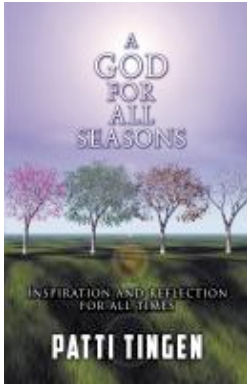




A
GOD
FOR
ALL
SEASONS

INSPIRATION AND REFLECTION
FOR ALL TIMES

PATTI TINGEN



As nature's seasons change, so too do the seasons of our soul. But God's love never changes. He is with us through every season of our lives. Join author Patti Tingen in a year of exploration as she reflects on her own spiritual journey, and provides hope and encouragement for yours - month by month, season by season. Find reassurance and pause for reflection in the inspirational readings for each month of the year.

A God for All Seasons

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Introduction

*“There is a time for everything,
a season for every activity under heaven.
A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.
A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to rebuild.
A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.
A time to search and a time to lose.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.
A time to tear and a time to mend.
A time to be quiet and a time to speak up.
A time to love and a time to hate.
A time for war and a time for peace.”*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NLT)

Life is never static. Physical, emotional, financial and spiritual ups and downs are all a part of this journey called life. More than ever before, I’m seeing how God is with us for the entire journey, through all of the highs and lows.

The seasons of the year have often been used as pictures of life; I think the months are also such pictures. Walk with me through the seasons and their months, no matter where you need to start—by the calendar or by your life-season.

Much of my adulthood has been peppered with a variety of struggles and times spent in the cold winter season. As I am now

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emerging into the warmth and light of spring, I'm realizing that I have learned well how to exist in the darkness. My desire is also to flourish in the blooming seasons.

Please join me in this year of exploration and reflection. May you find hope and encouragement in every month—and in every season.

It's time.

WINTER

*“As long as the earth remains, there will be planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and **winter**, day and night.”* Genesis 8:22 (NLT)

Snowflakes gently falling, icicles glistening, wood fires crackling... some of the sights and sounds of winter. Holiday celebrations and children cavorting in the snow can bring much laughter and joy to our souls. Some of my wintertime favorites include comfy sweaters, fuzzy blankets and a steaming cup of cocoa. And of course, a purring kitty to snuggle in my lap. All these help to warm my heart and lift my spirits.

In many ways, winter is a beautiful season. It can also be a very difficult time to endure. The harsh winds, long dark nights and icy temperatures can leave us longing for the light and warmth of spring. Handling the physical aspects of winter is trying enough—but when we also “winter” spiritually, the darkness can become almost unbearable. This can be especially difficult if our “winter” continues on long past the season’s end date on the calendar.

Whether we like it or not, we will continue to have winters—in one way or another. But there is much we can learn in winter that can’t be acquired in any other season. So in spite of the cold, in spite of the darkness, there is reason to not give up. For winter can bring us hope—it is a chance to renew—and it can be an occasion to wait.

These are the times of winter.

December: A time to hope

*“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the **hope** that you have.” 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)*

December—the season of joy. Perhaps for some. For others, it is a time of deep sadness, sorrow and hopelessness. According to the National Mental Health Association, more than one million Americans suffer from depression during December and more people attempt suicide in this month than at any other time of the year.

December surely can bring suffocating darkness. It can also bring an opportunity for hope. When the dark shadows close in around us, when all seems meaningless, when we feel like we cannot go on for one more moment—Jesus is our hope.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus is the light that the darkness could not overcome. “The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” John 1:4-5 (NLT)

Therefore, if Jesus lives in us—the darkness cannot overcome us either. It is in His name that we can trust, in His name that we can believe, and by His grace alone that we can find the courage to go on.

Moving from darkness to light can be a difficult process. But only when we have endured the blackest of nights and the darkest of days can we truly appreciate the light. For without the contrast, the brightness and warmth of better days are taken for granted and sorely underappreciated.

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Only in the coldest, most desolate, difficult “Decembers” of my life did I actually learn what it means to hope. Not an “I hope they have ice cream at the party tonight” hope. This was an end-of-my-rope, sliver-of-light, hanging-on-by-a-thread, clinging, desperate, longing hope. A hope that can only be found in winter.

Over the course of a five-year period, my husband Doug and I walked through some of our darkest days together. A promising dream and eventual disappointment of not succeeding in starting a business, dire financial straits, the selling of our home, the loss of our beloved cat Knickerbocker, the passing of my Grandmother, the death of Doug’s twin brother, unemployment, physical illness, emotional struggles and more disappointment than I could fathom were some of what greeted us during those long, bleak years.

After our situation had improved somewhat, I completed one of those stress scales where you answer yes or no to a list of stress-producing events resulting in a total score. (Like you actually need a test to tell you whether or not you’re stressed.) Still, I was curious as to what the experts would say my stress level was during that time. With a rating of 300 and above indicating very high stress, I scored 481 points!

I can honestly say that those years were both the hardest and yet the most precious that I have ever experienced. For nothing can compare to the gut-wrenching process of drawing near, pressing in, and clutching onto God when little else is left. Those are the times when one flicker of flame, one spark of light, one glimmer of hope can bring enough courage to continue on. Sometimes those flickers and sparks are seen or felt in an emotional way; other times they are made more tangible.

Worry threatened regularly as Doug set out to start his own business. It was definitely a faith adventure as we were stretched financially, emotionally and spiritually. Listening to a new CD I had

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just purchased bolstered my hopes. At the end of the song by Ray Boltz titled “I Think I See Gold,” I heard a crackling sound, which I likened to confirmation that we were indeed in the fire. By God’s grace, I felt it was yet one more assurance that though this process was more difficult than we had ever imagined, we were being transformed and refined and would come out in the end shining pure as gold.

Excited for Doug to also hear the song, I removed the CD from the computer where I had just listened to it through headphones and headed to the living room to play it for him on our stereo. He also enjoyed the song and remarked that he especially liked the crackling sound at the end. “It sounds like a fire,” he said.

“I know; isn’t that awesome?”

Well, I listened to that song countless times as our wearisome journey continued—but no matter what device I used, never again did I hear the cracks and pops of that spiritual fire. But our refining process continued, growing more difficult with each passing day.

Some months later, fears were rising again as our financial situation worsened and the promise of success looked more doubtful than ever. Wondering yet again if it was time to close the book on this dream, I felt drawn to look out the window at the back of our house. Our row of in-ground lights was continually shorting out, so I gave up long ago on even replacing the bulbs. In fact, I wasn’t even sure if there were still any bulbs in the lamps. Nevertheless, on this one remarkable night, hope arose from deep within, as I gazed at the lights shining brightly on our little patio. And I was reassured once again, that no matter how difficult our journeys may be—the light of God’s promises, whether by fire or lamp, can always be trusted.

Sometimes our Lord shines through boldly and beautifully; other times He seems to be nowhere in sight. A few years after we had sold our home and moved to a rental unit, new neighbors moved

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into the property adjoining ours. They seemed to be quite nice. They also smoked cigarettes—continuously. Their friends smoked, their two sons smoked, their sons' friends smoked, everyone who entered that house seemed to smoke. In fact, when absolutely no one was home, the place smoked all by itself!

We knew all of this because the smoke would immediately make its way over to our place. It came through the heating and air conditioning vents, it came into the basement, it seeped right through the walls. At all hours of the day and night. One Saturday afternoon, Doug could not cope with it for one more minute. Opening the door to my husband's impassioned petitions to please give us a break, our confused neighbor stammered, "But we were sleeping!"

On the day these folks moved in, there was a literal cloud in our front room. Grabbing my car keys and a large box of tissues, I headed out the back door. I told Doug not to worry, that I would be okay and I would come back, but that right then, I needed to go away. Driving aimlessly for a few minutes, I headed out of town and shortly pulled into the parking lot of a small church.

I tried yelling at God for a bit but that proved rather ineffective. By then my bawling had pretty much ceased and the tears wouldn't even come anymore. Yet the hurt and frustration permeated every fiber of my being. "Haven't I been through enough already? And now this?!"

I was hopefully anticipating some sort of miraculous encounter. Where a stranger, perchance even an angel, would suddenly appear, note my obvious distress and bring me prophetic, soothing words of encouragement, comfort and hope. I waited—and I waited—and I paced outside the car a little—and I tried to muster up some more tears. But there was no stranger; there was no angel. Only two middle-aged women across the parking lot who barely gave me a

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passing glance. Then from deep inside, a small voice I recognized calmly said, “Are you done now?”

The “smoking people,” as we came to call them, eventually moved. And all the smoke moved with them. There was not one trace left behind. Just as miraculous, the smoke didn’t stick when they *did* live next door. Even when the young folks had their “Friday night smoke fests” and a haze hung in our living room like a 1970’s bowling alley, the odor did not cling to our possessions or to us. Though our eyes and throats burned from the acrid odor, if we left the immediate vicinity, nothing on our person smelled—not our clothing, not our hair, not one thing. Moreover, when the party ended and the smoke eventually cleared, there was not a trace left behind. Not in the carpet, not on our furniture, not even on our coats that hung in a wardrobe where the heaviest smoke came through.

Hmmm... reminds me of another story where the smoke didn’t stick. “So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stepped out of the fire. Then the high officers, officials, governors, and advisers crowded around them and saw that the fire had not touched them. Not a hair on their heads was singed, and their clothing was not scorched. They didn’t even smell of smoke!” Daniel 3:26-27 (NLT)

God cares for us even when it feels like He is a million miles away. He knows our struggles and He is with us. His protection covers us head to toe. “When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2 (NLT)

Notice that this scripture says, “*When* you go through,” not *if* you go through. We WILL go through difficulties; it’s a part of the fallen world that we live in. I don’t suggest you go looking for trouble, but don’t rail against it when it comes. Let out the anger and frustration as you need to, but then press back into God. Run to Jesus,

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not away from Him. Because honestly—where else is there to go? Plenty of places actually, but where else is there that will truly help in the end? Don't waste precious time and energy trying to escape. You might find some temporary pleasure but eventually, the emptiness inside you will be darker and even more hopeless than before.

Facing “winter” can be the most difficult season of all. So many people leave the church and run away from their faith when they hit that wall. Please don't run away. Sometimes the fire burns a long, long time before the smoke clears, but do not give up. Find your sliver of light and cling to it with every fiber of your being. Claim one verse of scripture that speaks to you and repeat it to yourself endlessly. Say it silently or shout it from the rooftops. Remind yourself over and over again that the promise is true and that you are going to believe it no matter what—for however long it takes.

Sometimes December lasts much longer than 31 days. But also notice that the scripture from Isaiah talks about going through. It might take a very long time, but there is another side and if we persevere, eventually we will emerge from the river or the flames. While we are there, we can trust—and we can hope.

Horatio G. Spafford, who penned the famous hymn “It Is Well with My Soul,” knew how to hope in the midst of difficulty. According to Robert J. Morgan in his book, “Then Sings My Soul,” Horatio lost a fortune in real estate during the great Chicago fire. About that same time, his only son died of scarlet fever. Two years later, his four daughters perished in a shipwreck and his wife barely survived. Still he wrote, “It is well with my soul.”

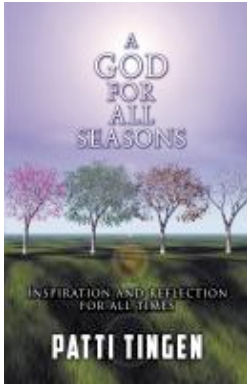
Certainly, Horatio could not have felt well emotionally or physically; nothing in his life at that time was well. So how could he possibly compose those words? Because in the very core of his being, in the depths of his soul—there was hope. It might have been only a

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flicker, or the tiniest flame, but some measure of hope burned deep inside his soul—and in his soul—it was well.

In the soul is where our hope resides. That is where the power to persevere lives. It is not in our minds, not in our emotions, and not in our physical abilities. It is in our souls. So learn to nurture your soul. Spend time seeking God and praising Him no matter the season in which you find yourself. Find a church where you can learn and develop your faith. Fellowship with other believers; serve and care for other people.

All of these activities will help to develop your faith and encourage your soul. And you will be better prepared and equipped when the harsh winds of winter begin to blow. Then when December's cold, dark nights descend, when all seems lost, when nothing makes sense, it will be well. Because in your soul, you'll find hope. And as long as you have hope—endurance, perseverance and faith will follow. So find your hope this December—then prepare for a time of renewal.



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