

Nov/Dec 2013

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

*God's Gift of*



**ALSO: LIFE**

Friends:

As the days grow colder in North America and the year draws to a close, we begin a time of holiday celebrations. Family gatherings, office parties, festive recipes, Christmas cards, postcards, photographs, and memory making all mark the season.



In December we celebrate the Christ of Christmas, who is “God with us,” the “reason for the season.” Yet the beauty of the season can also make us notice that not all is beautiful. Broken relationships, missing family members, a life that is not quite what we hoped for. But Christ is the ultimate Christmas gift, the gift of hope in the face of all things.

But first, in November, we explore the gospel of John and its theme of life restored through Christ Jesus. Life is stronger than death. Life in Christ literally conquers death, putting death to death, so to speak. Christ’s gift of life sets the stage for our longing for his coming!

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

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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Nov/Dec 2013

refresh, refocus, renew



**“Life”**  
**Harvey Stob**



**“God’s Gift of Hope”**  
**Calvin Aardsma**

**Managing Editor:** Eleanor Lamsma  
**Executive Editor:** Steven Koster

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re:FRAME MEDIA

# this month

## Life

**Harvey Stob**

**Ann Arbor, Michigan**

*In him was life . . . .*

*"I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full."*

*"I am the resurrection and the life."*

*These [things] are written that . . . you may have life . . . .*

—John 1:4; 10:10; 11:25; 20:31

We can state the major theme of John's gospel account in one word: *life*. In this New Testament book, the word *life* (or a derivative of it) occurs 51 times. It seems that our greatest enemy is death, and John wants us to celebrate Christ's ultimate defeat of death for our sake. But the defeat of death was not easy. And some of death's power is still evident within and around us.

During November we will step into the drama of Jesus' victory over death. May these meditations deepen our awareness and gratitude for all that our gracious Lord has done for us.

*Rev. Harvey Stob and his wife, Audrey, served as missionaries in Argentina for 11 years. They later served churches in Ohio, New Jersey, and Michigan before retiring in 2009. Harvey and Audrey have three children and eight grandchildren.*

**... AND THE WORD WAS GOD**

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*

—John 1:1-2

Many people know that the first three words of the Bible are “In the beginning” (Genesis 1:1). So after hearing the first three words of the book of John, many listeners would be reminded of Genesis and think they knew the rest of the sentence: “. . . God created the heavens and the earth.” But John had spent time with Jesus, the Son of God, and he knew Jesus was one with God and was with God there at the beginning. So he wanted his readers to know Jesus that way too. Before telling what Jesus said and did, even before writing about creation, John wanted his readers first of all to reflect deeply on Jesus himself.

To understand the stunning and breathtaking extent of God’s love for the world, we must understand who Jesus is.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you have already recognized that he is God. Write down what that means to you. Then worship him who forever “was with God” and is God. It’s a mystery we can’t fully understand, but we know it’s true!

If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, know that you are about to meet and be challenged by someone out of this world, and yet part of it.

Dear Jesus, impress on us the truth that you have always been God, enjoying full life with the Father and the Holy Spirit. You didn’t have to take on our humanity and be criticized and rejected and killed. But you did that because you love us. May your love amaze and humble us today. Amen.

**IN THE BEGINNING, LIFE; AT THE END, LIFE**

*In him was life . . . .*

—John 1:4

John has already told us that before we and the earth and the galaxies were formed, “the Word was with God” (John 1:1). He was with God from before the beginning of time. There was never a time when he was not.

John also tells us that “in him was life.” Life was there, in him, in the beginning. That means there never was a time when life was not; it always was. Life has no beginning.

Does it have an end?

Death, however, had a beginning. There was a time when death did not exist for human beings, but then we turned our backs on God, rejected him, and went our own way. Because of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin (see Genesis 3), death is a grim reality for us all.

Death is a terrible, threatening cloud that hangs over us.

Death tears into life; it rips up the deep, loving relationships we have with our spouses, our children, our friends. Death ends much that we cherish and desire in our life on this earth.

That is why our hearts race when we hear Jesus say, “I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

Jesus comes to put an end to death and to give us life—full, exuberant, joy-filled, never-ending life.

Isn’t that what we all most deeply need and want?

Life-giving Lord, come; breathe your life into me, into my home, into my relationships. Come, and, through me, bring life to others. Amen.

## PEOPLE LOVED DARKNESS INSTEAD OF LIGHT

*The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.*  
—John 1:9

In the first few verses of his book, John directed our gaze into a mysterious state before creation in which the Word was with God, full of creative life. Then, in today's verse, John focuses our attention on the eternal Word coming into our reality: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world."

But then something puzzling happened. Although the eternal Word—the light we so desperately need—came into the world, people refused to be guided by it! The light of life had come, but people didn't want to step into that light. Why?

What is there about the darkness that we like? Why do violence and death attract us, filling our TV and movie screens? What is there about the light that threatens us?

If I step into the light, I know that my actions, attitudes, values, and goals will all be out in the open, for God to see, to evaluate, to judge. And I feel threatened by that scrutiny.

But God sees them anyway. His light disinfects, allows life to grow, illumines the road, and makes things come alive with colors and shapes. Light and life are companions. We need God's light in order to live!

God's light also guides us so that we can share it with others. We can be lights in this sin-darkened world. We can "become children of God."

Grant us the courage, Lord, to come into your light, to be cleansed and given real life. Help us today to walk in and by your light and to share it with others. Amen.

## A STUNNING DECLARATION

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

—John 1:14

This is a stunning, breathtaking declaration. It first announces that a crossing of the great divide—between heaven and earth, between eternity and time—took place. God's Son came to earth to dwell among us. As God had walked in the garden in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8), so God's Son came in the wearying heat of human struggle to live with us.

What is it about God that he loves us so much and so strongly desires to be with us?

This declaration states that the Word became flesh. This means he became fully human, like us, except that he was without sin (Hebrews 2:17; 4:15). By assuming "our ignoble and base flesh," as the theologian John Calvin put it, the Word came to know our sorrows; he bore our pain and suffering; he even

took on himself the punishment for our sin (Isaiah 53:3-6). Flesh is what we are. As sinful flesh, we desperately needed help, so flesh is what the eternal Word became!

In Genesis 3 we are told that Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, and in their disobedience they experienced disaster and eventual death. But in Christ, the Word, God was willing to become like us so that all could be made right again.

What a remarkable God! What amazing love!

We bow before your creative power, O God. We admire the beauty of all you have made. And we are astonished at your desire to be with us. Thank you for that desire, for it is our salvation. Amen.

**“LIKE A LAMB TO THE SLAUGHTER”**

*“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”*

—John 1:29

In today’s verses, John the disciple writes about John the Baptist and his encounter with Jesus as the promised Messiah. What John the Baptist says goes to the center of Jesus’ mission and reveals the astounding depth of Jesus’ love. He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

John the Baptist likely had the ancient prophecy of Isaiah in mind as he described Jesus as the Lamb of God. About 650 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had written about a special Servant of the Lord, a promised deliverer who would establish justice and peace for all people (see Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). But this servant would also suffer. Isaiah wrote, “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . He was led like a lamb to the

slaughter,” making “his life an offering for sin.”

John the Baptist saw that Jesus, the Word, the Son of God, would be that lamb of sacrifice. The Word, so full of life, would die like a helpless lamb. Why? So that he could take sin and death away from us and give us new freedom and abundant life.

Be amazed again—and thankful—for all that the Word who became flesh has done for us!

Jesus, your sacrifice to take away our sin is an expression of a love far greater than we can understand. But we know how much we need your love, and we gratefully receive it. Thank you for being the Lamb of God! We pray in your name. Amen.

## JESUS' FIRST WORDS

*Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"*

—John 1:38

In the gospel of John, Jesus is quickly identified as God's chosen one, the deliverer promised in the prophecy of Isaiah. So John the Baptist told his followers that if they wanted to meet the Lamb of God, they would have to go after him.

Jesus was often going somewhere—to Jerusalem, to Galilee, through Samaria, to the cross, to the presence of his heavenly Father. In today's reading, he was "passing by," so if people wanted to meet with him, they had to get up and follow after him.

When Jesus noticed John the Baptist's disciples coming after him, he turned around and let them catch up. (He'll let any of us catch up, won't he?) Then he welcomed them with a question: "What do you want?" What a simple but disarming question!

These are the first words that Jesus speaks in John's gospel. And they are words that burn through so much that is superficial; they are words that invitingly, gently but firmly, clear everything away so that a genuine, fruitful encounter might take place. "What do you want?" Jesus asks. "What are you looking for?" "What is it you seek?"

We might have many questions to ask Jesus, but he wants to know something from us first: "What do you want?"

How would you answer him?

Thank you, Jesus, for asking me a question I must answer—not just once but continually. May my answer include renewing my commitment to follow you. Please guide everything I do today. Amen.

## THE TEACHER FROM GOD!

*"No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

—John 3:3

Nicodemus was intrigued by all that Jesus was doing. So he went to talk with Jesus. "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God," he politely began. And Jesus seemed to agree, for he went on to teach Nicodemus things from God.

But the first thing Nicodemus heard from this teacher threw him completely off guard. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

Nicodemus certainly looked for the coming of God's kingdom—every pious Jew did. He believed that God was coming, and that everyone would see his coming. But Jesus told Nicodemus that he wouldn't see God's kingdom at all unless he was born again—not in the sense of becoming a baby once more, but in being "born

from above." (The Greek word for "again" also means "from above.") Jesus means that we need new eyes if we are to see God's presence, new ears to hear his voice, and a new heart to love and obey the Lord. We need to be reborn, this time from above, by the power of God's Spirit.

For me, this is an ongoing project. (See 2 Corinthians 3:18.) Each morning I need to pray for eyes and ears and a heart to see and hear and respond to God. I'm thinking you do too. Would you join me?

You're right, Jesus. I need different eyes and ears and a new heart to live with you and for you today. Grant them to me, I pray. Amen.

## WHO KNOWS THE TRUTHS OF HEAVEN?

*"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man."  
—John 3:13*

Earlier in their conversation together, Nicodemus correctly identifies Jesus as “a teacher who has come from God” (John 3:2). And Jesus teaches Nicodemus and us a few things “from God.”

Heaven and earth are the two dimensions of created reality. Earth we know fairly well—it’s the “physical stuff” dimension.

But heaven we don’t know so well. Sin has clouded our understanding of it, has cut off our access to it. Heaven is the non-material, spiritual side of reality. We sense that it’s there, and we yearn to know its truths about God, about the true purpose and meaning of life. Who will tell us about heavenly things?

“I will,” says Jesus. “I know heaven; I come from there. No one else has—not the Buddha, not Krishna, not Carl Sagan, nor

any other dreamer. I know the truths of heaven.”

Do you want to know what is on God’s mind and in God’s heart? Listen to Jesus.

Do you want to know what God is like? Jesus will show you.

Do you want to know how you can become friends with God? Spend time with Jesus, and you’ll find out.

Do you want to know the truth about life and death? Witness Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Teach me, Jesus, for I have so many questions about God, about the purpose and meaning of life. Enlighten my mind with your truth. Amen.

## WE MUST BE BORN AGAIN; HE MUST DIE

*“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”*  
—John 3:14

As Jesus and Nicodemus talk together, Jesus speaks of a time when the Jewish people were in the desert making their way to the land God had promised them. They bitterly complained about their situation and, at one campsite, poisonous snakes bit many of them, and many people died. When they cried out for help, God told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up high on a pole for everyone to see. All the people had to do was look at the bronze snake and they would be healed. (See Numbers 21:4-9.)

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,” Jesus said. As we can guess, Jesus was referring to his death on a cross. He had come from heaven, and that made him extraordinary. But in coming to earth to give us new life, he had

to die. “In him was life” (John 1:4), but soon he would lay down his life to free us from the curse of sin and death (John 10:14-18, 27-28).

He had to die in order to save us. There was no other option, for death had us in its grip; death was our greatest enemy. Jesus had to defeat death in order to free us from it. And to do that, Jesus had to enter into death, in our place—and break out of it alive.

Like the children of Israel in the wilderness, we must look to him and be saved!

Will you do that?

Gracious Savior, we know what you had to do. Help us to do what we must—that is, look to you and believe in you—to be freed by you. Amen.

## AN ASTOUNDING TRUTH

*“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . . .”*

—John 3:16

This is a statement that we on earth would hardly dare to make, if Jesus hadn't said it first. For not only did our sin put a wall between us and God and between earth and heaven, but it spread its deadly poison into every part of earthly existence. The reality of sin's horrific, deadly power is something we don't have to debate: war, genocide, death of innocent children, broken relationships, pollution, waste, destruction of species, and on, and on.

But the truth, the astounding truth known in heaven and now revealed on earth, is that God loves this world—not the sin, not the violence, not the foolishness that destroys so much—but the forests and mountains, rivers and oceans, birds and flowers, animals and all people: men and women, boys and girls. God loves this world so much that

he sent his Son—not to destroy it and us, but to destroy death and to bring new life—beautiful, abundant, never-ending life for all of creation to enjoy.

Spend a few moments today thinking about the fact that God includes you, your children, friends, and neighbors in his great love and that his greatest desire is that you be filled with his life.

“Sing to the LORD a new song . . . all the earth. . . . Proclaim his salvation day after day.”

Thank you, gracious God, for loving your world and for including me in it. May I see everyone around me as included in your love. And may we together care for your creation and be filled with your life and love. Amen.

## THE GIFT OF GOD

*"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."*  
—John 4:10

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus was willing to break three taboos. First, there was an ethnic standard that Jews did not speak with Samaritans. Second, there was a gender standard in Jewish culture that men did not speak with women in public. And, third, according to religious laws, Jesus would be unclean if he used the drinking cup of a Samaritan. Why would Jesus be willing to break those "laws"? Because God had a gift for the Samaritan woman.

"If you knew the gift of God . . ." Amazing!

Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away . . ." (how we need him to take away all that is wrong within us!). And Jesus gives (how we need him to give us life-restoring water)!

"If you knew the gift of God . . ." Jesus didn't talk about God's judgment (though he knew everything about this woman—see 4:16-18). Instead he told her of the gift that God had for her.

What a powerful, loving way to present God's love and to share with people who do not yet know Jesus: "God has a gift for you! Can I tell you about it?" Are you prepared to say that to someone today?

Thank you, loving God, for the gift you have given me. May my desire be the same as yours: that my neighbors, coworkers, and everyone else around me may receive your gift too. Amen.

## THE CROSSOVER

*"Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me . . . has crossed over from death to life."*  
—John 5:24

Today's verses show Jesus in trouble. The Jewish leaders wanted to kill him because he was "making himself equal with God."

As Jesus responded to his critics, he gave them even more reasons to judge him harshly. He claimed (and of course had) two privileges that only God could have: the power to raise people from the dead and the right to be our final judge.

Now, people believed that God would raise the dead and judge all of humanity in a future "last day." But Jesus announced, in effect, "That day is now!" He said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."

Note the tenses of the verbs in this declaration. Listening

to Jesus, believing and trusting God today, means that we are alive forever and that we are not condemned. We have—already—crossed over from death to life!

In Christ, we can live today gratefully free of any threat of judgment. We can live, right now, joyfully free of the fear of death. For we have crossed over from death to life.

How will this influence our talk and attitudes today?

Dear Jesus, help me understand the impact of what you have said. May all that I do and say today reflect the fact that I have already "crossed over," by your amazing grace. Amen.

## WHAT DOES JESUS WANT US TO DO?

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven."*

—John 6:51

What a daring claim for Jesus to make! But what he says later is almost outrageous: "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

Who is Jesus? Bread. What does he want us to do? Eat him! Why? So he can get inside of us.

Jesus knows all about temptation, betrayal, rejection, persecution. He knows about sickness and death and family tragedy. So he wants to dwell inside us, strengthening and guiding us so that we will live as he did, fully in love with God and with people.

Jesus also expects us to be faithful disciples, and he knows how difficult that can be. People may ridicule us, hate us, persecute us, even kill us. We will be tempted to deny knowing him. So he wants to get inside of us and empower us to remain

committed to him and to his cause.

That cannot happen unless we eat and drink God's Word. That reminds us of the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion), but the Supper only makes visible what we are to do every day. We are to feed on Jesus Christ, the bread of life, allowing him to nourish and strengthen us from the inside. We are to drink from him, allowing him to restore and refresh us with his power.

Gracious Lord Jesus, come inside of me with your power, your obedience, your forgiveness, and your love. Be my nourishment and my strength today. Amen.

## THE FREEDOM OF JESUS

*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*

—Galatians 5:1

We love freedom, don't we! In free nations we enjoy religious freedom, political freedom, freedom of expression, freedom to make our own decisions, and much more. Thank God for freedom!

Jesus, too, values freedom—but it's a much deeper freedom: freedom from fear, from anxiety, from evils that can oppress and destroy us.

Can you think of anyone who lived as freely as Jesus did? He had the freedom to embrace people whom others wouldn't even touch. He had the freedom to speak the truth to powerful people who wanted him dead. Jesus was free—

- so free of prejudices that he could talk with a Samaritan woman, heal the servant of a hated Roman soldier, eat with prostitutes and tax-collectors.

- so free of hatred that he could love his enemies, even those who were executing him.
- so free of vindictiveness that he could forgive his friends who betrayed and abandoned him.

Jesus was free . . .

- to love and obey God in a religiously, socially, and politically tumultuous time.
- to love us to the point of dying for us.
- to do extraordinary things for the kingdom of God!

Are we that free? If the Son sets us free, we can be!

I am your disciple, Jesus; teach me to live freely, as you did. Free me of any habits and attitudes that keep me from honoring you, and help me hold on to your teaching and your example. Amen.

## AT FIRST JESUS DIDN'T COME

*When he heard that Lazarus was sick, [Jesus] stayed where he was two more days.*  
—John 11:6

This story is about the giver of life doing battle with the destroyer of life. Jesus, the Lord of life, has shown that he can heal all kinds of diseases. So his friends, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is sick. He is deathly ill, and Jesus responds to this challenge from death itself.

But Jesus doesn't respond right away. Mary and Martha surely thought that Jesus would come and heal Lazarus. He healed people before; certainly he would heal his friend, wouldn't he?

But Jesus doesn't come. Lazarus dies. What a tragedy for Mary and Martha! Jesus waits two days before going to their house. Why? Because he knows he isn't going there to confront an illness. He has already shown that he can overcome illnesses. Telling his disciples that this is

“for God's glory,” Jesus knows he is going to Bethany to confront death.

We know Jesus could have prevented Lazarus's death, if that's what the Father had wanted. But in this case, following his Father's will as usual, Jesus knew that this challenge was about defeating Lazarus's death.

And death is our greatest enemy, isn't it?

It is wonderful that Jesus heals us of many illnesses! But ultimately he defeats our death—and that is the Savior we need.

Thank you, Lord, for so often healing us and granting our requests. But help us understand we need you even more to defeat death for us, to give us eternal life. Amen.

## AN ANGRY LORD AT THE DEATH OF A FRIEND

*[Jesus] was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.*

—John 11:33

When faced with the death of their brother Lazarus, both Mary and Martha said the same words to Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” They may well have said something like that (several times) to each other earlier. Was that a simple, elegant statement of faith? Or were they complaining to Jesus?

Jesus tried to answer Martha, but she didn’t really understand what he was getting at.

Jesus didn’t even attempt a reply to Mary. Instead, we get a glimpse into his heart, and we see an emotional Lord and an angry Savior. Seeing Mary and her friends weeping, Jesus “was deeply moved in spirit and troubled”—and the word for “deeply moved” means “angry.” What would Jesus be angry about?

Some suggest that Jesus foresaw his own approaching death and was shaken by that. But most interpreters understand Jesus’ anger to be evoked by the effects of death and its power to destroy someone he loved. God loves life; God brings life into existence in beautiful ways. Death destroys what God creates and loves. And here, confronting death, Jesus was indignant, angry.

Aren’t you glad we have a God who gets angry at what kills us?

Thank you, Creator God, for being emotionally involved in what we do and in what is done to us. Thank you for getting angry at whatever does us harm. Help us to work against such things also. In your name, Amen.

## HE WILL CALL OUR NAME!

*Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"*

—John 11:43

There must have been a fairly large crowd at Lazarus's tomb, for many people had come to grieve with Martha and Mary. But they wouldn't have expected something extraordinary to happen. What could happen in a cemetery?

But then Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Would you have stepped forward to help? A few people obviously did, for the tomb was soon opened. Then every eye must have been on Jesus. There must have been a tense, nervous silence as they waited to see what he would do.

And what Jesus did was look up and speak aloud with his heavenly Father. He wanted to make clear that he and the Father were in this together. In the sorrow, in the anger, and in the battle against death, they were together—one.

Then Jesus spoke. But he didn't address "death" or Satan or "the darkness." He didn't dignify the enemy by speaking to it. Instead he addressed his friend: "Lazarus, come out!" And Lazarus, one of us, heard Jesus' voice and came out of his tomb! Then his life-filled body was restored to his loved ones.

Jesus had healed people, fed people, and walked on water. But this! Jesus also raised the dead!

Jesus will also call our names and bring us out of death—into life that will never end. "Do you believe this?" (John 11:26).

I know, Jesus, that one day you will call my name, and I too will walk out of death into glorious, full life in your eternal kingdom. Thank you! Thank you, Lord! Amen.

## WASHING JESUS' FEET

*The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

—John 12:3

It was “six days before the Passover,” and Jesus knew he would soon lay down his life as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He would spend much of his time that final week with his closest followers, talking to them, preparing them for what was soon coming. Among all that happened during those final days, John tells us about two special dinners.

The first dinner was hosted by Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. This dinner was given to honor Jesus.

While the guests reclined at the table, Mary took some expensive perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet. She then loosened her hair, thinking only of Jesus and all he had done, and without saying a word, wiped the excess perfume off his feet with

her hair. The fragrance of that loving gesture filled the house.

At this dinner Jesus is honored and loved, and he accepts Mary's extravagant love, genuinely given. What an intensely beautiful moment that must have been for both of them!

There is a time to wash the feet of Jesus, isn't there? A time to express our gratitude, our love, our devotion—extravagantly! There is a time to fill the whole house with the fragrance of our love.

Ask yourself today, What might I do that would express my love for Jesus?

Holy Spirit, what gift can I give Jesus today to express my gratitude and love? Lord, may I give you my life, my all. Amen.

## JESUS WASHES OUR FEET

*"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."*

—John 13:8

Jesus' death is only a day away, and he is again at dinner with his followers. But this time he is the host.

Knowing what will soon happen to him, Jesus does something for his disciples. He gets up from the table, wraps a towel around his waist, gets a pitcher of water, and begins to wash his disciples' feet. He wants to get the dirt off, and he takes the role of a servant to do it.

When Jesus gets to Peter, he objects: "You shall never wash my feet!" Peter knows that it should be the other way around.

"Unless I wash you," Jesus replies, "you have no part with me." In effect, Jesus is saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no part in my death, no part in my resurrection, no part in my kingdom of life! I've got to wash you, Peter!"

There is a time when Jesus must wash our dirt away. There is a time when we have to let Jesus do what he came to do.

He then tells us to wash each other's feet, to serve one another and point people to him, the Savior who gives us new life. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19); we forgive because he first forgave us (Colossians 3:13); we serve because he first served us. He does all this first, freeing us to follow his example. Because he does it first, he can expect us to do it also.

Jesus, wash us completely, that we may have new life in you. And help us to serve others for your sake, pointing them to you and to the life you give. Amen.

## I'M COMING BACK!

*"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."*  
—John 14:3

In John 1:14 we read the good news that Jesus, the divine Word, came to dwell with us. And today we see its glorious result: we will dwell with God.

Jesus was about to leave his disciples, and that would cause them much anxiety and fear. But he was quick to encourage and assure them with words of hope: "I will come back and take you to be with me."

What a deeply personal, loving thing for Jesus to say! Jesus doesn't want to spend eternity without us, his disciples, his friends. He is determined to take us to his Father's house!

And the Father will smile and say, "Welcome! Come in; enjoy yourselves! Let's celebrate, for your salvation is complete, just as we intended from long ago!"

Together with the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit have been

working to save us and to restore all things that were corrupted since the fall into sin, including the creation itself. From the call of Abraham, to the formation of his people Israel, to the coming of Jesus through that nation, and on to the formation of his church led by the Holy Spirit, God has been shaping history and building his kingdom so that all who call on his name may be saved to live forever with him (see Genesis 3; 12; 2 Samuel 7; Joel 2:28-32; Matthew 1; Acts 1-2).

God with us, and we with God—the way it's supposed to be.

Jesus, it's humbling to know that you want us to live with you forever. Come back soon, so that with you, the Father, and the Spirit, we can enjoy full life together. Amen.

**“YOU BELIEVE IN GOD; BELIEVE ALSO IN ME”**

*“I am the way and the truth and the life.”*

—John 14:6

Knowing that he was about to be killed, Jesus said to his disciples: “You believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1). In other words, “Don’t stop believing in me, even though you will see things happen that will make you wonder if I really am the Messiah.” Then Jesus said these remarkable words: “I am the way and the truth and the life”:

- I am the way, even though you will see me on a cross. Don’t stop believing in me.
- I am the truth, even though my enemies will try to make all I’ve said seem like a lie. Don’t stop believing what I’ve told you.
- I am the life, even though you will see me die. Trust me!

The disciples were challenged to believe those words. We are too.

Jesus is the way, even though his way demands that we surrender our ways, even though it may lead us to die for his sake.

Jesus is the truth, even though at times we wonder if what he promised is ever going to come, even while others say his words are out of date and his ethics are no longer relevant.

Jesus is the life, even when around us and in us death can still seem overpowering.

The apostles and the early church lived and died with Jesus’ claim on their hearts. We can and should too.

Dear Jesus, help me not only to accept your claim to be “the way and the truth and the life” but also to live and die with it engraved on my heart. Amen.

**“I AM THE VINE”**

*“Remain in me, as I also remain in you.”*

—John 15:4

The Old Testament speaks of Israel being a vine that God brought out of Egypt, planted in the soil, watered . . . and waited for the fruits of justice and righteousness to appear. It never came. (See Psalm 80:8; Isaiah 3:14-15; 5:1-7.)

In the New Testament, Israel is no longer the vine, but we followers of Jesus are not the vine either. We don't have the vitality, the strength of life within us, to grow and be fruitful any more than Israel did.

But Jesus does. “I am the true vine,” he says. “I have the strength and fullness of life sufficient to produce the fruits of righteousness and justice that God loves to see.”

Jesus is the vine! This means that all we have to be are branches! That we can handle, can't we? “All you have to do,” says Jesus,

“is remain in me. Remain attached to me so that my truth, my love, my compassion, my life can flow into you. Then you will produce the fruit that God loves to see!”

“Remain in me” is such a gracious phrase. Staying connected to Jesus is what we must do to produce fruit for his kingdom, the fruit of life. We do that by listening to him, watching him, and living by the power of his Spirit working in us. So the fruit we produce is the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of love, the fruit of full life (see Galatians 5:22-25; 1 Corinthians 13). And we remain in him because he remains in us.

Thank you, Father, for grafting me onto the true vine. May the life of Jesus flow into me and through me to others. Amen.

## GRANTED AUTHORITY!

*"Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."* —John 17:3

In this deeply personal prayer we hear Jesus acknowledge the fact that God gave him "authority over all people." Authority to demand this or that of us? No, authority to give us eternal life.

That should forever fill us with wonder and great joy, and it should make us eager to tell others who don't know it yet.

Jesus has the authority to give us life! And we know what kind of person he is—compassionate, never stingy, willing to give life to anyone who comes to him.

All we have to do is ask for it. It's his to give. To give us life is why Jesus came.

And it is always the Father giving to Jesus so that Jesus can give to us. We have a giving God; we have a giving Savior. And what they give us is no less

than beautiful, abundant, never-ending life.

This teaching stands at the center of our faith, reflecting the character of God—that is, love (1 John 4:7-21; see also 1 Corinthians 13). This is the cause of our joy, the source of our hope, the melody of our lives. God is love, and his Son loved us all the way into death and through it to bring us into full life on the other side.

This is God's glory; this is Jesus' glory. This is our salvation.

What have you been given by God through Christ our Savior that you can give to others?

Dear Jesus, we joyfully submit to your authority, knowing that by it you give us life. What a wonderful Savior! Amen.

**“I PRAY FOR THEM . . .”**

*“They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.”*

—John 17:16

Jesus is about to be crucified, but he’s not concerned about himself. He’s concerned about his disciples.

Jesus has been preparing his followers for what will soon happen, but he knows they do not understand much of what he has said. He knows that his arrest and then his crucifixion will shake their faith in him. He also knows that, even with their faith strengthened after his resurrection, they will face a hostile world. So Jesus prays for them.

Jesus notes that he is praying not for the world but for his disciples. He knows that the only hope for the world is that it change, that it cease to be self-absorbed and recognize him as Lord. And the world will need the testimony of Jesus’ followers in order to do that.

We disciples are not to affirm the world’s values but to challenge them. We are not to help the world meet its goals; we are to present to the world God and his goals.

Jesus prays that just as he glorified his Father by the way he lived and died, so we might glorify him today. He prays that we may be protected and made holy as he sends us out into the world.

May we glorify you today, Jesus, by all we say and do. May we love this world as you do, challenging its people and institutions to recognize you as Lord. Protect us, Lord, and help us to serve you faithfully. Amen.

## UNION WITH GOD

*"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."*

—John 17:20-21

Jesus has insisted throughout his ministry that his words are simply his Father's words, and that his deeds are the deeds his Father wants done. His love, his compassion, his judgments are precisely the love, the compassion, and the judgments of his Father. Jesus and his Father speak and act as one.

Now Jesus pulls us into that divine unity: "I in them and you in me!"

- Jesus living in us—his mind, our mind; his will, our will; his goals, our goals.
- The Father living in Jesus—his words, desires, compassion, and truth, all the same in Jesus.
- The Father in Jesus, Jesus in you and me—united in love, in purpose, and in life!

What a thought! The Father, the Son, and all of us believers liv-

ing and loving as one. What a challenge!

We divide and separate so quickly, and we justify our divisions so self-righteously. But if Jesus prays that we will be one, shouldn't that be our prayer as well? And if we aren't working on that, shouldn't we confess our sin and pray and work to change?

United with the Father and the Son, we will be united with each other. As A. W. Tozer wrote in *The Pursuit of God*, "One hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other."

Unite us, Lord, in your will, your love, and your truth so that, through us, the world may recognize you as the living, loving God. In Christ, Amen.

## A MATTER OF IDENTITY

*Jesus . . . asked them, "Who is it you want?"*

—John 18:4

Jesus knows which questions to ask. When two of John the Baptist's disciples followed after him, he asked, "What do you want?" (John 1:38). That's a question every person must hear and answer.

In today's reading, Jesus asks a similarly important question. Armed soldiers, led by Judas, come to arrest Jesus. He goes out to meet them and asks, "Who is it you want?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they reply.

The person standing before them is Jesus of Nazareth, of course. But he has another name too. "I am he," he says, identifying himself with the God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush ("I AM WHO I AM"—Exodus 3:14). And in the disarming presence of God the soldiers draw back and fall to the ground.

Again Jesus asks them, "Who is it you want?" Now they have a choice. Do they want Jesus of Nazareth, whom they can arrest, beat, and kill? Or do they want "I AM," before whom they cannot stand but must recognize as Lord?

Who is it we want? Do we want someone we can study and admire for a while, and then go on with our lives? Or do we want "I AM," the one true God, who has power over all things and yet loves us so fiercely that he came to die for us to give us new life? Will we bow and worship him? Will we serve as he calls us to?

Jesus, we confess that you are God with us. May we listen to you, receive the life you give, and obey all that you have commanded us. Amen.

## JESUS FINISHES HIS WORK

*"It is finished."*

—John 19:30

One of the last things Jesus said on the cross was "It is finished." To whom was Jesus talking when he said that?

- To himself? Was this a cry of terror, something like "This is it! I'm going to die! It's all over!"
- To the devil, his enemy who fought him all his life? Was Jesus surrendering here, saying to the devil, "Yes, it's finished; you win!"
- To God, his Father? Was Jesus saying, "You failed me; you didn't protect me. It's over between us—finished!"
- To you and me? Was Jesus saying, "Sorry about this. I tried, but I guess all I've said and done ends here."

Earlier, in John 17:4, Jesus had said to the Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do." What work was that?

1 John 3:8 tells us: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." And the devil's work is death, suffering, broken relationships, evil of every kind.

So when Jesus said, "It is finished," to whom was he speaking?

- To the devil? Yes, it's the shout of a conqueror!
- To God? Yes, it's the exclamation of a mission accomplished!
- To us? Yes, it's the good news that the battle over death has been won for us!

With deepest gratitude, Lord Jesus, we hear your cry that your mission is accomplished, our victory won. We confidently wait for your victory to be fully present at your return, when all will be well. Amen.

**STUCK IN GRIEF, PULLED INTO JOY**

*“Woman, why are you crying?”*

—John 20:13

Mary stood outside Jesus’ tomb, crying. Her Lord and friend had died, and a real and legitimate grief had come over her.

But Mary’s grief entombed her. It blurred her vision so that when she saw the stone rolled away from Jesus’ tomb, she assumed that someone had stolen his body. And when she saw Jesus standing in front of her, she thought he was a gardener.

Jesus, fully alive, faced a friend who was blinded by so much grief that she couldn’t see him.

Perhaps Jesus spoke Mary’s name softly, gently. But he might well have said it forcefully to shake her out of her grief: “Mary!”—as if to say, “Get a grip on yourself! I’m alive! I’ve conquered death. I’ve broken its grip. Mary! Leave the tomb behind and come into the joy of new life!”

Sometimes grief or other harsh realities can overwhelm us so much that we forget Jesus is alive. But he has conquered death—our death, our loved ones’ deaths—and our future is safe in his hands.

We legitimately grieve the deaths of people we love, and we struggle with the cruelties of injustice and corruption in this world, but we do so knowing that our grief will one day turn to joy. What a call to thankful living!

Christ has risen, and one day he will return again!

Jesus, may the truth of your resurrection calm our spirits. May your victory fill us all with gratitude, courage, and hope. In your name, Amen.

**STUCK IN FEAR, SENT OUT WITH PEACE**

*"Peace be with you!"*

—John 20:19

On Easter Sunday Jesus' disciples gathered in a room and locked the door. They were afraid that the people who had killed Jesus would want to get them too.

But Someone came in anyway, as if the door weren't even there! And the one who came in was Jesus! He said, "Peace be with you!" And he might well have meant, "Peace be with you, you scared, door-locking disciples."

Then he showed them his hands and side. For on them were the scars of battle between life and death, between God and the enemy. Jesus had taken everything the enemy could throw his way. And there he was, alive! "The disciples were overjoyed."

Then Jesus said again, "Peace be with you!" And he gave his followers a mission: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

Where was Jesus sending them? Into the world, where people live and die. Into the world, where men and women are easily overwhelmed and defeated. Into the world, where it's hard to experience true peace.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples hiding in locked rooms; he wants us out in the world with the message of life on our lips and acts of life in our hands. And as we go, he says, "Peace be with you!"

Resurrected Lord, grant us your peace so that, in a world of violence, struggle, and death, we may confidently claim and put into practice the truth of your victory over sin and death. Amen.

**STUCK IN GUILT, RESTORED TO DISCIPLESHIP**

*[Jesus] said to him, "Follow me!"*

—John 21:19

On the night Jesus was arrested, Peter had revoked his discipleship. Under threat, he had denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus. When he realized what he had done, Peter went out and wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75). He was overwhelmed by shame and guilt.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the Lord asked Peter a question. But the question wasn't "Why did you abandon me when I needed you?" or "Why didn't you have the guts to stick up for me?" It was simply "Do you love me?"

Jesus had died on the cross for Peter's sins. What he wanted to know now was whether Peter loved him. Peter's sins were in the past; Peter's love would shape his future.

When Peter said, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," Jesus, the conqueror of sin and death and the Lord of life, graciously invited him to take up his discipleship again and follow him into the future.

Doing the same with us, Jesus is astonishingly gracious. He doesn't bring up our past sins, betrayals, or infidelities. He simply wants to know if we love him. For that makes all the difference.

Are you seeking Jesus? Do you love him? He invites us to go out and serve him today!

Gracious, compassionate, loving Lord, I do love you. By your Spirit, help me to remain in your love, dwelling in it, living out of it each day, and sharing it with others, to your glory. Amen.

# this month

## GOD'S GIFT OF HOPE

**Calvin Aardsma**

In December we traditionally wish each other “Merry Christmas,” but we can’t escape the reality that we live in a broken world. For many people, December is filled with broken dreams, unrealistic expectations, and depression. When the holidays are filled with hurts and fears, where do you turn?

The answer is found in the Christ of Christmas. This month, recognizing our brokenness and our need, we will focus on life-changing hope. God has not abandoned us; he has sent Jesus to bring hope and healing.

*Calvin Aardsma has been a pastor for more than thirty years. He has served churches in Indiana, in Oregon, and in the Chicago area. Currently he pastors Bethel Christian Reformed Church in Lansing, Illinois. He also serves on the board of the Ugandan Orphanage Relief Fund. Cal and his wife, Sandy, have four children and five grandchildren.*

## CHRISTMAS HOPE

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

—Romans 5:5

Hope is a vital part of life. Hope drives and motivates us. It gives us the power to endure in hard times and to excel in good times. Without hope we die. The good news in our passage today is that through faith we can have hope even in the face of our sinfulness and in life's hardships.

"We boast in the hope of the glory of God." This hope is rooted in both who God is and what God has done for us. He is the holy God, who seeks his wayward children and provides a way home. God demonstrated his love for us in spite of us. While we were still sinners, God sent Jesus to be our salvation.

Christ came to earth to open the way to God, so in Christ we have gained access to God's grace. The image of "gaining access" is that of a ship reach-

ing a safe harbor in the threat of a raging storm. We have hope because we have shelter and security in almighty God's grace.

Do you feel undeserving of God's love? Do you feel you are beyond hope? In the Christmas season we celebrate not what we have done but what God has done for us. Our hope is not in ourselves. Real hope rests in God's promises and in his amazing love for sinners like you and me. Can you look forward to celebrating Christmas with that hope?

We praise you, Jesus, that in your great mercy you have given us a new birth into a living hope. Help us to wait patiently and confidently in you. Amen.

## JESUS

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."*

—Acts 16:31

A neighbor asked a friend, "What must I do to be saved?" "It's too late!" came the reply. "What do you mean? Isn't there something I can do?" With a smile the friend continued, "It is already done; Jesus took care of it 2,000 years ago."

When that question was raised in Acts 16, the answer was, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." It is not what we do, but what God has done for us. Jesus' work is perfect and complete, and we are called to respond in faith.

God's great Christmas gift is eternal life through faith in Jesus. Personalized, John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world [including (*your name*)] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him [including (*your name*)] shall not perish but have eternal life."

God's promise does not say "might be saved," or "could be saved." God's gift is the promise that everyone who believes *shall have* eternal life.

As Joseph came to grips with the pregnancy of Mary, he was told that God was doing a miraculous work to bring salvation. He was instructed to give the baby the name "Jesus." That name revealed the purpose of his birth and work: "he will save his people from their sins."

Do you know Jesus? Believe and celebrate God's salvation!

Jesus, your name beautifully describes your work for our sake. We humbly confess that we cannot save ourselves, so we look to you in faith. We pray in your name. Amen.

## LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS

*Jesus . . . said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."*

—John 8:12

During the Christmas season people call out, "Merry Christmas!" But for many people the season can be filled with loneliness and depression. In the face of disappointment, what is the source of hope?

Isaiah 9 offers hope in the face of hardship. Israel had rejected God's Word, and the Jewish regions of Zebulun and Naphtali had been suffering greatly under enemy attacks. But in this context of darkness, God promised light.

Think about the power of light. Light brings life, clarity, and safety. It drives away gloom and brings hope. Nightlights allow little children to sleep peacefully. Light offers safety as we walk down dark streets. Light can keep you from falling, and it allows crops to grow.

God's promise was fulfilled in Jesus, who declared, "I am the light of the world." Isaiah prophesied that light and honor would come to Galilee. Much of Jesus' public ministry was in Galilee. It was there that he fed crowds of many thousands, released the demon possessed, healed the sick, and taught the Word of God.

Isaiah said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light." Have you seen this light? Jesus promised, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." May we grow in hope as we follow the Lord's light.

Jesus, you are our light and life. Drive away our darkness and fill us with hope. Help us to walk in the way of light. Amen.

## WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

*May [they] know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

—Colossians 2:2-3

To face life's questions and problems alone only adds to our struggle and pain. But where can we turn? Thankfully, many of us have close friends or family who listen and offer words of wisdom. These confidants offer a helpful perspective and can guide our thinking. But, sadly, many others are not so blessed. And even the best counselors cannot always be there. What's more, even their wisdom is limited.

Isaiah reminds us of God's gift of Jesus as our Wonderful Counselor. In his divinity he is all knowing. In his humanity, he understands. When we are tempted to cry, "But you don't know what I am going through!" we need to know that Jesus has walked in our shoes. He faced temptation, pain, loss, betrayal, and even death for our sake. He knows, cares, and understands.

By coming to live with us in our world, Jesus has shown the depth of his love. And, as God, he has the power to accomplish his purposes. Reigning now in heaven, he is both praying for his people and moving time and space toward the full coming of his kingdom.

He is the Wonderful Counselor. Come to him for direction and counsel. Talk to him honestly, and humbly seek his guidance. Listen to his Word, for all the treasures of divine wisdom and knowledge are found in him.

Lord, you have the words of life. Speak to us, and help us grow in true wisdom. We pray in your powerful name. Amen.

## WONDERFUL

*They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty—and I will meditate on your wonderful works.*  
—Psalm 145:5

Sometimes labels become meaningless. In an age of marketing, everything is fantastic and marvelous. So to hear that the Christ of Christmas is “Wonderful” might not impress us.

When was the last time you stopped to look at something and marveled like a wide-eyed child? We are usually too busy to wonder. In fact, we often use the word in a negative sense: “I *wonder* about that person.”

But Jesus truly is wonderful. This is not just a description; it’s his essence: Wonderful. And throughout the Christmas story all the characters are filled with wonder: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, and many others.

Jesus is wonderful in who he is—eternal God come into the world, fully God and fully hu-

man. He is wonderful in his actions—holy God redeeming his sinful creation. And he brings wonder to our lives as he frees us from our slavery to sin and transforms us to be like him.

True wonder has substance. It is not a brief amusement or shallow emotion. It makes an impact on us, filling us with humility, awe, and worship.

In this busy season we need to stop and reflect on who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This is no marketing spin; it is God’s declaration of truth. Let us bow in wonder and worship.

Glorious Savior, help us to ponder your greatness and marvel at your redeeming work. Fill us with humility, awe, and wonder. Amen.

## MIGHTY GOD

*In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*

—Colossians 2:9

Many years ago, as our family was opening Christmas cards, one of our young children asked, “Why is there a circle behind baby Jesus’ head?” His older sister quickly replied, “It’s called a halo; it’s there because he’s God.”

Isaiah similarly reminds us that the baby in the manger is “Mighty God.” All things in heaven and earth were created by him, “and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). The wind and the waves obey his command (Luke 8:25). People marveled at the authority of his word (Matthew 7:28-29). He is “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13). There is no one greater; he has no equal. He is eternal God, who is, was, and is to come (Revelation 1:8).

Jesus stands above time and space—the all-present, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-glorious Lord, “who, being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7). For us and our salvation, God in Jesus entered this world as a helpless baby.

He did all this for you and me. Marvel at the incarnation: God coming to us in human flesh. Devote your life in gratitude to the babe in the manger, for he is our God.

Savior who came into the world, words cannot express the depth of our gratitude for the gift of yourself for our salvation. We give ourselves to you as thank offerings, praying in your name. Amen.

## MIGHTY GOD IN OUR LIVES

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

How is it that we have the power and know-how to put someone on the moon, but we cannot get along with our neighbors, family, or coworkers, or we can't overcome our weaknesses or addictions?

Sometimes we act as if we are powerless and the situation is hopeless: "I couldn't help myself."

But we need not go down in defeat.

The Christ of Christmas came not only to save us in our sin but also to save us from our sins. Jesus is Mighty God, come to bring us new life in his transforming power. He is at work in us, bringing forgiveness, renewal, and empowerment.

Our passage describes God's children as being rescued "from the dominion of darkness" and brought into "the kingdom of light." In this way God calls us

to live worthy and pleasing lives for our Savior. Our lives can be fruitful and flourishing.

This passage challenges us to responsibility but also reminds us that the source of our power and victory is God, "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might."

We need not despair but can be confident that almighty God, who began his good work in us, will bring it to completion.

Mighty God, we surrender our lives to you. Thank you that we need not go down in defeat. Fill us with your power, that we may live a life worthy of you, our Savior. Amen.

## MIGHTY GOD AND HARDSHIPS

*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.*  
—Romans 8:28

In this world we will have trouble. Jesus himself says so. Being a Christian is not a guarantee of pain-free living. We can expect to face hardship because of our relationship with Christ. And the important question for each of us is “Will hardship drive me from or toward God?”

None of us is great enough, strong enough, or wise enough. We cannot control the forces of nature or other people. We live in a broken world.

But Jesus has come to us as Mighty God, and he has overcome the world. He also promises us his presence: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). And he promises his all sustaining grace: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Today’s verse promises that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” But in the face of life’s pain and tragedies, the natural question is “Does God really mean ‘all things’?” Yes! Notice that it does not say all things are good but that God can bring good out of all things, even things that Satan intends for evil.

When your heart is broken and the world crushes you, may the peace of Mighty God sustain you as you draw comfort and strength from him.

Thank you, Lord, for being our refuge and strength, our ever-present help in times of trouble. May your grace and presence sustain us as you work for our good in all situations. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## MIGHTY GOD AND OUR ENEMIES

*Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
—1 Corinthians 15:57

Lightning flashed, thunder boomed, and a tree came crashing down. My granddaughter came running and climbed into my lap. In her eyes I was big strong Papa, and she felt safe. I knew there was little I could do in the face of the storm, but I also know the source of our ultimate security, Mighty God.

What are the threats to our ultimate security? Today's Scripture runs through a frightening litany of adversaries. It surveys the full scope of our lives past, present, and future and declares that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Declaring that we are not just conquerors, but even more than conquerors, this passage encourages us not only to face physical dangers but also the entire spiritual realm.

We can claim that because Jesus came and defeated our

enemies, death for the child of God has been "swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). Satan and his forces lost the decisive battle and will be defeated (Revelation 19). The cost of my sin has been paid, and I have eternal life (John 3). Jesus is making me and all things new (2 Corinthians 5).

Mighty God has defeated my enemies, and I am secure. He is in control, and I belong to him.

"Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Mighty God, thank you for defeating all our enemies and giving us the victory. We are secure in your loving arms. Amen!

## EVERLASTING FATHER

*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.*  
—Psalm 103:13

God is one God in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Is it strange, then, for Isaiah to describe the Son as “Everlasting Father”? What does that mean? Jesus reveals God the Father, and he is the Word of the Father in the flesh. But how is Jesus the “Everlasting Father”?

“Everlasting Father” is a term used to describe the caring relationship between a protector and those under his charge. A king was sometimes described as the father of his people. Job used the term to describe himself as “a father to the needy” (Job 29:16).

Think of the relationship between a father and his children. At his best, a father wants and seeks what is good for his children. It might not always be what they want, but it is for their good. A father loves, protects, nurtures, and provides.

Jesus establishes this kind of relationship with the children of God. Earthly fathers fail, even to the point of distorting our understanding of God the Father. But God our Father never fails us. Christ’s care and provision for the children of God is unchanging and secure. Jesus is the Everlasting Father; there is nothing temporary or passing about his steadfast love and abiding faithfulness.

If you have this kind of relationship with God, let its depth and security embrace you. If not, commit your life to Jesus, the Everlasting Father.

For making us your children through faith and for your steadfast love and abiding faithfulness, we thank you, Lord Jesus. We pray in your name. Amen.

## REVEALING THE FATHER

*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*  
—Hebrews 1:3

Sometimes we say about a boy or a young man, "He is just like his father." This might mean the son looks similar to his dad, or it can mean the son reminds us of the way his father acts, what he says, how he thinks, and so on.

What is God the Father like? The Son, Jesus Christ, "is the exact representation of his being." Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." When Jesus came into this world as a human baby born of a virgin, he was called Immanuel, meaning "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

So if you want to know more about God or want to become more godly in your character, look to Jesus and be like him.

Jesus not only shapes our character but also defines how we are to live godly lives. We sometimes say, "A picture is worth a

thousand words." In Jesus, God placed his heart and thoughts on public display. In Jesus, we see God's words and deeds, character and attitudes lived out in the joys, sorrows, and difficult moments of life.

How should I respond to betrayal, loss, temptation, and suffering? What should my attitude be toward my neighbors, friends, and enemies? How can we know our heavenly Father's will in real life situations? Look to and be like Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you for revealing your Father truly in your words and deeds. Help us to be more like you (and our Father) every day in all that we do and say. In your name we pray. Amen.

## PRINCE OF PEACE

*He will be called . . . Prince of Peace.*

—Isaiah 9:6

After the crush of shopping and the holiday traffic, a friend exclaimed, “We need peace on earth, goodwill toward men!” (See Luke 2:14.) But what really is “peace on earth”?

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. It is more than warm feelings or sentimentality. God’s peace is much richer. God offers us *shalom*, which refers to a peace that flows from all things being in proper harmony. *Shalom* points to wholeness, wholesomeness, and flourishing within God’s guidelines for living. It means my heart, soul, mind, and strength are in alignment with God. My security and rest are rooted in God’s goodness and blessing.

Before Adam and Eve fell into sin, they knew this peace in a perfect way. Life was in balance. And God declared it “very good.” There was fellow-

ship with God, companionship within humanity, and harmony with creation. Adam and Eve experienced God’s blessing as they lived lives of meaningful, joyful service.

But we live in a world that is fragmented, filled with discord, insecurity, and uncertainty. Is there any hope? The good news of Christmas is that the Prince of Peace has come. And through his redeeming work we can experience the richness of God’s peace: “peace with God” (forgiveness and reconciliation with God) and the “peace of God” (his security and wholeness) in our lives.

Prince of Peace, only in your kingdom can we find true, lasting peace. Fill us with your peace as we trust in you. Amen.

## PEACE WITH GOD

*"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy . . . a Savior has been born to you."* —Luke 2:10-11

The shepherds in the children's Christmas program are often a cute sight, but does that portray the reality? We tend to romanticize those shepherds. Actually they were rough and tough, sleeping out in the fields to protect the flocks.

Most shepherds did not care for their own sheep; they were "hirelings." Out in the open fields, who knew how many lambs were born, how many sheep died, or how much wool was collected? It was easy to steal, and that was so common that there were laws against buying wool, lambs, and milk directly from shepherds. The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, would not associate with shepherds, and most people didn't trust them.

It's no wonder the shepherds were terrified when an angel appeared. As sinners encoun-

tering a mighty warrior of the Holy God, they had every reason to be afraid. But the angel's words were not judgment but good news: "Do not be afraid. . . . A Savior has been born to you." The angel declared God's message of peace.

In our sin we rebel against God, and we deserve punishment. But God has provided a way of reconciliation, salvation, and peace through the babe born in the manger. The Pharisees would not associate with shepherds, but Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

That includes you and me. Through faith in Jesus we can have peace with God.

Lord, we confess that we are sinners. Thank you for your gift of reconciliation so that in Jesus we can have your peace. Amen.

## PEACE OF GOD

*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.*  
—1 John 3:8

Many of us have seen or experienced deep pain and losses over the past year: families at gravesides, broken promises, cancer, violence in the streets, world hunger, abuse. . . . Where is the promised peace of God?

Long ago sin, brokenness, and death entered our world through the work of the devil and Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. But God responded by sending Jesus, the Prince of Peace. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." Through the Prince of Peace God is destroying the work of the devil in this world and in our lives. He is restoring creation and redeeming and renewing his children.

It's a kingdom battle. On Christmas the battle was engaged. At the cross and through Jesus' resurrection, the decisive battle was won. When Christ re-

turns, the fullness of God's kingdom peace will be here. Paradise was destroyed, but God, through Jesus, is at work ushering in a new heaven and earth.

The peace of God rests in the kingdom of God. Are you a child of the King? As a child of God, you can experience peace in this broken world because Jesus has won the victory and made you secure in body and soul, in life and in death. And you can serve the Savior by living in ways that bring healing, wholeness, and peace where there is brokenness.

Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus to destroy the devil's work. Fill us with your peace as we find our security and serve as agents of peace in your kingdom. Amen.

## THE LIVING ONE

*"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."*

—Revelation 1:18

"Living in darkness and in the shadow of death." We can relate to the emptiness and sadness of those words because we have experienced the shadow of death. As families gather for Christmas festivities, many feel the pain of an empty chair at the table. Some wonder whether Mom or Grandpa will survive to be here next Christmas. Others struggle with their own mortality. Is there comfort and hope?

Jesus was the only person born to die. He came to earth to bring us to heaven. He died to pay the penalty for our sin—death—and he rose to life again so that we might live forever with God. Death does not have the final word; Christ does.

Jesus came to destroy the powers of sin and death. He declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who

believes in me will live" (John 11:25). By taking on our sin, the cause of death, he has won for us eternal life.

Children of God are not parted forever at death. Rather, they look forward to a grand family reunion around the throne of the Father in heaven.

May we weep with those who weep. As the family of God, may we embrace each other in love. And may we find our hope and comfort in the victory of Jesus, the Lord of life.

Lord of life, shine your light into the shadows of our lives. Dispel our darkness and guide us into the path of peace. Thank you for defeating death and bringing eternal life. Amen.

## HOPE FOR SINNERS

*Christ Jesus [is] our hope.*

—1 Timothy 1:1

*Is there any hope?* Many of us have had that thought at one time or another. Using the image of someone drowning or trapped in a pit, Psalm 130 cries out for help.

The sense of hopelessness is made worse because the psalmist knows the reason for the brokenness of life: sin. It is not that God failed. But we have failed God. The psalmist also knows the source of hope: God himself.

God in his mercy offers real hope, not the wishful thinking we often call hope. Human hope falls short and fails; hope in God “does not put us to shame” (Romans 5:5).

Why is God’s hope sure?

Our psalm passage points to God’s unfailing love, unchanging word, and full redemption. In Christmas we see the depths

to which God went for our sake. In his unfailing love God gave his only Son to be our savior (John 3:16). On Christmas, fulfilling God’s word, Jesus the Word of God came in the flesh to reveal God and bring salvation. This salvation brings not only the forgiveness of our sins but also full redemption and a future where the consequences of sin are fully removed. Christ Jesus is our hope!

In the dark of night, may we put our hope in the Lord. The dawn is coming because Jesus came at Christmas.

Lord, you are the hope of the hopeless, the help of the helpless. We praise you for answering our deepest need through “Christ Jesus our hope,” in whose name we pray. Amen.

## THE HOLY ONE

*Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.* —Romans 13:14

The angel told Mary that her child would be “the holy one.” That title identifies Jesus as uniquely qualified to be our Savior. This phrase, “the holy one,” should also describe our lives, but tragically it does not.

God is holy and cannot accept unrighteousness, an offense to his very person as holy God. The rebellion of sin is also an assault on his lordship; sin in our lives declares war against God’s sovereign rule. We must be holy to be right with God. “Good enough” is not good enough. God’s call is “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44-45).

But all have sinned; none of us is righteous. So what hope is there? Do we give up in despair and languish in guilt? We have failed, but God has provided. Jesus, “the holy one,” lived the holy life we fail to live.

Jesus is unique and able to save. A bankrupt person cannot pay another person’s debt. Similarly, a sinful person cannot pay the debt of another’s sin. But Christ is without sin. And because Jesus died in our place, God graciously clothes us in Christ’s righteousness. Believing in his power to save us, we are declared holy in Christ, and with the Holy Spirit’s help we are empowered to grow in that new reality.

Don’t give up in despair. Through the power of Jesus Christ, we are holy!

Dear Jesus, we thank you for being the answer to our guilt and shame. Thank you for the gift of your righteousness, and for clothing us in your holiness. Help us to live holy lives. Amen.

## JESUS ANSWERS OUR NEEDS

*Praise be to the Lord . . . because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*  
—Luke 1:68

“I want one of these, and one of these, and . . .” The child went on and on, turning the pages of the Christmas gift catalog. Adults have their wants and wish lists too. The problem is that what we want is seldom what we really need, and it’s not always good for us. Too often our wants reflect our selfishness and greed.

We have a hunger that cannot be satisfied apart from God. We may try to fill that gap, but the longing of our soul will remain. The author of Ecclesiastes observes that all our pursuits—things, pleasures, even wisdom and work—are meaningless without God. We are created by God and for God. To live apart from God is emptiness.

In Luke 1, Zechariah praises God not because God fulfills a wish list but because God meets our deepest needs. Zechariah’s

song is a litany of praise for God’s redeeming work.

Though we alienated ourselves from God, God has come to us. Christ has redeemed us, purchasing our freedom from the slavery of sin. Jesus saved us from our enemies.

God keeps his promises and remains faithful to his people. Jesus has made us holy and righteous. Our lives are filled with meaning and purpose as God empowers us for service.

Thank you, Lord Jesus.

Lord, forgive us for pursuing our wants with greed and selfishness. Help us to focus our lives on you, as we praise you for meeting our deepest needs. Amen.

## GOD STOOPING TO COMMUNICATE

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*

—John 1:14

We all know the pain when communication breaks down. This is true not only in our human relationships but also in our relationship with God.

The world is hungry for divine guidance, as we can see by the popularity of fortune tellers, channeling, and spirit guides. People look for communication with spiritual powers but do so in the wrong places.

Or maybe you feel that God won't hear your prayers. Maybe something in your past makes you feel that God doesn't care or that a holy God wouldn't welcome someone like you.

The good news is that God is a God of communication. God is constantly revealing himself through creation and the Bible. And Christmas shows how far God has come to communicate his love for us.

In Jesus, God humbled himself and stooped to our level. Imagine a powerful king getting down on his belly to smile and speak baby talk to his newborn. God's approach to us goes far beyond that. He is the infinite Creator entering into his creation to reveal himself on our level.

Will God hear your call? Does God want to communicate with you? Yes—so much so that he took the initiative, bridged the gap, and stooped to our level. In Jesus, “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

Lord, thank you for coming to us on our level to communicate with us. Deepen our prayer life and help us listen. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## GRACE AND TRUTH

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*  
—John 14:6

Self-deception and denial are powerful forces. We like to avoid painful news, but that can be tragic if we ignore a life-threatening diagnosis. Pretending not to have a problem does not change the situation. This is especially true as we stand before God.

We live in a world of relativism. "What is truth?" "Are there any absolutes?" The Bible answers with a resounding yes! Jesus declared, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Jesus came to earth as the Word of God, revealing truth. And throughout his ministry he spoke truth into life situations. He challenged hypocrisy and exposed the sin of self-righteousness. His teachings held high the law of God, and warned of sin's consequences.

But Jesus also came as the living Word of God, revealing grace. He came as the answer to sin. He revealed God's mercy and forgiveness to all who would repent of their sin. He fulfilled the high standard of the law through his own perfect life and then gave his life as a ransom for ours. And now God grants us the righteousness of Christ.

In this Advent season, may we honestly face the truth in self-examination and find the grace of God through Jesus. And then, like Christ, may we live lives of grace and truth.

Lord, lead us in honest self-examination. Remove our excuses and rationalizations as we confess our sins. In your grace, forgive and empower us to live lives of grace and truth. In Jesus, Amen.

## HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

*Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. . . . And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." —Romans 8:14-15*

This is the time of year when our hearts turn toward home and loved ones. We look forward to family gatherings, and we are saddened if we can't be home for Christmas.

For our sake, Christ actually left his home at Christmas. He left the glory of heaven to come to our sin-filled world. The Holy One came to the unholy; the Creator came to his broken, corrupted creation.

Sin alienated us from God. Jesus took the initiative to seek us out and bring us back. He came to bear our sin. He came to be cut off from the Father's love because of his love for us. He came to earth to bring us to heaven. He paid our debt to provide the way home to the Father.

Through Jesus we are adopted as God's beloved children. It is

through Christ that we can call the almighty, holy God "Abba, Father." Our equivalent word for *Abba* is "Daddy." I still remember the joy of times when my children ran to my arms, crying "Daddy!" when I came home. *Abba* is the trusting child's cry of joy and love.

What a privilege we have in Jesus that we can call God "Abba, Father." May we grow as his children in an ever-deepening relationship of gratitude and love.

Thank you, Jesus, for coming to earth to bring us home to our heavenly Father. Deepen our love, and may our lives reflect that we are children of God. In your name, Amen.

## PERFECT TIMING

*The time came for the baby to be born . . . .*

—Luke 2:6

The label said, “Don’t Open Until Christmas,” but the grandchildren cried, “Hurry up; open it!”

Patience is a virtue, and we recognize the importance of perfect timing. But we often have a hard time waiting. This is especially true when we are hurting and want relief, or we are anticipating something special.

The same holds true in relation to God’s work in our lives. We suffer a loss, wrestle with what seems to be unanswered prayer, or face a spiritual struggle, and soon we cry, “Hurry up, God!” We wonder why God hasn’t acted, and the “delay” often causes us to question God.

Or how about when we reflect on Christ’s second coming? We eagerly long for a world free from sin, Satan defeated, injustices set right, and all things made new. So we cry, “Come, Lord Jesus; come quickly.”

For ages believers waited for the birth of the Savior and wondered, “How long?” But God was not slow. He had a plan, and in the fullness of time—when the time was ripe—God sent Jesus.

In our lives, as we wait for God’s help or for the second coming, we remember God’s promise that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength” (Isaiah 40:31). God might not come when we want, but we can trust him—his timing is perfect.

Lord, we see the present, but you grasp eternity. We view only a part; you understand the whole. Help us to trust your wisdom. Renew us and your world, we pray. Amen.

## WHOM DO YOU TRUST?

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*  
—Proverbs 3:5

My three-year-old granddaughter was fighting back tears. “What’s wrong?” I asked. With a determined look she said, “Me do.” Without my help, she wanted to carry the bulging grocery bags all by herself.

A child’s desire to grow and do as adults do is one thing, but attaining our ultimate security and salvation is another matter. Whom will you trust? Are you in ultimate control? Can you save yourself? Those were the questions King Ahaz faced in today’s verses.

Jerusalem was under attack, but God promised his deliverance. When King Ahaz refused to believe, God said through Isaiah, “Ask for a sign.” Lacking faith in the Lord, Ahaz rebuffed the offer, but God gave a sign anyway: “The virgin will . . . give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

The name “Immanuel” was a sign of hope, but also a teaching point. King Ahaz sought a salvation of his own doing. Refusing to trust God, he turned to the king of Assyria (who later attacked Jerusalem). A young girl in the face of the attack would name her baby Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” She trusted in God while the king trusted in his own efforts.

What is the source of your hope and salvation? Isaiah’s prophecy found ultimate fulfillment in the birth of Jesus Christ. Like Ahaz, we can’t save ourselves. The answer to our deepest needs and our salvation is Immanuel (“God with us”).

Lord, we cannot save ourselves. You are our only sure security and salvation. Deepen our trust in you, we pray. Amen.

## GOD WITH US

*“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).—Matthew 1:23*

Many of us know the old playground song “[Boy] and [girl], sitting in a tree . . . K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage . . . then comes the baby in a baby carriage.” Even at a young age, we know where babies come from.

But 2,000 years ago a child came into this world in a unique way. By the miraculous work of God, the virgin Mary conceived and gave birth to a son. This child was given the name Jesus, but he was also called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” The virgin birth revealed Jesus’ unique nature. He was fully God and fully human, so he indeed was “God with us” in our life in this world.

Jesus is God, graciously kneeling to meet us on our level in flesh and blood. He is God, humbling himself to come into our world of sin, pain, and brokenness.

Immanuel is God, with us, acting on our behalf, doing what we could not and would not do for ourselves. Having “God with us” is life changing. Immanuel is changing the world. Guilt, alienation, shame, and futility have given way to forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, and purpose. Immanuel has opened the way from decay and death to God’s redemption and restoration. Nothing is the same, because God came in Jesus. Celebrate Immanuel: “God with us”!

Lord, we marvel at your coming as Immanuel. Draw us into a deepening relationship with you, that through faith we may live the reality of “God with us.” Amen.

## GLORY TO GOD!

*To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

—Philippians 4:20

A young married couple played Mary and Joseph in the church's Christmas program. The young woman had just recently given birth to a son. On cue they walked on stage, and she placed her infant in a manger there. It was a precious scene as these parents, role-playing Mary and Joseph, lovingly looked at their child in the manger.

I tried to imagine what it was like at the first Christmas, when the real Mary placed the newborn Jesus in a manger. And as we sang "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," I thought about the announcement of this special birth. It wasn't on a church stage; it came to shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem. "I bring you good news that will cause great joy. . . . Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

The excitement was not limited to the audience in one church; the angelic choir of heaven sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven . . ." Mary pondered and treasured the event. The shepherds came and went, glorifying and praising God. And all who heard the shepherds' news were filled with awe.

May we also be filled with awe and treasure in our hearts, and may we sing glory to God for the world-changing birth of Jesus!

With the angels and shepherds we worship you, precious Savior. We treasure you in our hearts. May all that we do and say bring glory to your name. Amen.

## CHRISTMAS GIFTS

*If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*  
—2 Corinthians 5:17

The Christmas gifts have been opened, and some may already be broken or returned for refunds. Some gifts were a hit, others a miss.

What is the greatest Christmas gift you ever received?

Look at the life-altering richness of God's gifts given to us through the Christ of Christmas. The closing words of Jude pulsate with hope and confidence. Jude speaks of faith, being kept from falling, standing faultless before God, prayer in the Spirit, God's love, the mercy of Jesus, eternal life, and great joy. This is the life-changing, history-changing gift of God through faith in Jesus. God came to us in our helpless, hopeless brokenness and changed us and our future.

Take time to reflect on each of these powerful truths as they apply to your life. Let their

healing power penetrate your hurts and fears. These make up our reality in Jesus. We have a new identity. In Christ we are new creations; the old is gone. Our future is secure because of Christ's completed work for our salvation.

Let's rejoice and worship our gracious God for his perfect gifts. "To the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."

We worship and praise you, Lord, for your life-changing gifts through Jesus. With hearts of gratitude, may we live out our new reality for the glory of your name. Amen.

## CHRISTMAS LIFESTYLE

*"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . . just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve . . ."*  
—Matthew 20:26-28

"I wish every day was Christmas." These are more than the winsome words of a child. The day has come and gone, but the heart of Christmas should be ours all year long.

Our passage today challenges us to a Christmas lifestyle, to a life that imitates the Christ of Christmas. Jesus put aside his glory and became the suffering servant for our salvation. His love was a committed, taking-the-initiative, forgiving, self-sacrificing love.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to reflect the attitude of Christ. This lifestyle is not just for the spiritually mature; it reaches every one of us as Christians. Jesus' attitude is at the very foundation of our salvation, motivating us to follow his example by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us.

To the blessings of God we respond in gratitude and with God's love. Our Lord calls us to unity: being like-minded, one in spirit, purpose, and love. We are called to humility: putting away selfish ambition and conceit. And we are called to selfless, sacrificial service: looking to the interests and needs of others.

Christmas may be over, but may we reflect each day the Christmas lifestyle by seeking unity, living humbly, and serving selflessly for Jesus' sake.

Lord Jesus, thank you for all you have done for us and our salvation. In gratitude we offer ourselves in loving service. Help us to reflect your lifestyle in all that we do. Amen.

## SHARING THE HOPE

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

“No news is good news,” we sometimes say, meaning that at least we are not hearing bad news, which tends to come in urgent messages.

But in regard to Christmas, *no news is bad news*. The Christmas story is filled with the spread of the good news of God’s salvation. Angels visited Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Then the shepherds shared with everyone the amazing things they had heard and seen. God declared the birth of Jesus to the Magi through a star and the writing of the prophets. The Holy Spirit identified Christ to Simeon and Anna.

We have been celebrating God’s gift of hope through the Christ of Christmas. We have seen the difference Christ has made as we face guilt, uncertain futures, loss, even death. Christ has met us in our pain and filled us with

a hope that will not disappoint. Even though we live in a broken world, we look forward to a glorious future.

Peter challenges us to look at the world around us. People are living and dying without hope. We have what they desperately need—we have hope. And when we live in hope in the face of brokenness, the world will notice. So Peter calls us to be ready to give an answer about the hope that we have.

We are called to share the message of hope in Jesus Christ. Will you do that?

Thank you, Lord, for the hope that sustains and comforts us. May our lives be a testimony of your redeeming love, and may we share the good news of Jesus. Amen.

## NEW YEAR BLESSING

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*  
—Romans 15:13

May God fill you with joy, peace, and overflowing hope.

Joy, which is much deeper than our common idea of happiness, is rooted in God and allows us to rejoice in his goodness even in the darkest of situations.

Peace is more than the absence of conflict. God's peace involves resting in the Lord and Savior who will make things right in spite of all the brokenness in our world.

Hope is the believer's confident expectation that all of God's promises and plans will be fulfilled, and it includes working with God now in all that he is doing in our lives and in this world. Overflowing hope not only fills us but abundantly flows from us and inspires others, by the power of God's Spirit working in us.

All three find their source in the one true God. He is the one at work restoring and redeeming. God guarantees our future. Hope is rooted in the faithfulness of the Father, the saving work of Jesus, and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

God is at work, and we are called to trust and follow his lead. We place our confidence in God, waiting and relying on him. This calls us to draw near to God, believe his Word, and follow his Spirit. The key to entering the New Year with joy, peace, and overflowing hope is to enter it with the God of hope.

Lord of hope, help us to walk with you each day. By your Spirit, fill us with overflowing hope in the coming year. Amen.

## CONFIDENCE ROOTED IN RELATIONSHIP

*I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.*

—2 Timothy 1:12

“It is not what you know, but who you know.” Fair or not, this saying often rings true in our world.

We can thank God that this saying is also true in the matter of salvation. Though none of us deserves it, we can be saved from sin and death because we know Jesus. Nothing we do can reconcile us with God. Nor can our head knowledge save us. Today’s verse does not say, “I know what I believe”; it says, “I know *whom* I have believed.”

Prior to his personal encounter with Jesus, Paul, who wrote the letter of 2 Timothy, knew Scripture and was passionate in his “good works,” but he was lost in sin and traditionalism. In other words, you can miss salvation by eighteen inches, the distance between your head and your heart.

Knowing what we believe is good, and we want to grow in that knowledge. But if our confidence is rooted in what we know rather than who we know, we are trusting in ourselves rather than in the Savior.

The Christ of Christmas is coming again, and we will stand before his throne. Paul says he does not fear that day because the Judge is his personal Savior, the one who already paid his debt and forgave his sin. Paul is confident because he has entrusted his life to Jesus. Do you have that same confidence?

Jesus, thank you that we can stand before God’s throne unafraid, confident not in ourselves but in you. Deepen our relationship with you each day, we pray. Amen.

## VICTORIOUS CHRIST

*No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame.*

—Psalm 25:3

It is New Year's Eve, and we look forward in hope to a new year filled with potential, but we also know there is uncertainty. A review of 2013 reminds us of the changes a year can bring—some good, some very painful. What will happen in 2014?

We opened this month by asking "What is the source of our hope?" And through Scripture we have seen God in Jesus meeting our deepest needs. Now on this New Year's Eve we look once again to Jesus—the Savior who has come and who now reigns in heaven until the day he will come again.

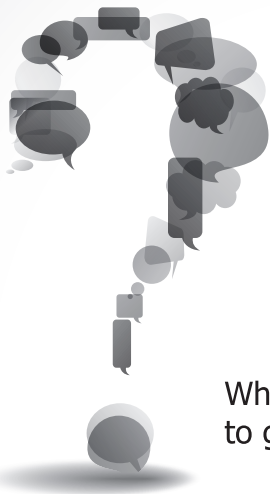
Words can only begin to describe the power and glory of the ascended Savior. He is the Lord of life. John describes Jesus as standing in long flowing robes. Long robes were worn by royalty, or at times of celebration. They were a sign

of victory, security, and work completed. A person fleeing danger or a worker could not be encumbered with a long robe. But Christ stands in flowing robes.

There is no threat to his kingdom; his redemptive work is fully accomplished. Children of this victorious King have eternal security. As we enter the New Year, may we all declare, "My only comfort in life and in death is that I belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ!"

In a world of uncertainty, we thank you, Lord, for the comfort, hope, and peace we have because we belong to you. Thank you for being our security and allowing us to share in your victory. Amen.

# Have questions about faith?



What do I say when my friend is hurting?

How does God want me to live my life?

Is God testing my faith?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

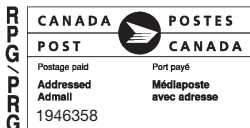
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