITY TODAY

DARKNESS THEM LIGHT

STORIES OF ILLUMINATION
FOR THE SEASON OF ADVENT

CHRISTIANITY TODAY

DARKNESS THEN LIGHT:
Stories of Illumination for the Season of Advent

Christianity Today, P.O. Box 788, Wheaton, IL 60187
ChristianityToday.com
Printed in the USA

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INTRODUCTION

DARKNESS THEN LIGHT

RONNIE MARTIN

Christmastime has arrived in all its luster, but I'm having one of those nights when sleeping has become a wild ambition. The cares of the world are weighing down on my soul, and the ticking hand of my analog clock has turned into a deafening roar. For me, it is better to simply admit defeat and abandon any hope of attaining some sweet slumber. I silently shuffle down the dim hallway, trying to keep my steps delicate as the Christmas tree finally comes into view from the corner of the room. I glance at the garland and lights, woven between the pine needles in suspended animation, still magically twinkling from the night before. Even in this depressingly early hour, it manages to bring a faint smile to my sleepy face.

Of course, this is predawn, when everything appears darker and quieter than at any other time of the day. I settle into a room we call the library and gaze through the glass windowpane as the first hints of light declare morning's arrival. Although my eyes are tired and dull, my mind happens to be as alert as ever. As I sit before the Lord in stillness, he provides me with a much-needed remembrance at Christmastime: My story is not always what it seems. It appears darker and quieter at

WEEK 1

The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.

C.S. LEWIS

PSALM 112:4

ESV

W1 | D1

LET THERE BE HOPE

CHAD BIRD

is a scholar in residence at 1517. He is the cohost of the podcast *40 Minutes in the Old Testament* and the author of several books, including *Untamed Prayers: 365 Daily Devotions on Christ in the Book of Psalms.*

Midnight stole upon us while the sun remained high in the sky. It was a Saturday. The phone rang. I answered. And just like that, night fell. Words upon words, like soot-black spatters of darkness, rained from the phone and smothered me.

It was the call that other parents get. You know, the ones of whom we say, "Oh, those poor parents. My heart breaks for them." Only it was not other parents. Not this time. And the heart crushed and ground to fragmentary shards lay dead but stubbornly alive within my own chest.

Luke had fallen to his death. A sentence grammatically simple. A fact devastatingly horrid. On this side of the resurrection, he will remain, with every passing year, 21 years old.

He had died on a hike while studying abroad in Chile. In the weeks we waited for his body to be flown home, in the time between his funeral at home and his second funeral and interment at the United States Naval Academy, and in the months following, I arose early and walked for miles in the dark. Praying psalms. Weeping rivers of tears. Launching a million and one whys to heaven's throne of grace.

Day by torturous day, unbeknown to me at first, the Spirit of God was doing what he has been doing since the dawn of life: accomplishing his best work in the dark. The Lord's creation of all things began in the dark. "Let there be light," he said, and there was light. His creation of each

of us began in the darkness of the womb. “Let there be birth,” he said, and there was birth.

Within me, the voice that spoke, initially in a whisper but with gradually intensifying volume, uttered these four words: “Let there be hope.” And there was hope.

Our Father was accomplishing his work within me in the dark. He taught me, when the present is covered with the shadow of death, to borrow light from the past. There is hope because the young man whose body we buried had been united by baptism to the living body of Jesus, who had also been buried, then rose triumphant, his foot on the neck of death for us.

The Lord taught me to bank on light from the future as well, for no matter how fierce the growl of midnight grief, it whimpers in defeat when dawn begins to laugh. And the dawn of resurrection comes. It shone during the first advent of Jesus, when he vacated his borrowed tomb, and that resurrection dawn will dispel every vestige of night at his second coming.

I have learned that tears and smiles can coexist in a soul full of the hope of what Jesus has done, is doing, and will do for us. Never will I be the same, and I am grateful for that. Through wounds and tears, in darkness and grief, I have learned that “even the darkness will not be dark to you,” O Christ (Ps. 139:12), for you are the Light of the World. ✶

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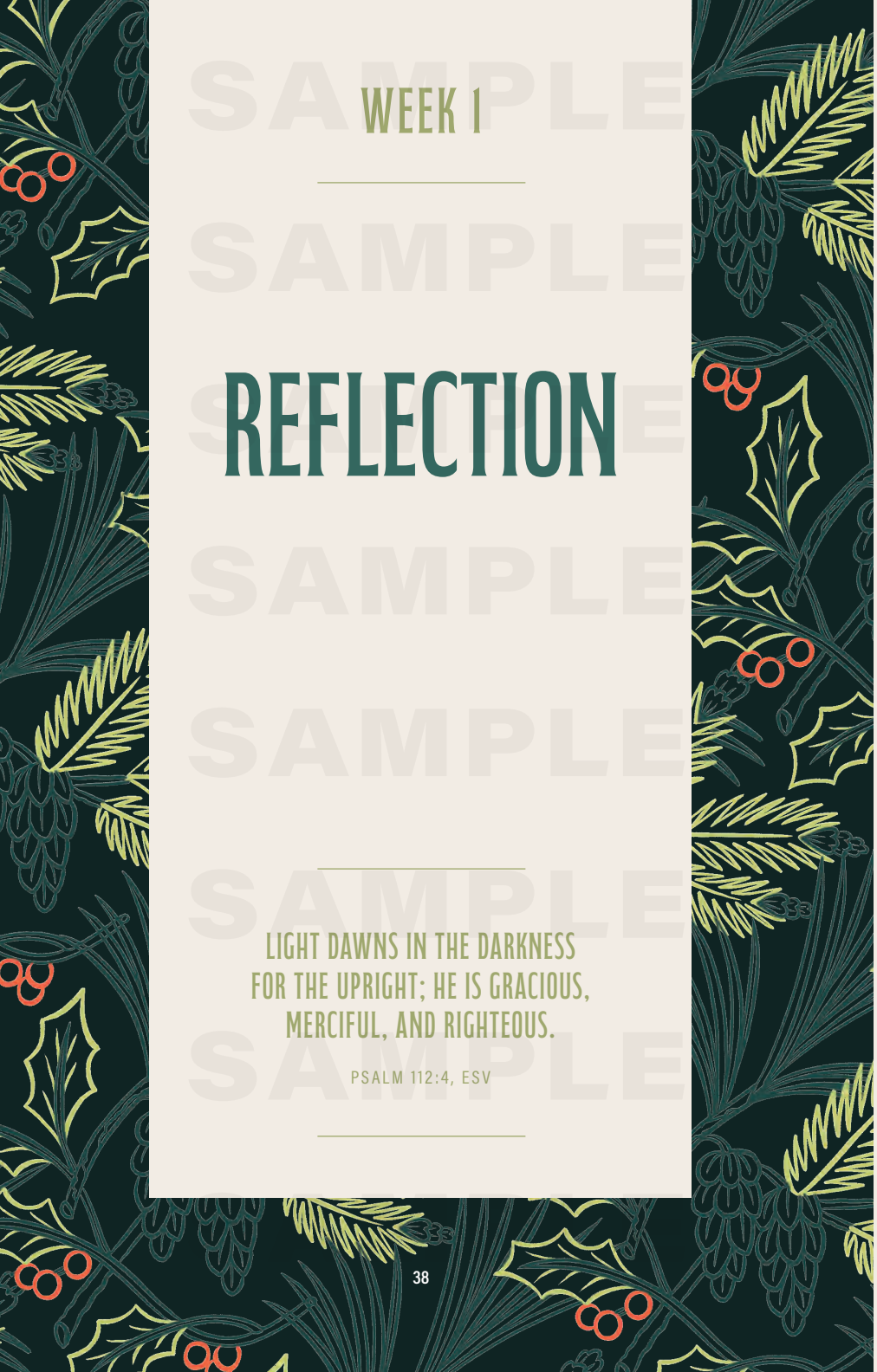

WEEK 1

REFLECTION

LIGHT DAWNS IN THE DARKNESS FOR THE UPRIGHT; HE IS GRACIOUS, MERCIFUL, AND RIGHTEOUS.

PSALM 112:4, ESV

As you begin this Advent season, take a few minutes to reflect on how you are coming into it. Do you feel excited and hopeful as the days unfold around you? Are you experiencing anxiety due to pressures and expectations being laid on you? Maybe you have some deep loneliness, a physical issue, or an unresolved relationship conflict. Take a moment to lay your hopes and heartaches at the feet of Christ.

What is one story in particular that stuck out to you during this week's readings? In what ways does it help you apply the grace and mercy of Jesus to your own story?

Advent, which means "arrival," carries a sense of longing and anticipation for what is to come. What is something that you are longing for and anticipating this month? How does the birth of Christ ultimately fill our greatest longing?