

Dear Saint Nicholas,

Life has been tough. I am writing to you after getting into huge trouble today. My parents caught me disobeying them and I have been severely grounded.

There are so many bad things happening to our world and in our country. I am filled with fear and worry about the future. I have a lot of wounds from my past. I really want to be healed of these wounds so I'm trying to pray to God and give all that fear to him.

My dad doesn't seem to understand. He has no compassion. He doesn't seem to have a heart. Now that I think about it, I can't blame him for my troubles, it was my own actions that destroyed trust through my dishonesty.

I'm tired of being in trouble. I'd like to celebrate the joy of Christmas, but I've probably lost all Christmas gifts possible. I thought at least I might get some coal but even that seems impossible. Please pray that I have the grace to be a true Christian, a good son, and that I may have a happy death in the future.

I've lost all my parent's trust and I doubt that it will ever come back. My parents say they love me, but I don't really believe at this point even though I wish it was true. I want to make God and my parents happy and I'm going to try but I don't have much hope. Please pray that I may find hope this Christmas season. I hope that one day my parents can be proud of me again.

God hears and answers our prayers. Sometimes he uses the Saints like Nicholas to respond.

Dear Child of God,

Thank you for writing to me and expressing what is on your heart. Amidst the dark and cold days of winter, the prophet Isaiah shares hope for this season. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." An entire nation had been disobedient, many were exiled, the punishment lasted for some 70 years. God never abandoned his people. He never condemned them to darkness, just the opposite, he promised to send a Savior. He promised to help them to do better in the future. So often in this life, we fall short of our own desire to be good ... no matter what we have done, God never gives up on us. God never tires of forgiving. Created in the likeness and image, we must never lose sight of how much God loves and cares for us.

Sometimes we get too close to a hot stove and the loving thing to do is to very quickly pull someone out of harm's way. Being grounded doesn't sound like much fun, but I am glad that it gave you the extra time to write me. We need to step back some time and reflect on our actions. What plans does God have for you? Joseph was afraid until he understood God's plan for his life. Mary was confused but she trusted in the message of the Angel Gabriel and put her fears aside to say YES to being the mother of Jesus. We often learn from our mistakes so I hope that this time of quiet helps you to reflect on where you are and where you would like to be in the future.

Your worries and concerns are grounded in reality. We live in troubling times, and there are so many things we are unable to control. Imagine how Jesus must have felt when he who is almighty was born of the Virgin Mary. He came as an infant, completely vulnerable and dependent on others to care for him, to feed him, to teach him how to speak, to change his diapers and to provide for his needs. God placed infinite trust in Mary and Joseph to care for and nurture Jesus. In a certain sense, God does this with every set of parents. They are given charge of the immortal soul of a child and entrusted with the awesome responsibility of teaching him or her to love God and to love our neighbors.

It sounds like your parents are pretty upset with you but let me put things in perspective. They were once young and made plenty of foolish mistakes. They too disobeyed their parents and got grounded. Truly, they want only the best for you but that is sometimes hard to see when you are in a tug of war with the boundaries they establish to help you.

Having made mistakes of their own, they are more aware of the pitfalls and dangers of the scary world we live in. And so, they make rules to try to help you until such time as you will be able stand on your own and make choices in the absence of parental guidelines. Believe me, they would not set boundaries if they did not care. They would not punish if they did not think it would help you in the long run to make better choices in the future.

While it is true, you are filled with fear and worry about the future, please remember the love and the trust God has in you. He is trusting in you to make the world a better place. This is what our Christian faith is all about. God gives us time, and talents and treasures. He wants us to use each for the benefit of others. In our baptism, and with the sacraments throughout life, God gives us the grace to rise above our human weakness and to reach out and help others.

And sometimes it is the wounds that we bear that help us most. Jesus can help to transform our cross if we let him help us. In ancient times, I lost my parents at a very young age. I was not always a saint. I turned to God for help, and he gave me the strength and compassion to recognize the suffering of others so that I might reach out and help them. With the help and the grace of God, I became a priest and later a bishop. The world I grew up in was a scary place to. With the grace of God that you so wisely pray for, failure is overcome, sin and human failings are forgiven, and love conquers all. And the trust that is shattered is carefully rebuilt to grow stronger and more resilient.

Hope springs eternal as we gaze on the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. Join your own voice with that of the angel and the heavenly host praising God in word and song. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Lk 2:14).