

# Today

Nov/Dec 2016

refresh, refocus, renew

## ADVENT HOPE



**ALSO: THE POWER OF A GRATEFUL HEART**

Friends:

Christmas is coming. Autumn still reigns just now in North America, but Christmas is coming. Since so much of our preparation for Christmas is about jingly decorations and jangly presents, we often must remind ourselves, "Jesus is the reason for the season." And while we're sentimental about the circumstances surrounding the birth of a baby named Jesus, Christmas is really about the coming of God's Christ. Advent is about waiting for, longing for, and needing a Savior. Advent is about groaning for rescue, for light to shine in the darkness. And what we often miss is that Advent and Christmas are as much about Christ's second coming as his first. We remember the baby that changed everything, but we long for his return as Victor.



In December, Pastor Rebecca Jordan Heys will walk us through the season of Advent, reflecting on hope and helping us to anticipate the good news of great joy in both of Christ's arrivals.

But first, in November, my Russian colleague Pastor Sergei Sosedkin prepares us for both Advent and Christmas by exploring gratitude and thanksgiving as the core of our response to God's grace.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

—Steven Koster

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**“The Power of a Grateful Heart”**  
**Sergei Sosedkin**



**“Advent Hope”**  
**Rebecca Jordan Heys**

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**ReFrame**  
Media

# november

## The Power of a Grateful Heart

**Sergei Sosedkin**

In autumn our hearts often turn toward being thankful. Farmers are thankful for crops safely harvested. Many of us look with gratitude on the past months of another year—having endured a mixture of ups and downs—and are thankful for the upcoming holiday season. In connection with harvest, North Americans also set aside a special day of Thanksgiving, observed by Canada in October and by the United States in November.

Being thankful is something that makes us truly human. Gratitude is a crucial ingredient in our relations with God and others. An ungrateful heart cannot be happy, and it can hurt other hearts badly. Without daily thanksgiving we cannot attain closeness to our Savior and to our loved ones.

For what are you thankful? What role did thanksgiving play in Jesus' life? Can we really be thankful in all circumstances? Is it possible to defeat one's anxiety and doubts with gratefulness?

This month's devotions aim to answer these questions and more. May the biblical passages, meditations, and prayers here encourage and inspire you on the journey of joyful Christian thanksgiving.

*Sergei Sosedkin is director of the Russian outreach of Back to God Ministries International, a sister ministry to ReFrame Media, the publisher of these Today devotions. A Moscow native, Sergei carries out his ministry from offices in suburban Chicago, Illinois, and various locations in Russia.*

## OVERFLOWING WITH THANKFULNESS

*Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith . . . and overflowing with thankfulness.* —Colossians 2:6-7

My friends are proud owners of a dog. They claim that their dog is the most thankful creature ever. Just look into his eyes! See how he wags his tail!

It's likely that our favorite pets do display a sense of gratitude to us, their caring owners. But from the Bible's pages we discover that only a human heart can be truly thankful. In a sense our ability to be thankful sets us apart from the rest of God's creation. Our urge to say "thank you" makes us human.

In today's verses we discover that an attitude of thanks is deeply rooted in our encounter and friendship with God, in the person of Jesus Christ. Note that it doesn't depend on external things or our life's circumstances. Rather, it's connected to our knowledge of and faith in God. To put it simply, the better we know Jesus as

our Lord and Savior, the more thankful we are. Our daily walk with him helps us experience the true abundance of godly thankfulness.

This month I invite you to reflect with me on thanksgiving and gratitude. The Bible is filled with passages on this subject, and in the next 30 days we are going to explore many of them. Let us be prayerful and patient as we dig into God's Word for new and exciting insights.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of knowing you through Christ. Encourage us in our daily walk with you, strengthen our faith, and help us to be thankful. In Jesus, Amen.

## THE PEACE OF CHRIST

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . as members of one body. . . . And be thankful.*  
—Colossians 3:15

My grandmother was one of the most peaceful and thankful persons I've ever met. As a young boy, I often took her cheerful personality for granted. Looking back on her life, though, I cannot help wondering how she managed to escape bitterness and resentment.

Her younger years on a farm in Russia were tough. In her teens she endured the war, Nazi occupation, hunger, hard labor, and suffering. Later, after moving to a city, she was injured in a work-related accident and lost the use of her right hand. Even so, she remained cheerful and thankful to the very end. How can this be?

There's an answer in today's passage. The apostle Paul talks about the Christian calling to peace and thanksgiving. For him, these attitudes did not depend on happy life experi-

ences or special training. Peace and thanksgiving come through Christ alone.

When Christ's peace rules in our hearts, it changes us and our perspective on the world. It gives us strength to meet our challenges with grace and humility. And no matter what—we are called to be thankful.

I'm convinced that my grandmother had the peace of Christ in her heart. Each of us can experience this peace too, if we humble ourselves before God.

Do you have this peace?

Heavenly Father, help us to humble ourselves and receive the peace of Christ. Teach us how to reflect your peace in this world with grace and thanksgiving. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

## AUTHENTIC THANKSGIVING

*Always [give] thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
—Ephesians 5:20

"I have no one to thank for my success but me! I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Whatever I have, I got it through my hard work and dedication!" Those were the words of an angry listener during our live call-in radio show in Moscow, as we were discussing thanksgiving.

I suspect his words ring true in many people's hearts. In a culture of self-reliance it's not unusual to recognize only our own contributions to our success. Sadly, in our pride we tend to forget not only the other people who have helped us along the way, but especially God himself!

Today's verse teaches us three important truths about thanksgiving. First, God the Father is the one to whom we should be thankful. He is the source of our strength and intelligence. And

being thankful to God means we should also acknowledge others whom he has guided to help us. Second, we should be thankful always and for everything. This can be really difficult. But in God's strength we can be mindful of his love even in the midst of severe trials and struggles. That's the only way to escape bitterness and self-pity. Third, our thanksgiving should be in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Only through him can we truly know our heavenly Father and his amazing love.

Father, thank you for teaching us through your Word. Fill our hearts with thanks for your love, even in times of struggle. Give us wisdom to rely on Jesus alone for our salvation. In his name, Amen.

## THANKFUL TO OTHERS

*I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.*  
—Ephesians 1:16

Marina heard the gospel of Jesus Christ for the first time while she was in the hospital. Another patient there, Antonina, explained to her what Christ did for us on the cross and how to be spiritually healed by his wounds. Soon Marina trusted in Jesus for her salvation.

Later in her letter to us she shared, “When I entered the hospital, I was so depressed. But I learned about Jesus and was encouraged by his gospel. I’m so thankful to Antonina, who cared enough to talk to me.”

Are you thankful to people whom God sends into your life? The Bible teaches us to love both God and our neighbors. The daily practice of this love includes thanks both to our heavenly Father and to the people around us.

When the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, his main objective was to explain God’s eternal purpose and grace. He sought to share with his readers God’s high goals for the church. Yet against the background of this monumental task, the apostle remembers to say how thankful he is for the ordinary believers in the city of Ephesus. He compliments them for their devotion to Jesus and for their love for all God’s people. He encourages and prays for them.

In our daily interactions with people, are we doing the same?

Father, your Son, Jesus, reminded us to love you and our neighbors. Fill our souls with love toward you, and teach us how to love our neighbors through our words and actions. Amen.



## GENEROSITY AND THANKSGIVING

*Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God. . . .*  
—2 Corinthians 9:13

When I became a new believer at the age of 18, I was on fire to share the gospel with just about anyone willing to listen. I was heartbroken when people rejected salvation, and I dreamed of finding a particular pattern for my gospel presentation that would bring everyone to Christ.

Today I'm as convinced about the need for sharing the gospel as I was back then. But now I'm more humble about my evangelistic skills. I also know there's no magic formula. Effective witness requires complete reliance on God, as well as a lot of patience and humility.

In today's passage the apostle Paul adds another important dimension to witnessing to others. A powerful preacher, he goes beyond the need for the right words or proclamations. He challenges the Corinthian church to view their generosity

as a natural extension of their daily Christian witness. The apostle shows how God can use their monetary gifts for fellow believers to help others discover the gift of God's grace and prompt them to give thanks for Christ as well. He also points out that such godly generosity comes as a response to God's gift of salvation.

As we seek to share God's love with others, let us be reminded that our actions often speak louder than words.

Lord, make us reflectors of your love and grace to the world around us. Use us to share your message of salvation with the people around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## THANKSGIVING IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Our listener Yulia shared with us how her husband abandoned her and their two small children shortly after she became a Christian and joined a local church. Soon she lost her job and was about to lose her housing. Yulia's unbelieving mother said that everything happened to her because of her "new religion."

But the local church stepped in. The deacons held a special collection to support the daycare for Yulia's children, and soon she managed to find a new job. Yulia says that her prayer life helped her to get through some very difficult times. She is thankful to God for sending such caring people into her life.

On the one hand, our passage today provides some important guidelines for Christian living. On the other hand, Paul's words sound like an almost impossible

directive. How can we "rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances"?

In difficult times we have to be reminded of God's goodness and faithfulness. Our heavenly Father loves and cares for us. We must always focus our spiritual sight on his power to deliver us from evil in this temporal life and in eternity. We must also thank God for the salvation we have in Jesus, regardless of our external circumstances. Can you do that?

Father, when our circumstances are difficult, you are near. Encourage us through your Spirit and through your people. Use us to share your love with others. Amen.

## REJOICE IN THE LORD!

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

—Philippians 4:4

Are you old enough to remember writing or receiving handwritten thank-you notes? Those cards with polite words of thanksgiving to a host, friend, or associate used to be quite common. I still mail them occasionally. But judging by recipients' surprised reactions, it's not so common to receive such notes these days. We rush through our lives forgetting to thank people who show love and care for us.

The book of Philippians can be described as a long and amazing thank-you letter. The apostle Paul wanted to express his gratitude to the believers in the city of Philippi for the gift they had sent after learning of his imprisonment for preaching the message of Christ. Led by the Spirit, Paul also sought to encourage them to stand firm in persecution and to rejoice, regardless

of their circumstances. What a great way to say thank-you!

The unyielding joy Paul shares with his readers is based on the great truth "The Lord is near." Our loving God is never far away from his children. He is standing with us in our suffering. He knows what we are going through, and he is always ready to guide and comfort us, even in the most difficult situations. Nothing can separate us from his wonderful love!

Do you know this gracious God? Are you thankful to him?

Merciful Lord, fill our hearts with godly joy and thanksgiving. Teach us to rely on you even in the most difficult situations. In the name of our Savior, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

## ANXIETY-FREE LIVING

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*  
—Philippians 4:6

Daily we are bombarded with bad news on the global, national, and local scales: economic crises, disasters, terrorism, corruption, crime, poverty. We also face personal stressors: family problems, health situations, unpaid bills. The list goes on and on.

We seem to be poorly prepared for bad news. We are disturbed by potential negative outcomes. We turn anxious to the point of becoming physically ill. It's no wonder anxiety is considered one of the most common nervous disorders of our time.

In Philippians, however, we read Paul's blunt instruction not to be anxious about anything. How is that possible? Amazingly, the apostle gives this God-inspired advice while he is imprisoned!

For Paul, inner peace doesn't come as a result of some relaxation technique, denial, or the power of positive thinking. The apostle fully trusts the power of God to protect him and give him peace. Uncertainty fuels anxiety, but if you are certain about your standing with God, you don't have to be anxious. He is your strongest shield against difficult or unpleasant situations you might be facing.

Go ahead and thank God. And share with him, in heartfelt prayer, all your problems and anxieties. He hears and provides strength.

Lord, in this world filled with negative news, we are so thankful to find the good news of the Bible. Fill us with your peace and deliver us from anxiety. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## ONE OUT OF TEN

*He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.*  
—Luke 17:16

We all know what it means to be unappreciated. A loving mother is hurt when a delicious meal she has prepared for her family is taken for granted. A worker is disappointed when his initiative and extra effort go unnoticed by his supervisor. A friend feels used when her help isn't acknowledged.

During his teaching ministry Jesus was often unappreciated too. In today's verses we read of Jesus healing ten men who had the disease of leprosy, for which sufferers became outcasts. Leprosy made people "unclean," and doctors had no cure for it. Jesus sent the men to the priests so they could be declared "clean" and become part of their community again. But only one of the ten came back to thank Jesus. In a gesture of humility, "he threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him." The other nine simply got what

they wanted from Jesus and moved on.

It's ironic that the only grateful person was a Samaritan. The Jews viewed Samaritans as greatly inferior, both physically and spiritually. But this foreigner genuinely praised God while the others went their own way.

When we call out to Jesus for his grace and mercy, he saves us. But then what do we do? Do we go about our lives forgetting the Savior? Or do we throw ourselves before him, thanking and praising him?

Father, thank you for teaching us about the spiritual dangers of an ungrateful heart. May we be reminded by your Spirit again and again of the salvation you have given us in Christ. Amen.

## THE SEARCHING GOD

*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*  
—Psalm 139:7

Yelena, a godly grandmother from Ukraine, had joyful news to share in her letter to us. Her grandson had become a Christian! He used to be the village drunk, and his relatives thought he would end up in jail. But then he read the Bible we had mailed to him, and he started attending a local church. The gospel had dramatically changed him.

Yelena calls it a true miracle. The neighbors still can't believe that her grandson now welcomes large groups of people to his house—and not for a drink but for a Bible study! Yelena and her Christian friends cannot stop giving thanks to the Lord for the abrupt change in the life of this young man.

In Psalm 139 we read about the searching and knowing God. We are assured that his love goes far beyond human

circumstances. God knows our heart perfectly and cares about our deepest needs. He sends his Holy Spirit to bring us salvation, even as we stray from him or go through difficult and unfamiliar terrain.

When we are hurt, when our situation looks bleak, when we are haunted by dark, anxious thoughts, we must remember that we are not alone. Our loving and caring God is always near and is able to help.

Turn to him, and he will lead you in the way everlasting!

Father, we thank you for being a searching God. In your love for us, you found and saved us in Christ. Now help us to walk with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## A NEW SACRIFICE TO GOD

*Through Jesus . . . let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. . . . And do not forget to do good and to share with others.*

—Hebrew 13:15-16

Hennie was 13 years old when her parents took her and her siblings from their native Netherlands to Canada. She vividly remembers how they arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, after crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The family then took a week-long train journey across Canada to British Columbia.

Getting settled in a new land was difficult. They were initially housed in a farm building where animals had been kept. But the family trusted God, prayed hard, and worked a lot.

Looking back, Hennie gives thanks to God for carrying them through some challenging times and blessing them richly—physically, spiritually, and financially. Today Hennie is a generous supporter of Christian causes, giving back to the Lord from what he has given to her.

Today's passage teaches us to give God a new kind of sacrifice. The animal offerings of the Old Testament are obsolete. This "sacrifice of praise" involves the attitudes of our heart and includes thanksgiving and praise that we offer to the Lord. In addition, we are instructed to "do good and to share with others," which truly pleases our heavenly Father.

What are you offering as a sacrifice to God? Are you thanking and praising him through Jesus Christ? Are you using the resources he gave you to do good and share with others?

Father, thank you for blessing us daily and for sacrificing your only Son, Jesus, to save us. Help us to honor and please you by doing good and sharing with others. Amen.

## HELPING PEOPLE IN NEED

*They will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.* —Deuteronomy 24:13

Our reader Oleg sent us an email expressing his doubts about God. He wrote, “When I see how the rich and powerful are crushing the poor people, I often wonder if God really exists. If he does, why doesn’t he get involved with the world?”

Oleg openly and honestly shared his thoughts, and many others have also asked these questions. It’s true that we live in a broken, unjust world. But rather than blaming God, we must remember our own responsibilities and opportunities to work for justice.

In Deuteronomy we find God-inspired advice that can serve as a general framework for our actions. A poor neighbor’s only valuable possession for use as a pledge or collateral might be his cloak. The holder of the pledge is told to return the cloak to the

owner by sunset so that he may sleep in it. This thoughtfulness should bring about a debtor’s thanksgiving. And God will view it as a just, righteous act.

As Scripture challenges us to get involved with helping people in need, it also reminds us of our own poor spiritual condition. Without Jesus, we have absolutely nothing to use as collateral for our salvation. Even so, he freely and generously grants us forgiveness and new life. He saved us by dying on the cross.

Are you responding with gratitude and thanksgiving?

Lord, thank you for your forgiveness in Christ. Give us a thankful heart, and teach us how to live in gratitude to you by helping others. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.



## THE FATHER WHO HEARS

*Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."*  
—John 11:41

Crime and Punishment is Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous novel about a poor young man, Raskolnikov, who comes up with a plan to kill an unscrupulous pawnbroker for her cash. The murder that he commits pushes him into a profound personal crisis and anguish.

The major step on his long road to confession and repentance comes as a result of hearing the story of Lazarus. Raskolnikov's new friend Sonya reads John 11 to him, with unusual power and authority in her voice.

Dostoevsky masterfully interwove much of John 11 into his narrative. But why did he choose the story of Lazarus? Perhaps because it is such a powerful testimony to Jesus as our only hope in the face of death and despair. Jesus enters the most hopeless situation and in a miraculous way fills it with

hope. He turns tragedy into triumph, and death into resurrection.

In the prayer of Jesus that we read today he addresses God as his personal Father. We know that the Father and the Son are part of the holy Trinity. It's no wonder that Jesus expresses his thanksgiving and full commitment to his Father's will.

As followers of Jesus, we have the privilege of praying to God our Father, who always hears and loves us and who gives us the sure hope of resurrection.

Father, we praise you for the hope we have in Jesus. As your children, we can come to you with the assurance that you hear and respond in your love and mercy. Thank you for that amazing blessing. Amen.

## ARE YOU HUNGRY?

*Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.* —Matthew 14:19

Physical hunger is very real in our world today. The United Nations estimates that up to one billion people in the world struggle with food insecurity. That's about one out of every seven people.

But a different kind of hunger is even more common: spiritual emptiness and insecurity. It extends from the poor to the rich, and from the young to the old. Of course, precise statistics on spiritual hunger are impossible to determine. But it's safe to assume that the number of those who are spiritually hungry in this world is much higher than a billion.

In today's passage Jesus reaches out to people who are both physically and spiritually hungry. Taking five loaves and two fish, he looks to heaven and gives thanks. After breaking the loaves, he gives them to his dis-

ciples to distribute to the large crowd of people. And the miracle happens! Everyone eats and is satisfied, and there are lots of leftovers.

Some readers of this passage try to give "rational" explanations as to what happened. But it was a true miracle. God promised that with the coming of the true Shepherd the wilderness would become a rich pasture where his sheep would be gathered and fed (Ezekiel 34:23-31). Jesus is the Shepherd who provides for all our needs.

Please come to him if you struggle with hunger in your heart! He alone can satisfy!

Father, thank you for satisfying our spiritual hunger through Jesus. You feed us daily as your Spirit gives us strength to walk in your ways. Amen.

**SEIZE THE MOMENT!**

*Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*

—2 Corinthians 6:2

Ivan was a university student in Moscow who called in many times during our live radio broadcasts. He seemed genuinely interested in Christianity and had many questions about Christ's teaching. But when he was invited to make a commitment to Jesus, Ivan rejected it outright: "I'm too young for something like that! I have my whole life ahead of me."

Does Ivan's logic sound familiar to you? Regardless of our age, many of us still look for an excuse to delay making a commitment to God, thinking that we have lots of time on our hands.

You probably have heard the ancient saying "Carpe diem." It's a Latin aphorism that can be translated as "Seize the day." Sayings with similar meanings can be found in many cultures.

The Bible also tells us about the urgency of making our commitment to God. The apostle Paul urges us not to delay when it comes to our salvation. We are privileged to live in an age of grace, when the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world. That is something to be thankful for. But it may not be that way forever. Also, we never know when our life on this earth will end—whether by illness or accident—slowly or suddenly. But it will end—when we die or when Christ returns.

So I urge you to believe in Jesus and find peace with God today, before it's too late!

Father, give us wisdom to appreciate the opportunities we have. Let us lean on Jesus for our salvation today and always. Amen.

## OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."*  
—John 10:11

An elderly passenger in the airport security line just wanted to talk to someone. I was standing near him, so he started talking to me. Soon he shared something that was breaking his heart: his 20-year-old grandson had become a drug addict. He had dropped out of college and was living aimlessly, consumed by his deadly addiction.

"He was such a great boy, so bright and talented," the man told me with deep sadness and love in his voice. I committed to pray for the young man and also for his whole family as they are seeking to help him. I also wanted to share today's verses with the grieving man, but we lost track of each other as we passed through the security checkpoint.

Jesus calls himself the good shepherd who sacrifices his own life in order to save his

lost sheep. That's the power of God's love! When we clearly see how lost we are and turn to Jesus Christ in repentance, he always finds us. He is there!

It doesn't matter how bad or hopeless your circumstances are, there's always hope. The good shepherd has already died for you, and he has risen from the dead! He is looking for you. He wants to give you a full life and fill your heart with thanksgiving. Will you answer his gracious call?

Father, we are so privileged and grateful to have your Son as our good shepherd! He leads us along your ways and gives us hope in the most desperate situations. Give us the wisdom to lean on him alone each day. Amen.

## APPRECIATING OUR BODIES

*You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.*  
—1 Corinthians 6:19-20

A young pastor updated his congregation about his five-year-old son who was undergoing chemotherapy for a deadly cancer. After telling them about his son's conditions and thanking them for their help and prayers, the pastor said something rather unexpected.

He shared how excruciatingly painful it had become for him to hear news reports of people killing themselves through violence, substance abuse, or even overeating. With great emotion he said, "Here we are, fighting for this little child's life, while some other people have absolutely no appreciation for what they were given!"

Scripture teaches us that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit." As Christians, we are called to honor God with our bodies, and that includes valuing them and taking care

of them. Remember that Jesus gave his own body to save us. Now we are encouraged to be good stewards of both body and soul, for we belong to God both physically and spiritually.

This is another way to show our gratitude to God—by maintaining what he gave us through exercise and healthy eating habits. God wants us to be as healthy and fit as possible, as we serve him and our neighbor.

Do you treasure what you have in your life? Do you take good care of yourself and appreciate what Jesus did for you?

Lord, we are thankful for the body of Jesus that was broken for us. Help us to grow in our appreciation of our own bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## TWO REVELATIONS

*Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*  
—Romans 1:21

Tatyana, a young Russian woman, shared with us how much she enjoys the outdoors. It makes her feel spiritual and brings her closer to God, she said. Yet Tatyana doesn't see the need for believing in Jesus. She maintains that a careful observation of nature is good enough to be reassured of God's existence and love.

According to the Bible, God does reveal himself to all people through his creation, by which we become aware of his presence and clearly see "his eternal power and divine nature." Whatever we can learn about God from observing his creation is often called general revelation.

However, general revelation does not reveal Jesus to us. And Jesus is our only hope for fully knowing God. So we also need the special revelation that

describes the way of salvation in Christ. And that comes to us in the Bible, God's Word.

Only when we discover our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, can we give full thanks to God for saving us from the destruction that follows from sin. The only way to meet him is in the teaching of Scripture and by the preaching of his Word. That's why the habits of worshiping God and reflecting on the Bible are so important.

Do you know the God of the Bible? Do you rely on his Word? Are you thankful to him for your salvation in Christ?

Father, we thank you for showing us yourself in nature and in the Bible, which reveals how you love us in Christ. Amen.

## TURNING DESPERATION INTO HOPE

*“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”*

—Acts 3:19

Nikolay listens to our gospel broadcasts in prison. We don't know what crime he committed, but his sentence is for a long time. In one of his letters Nikolay shared with us how sorry he was about his former ungratefulness to God. He says he had many good opportunities in life but squandered most of them. He realizes that his own sin brought him to prison.

In our correspondence with Nikolay we shared the Acts 3 story and the call to repentance in verse 19. But you don't have to be in prison to appreciate this verse. It applies to all of us, even those whom we might consider “good.”

Peter is speaking about the common human need for repentance and turning to God. Maybe you have heard his words before. But do you know what they mean? According

to the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, repentance is “a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it.” It is a change of will and mind that comes because we are truly sorry for what we have done. It involves turning away from sin.

But repentance isn't complete unless we turn toward God by believing in Jesus Christ. First, you see yourself in relation to sin and become desperate. And then you see yourself in relation to Jesus and experience hope. Do you have this great hope?

Lord, from the darkness of our desperation in sin, lead us to hopeful trust in Jesus, in whom you wipe out our sins and refresh us spiritually. Amen.

## HUNGRY FOR GOD'S WORD

*"I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD."*

—Amos 8:11

As a young woman, Alidia lived through mass hunger in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam in World War II. She recalls how her husband would travel to nearby farms trying to exchange their household possessions for food. She personally saw people, emaciated by hunger, faint and fall in the city streets. But the Lord saved Alidia, her husband, and their baby in the midst of that terrible trial. Today she lives in Canada and regularly corresponds with us.

The Old Testament prophet Amos prophesied about a time of hunger for hearing the words of the Lord. He described people searching desperately for direction but unable to find it. Some people would even faint as a result.

We all hope that we will not have to experience such physical hunger that would make us

fear for survival. But do you hunger for the Word of the Lord? I hope you do.

It's a special blessing when we are prompted by the Holy Spirit to seek God's Word and his will for our lives. Thankfully, we have easy access to the Bible, the written Word of the Lord. So when we are hungry for him, we need to prayerfully turn to his Word to satisfy the deepest longings of our souls. Are you reading and listening to what God has to say to you?

Father, only your Word can feed the deepest hunger of our souls. It's such a blessing today to have easy access to the Bible! Give us wisdom and humility as we listen to you. In Jesus, Amen.



## JESUS, THE LIBERATOR

*“He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” —Luke 4:18*

Ann, a dear supporter of our ministry, worked as a nurse in a mental health hospital in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands during World War II. She shared with me that as the war drew to an end, their hospital had to be evacuated to save the patients from extermination. In very dangerous conditions they finally escaped to safety.

Ann, who now lives in Canada, told me that recently she saw a WWII veteran in a wheelchair. She approached him and said, “Thank you so much for your sacrifice! If not for men like you, we wouldn’t be free.”

The Bible presents Jesus as our Liberator. Did you know that the name Jesus means “Savior, Deliverer”?

In our verses for today, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61, which looks back to the Year of Jubilee (which called for slaves to be

freed and debts to be canceled in every 50th year). Jubilee pointed ahead to the Messiah, Christ, the Savior. And then, to the surprise of his audience, Jesus applies those words to himself!

He came into this world to rescue us from the tyranny of sin. His teaching is the proclamation of our Year of Jubilee.

Do you appreciate what Jesus has done to free you from sin and death? Are you truly thankful to your divine Liberator? Do you want to be free? If so, put your trust in him!

Father, thank you for sending Jesus to deliver us from the slavery and curse of sin. We praise you for the freedom we have in your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## GOD AND OUR WITNESS

*We ought always to thank God for you . . . because God chose you as firstfruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. —2 Thessalonians 2:13*

Have you ever tried witnessing about God's love to your friends, neighbors, and coworkers? If you have, you know it's not easy. When I share the gospel with others, I become disappointed when they reject God's salvation.

In our gospel outreach we have to be encouraged that it's God's work, first of all. We have to be patient and rely fully on God. Many of his plans are hidden from us. But God's will for our life as Christians is clear: We must be a living testimony to the saving grace of Christ. And we must share this hope with others by witnessing through what we say and do.

The apostle Paul thanks God for choosing the Thessalonian believers to be saved through faith and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Paul was likely the one who started the church there by

preaching in a local synagogue (see Acts 17:1-4). But instead of taking any credit for that, Paul simply gives thanks to God.

Many of our readers share their concern for their unbelieving relatives and friends. They pray regularly that these loved ones may come to know Jesus as their Savior. Based on the Scriptures, my encouragement is this: Trust the Lord, witness about his love boldly, and let the Spirit use your testimony for God's purpose in his time!

Father, make us a living witness to your saving love and mercy in Jesus Christ. Purify our imperfect testimony by your Spirit's power so that others may believe in the truth. Amen.

## LIVING OUT OUR FAITH

*We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.*  
—Ephesians 2:10

Oxana, one of our listeners from Ukraine, confided to us about her struggles with boredom and lack of motivation in her daily walk with God. This young woman firmly professed her trust in Jesus Christ, but somehow she wasn't excited about her faith. "I know that I'm already saved. What do I do next?" she asked us bluntly.

In our response we directed her to Ephesians 2:10, which describes believers as "God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works." In this context "handiwork" can also be translated as "work of art." We are unique and special creations in God's eyes.

Please note that doing good works does not earn us our salvation. We are saved totally by God's grace. Rather, doing good is an exciting way to live out our faith and express our grati-

tude to God for his gift of grace and deliverance.

We challenged Oxana: "What can you do as God's handiwork to show how thankful you are to the Lord for his salvation?" Later we learned that she got involved with work in a local orphanage.

The same challenge goes to you today. What good works do you see prepared for you by God? Maybe you can volunteer at your local church or food pantry. Maybe you can help an elderly neighbor. There are many people out there who are hungry for God's love and our care.

Father, we praise you for making us your precious handiwork! Show us how to live out our faith by our actions as well as our words. Amen!

## EVERY DAY IS THANKSGIVING DAY!

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*

—1 Chronicles 16:34

Today is Thanksgiving Day in the United States. Our Canadian readers celebrated a special day of thanks back in October. Many countries don't have such a holiday. But shouldn't every day be a day of thanksgiving?

Today let's explore one of the most beautiful verses in all of Scripture: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever." This precious teaching runs throughout the Bible. Sometimes it's repeated word for word—as in 1 and 2 Chronicles, Psalms, and Jeremiah. At other times its meaning is clearly present—and that is the case in every Bible book.

Our earthly relationships are so fragile. We often get separated from each other by new experiences and fading memories, by long distances and impenetrable borders. Eventually we are separated by death itself. Yes, all our earthly relationships are

insecure, except for one—the relationship we have with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This relationship is so enduring because of the Lord and his eternal love for us. Jesus showed this love in the most vivid way by dying for us on the cross. Then he rose from the dead to be seated at the right hand of God the Father.

It is my prayer that once you realize what Jesus has done for you, once you experience his everlasting love, your life will overflow with gratitude and thanksgiving to him!

Lord, thank you for your love that endures forever! Because of Jesus, we know how much you love us, and we will always be grateful to you. In his name we pray. Amen.

## A MESSAGE FOR THE LONELY HEART

*"Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

—Mark 3:35

Often in media ministry we receive messages from lonely people, especially around major holidays. It's common to feel lonely or misunderstood. Jesus definitely knew that feeling. Maybe you know it too.

Today we have read that Jesus' mother and brothers came to speak to him. At that time his family was convinced that Jesus was "out of his mind." Perhaps they just wanted to protect him, thinking he might get himself into trouble. Clearly, Jesus was misunderstood by his family and by the teachers from Jerusalem. That's why he pointed to his followers and called them his family.

It should be noted here that Jesus never stopped loving his immediate family. Just before his death on the cross he made arrangements for his disciple John to take care of his mother (John 19:25-27). And after

Jesus' resurrection we find Mary and also Jesus' brothers among the believers (Acts 1:14).

But today I want to concentrate on the fact that Jesus calls us his close family. You see, in Jesus we intimately connect with God the Father and the Spirit, and we become part of the worldwide body of believers. We have friends everywhere. We were created for connection. A big part of dealing with loneliness is to be intimately connected with God and his community. Do you belong to a Bible-believing church family? If not, please seek one out!

Father, when we are lonely or misunderstood, comfort us by your Spirit and help us connect with our family and friends in Christ. Thank you! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## CHRIST'S BODY

*Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."*

—Mark 14:22

As a little girl, Olesya often observed holy communion at her grandmother's church. As a young adult, though, she drifted away from the religious life of her grandmother. But somehow she was still interested in what communion was all about. She called our radio talk-show to find out more about the sacrament. During the conversation I had a chance not only to respond to her questions but also share the gospel of Jesus with her.

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a time for thanksgiving. We gather around the Lord's table to be vividly reminded of what Jesus did on our behalf.

During his last supper with his disciples Jesus used vivid images—bread and wine. Bread is still a popular food item in Middle Eastern cuisine—and

around the world. After giving thanks to God, Jesus broke the bread. It's a profoundly symbolic act pointing to his upcoming death on the cross. Then he gave the pieces of bread to his disciples: "Take it; this is my body." The bread is a symbol of his body, broken for us.

This is the gospel story in a nutshell. When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we are still offered the bread that points us to Jesus' body. We are encouraged to turn to him and partake in his sacrifice for us with humility and thanksgiving.

Father, thank you for your Son's body that was broken for us. Remind us daily of what Jesus did for us on the cross. In his name we pray. Amen.

## CHRIST'S BLOOD

*"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.*  
—Mark 14:24

In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus used the common elements of bread and wine to draw a word picture for his followers.

After first giving his disciples bread, Jesus took a cup of "the fruit of the vine." He gave thanks to his Father and shared the cup with his disciples.

Wine was a common drink in that day. No refrigeration existed back then, and the easiest way for storing and transporting grape juice was to have it fermented first. It's likely that the disciples drank from Jesus' cup without realizing its significance at first. It was such a regular thing—there was nothing unusual about it.

But then Jesus interrupted with some startling words. He intended this drink to be a symbol of his own blood, the

"blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." The Israelites viewed blood as a sustaining power of life. And now Jesus talked about shedding it for his chosen ones. Moreover, he invited his disciples to drink it. What a powerful way to point to his sacrifice!

Are you one of those "many" for whom Jesus shed his precious blood on the cross? You are if you fully trust him to cleanse you from sin with his blood, and your heart overflows with thanksgiving for his salvation.

Our heavenly Father, we are reminded of Jesus' perfect blood, shed for us to wash away our sin. Give us wisdom to rely on Christ's finished work alone, by your grace, for our salvation. Amen.

## ANTIDOTE FOR AN UNGRATEFUL HEART

*There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive . . . ungrateful, unholy. . . .*

—2 Timothy 3:1-2

If you ever meet ungrateful people, you know how much they can discourage you from doing good. Just recently we mailed a free Bible to one of our listeners. A few weeks later he sent us an angry letter saying that we sent a wrong translation in a cheap cover and with a font that isn't large enough.

Of course, there are many times when we ourselves display ungratefulness to others. Sadly, it comes to us so naturally that we often don't even notice we have been unthankful to the people around us.

It's no wonder that the apostle Paul includes ungratefulness in his list of common sins peculiar to "the last days," the era that began with Christ's first coming.

Obviously, being ungrateful is a serious thing in our social interactions, for it hurts others. But

being ungrateful can also be deadly in our spiritual life, for it hurts God and damages our soul. Being ungrateful to Jesus means discounting his salvation and turning away from him. That's why the Bible teaches us to carefully examine our hearts.

The best biblical antidote for an ungrateful heart is this: "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:1). Only by looking to the cross of Christ can we attain God-pleasing thankfulness.

Lord, fill our hearts with thanksgiving to you for your love and salvation in Christ. Teach us to love our neighbors by showing our gratitude to them too. In Jesus' name, Amen.



## THE UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM

*Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.*

—Hebrews 12:28

We have some elderly radio listeners in western Ukraine who have managed to live in four countries without ever moving from their hometown. You see, their land was taken over many times by different nations through conquests or geopolitical developments. Each takeover brought big changes. For example, all history teachers had to learn a new language and a new history whenever their country was taken over by a new power.

But the kingdom of God is completely different. The reign of the Lord is eternal. It cannot be taken over by outside powers. At every moment God remains in full control over it. From the Bible we know that “the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire” (2 Peter 3:7). Whatever we see around us is not going

to last forever. Yet the reign of God can never be shaken.

In Jesus Christ we become the citizens of this most powerful kingdom ever. Regardless of our external circumstances, the Lord always reigns, and his loving reign extends to every corner of the visible world and every part of our lives. His kingdom reflects God’s eternal nature and unlimited power.

Earthly countries and empires will rise and fall, but we will always be secure under the reign of our Lord. That’s why we are called to worship him “with reverence and awe.”

Father, in awe and humility we bow before you. Thank you for making us the people of your eternal kingdom. In Jesus, Amen.

**ENCOURAGEMENT TO KEEP GOING EACH DAY**

*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus. . . .*  
—Hebrews 12:1-2

Our month of reflections on thanksgiving and gratitude is coming to a close.

For what are you thankful today? You may have asked this question of others at times. Or maybe you'll pose it to yourself in the quiet of your reflective prayer.

May I tell you what I'm thankful for—today and every day? Among many other things, I'm grateful for you supporters of ReFrame Media and Back to God Ministries International. Your prayers and generosity make our outreach possible, whether at home or abroad.

Over the years I have met hundreds of our friends and ministry partners. You have inspired me with your kind comments and personal stories. Thank you!

The Bible mentions “a great cloud of witnesses”—heroes of faith—who encourage us with their examples. We are also cheered by many “living saints” in our local churches, extended families, and circles of friends.

The race of faith is different from any other race we might run. Instead of competing with others, we are fighting against our own sinful nature. The only hope we have in order to finish is to fix our eyes on “Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

Father, we praise you for the examples of faith heroes who have run this race before us. Give us strength and perseverance, and help us to focus on Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

# december

## Advent Hope

**Rebecca Jordan Heys**

First Corinthians 13:13 tells us about the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. All three are important in every season, but the season of Advent is a particularly good time to emphasize Christian hope.

During Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we look back and remember that Israel longed and waited for their Messiah, and we celebrate the birth of that Messiah, Jesus, on Christmas Day. During Advent we also look forward in our longing and waiting for Jesus to come again. In all of this waiting, the Bible gives us good news that teaches us to hope in both good times and hard times.

This month we will learn about the hope we can have in Jesus Christ. First we will focus on the hope of anticipation, hope that has not yet been realized as we await Christ's return. And then we will explore how our hopes are already fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

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## SOURCE OF HOPE

*Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.*  
—Psalm 146:5

What do you mean when you say “I hope so”?

If you are a believer, hope is not just hope for its own sake, but hope in something and hope in someone. We are invited to hope not by our own strength nor by the strength of anything in the world around us. Rather, we are invited to hope by the character of God. God makes and keeps promises, which means we can have hope for the future because of the Lord our God.

Psalm 146 points out the futility of trusting in earthly rulers and other leaders. Although we might like to put our hope in princes of industry or in political leaders or in our own good efforts, this psalm makes clear that all those things will fade away. Even our most respected human heroes have their limits. The only true, remaining source of hope is the Lord God. As we

focus on hope this month, we'll be learning about the God in whom we hope.

Unlike the princes of ancient Israel and many political leaders today, the Lord cares for more than just the wealthy and powerful. The Lord makes promises in Psalm 146 to people who are oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, and blind.

No matter who you are or how hopeless you may feel at times, God is the one true source of hope. In times of despair, look to him as your help for today and your hope for tomorrow.

Lord, our only source of hope, forgive us for trusting in other things. Help us to put our trust in you for the challenges of the present and the uncertainty of the future. Amen.

## NEED FOR HOPE

*The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God . . . and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

—Genesis 3:8

There are many good things about this world, because it was created by God. But there is also something wrong with this world. We can tell there is something wrong when we look around us and see disease, war, and famine. We can also tell there is something wrong when we look inside ourselves. Our own consciences tell us that something is wrong, that we are not living the way we were meant to live.

Genesis 3 describes this situation. God had created Adam and Eve as a good part of his good creation. But they were disobedient to God, and they tried to hide from the Lord in shame. Adam and Eve were in what seemed like a hopeless situation.

But even in this story of sin and seeming hopelessness, we find glimpses of the hope that God

gives to human beings. Adam and Eve could not hide from God.

God called out to them because he loved them so much and wanted to seek them out. Then God promised to give them victory over the evil that seemed to overwhelm them.

We still live in this world of sin and evil, but we can have hope in the God who seeks us out, forgives our sin, and promises to overcome evil.

Creator God, we confess that we have fallen away from your good intentions for the world. Forgive us, and give us hope in the new creation you have promised. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## HOPEFUL HARVEST

*Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.* —Psalm 126:6

Do you know the old gospel song “Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves”? That song was played often on the old TV series *Little House on the Prairie*. The show was set on the Midwestern plains of the United States, and the song lyrics make you think of fields of abundant grain. Those lyrics are based on Psalm 126, a psalm about hope.

In Psalm 126, a metaphor from farming is used to describe our lives of hope in the Lord. The psalm says, “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.”

After sowing with tears, a farmer might well despair of seeing any harvest at all, let alone a joyful harvest. But in the metaphor of this psalm, the sowers return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves of grain.

In our lives, we sometimes feel as if we are sowing with tears. We weep for ourselves, or for our families, or for our world. And yet God assures us that because he sent Jesus into the world, we will reap with songs of joy.

Our hope in Jesus Christ is that God has been faithful to his promises to save his people. Our tears can turn into songs of joy because of our hope of salvation through God’s love for us in Christ. “We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”

God of promise, we lament the things in our own lives or in the lives of others that cause tears and pain. We cling to your promise of a future filled with joy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## GOD'S NAME GIVES HOPE

*Although our sins testify against us, do something, LORD, for the sake of your name.*  
—Jeremiah 14:7

What can we count on? Is there anything in this world that we can really be sure of?

Benjamin Franklin famously said, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." That may seem like a pessimistic way of looking at the world, but sometimes it also feels true. Sometimes the people we trust betray us. Sometimes we lose things we rely on, like a job or good housing. Sometimes we even fail ourselves.

In these verses Jeremiah recognizes that we cannot rely on our own goodness. Our sins make us unreliable too, just like many other things in our lives. We let others down, and we let ourselves down. But in the midst of all this uncertainty, as Jeremiah reminds us, God has a reputation of being reliably loving and faithful.

God has made a name for himself that is a source of hope to us. God's name is not just a name. God's name is about his identity and character. God is reliable, forgiving, and steadfast in his love.

God's identity is the one thing we can count on in this uncertain world. God's promises are sure, and that gives us hope. Death and taxes might still be certain, but God's faithfulness is the most certain thing of all.

Do you hope in the reliability of your God and Savior?

God of hope, give us hope, because we know you have a reputation of faithfulness and love. Thank you for being the God we can count on. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## AUDACIOUS HOPE

*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.*  
—Lamentations 3:21-22

Hope is a Christian virtue. It's a good and positive thing.

We need hope because the world is not yet the way God intends it to be. We need hope because we are waiting for things to get better. Hope means believing in the light even when we are in the darkness. Or, as Wendell Berry put it in his poem "Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front": "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts." Hope opens us to have joy whatever the facts may be.

The facts around us show that the world can be a scary place. But Christian hope is bold to say that even in the darkest times, God's light still shines. Even when we are afraid, God remains in control of the universe, and he loves and cares for us more than we can imagine.

To those who do not know the Lord, hope might seem like a crazy virtue. If we consider the facts, we could be frightened about our lives and our world.

But because of the great love God has for us, we have reason for hope. We have reason to believe that we are safe in the care of a faithful and powerful God. We can boldly hope in God and in the promises God makes to us.

Faithful God, thank you for giving us reason to hope, even when our lives are difficult and the world seems like a scary place. Thank you for being true to your promises. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



## SURE HOPE

*Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

—Romans 5:5

In the chapter just before Paul wrote these words in Romans 5, he told the story of Abraham. He emphasized Abraham's faith. Paul said that even Abraham, who was considered a God-fearing and good man, was praiseworthy not because he was so good but because he believed God.

If you go read the story of Abraham in Genesis, you will find quite a few examples of Abraham making mistakes and committing sins. For example, twice he lied and told someone that his wife, Sarah, was his sister (Genesis 12 and 20). He was a good man in many ways, but he was an ordinary, flawed person, like anyone else.

The great thing about Abraham was not anything about Abraham himself; it was that he put his trust and hope in God. Abraham believed God's prom-

ises, and he put his hope in God's being true to his promises.

The same is true for us today. If we hope in our own power or our own goodness or strength, we will be disappointed. In ourselves, we do not have enough goodness to give us hope for the future. But faith in God, given to us by the Holy Spirit, is a sure source of hope.

Do you have that hope?

Dear God, we praise you because you are true to your promises, and we thank you that you are the true source of hope. Help us, by your Holy Spirit, to put our hope in you. Amen.

## WAKEFUL HOPE

*Since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*

—1 Thessalonians 5:8

Just as we look forward to Christmas, Christians hope for the day when Christ will come again, as he promised.

Many people try to guess the time of Christ's return. The year 2000 was a popular guess. A radio preacher also guessed that the world would end on May 21, 2011. When that didn't happen, he revised his guess to October 21, 2011. Today, many years later, his predictions still have not come true.

The truth about Christ's second coming is that we cannot predict when it will be. Today's verses tell us, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Jesus himself said, "About that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). We shouldn't worry too much about the precise timing. What's

most important is that Jesus's second coming is good news for believers because God has promised that he will make everything new and whole at that time.

The Bible encourages us to live in wakeful hope as we look forward to the day when Christ will come again. And as we wait, we are invited to begin living already in the ways of heaven, as the Holy Spirit helps us. The second coming is not scary for Christians; it's something we look forward to with hope.

Dear Jesus, we look forward to the day when you will come again. Thank you for the hope we have because of your gift of salvation. Amen.

## DAWN OF HOPE

*The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.*

—Romans 13:12

I was on the track team when I was a high school student. I enjoyed the 3,200 meter event, in which we ran eight laps around the track. Though I was not a fast runner, the last lap was often the fastest for many of us. That might seem strange, since we were all tired by the last lap, but we ran as fast as we could because we knew that we were almost finished with the race.

We do not know when Jesus will return. We do not know when we will begin our heavenly life with Jesus. But we do know that heavenly life with Jesus is how our story can end. Because of his death and resurrection, we know that the story of this world will end with the victory of good over evil.

Since that is the end of the story as we know it, the Bible encourages us to live with that confident hope in mind.

We are called to live as Jesus desires us to live. That is difficult sometimes, but we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live in that way because we know that Jesus will return and that all creation will be restored.

This is our last lap, in a way. Though we may be tired, we can still run quickly because the glorious finish line is just ahead of us.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus. We trust that you will come soon, as you have promised. Help us to live in the light of your coming kingdom. Help us to follow you in hope. Amen.

## THE ANCHOR OF HOPE

*We who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*  
—Hebrews 6:18-19

The writer of Hebrews uses the image of an anchor to describe the confident hope we can have in God. When a boat is in open water, away from a dock, nothing can keep it in place but an anchor. The anchor keeps the boat from drifting off in any direction. No wonder Hebrews calls hope “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” That is what an anchor is for a boat, and that is what hope is for our souls.

Hebrews 6 tells us about two people who assure us that hope in God is an anchor for the soul. The first is Abraham. God promised Abraham land and descendants. Even though those promises were threatened many times during Abraham’s life, Abraham hoped in the anchor of God’s promises, and those promises eventually were fulfilled. The second

person is Jesus, “our forerunner.” Jesus ran ahead of us. He ran the race of human life. He ran through death, and he returned victorious to life, rising from the dead. Following in his footsteps gives us an anchor for our souls. Because he lived, died, and rose, we have hope that God will also give us new life after death.

When the waters of life get rough, or when we can’t see the shore, let our hope in Jesus be the anchor for our souls.

Faithful God, we often feel like a boat that is far from shore. At those times, and at every time, give us the sure anchor of hope in you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## LIVING HOPE

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.*

—1 Peter 1:3

Christmas is a season of birth, remembering the new life of Jesus when he was born on the earth. But in our Advent preparation for Christmas, we can also think about the other end of the life spectrum, remembering that we will eventually die.

This is a frightening thought to many people, so we often try to avoid even saying the word death. Instead we often say that someone “passed away.”

But for Christians, death does not have to be frightening, because it does not get the last word. We might be frightened of the pain that can come before death, and we may grieve the deaths of our loved ones while we are still living. But death itself does not have to be frightening, because we have hope in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he promised that we too will be raised from death to eternal life. We have hope that even though our earthly lives will end, our lives with the Lord will never end.

Some Christian traditions refer to a funeral as “a service of witness to the resurrection.” That is a good reminder of the hope that Christians have in the face of death. Death does not have the last word; God does, and his Word is life!

God of life, thank you that in the resurrection of Jesus you have promised us the gift of eternal life with you. Give us hope in the face of death. In the name of our resurrected Lord we pray. Amen.

## MYSTERIOUS HOPE

*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him.*

—1 John 3:2

The women's Bible study at my church had a discussion about heaven. What will it be like? What will we be like when we are there?

The answers to these questions were as varied as the women in the room. Some of the musicians in the room said that we will sing praise to God all the time. One woman who was very active said that she couldn't imagine standing still all day long in order to sing.

In the end, we don't know exactly what heaven will be like, or what we will be like when Jesus returns to live with us in a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21). We can imagine it, but the Bible doesn't give many details about the life to come.

As 1 John 3:2 puts it, "What we will be has not yet been made known." We will only know

when the time comes—and not before then.

But the Bible does tell us clearly about something that is much more important than those details. It says that "when Christ appears, we shall be like him."

Because of God's love for us in Christ, we will actually become like Christ. That will allow us to enjoy communion with God.

Until then, we are already children of God, loved by him and called his own.

God our Father, thank you for calling us your children. Make us like Christ when he appears, so that we can be with you forever. Give us patience as we wait on this mysterious hope. Amen.

## UNSWERVING HOPE

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*  
—Hebrews 10:23

The book of Hebrews tells us how Jesus Christ makes possible a loving relationship between the holy God and his unholy people. Jesus has actually become our perfect priest, having made a sacrifice of himself in order that all God's people might be united with him. In today's verses the writer turns to talk about our response to God's gracious love in Christ. If God has done all this for us, how should we live?

One way is to live in hope—unswerving hope. But even here, as the writer turns to talk about what we should do, it's clear that unswerving hope is possible only because of the faithfulness of God. It is possible to hope in the promises of God because God keeps his promises. It is possible to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess because God, who promised the things we hope

for, is faithful to keep those promises.

The writer of Hebrews also counsels his readers to continue meeting together regularly and encouraging each other. Worshiping or gathering with other Christians is an important way to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. Other Christians are a valuable gift from God to encourage us in hope.

Do you meet regularly with other believers? If you don't, I urge you to find a Bible-believing church where you can be encouraged in your faith.

Holy God, help us to stay true to the hope you have given us in Jesus Christ. Surround us with other Christians who will encourage us in this life of hope. Amen.

## HOPE IN THE UNSEEN

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.*  
—Romans 8:26

One of the ways Jesus taught his disciples to pray was to ask God the Father, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). This is often a difficult prayer for us to pray honestly. How can I pray for God’s kingdom to come when it is a kingdom without selfishness and I tend to be a selfish person? God’s will is different from my will, and it is easier for me to pray that my own will be done than for God’s will to be done.

A person might hope and pray to get a new job that pays a lot of money. But God’s will might be that he get a lower-paying job that will help him grow in dependence on God.

That’s why we can be thankful for this promise: “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself inter-

cedes for us through wordless groans.” God the Holy Spirit wants what is best for us and for God’s kingdom. The Spirit is praying for us, interceding for us in ways that human language cannot even express. God knows what we need, and God cares for us, providing what is best for us.

Even when it is hard to pray, we can trust that the Spirit is praying on our behalf. We can live in the hope that God, by his Spirit, will work out his perfect will for our lives.

Holy Spirit, pray for us. We do not have the words we need, but we trust that you know everything we need. Your kingdom come, O Lord, and your will be done. Amen.



## HOPE OF THE WORLD

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope.*

—Romans 15:13

We get along well with people who have a lot in common with us or who are similar to us. But what about those who are in other groups, those who are different, those who make us uncomfortable, or even those who are our enemies? We'd rather stay away from them. We may even imagine that God doesn't love those people as much as he loves us.

Thankfully, God's ability to love is much broader than ours. God promised the people of Israel that they were his people and that he would love them. In Jesus Christ, God broadened and extended that love to people of all nations. Now the Gentiles, people who are not from the line of Israel, can have hope in the promises of God too.

I am a Gentile. I am so thankful that because of Jesus, God has included me in the love he

has for his people. Paul reminds us that this broad love of God empowers us to love all who are different from us. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Even when it doesn't come naturally, I pray that God will strengthen me to love people who are different from me. I pray that for you as well. After all, that's the kind of love God has for me, and that's what gives hope to us all.

God of all nations, thank you for offering salvation to all people around the world. Give me grace to love all who are different from me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## HOPE IN LIFE AND DEATH

*And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

—1 Thessalonians 4:17-18

In Advent we await Christ's return. After he rose from the dead, Jesus ascended to heaven. As he did, his disciples were promised that he would come back again (Acts 1:11).

The first Christians had hope in the fact that even though life was hard and they were often persecuted for their faith, Jesus would return to the earth to make everything right.

As they waited through the years for Jesus to come again, some of their fellow Christians died. They wondered, "What about my loved ones who died before Jesus' return? Will they be a part of the new life in Christ too?" They worried about their friends who had died before Jesus' coming again.

In 1 Thessalonians, we are assured that Jesus' second coming and his loving restoration of

creation is both for those who are living and for those who have already died.

We do not know exactly what it will look like when Jesus comes again, but we have the assurance that all who are in Christ will be with him, whether they live or die. Christians "do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." Instead, the second coming of Jesus gives us great hope that, whether we live or die, "we will be with the Lord forever."

Do you have this hope?

Coming Lord, we await your return with great hope. Thank you for the assurance that all who are in Christ will be with you forever. Grant comfort and hopeful assurance to those who grieve. Amen.

## CERTAIN HOPE

*"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah."*

—Jeremiah 33:14

In this month of December, we often hear the phrase "Christmas cheer." We're encouraged to have Christmas cheer as we sing carols, bake cookies, and shop for gifts. There can sometimes be good reason for cheer. But at other times we may feel that cheer is something on the surface, even something false, while underneath we feel sad or empty.

The prophet Jeremiah was in captivity in the courtyard of the king's guard when he spoke the words of our text for today. He was not a "Christmas cheer" kind of prophet; he spoke the sad truth about the world and about people's sin. But Jeremiah did have words of hope for the people of Israel and Judah. He said that God was going to keep his promises. He said that God's promise-keeping was as certain

as the sun rising every morning and setting every night.

For us today, Jeremiah offers something better than Christmas cheer. He offers Advent hope. He offers the assurance that God will keep all his promises.

As we wait for Christmas, we wait with joy and hope, which are deeper than just cheer. We wait, knowing that God will certainly keep his promises to save and renew us.

Lord our God, we thank you for the assurance that you always keep your promises. Give us hope as we wait for all your promises to be fulfilled. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## LONGING HOPE

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?  
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my  
God.*  
—Psalm 42:5

One way to describe our sin and our life in a sinful world is to say that we are thirsty. We thirst after God. We were created for communion with God, but because of sin we thirst for God.

Psalm 42 says this poetically: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

The psalmist remembers times when God has been faithful to him in the past. Those memories give him hope for the future. He trusts that God will quench his thirst.

We can have confident hope that God will make everything right. But the psalmist also lets us know that we can cry out to God with our longings and our pain. This can be a model for honest prayer, even for tell-

ing God about the ways we are disappointed or angry with him. God wants us to pray honestly, and God delights to hear our prayers.

A prayer like this psalm is not a sign of weak faith. In fact, it is a sign of strong faith. Psalm 42 is a prayer trusting that God cares for us in our weakness and forgives our sins. We can cry out to God with longing hope, praying that he will quench our thirst and knowing that he is near.

Dear God, we long for you as the deer longs for streams of water. We thirst for you. Draw us near to you and quench our thirst. We put our hope and trust in you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## PATIENT HOPE

*Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*

—James 5:8

When a child sees gifts under the tree with his or her name on them, it is hard to be patient for Christmas morning to come. When a person is hungry, it is hard to be patient for the next meal. When you are feeling the burden of a long to-do list, it is hard to be patient with people who hold you up or take extra time.

These are just small things to be patient about. What about adoptive parents waiting for a child, or a prisoner waiting to be released, or citizens in a war zone waiting for the conflict to end? In these situations, patience might seem almost impossible.

James calls us to be patient as we wait for the Lord's coming kingdom. In the book of James, patience does not imply an absence of eager longing. Patience doesn't mean that we

don't want the Lord's kingdom to come very soon. Instead, according to James, it means that we "stand firm" and that we "don't grumble against one another." He compares patience to a farmer planting a crop and waiting for the seasonal rains to come.

Patient hope means that we long and pray for God's kingdom, while at the same time we live with courage and compassion in a world that is still waiting for God's kingdom to come fully. May we live in such patient hope.

God of compassion and mercy, may your kingdom come soon. As we wait with eager longing, give us patience to stand firm with courage and compassion. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**DAILY HOPE**

*You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.* —2 Peter 3:11-12

I have a wise friend who asks, “How would I spend my time today if I knew that I were going to die tomorrow?”

He answers the question by saying he would live a rather ordinary day. He would go to work, eat dinner at home with his wife, and take a walk around his neighborhood. The end of his life would not be an occasion for bucket-list adventures or wild parties, but an occasion to relish the ordinary gifts of God and live in obedience to God’s daily call.

I don’t know if I’m wise or mature enough yet to answer that question the same way, but it is my prayer that I will grow into answering that question as my friend has done.

Every day of our lives is lived in the light of God’s coming. Even if we are going to live for many

more years, we are called to the same kind of obedience and gratitude as if today were our last day on earth.

God knows the day of your death. He holds the big picture of your life and death in his hands, and he promises to care for you.

Your part is to follow the Lord in daily obedience and confident hope. You can do this in gratitude for his provision for all of your days.

God, you hold our life and death in your hands, and you promise to care for us. Thank you for the hope we can have in you. Give us the wisdom to live in obedience and gratitude each day. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

## HOPE FOR RESTORATION

*"The LORD your God . . . will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."*  
—Zephaniah 3:17

In this season of Advent, we wait and hope for the coming of Jesus Christ. We hope in two ways: both for his second coming and for the celebration of Christmas. When we hope for Christmas, we remember that we needed a Savior and that God sent his Son, Jesus, to become human for our salvation. We hope to celebrate that first coming and the salvation we have in Jesus.

Because of the wrong that we do, God would be right to rebuke us. God would be right to punish us for our sin. But in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God offers us salvation instead. These words from the prophet Zephaniah point to the hope of salvation we have in Jesus. They point to the way God restores us in Jesus. Instead of rebuking us, Zephaniah says, the Lord rejoices over us with

singing. Like a mother singing a lullaby to her baby, or like the winner of a contest singing a victory song, God rejoices over us with singing.

The birth of Jesus is God's greatest love song for his people. In Advent we sing a song of hope because of this love song from God. We sing a song of hope because of the restoration God brings to us in Jesus.

Do you hear God's love song for you today?

Lord, we deserve your rebuke for the wrong we have done. Thank you for responding instead with a song of rejoicing over us. Give us hope because of your love for us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

## HOPE FOR PEACE

*They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.*  
—Isaiah 2:4

Those who follow Jesus hope for peace. The prophet Isaiah promises a Savior called the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6), and Jesus is called “our peace” (Ephesians 2:14).

Different groups of people within the Christian church have held different views about war, peace, and the role of government in our world. Some Christians believe that war is never the right choice, while others believe that sometimes there can be a just war. But not everyone agrees on what makes a war “just.”

What all followers of Jesus do agree on, however, is that war is tragic. War is not the way in which God means for people to engage with each other. Though it might be necessary at times, war is not a part of God’s good plan for creation.

We can give thanks for the hope we hear in Isaiah 2 about God’s peaceful kingdom. These words paint an interesting picture of weapons that have been turned into farming implements because they are no longer needed for war.

This is a picture of hope even in times of war. Weapons are still used for violent purposes, but one day they will have no purpose other than for growing good crops for food.

We pray that God will grant us wisdom now as we engage in the realities of war, and that God will grant us hope as we long for a future of peace.

Prince of Peace, we lament that war is still a reality in our world, and we pray that your peace will reign everywhere soon. In your name, Amen.



## HOPE FOR COMPLETION

*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*  
—Philippians 1:6

Some Christians can point to a single moment of conversion, a moment when they accepted Jesus into their heart and began to follow him. Other Christians grew to know Jesus so gradually that it is hard for them to point to just one moment of conversion. They talk about experiencing several different moments of conversion instead, or a lifelong process of conversion.

No matter how one's Christian faith began, it is never finished at that moment. Following Jesus is a lifelong process. When the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippian church, he prayed that their love would abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight. When the Philippians first became Christians, they began to love God and their neighbors, but they still had much more growing to do. And so do we.

The process of Christian growth should not be daunting or intimidating. God has promised to generate the growth within us. Even the process of growth comes to us as a gracious gift from God.

Our growth and progress as Christians will not reach completion in this life. No matter how mature we are, we can still grow more in Christlikeness and in love. But God promises that our love will continue to grow, and that when Christ comes again it will be complete.

Dear God, we praise you for the lifelong process of growth that you work in us by your Holy Spirit. Give us patient endurance as we grow to be more like you. Amen.

## FUTURE HOPE

*"I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*  
—Jeremiah 29:11

This verse could be printed inside a graduation card. It sounds encouraging and positive about the future. We might imagine that these words could be used to give encouragement to someone who has accomplished great things and is on their way to even greater things.

But the Lord was speaking through the prophet to people who were in exile. What's more, they had just heard the news that they would be in exile for many more years before they could return to their homeland. These were not people who had accomplished great things, and they were not people who were feeling positive about their future. They were probably feeling quite discouraged about the exile and about their dim prospects for the future.

To these people—and to us today—God does not promise

health and wealth and a great personal life. Instead he promises something so much deeper and better: God promises that he is saving the whole world and that we can be included in that salvation. Our hope for the future rests not in our own selves but in his power and love. In our own exile of sin, God gives us not just a graduation card but certain hope for a future held in his care.

Do you have that hope? Rest in it today!

God of the past, present, and future, we entrust ourselves to your care. We trust that in times of joy and in times of sorrow, our hope is in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## PROMISED HOPE

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.*

—Isaiah 9:2

Tomorrow is Christmas, the day when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. The prophet Isaiah tells us why the birth of Jesus is such great news for the world. This good news comes to people who were “walking in darkness.” But now those same people “have seen a great light.”

In the prophecy of Isaiah, darkness and light are used to represent sin and salvation. Without Christ, we are lost in the darkness of sin. But because of the birth of Jesus, we have hope in God’s light, his victory over sin and death. God promises us salvation in Jesus.

In our world and in our lives, it can sometimes feel as though the darkness is overwhelming. It can seem as though sadness and sin have the upper hand, while the light of goodness and joy are hidden in shadow.

But God’s Word promises us that light is coming to the world in Jesus. Isaiah promises a Savior who will rule the world. “He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” His reign will bring peace and joy to the world. “Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.”

Jesus rules the whole world, and his rule is one of peace. That news is light for a darkened world.

God of promise, we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus tomorrow. We thank you for the light of hope you have given us in him. In his holy name we pray. Amen.

## HOPE FULFILLED

*"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*  
—Luke 2:11

When Jesus was born, a great company of angels announced his birth. He was the Son of God, after all—he deserved a grand entrance into the world. They sang a glorious song, and they must have looked amazing as they shone in the night sky.

But the angels announced the Savior's birth to a group of peasant shepherds. They were not a very grand audience to receive the King of all nations, "the Messiah, the Lord." Nevertheless, the birth of Jesus was announced to lowly shepherds.

It's fitting that the birth of Jesus was announced to a lowly group of people. The purpose of the Messiah's coming was to bring God's love to lowly people like us and to fulfill the hopes and dreams of lowly people like us. The purpose of Jesus' coming was to restore lowly people

like us to relationship with God. So the shepherds were just the right kind of people to hear this news.

The world desperately needs God. We desperately need God. But no matter how hard we try, we cannot get to God on our own merit. The good news of Christmas is that God has come to us. The good news of Christmas is that in Jesus the hopes of the world are fulfilled.

Let's make this good news the focus of our Christmas celebration today!

Dear God, with the angels, we give you glory and praise. With the shepherds, we thank you that by your grace you have come to lowly people like us in the birth of Jesus. Amen.

## LIGHT OF HOPE

*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

—John 1:4-5

Christmas day is over, but its message is still with us.

In this season after Christmas, we rejoice in the fact that Jesus was born. We rejoice that God loved the world enough to send his only Son. We join our voices with the angels and the shepherds and with Christians throughout the centuries who have sung praise to God for the wonderful gift of Jesus' birth.

John describes Jesus by talking about "the Word." When he describes the event we celebrate at Christmas, he says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." John talks about the great good news of Jesus' birth, saying, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind."

But after sharing the good news of this light, John does not pretend that the darkness is com-

pletely gone. There is still darkness in the world. It's not literal darkness, but the darkness of sin and despair.

The truly good news in John's message, then, is that the light that has come into the world in Jesus is stronger than the darkness. The darkness cannot overcome the light that has come into the world in Jesus.

What wonderful hope this gives us! The light of God's love for the world in Jesus is so strong that nothing can take away its power.

God of light, give us hope in the power of Christ, whose light is so powerful that no darkness can overcome it. Thank you for the amazing gift of Jesus' birth. Amen.

## DAWN OF HOPE

*"The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death." —Luke 1:78-79*

John the Baptist pointed the way to Jesus. When John was an adult, he told people about Jesus and the salvation that Jesus would bring for them. When John was just a baby, his father Zechariah sang a song of praise to God. Zechariah sang because he knew that when John grew up, John would point the way to Jesus. Zechariah was thankful for God's gift of salvation in Jesus.

Zechariah's song of praise is recorded in our Scripture reading for today. Zechariah sings of the God who fulfills his promises. Jesus had not even been born yet when Zechariah sang, but Zechariah was sure of the promises of God. He sang praise to God already for the saving work God would do in Jesus.

As in other places in the Bible, this song compares salvation

to a light shining in the darkness. After the long night of sin, Zechariah rejoiced that the morning dawn of forgiveness and salvation had come in Jesus.

Our suffering and sin sometimes seem like a night that will never end, but Jesus is like the rising sun that comes in the morning and drives out the darkness. Our lives now are lived in the light of his love. Because of that wonderful hope, the light of Christ can "guide our feet into the path of peace."

Lord, we praise you for the light of Christ that has come into the world. By his light, guide our feet into the path of peace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## LOVING HOPE

*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*

—1 John 4:9

I have a painting by a local artist that hangs in my house. The painting features a colorful background behind the words "I love you. Pass it on."

I'm not sure whether the artist was thinking of God's love when he painted those words, but that's what I think of when I see the painting. The book of 1 John in the Bible makes clear that God's love is what empowers us and enlivens us to love others.

John says, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God," and, "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." When I read these words, I imagine God saying to me, "I love you. Pass it on."

The birth of Jesus that we celebrate in this Christmas season is the greatest gift of love that

God gives to us. God showed his love to us by sending his Son into the world to give us life.

Now we can pass it on. We can show the love of God to other people by putting others before ourselves. The love of God is the greatest Christmas gift we can give.

Our hope for a Savior was fulfilled in Jesus. We show our gratitude for God's love in Jesus by loving one another.

God loves you. Pass it on.

God of love, thank you for the great love you have shown us by sending your one and only Son into the world. Strengthen us to share that love with one another. Amen.

## FEARLESS HOPE

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment.*  
—1 John 4:18

We've been exploring the Christian virtue of hope this month. You could say that the opposite of hope is despair. I think you could also make a good case for saying that the opposite of hope is fear. Fear looks at the future with worry or dread, but hope looks at the future with eager expectation.

In today's verses we see that hope and love are closely related to each other. We can look to the future and hope because of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. Because we live in hope, we are free to love one another.

Because we are loved by Jesus, we are free from the punishment for our sins. Jesus has already paid the price for our sin on the cross.

We do not need to be afraid that God will punish us someday.

We do not need to be afraid of the future, because God has given us salvation and new life in Jesus Christ. God holds our future in his loving hands.

There are many things in this life that can tempt us to live in fear: the unknown, war, sickness, death. But no matter what happens, God promises that nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:39). Because of that love, we can live in hope, free from fear.

Do you have that hope in your life?

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we confess that we often feel afraid. Assure us of your love and of the hope we can have in you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



## HOPEFUL PURITY

*Jesus Christ . . . gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own. . . .*

—Titus 2:13-14

These verses begin with an assurance of God's grace in Jesus Christ: "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people."

That is an amazing declaration of grace. It means that we don't have to do anything to earn our salvation. Jesus Christ has already earned salvation for us, and he has offered it to us as a free gift of grace.

But that isn't the only thing God's grace provides for us. God's grace also forms us into people of holiness and purity.

It's not that we need to become holy and pure by our own efforts in order to earn salvation. Rather, the salvation that Jesus freely gives to us also teaches us and forms us into people who live holy lives out of gratitude. Salvation comes first, and holy living is a result.

The good news for people everywhere is that Jesus gives salvation to all who believe in him. But the good news gets even better than that. In addition to giving us salvation, Jesus gives us new life right now.

The gospel is not just about living with God after we die; it's also about living in holiness and purity with God right now. We can receive the grace of holy living as we follow Jesus each day.

Holy God, make us more and more like Jesus each day. Help us to live lives that are self-controlled and upright, showing our gratitude to you for your amazing grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## HOPE FOR SHALOM

*Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*  
—Psalm 85:9

Psalm 85 is a beautiful description of shalom, promised by God. Shalom is a Hebrew word that means “peace,” but our word peace is not enough to describe the wonder of shalom. Shalom includes vigorous well-being and abundant flourishing for all of God’s creation in the beauty of God’s presence, in a world that is in complete harmony, the way God intends it to be.

Psalm 85 looks back on times of experiencing God’s goodness. The memory of that time gives God’s people strength, even as they are experiencing a time that does not have shalom.

The psalm ends with hope for future shalom. We can be assured that this shalom is certain. Our hope for shalom can guide our life in the present too. Even now we can already experience some part of God’s

shalom. “Surely his salvation is near,” says the psalmist.

God’s shalom is so beautiful that the psalmist cannot come up with enough words to describe it. It is characterized by righteousness and peace, but both of those words are not enough to describe the beauty of God. To multiply the description, we read that “righteousness and peace kiss each other.” What an amazing God we serve!

We can have confident hope that God is bringing a kingdom in which righteousness and peace will fill the earth.

Lord, we long for the time when “righteousness and peace kiss each other.” Come quickly, Lord Jesus, in the fullness of your kingdom. All glory and praise be to you. Amen.



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