



Advent Devotions

Preparing for a Season of
Hope, Peace, Joy and Love

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Preparing for a Season of

*Hope, Peace,
Joy and Love*



PREPARING FOR A SEASON OF HOPE, PEACE, JOY AND LOVE

I absolutely love this season of the year. I love the decorations and the traditions, but most of all I love to sing the carols and tell the Christmas story to my grandson.

It is the most wonderful time of the year. Not because of the decorations, traditions or even the songs, but because it is a time when we remember Immanuel, God with us.

Probably one of the first verses we memorized as children was John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is indeed good news! Because this good news has transformed my life, I want to see it shared with all peoples.

I know these past two years have been some of the most difficult that many of us can remember in our lifetime. As a result, there is a real desire for Hope, Peace, Joy and Love in the world right now.

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord’” (Luke 2:10–11).

The good news of Jesus Christ is truly the one thing that can bring Hope, Peace, Joy and Love to the world. During this season — in your community or around the world — let’s share this good news. Let us also remember that over 3,000 people groups are still waiting for someone to come and tell them about Jesus, and that 155,473 people are dying each day without Him. As we finish 2021 and enter a new year, I hope you and your church will commit to adopt an unreached people group to pray for, or that you’ll partner with one of our IMB missionaries to take the gospel to those who have still not heard the good news.

It is a joy for us to provide these Advent devotions to you again this year. I am grateful to Jamie Work and Bill Langley for their hard work and pray this resource will bless you during the Advent season. May they also be a reminder and encouragement to each of us to go and share the good news across the street — and around the world.

Terry Sharp

Convention and Network Relations Leader

Co-leader Diaspora Coalition

Hope Always

“As for me, I will always have hope.”
(Psalm 71:14a)

Hope. Merely reading the word can stir our emotions, inspire positive thoughts and lift our spirit. Hope is what keeps us going, causes us to press forward even in the face of hardship or despair, and prevents us from giving up on ourselves or others regardless of past disappointments or current circumstances. Hope is life-giving and life-sustaining. Human flourishing requires hope.

When coupled with the word “eternal,” the two-word phrase grabs our attention and captures our imagination.

ETERNAL HOPE

Eternal hope is the greatest need of every human being. The absence of hope in this life is both sad and concerning; the absence of eternal hope is tragic and defeating. While many have managed to cling to a temporal life void of hope, no soul survives without eternal hope. As the Psalmist recognized, it’s one thing to have hope but incomparably more to “always have hope.” He declares, “For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother’s womb. I will ever praise you” (Psalm 71:5–6).

Words like “always” and “ever” are not void of eternal meaning in Scripture. Like the word “hope,” they aren’t cheap words nor words that come cheaply to us. Eternal hope comes to us at great cost, not to us, but to the One the Scriptures refer to as “the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). Jesus secured eternal hope for us on the cross and as He took that first step from the tomb.

For those who have trusted in Jesus, his death and resurrection kill hopelessness ... forever.

Paul Chitwood
President, IMB



Pause to Pray

“The pandemic has kept schools and churches here closed. Pray for us at the Uganda Baptist Seminary as we seek to make classes available online. Pray that students will have access to electricity and internet. Pray for our faculty and staff who need to work to earn a living while we continue having no students. Pray for our team as we seek to stay focused on the purpose for which we’ve been called to Uganda when circumstances try to pull our focus away.”

IMB MISSIONARIES IN UGANDA

OUR SOURCE OF HOPE

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”
(Romans 15:13)

The source of our hope is “the God of hope.” The means by which He instills His hope within us is “the power of the Holy Spirit.” The evidence of the presence of His hope is being filled “with all joy and peace in believing.” Those who personally encountered the diminutive Charlotte (Lottie) Digges Moon saw this hope firsthand.

Once she was converted to faith in Jesus at age 18, Lottie pursued Christ and His commands with radical obedience. By the time she was 32 years old, she was convinced the Lord was calling her to follow Him to China, just as her younger sister, Edmonia, had done. Southern Baptists had initiated a global missionary presence in 1845; not even the Civil War halted our missionary endeavors. So, when first Edmonia and then Lottie were sent to China as single missionaries entrusted with the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, it was “the God of hope” who sustained them in the work!

“The joy and peace in believing” resonated in Lottie’s life and ministry among the Chinese. Nineteenth century “China was not safe for foreigners or Christians.” Yet Lottie shared “not only the gospel of God but also [her own life] because [the Chinese people] had become very dear to [her]” (1 Thessalonians. 2:8). Not only did Lottie plead often with Southern Baptists back home to send more workers, but she also addressed social and cultural issues in China that she deemed harmful and unbiblical, like the binding of young girl’s toes to create tiny feet.

Driven by her hope in the Lord, Lottie Moon set a high bar for all those who have come after her. “By the time Lottie turned 70, China faced the triple threat of plague, famine and revolution.”² Relentless, however, she pressed on in ministry with her hope by the power of the Holy Spirit literally keeping her alive as her body weight dropped to only 50 pounds. **Her radical obedience, produced by “the God of hope,” helped pioneer the path of missions in China such that it is estimated well over 100 million Chinese people today are followers of Jesus. Hope. It sustains us in His mission. It fills us with joy and peace.**

1. IMB Brochure “Lottie Moon: A Life of Radical Obedience,” p. 1.
2. Ibid. p. 8.

REMEMBER

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”
(Lamentations 3:21–23)

In 2003 Bill and Lyn Hyde were 25-year veterans of ministry in the Philippines. They were no strangers to danger in their work. Mindanao was known by most Christian workers as a place of resistance, at least in parts of the island, from Muslim separatist groups. Bill often traveled to some of the most dangerous parts of the island, trusting the Lord’s protection at every turn.

On March 4, 2003, after 11 hours on the road in some of those dangerous areas, Bill returned safely home just in time to go to the airport to pick up a returning missionary family. There a bomb, planted by a member of one of Mindanao’s Muslim rebel groups, exploded and killed 23 people, “including one American, a fifty-nine-year-old Southern Baptist missionary named Bill Hyde.”³

As Bill’s wife Lyn was being rushed to the hospital where Bill lay, his body fatally riddled with shrapnel, she “felt God clearly talking to her.”⁴ He was reminding her of Joseph’s words in Genesis 50:20, and at the Lord’s prompting she spoke to everyone in the car with her: “The Lord is telling me that regardless of what happens, more people are going to come to know Christ as a result of this.”⁵ Bill stepped into the presence of Jesus shortly after Lyn arrived at the hospital.

The fact that Bill and Lyn surrendered to God’s call to serve Him in the Philippines was itself a wonder. Bill was a military veteran. Having survived the Vietnam War, he had once vowed he would never leave the United States again. But here they were, appointed in 1978, serving the Lord in Southeast Asia — gladly and fruitfully. What drew him back? Confidence in the Lord’s promises. Bill and Lyn put their trust in Jeremiah’s words — “great is Your faithfulness” — and that was enough. **His faithfulness is still enough. For you. For me. For all who will put their hope in Him alone.**

3. Lives Given Not Taken: 21st Century Southern Baptist Martyrs, by Erich Bridges and Jerry Rankin (International Mission Board: Richmond, VA, 2005), p. 107.

4. *Ibid.* p. 106.

5. *Ibid.*

HOPE-FILLED SILENCE

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him.”
(Psalm 62:5)

Just a young teenage girl, “a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph ... And the virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:27). Yet, surprisingly, out of nowhere, this young girl was having a conversation with the angel Gabriel. “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28). Initially it may have sounded overwhelming to her ...

- » “... you have found favor with God ...” (v 30)
- » “... you will conceive in your womb and bear a son ...” (v 31)
- » “... you shall call his name Jesus ...” (v 31)

What? Our long-awaited Messiah? From my womb?

There had been centuries of hope-filled silence as the people of God anticipated the fulfillment of God’s promise given in the Garden, “He shall bruise your head” (Genesis 3:15). And years of hope-filled silence in Mary’s short life when Gabriel came announcing God’s plan for her. Now there would be nine months more of hope-filled silence until the “Son of the Most High,” the One who will receive “the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end,” (Luke 1: 32–33) would be born ... and that as a baby in a livestock feeding trough.

Our God of hope sends messages of hope in unusual containers. An 80-year-old man in a lion’s den. A frustrated prophet thrown into a mud-filled cistern. A young queen barely in office long enough to enjoy her royal privileges. A foreign-born widow who vows to stay with her widowed mother-in-law. A young martyr confronting unbelieving Jews with rocks in their hands. A former anti-Christian terrorist on a desert road. A teenage virgin. Unusual containers. But all reflect the necessity of clinging to what is often hope-filled silence, otherwise known as faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The Advent of our Savior is the assurance of things hoped for.

Have faith. We, too, are unusual containers. Yet God in His kindness has planted His resounding message of hope to the hopeless in us. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Let His hope fill your silence.

ALL NATIONS; EVERY TRIBE, TONGUE, PEOPLE

**“And in His name the Gentiles will hope.”
(Matthew 12:21)**

In their long wait for God’s Deliverer, the Promised Messiah, the Jews became guilty of many things offensive to God. Perhaps one of their most significant errors was forgetting the promise given to Abraham, their father of faith. “In you,” God promised Abraham, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3c). However, by the time Jesus arrived, the Jews not only held Gentiles in derision, but often despised them altogether. Sharing their God with the Gentiles had become unthinkable for many.

Yet, Jesus was clear to remind the Jews of His day of the assurances of the prophet Isaiah, and the ancient promise to Abraham: in God’s Servant “the Gentiles (nations) will hope” (Matthew 12:21). That’s why Jesus commissioned His disciples (then and now) to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations …” (Matthew 28:19). And why He provided further assurance to the Apostle John in His Revelation that one day “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” (Revelation 7:9) will worship Jesus forever in heaven!

It is with Spirit-breathed confidence in the Word of God that the International Mission Board’s vision is exactly what John saw and recorded in the Revelation. A multitude. From EVERY nation and ALL tribes, peoples and tongues! The IMB is working and praying toward the goal of a net increase of 500 fully funded missionaries to the nations from 2021–2025 because of this very assurance — people in every pocket of humanity need to hear the gospel, and some from every dimension of humanity WILL believe!!

Will you pray and give with confidence in God’s Word? Will you go and send with assurance that God will do what He said? “In His name the Gentiles will hope” (Matthew 12:21). So, we search out the lost. We live as intentional witnesses sharing gospel conversations. We welcome immigrants, strangers and refugees into our lives, our homes and our churches. We go to the nations in every corner of the globe — dark or dangerous or distant — because we believe His promise. We hear His call. We serve His purpose. Hope for ALL peoples.

FOLLOW HIS CALLING

“Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord!”
(Psalm 31:24)

William Henry Sheppard Jr. was born March 8, 1865, to William Sheppard and Sarah Francis Martin, one month before slavery in the United States was eradicated. His mother’s being a free African-American meant her offspring were also free of the bonds of slavery. As such, William Jr. enrolled in Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute on the Virginia coast around age 15. Shortly after that, he enrolled in the Tuscaloosa Theological Institute in Alabama and spent three years studying there.⁶

Sheppard pastored churches in Montgomery, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia, but he was not satisfied with this avenue of ministry. “Inwardly he felt a call for mission service in Africa.”⁷ Though he was part of the Presbyterian denomination the “Presbyterian hierarchy refused to send an African-American male as their sole leader of the foreign mission stations.”⁸ Sheppard was relentless in his faith and in his determination to follow God’s call. His hope was in the Lord, and he chose to be strong and courageous in pursuing God’s will.

Eventually the Presbyterian mission board appointed William along with Samuel Norvell Lapsley, a white man, to work together as “equals” in the African Congo in 1889. Once they arrived in Africa it did not take long for the people there to fall in love with William in particular. Said his colleagues, “Brother Sheppard ... is the most popular man that ever came to this [mission] station. He has the constitution needed, and the gift of getting along in Africa.”⁹

Sheppard had followed God’s call and found in it the most satisfying and fruitful ministry he could have conceived. He would become the first African-American leading a mission station in Africa, and his work among the Kube tribe gained him international prominence in Europe and America. He gave speeches in London’s Exeter Hall and met with U.S. President Grover Cleveland. **Again and again throughout his life Sheppard would follow the admonition of the Psalmist, “Be strong and let your heart take courage,” for indeed God was working His plan through William’s life. Just as He is yours.**

6. Profiles of African-American Missionaries, edited by Robert J. Stevens and Brian Johnson (William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA, 2012), pp. 107-108.

7. Ibid. p. 108.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid. p. 109

HOPE HAS COME

“O you hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night?”

(Jeremiah 14:8)

Hope of Israel. Their God. Our God. The One and Only God. Savior. Redeemer. Friend. Counselor. Hope of Israel. Hope of the nations. Our Only Hope. He is all that and so much more. More than our words are prepared to describe. Everything.

Jeremiah was crying out to God because God’s people were living in a desperate day. There was no one else to whom he could cry (nor is there for us). Jeremiah lamented that ...

- » “Judah mourns ...” (Jeremiah 14:2)
- » “... her gates languish ...” (14:2)
- » “their servants ... come to the cisterns; they find no water ...” (14:3)
- » “... they ... cover their heads ...” (14:3)
- » “the ground that is dismayed ...” (14:4)
- » “... there is no rain ...” (14:4)
- » “... there is no grass ...” (14:5)
- » “... there is no vegetation ...” (14:6)

Have you ever felt like Jeremiah and his people felt? Abandoned? Undone? Hopeless? Forsaken? Forgotten? Most likely you have. Most likely all have. But that’s why Jeremiah’s complaint quickly turns into a plea. He knows to whom he must turn. He pleads for “the Hope of Israel” to intervene, to rescue, to sustain. However, in Jeremiah’s historical situation, while his plea for God’s intervention was appropriate, God responded that no intervention would be coming at that time. The people had failed to repent far too long. “They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet” (Jeremiah 14:10), the Lord said. All that remained for that generation was God’s promise that He “will remember their iniquity and punish their sins” (Jeremiah 14:10).

The Hope of Israel is the Hope of nations. He has come. As the prophets declared. As the Word of God promised. But “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:14-15). **More than 155,000 people per day around the world die and step into a Christless eternity, bound for the devil’s hell. We have THE HOPE in our hearts. May He ever be on our lips. “Repent, Hope has come!”**

Peace that floods our hearts

Shalom, quiet stillness at dawn, a sleeping baby. What places and experiences come to mind when you think about peace?

We all know what the lack of peace looks like. We turn on the television news and hear shouting matches. The world erupts in violence with terror attacks, wars and inter-ethnic fighting.

We experienced that many years while living in Pakistan. Violence gripped the city of Karachi. Attacks on government buildings took place often. A tank was parked in the roundabout where we went grocery shopping — to keep the peace. We knew what the lack of peace looked like — we saw it daily.

One year we celebrated Christmas Eve with fellow believers under a “shamiana,” a colorful tent, in our front yard. As we set up the tent and welcomed friends and guests, we could hear the Muslim call to prayer. We worshiped outside on a cool, crisp December evening with loudspeakers declaring the coming of the Prince of Peace.

After the crowd departed, a quiet peace descended over the neighborhood like the cool air that enveloped us that evening. It was as if the world knew it was time to take a breath, enjoy a peace-filled night, and look expectantly for the coming of the Savior.

Perhaps you need to take a breath, push pause, and breathe in the stillness of the night. Worship the Lord in quietness and allow the peace of Christ to flood your heart this Christmas season in a fresh way. If you are still and listening, you might hear that angel chorus: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!” The Son of God, born in a manger, came to bring peace in our hearts and peace among people. Seek the peace that passes all understanding this Christmas season — you’ll find it in the One who is the Prince of Peace.

Todd Lafferty

Executive Vice President, IMB



Pause to Pray

“At a recent meeting, we learned about using healthcare mission alongside our local ministry partners. Our personnel serving among American peoples discussed topics like trauma healing, other mental health strategies and food distribution. Pray as God continues to guide us in these and other ministry strategies.”

IMB PERSONNEL IN PERU

PEACE ON EARTH

*“In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!”
(Psalm 72:7)*

One night about 2,600 years ago, a pagan king named Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. God provided a young prophet named Daniel to recount the dream and give its proper interpretation.

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a large image. Its head was made of solid gold. Its chest and arms were silver. Its waist and thighs were brass. Its lower legs and feet were iron, along with baked clay mingled in the toes. What could this possibly mean?

Daniel told the king God had given him a glimpse into the future. The king saw great and successive empires. His kingdom, the Babylonian empire, was represented by gold. The Medo-Persian empire that followed was represented by silver. Brass represented the empire of Greece. Finally, iron represented the world domination of Rome.

Daniel’s interpretation was spot on, and I’m sure the king was sitting on the edge of his chair with great anticipation as he listened for the climatic conclusion. Daniel continued, “As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Daniel 2:34-35).

This stone that crushes all the kingdoms of men is none other than the kingdom of Christ! Since the Tower of Babel, man has done his best to usher in a utopian society. Yet man's attempts at world domination and universal peace are feeble and futile. The peace on earth that the angel announced to the shepherds 2,000 years ago is coming, but not through the work of man. It's coming by the hand of God.

The Apostle John also had a vision of the future which he records in Revelation 7:9-10. "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (This is the fulfillment of the Great Commission you and I are participating in now!)

By this time, the kingdom of Christ, which was inaugurated at His first coming, has been consummated at His second coming. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). Then we will experience uninterrupted peace on earth!

GRACE AND PEACE

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
(Ephesians 1:2)

Have you noticed Paul often opens his letters with the words, “grace and peace”? He does it in both letters to the Corinthians. He does it in his letter to the Galatians. We see it here in his letter to the Ephesians. We read the same greeting in his letters to the Philippians and Colossians, as well as both of his letters to the Thessalonians. We also see it in his personal letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

Some might see Paul’s greeting simply as a repetitive style or habitual practice, but it is so much more than that. If you’re reading carefully and paying attention, you’ll notice there is a definite order. “Grace” comes before “peace,” always — it’s never the other way around. The Apostle Paul, in this short greeting, gives us a brilliant summary of the entire Christian faith!

People are seeking peace. They were in Paul’s day; they are in our day as well. There is so much hatred and injustice in our world. Instead of things getting better, the cruelty of wicked acts only continues to be amped up. People are desperate for peace.

For Paul, peace was more than a cease-fire. As a Jew, Paul’s understanding of peace was “shalom,” which basically means “everything is as it should be.” It’s far more than just experiencing inner tranquility. Shalom comes from a root word that means “to be complete, perfect and full.” This is what we need! Since the fall of man in Genesis 3, there has been no lasting peace on the earth. Yet we are not without hope. The message of Christmas is “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14).

Isaiah identifies Jesus as, “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Paul personalizes this for us by saying, “For he (Jesus) himself is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14). **Jesus is our shalom. Only through Him can we experience everything as it should be. By His grace we can be complete, perfect and full! “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).**

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

(Matthew 5:9)

Washington Irving wrote a short story in 1818 called “Rip Van Winkle.” It was about a man who took a walk one afternoon with his faithful dog, lay down to take a nap, and woke up 20 years later. When he woke up, he noticed his dog had died and his rifle had rusted. As he walked back into town, everything had changed! King George’s picture, which had been hung in a prominent place, had been replaced with a picture of George Washington. Rip Van Winkle had slept through the Revolutionary War!

That story rings far too true to many of us. The difference is, we don’t remember falling asleep. We grew up in a nation that was shaped by Christian values. But in less than a generation, our so-called “cultural Christianity” has been swallowed up and replaced with a godless culture absolutely foreign to us. That, however, is the danger of cultural Christianity. It’s a counterfeit gospel that has no substance. Somewhere along the line, too many evangelical churches started preaching a message that basically said, “Trust in Jesus and behave yourselves.” The problem with that is, Jesus didn’t tell us to go into all the world and teach people how to behave themselves. He told us to make disciples.

In His Sermon on the Mount, one of the special blessings Jesus pronounced was on the “peacemakers.” Peace is not easily established, and it isn’t cheap. Maybe that’s why Jesus said of peacemakers, “They shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). As the Son of God, Jesus is the greatest peacemaker of all. But the peace He established came at a fearful price. He made “peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20).

Being a peacemaker means when you look at someone hostile toward you, you don’t see an enemy, you see a person in need of the transforming grace of God. When Jesus looked at Zacchaeus He didn’t see an enemy. When Jesus looked at the woman at the well, or the woman caught in the act of adultery, or Mary Magdalene (a woman who was possessed with seven demons), He didn’t see enemies. He saw people who needed the gospel. In His own words, Jesus didn’t come to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17).

Have you ever looked at someone who thought they were beyond any hope of salvation? Their behavior may have gone way past “deviant!” They may be living in out-and-out rebellion against God. Here’s the fact: it doesn’t take one more ounce of God’s grace to save them than it took to save you! It doesn’t take one more drop of Christ’s blood to wash their sins away than it took to wash your sins away. Pray for that person. Share the gospel with them. Be a peacemaker!

KNOWING GOD BRINGS PEACE

“Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.”
(Psalm 119:165)

A farmer had trained his cows to respond to his voice. Every day, when it was feeding time, he would go to the barnyard, call the cows and they would come. One cold, winter day the farmer was unable to call the cows because he had laryngitis. There was an old, dead tree in the barnyard, so the farmer took a stick and started beating on the tree. Eventually, the cows came to the barn and ate the hay the farmer had put out. After a few days, this method of calling the cows proved successful. Even after the farmer’s voice returned, he still got the cows to come to the barn at feeding time by beating on that old tree.

One day, when the farmer went out to the barnyard the cows were already there. They were working themselves into a frenzy and running in every direction. Long story short, a bunch of woodpeckers had flown in and were working over that old dead tree and several other nearby trees. The cows were running from one tree to the next, thinking they were going to be fed.

That’s an illustration of what happens all over our world every day. People are running from one religious teacher or leader to another. They think they’re running to the farmer so they can be fed. The truth, however, is that they’re just running after a bunch of woodpeckers. All the while, they’re starving to death spiritually.

Pray, today, for a flourishing of God’s Word as it is proclaimed around the world. Pray for the gospel seed to take root as it is spread. Pray for a great harvest of souls as multitudes turn to Christ and experience genuine fulfillment and contentment. “For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things” (Psalm 107:9).

You and your church can support the proclamation of the gospel around the world through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering®.

PERFECT PEACE

“You keep him in perfect peace
whose mind is stayed on you,
...because he trusts in you.”
(Isaiah 26:3)

What’s your stress level been lately? We are living in difficult days, and there are so many things that try to rob us of peace. The world at large seems to be spinning out of control. Whether the news is domestic or international, reports are of one disaster after another. Then, closer to home, your own world may be in an uproar. Finances, schedules, relationships and everything else seem to be under attack. It’s no wonder our stress levels are dangerously high!

Amid all this turmoil, God has given us a wonderful promise — peace. Not just peace, but perfect peace! How can this be possible? Well, there is a catch (let’s call it a condition). Peace is not automatic, but it is possible. Look at the promise again. “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you” (Isaiah 26:3). God gives His peace to those who have their minds focused on Him.

There is a similar promise in Psalm 84:5: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you.”

God blesses us when we decide to depend on His power, on His strength. This means God doesn’t bless self-sufficient people. Why would He bless someone who says, “I can do it all on my own”? He doesn’t. God blesses those who recognize they need His help.

The more you depend on God the more He blesses you. That’s why God puts us in situations where we must depend on Him. If we were always in situations where we could figure life out on our own and rely on our own strength, then we would never have to depend on God. So, He constantly puts us in situations beyond our control. This gives us the opportunity to trust in His strength and rely on His resources. As we do that the byproduct is peace — perfect peace.

TAKE A FEW MINUTES, RIGHT NOW,
TO SLOWLY READ THROUGH THE FOLLOWING
WONDERFUL PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE.
FOLLOW THE PROMPTINGS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
AS HE LEADS YOU IN THIS TIME OF PRAYER.



Do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything by
prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God,
which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your
minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just, whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence,
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.”

(Philippians 4:6–8)

PROCLAIMERS OF PEACE

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him
who brings good news, who publishes peace,
who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, ...”
(Isaiah 52:7)

Having grown up in a Southern Baptist church, my Christmas memories are linked to missions. Each year during this season, SBC churches rally together and participate in the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions®. That’s great because it causes us to look beyond ourselves to a bigger picture that encompasses an entire world.

As we look at our world during this Christmas season, what do we see? We see nations still reeling from a global pandemic. We see deadly diseases and crippling poverty. We see terrorist activity, military aggression, displaced people, fear and unrest. In short, we see people who desperately need to hear some good news.

Is there any good news for our world today? Yes! Two thousand years ago to a world just as weary, an angel announced, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). Good news for whom? All people.

There are more than 7.5 billion people on this planet. More than 2 billion of them have never, one time, heard the gospel. Of 16,500 unique people groups in the world, 7,000 of them are considered unreached. The term “unreached” means these people have no access to the gospel. They have no Christian influence around them. They have no Bibles to read, no churches to attend, no preachers or missionaries, no Christian radio or television programming. They live their lives, day after day, without anyone ever telling them the greatest news in the world: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” (Romans 10:14-15)

Good news! The gospel is good news, but it’s only good news if it gets there on time. You and I have to make sure it does! We have to go. We have to cross the street. We have to cross the country. We have to cross the oceans to take the gospel to a lost and dying world. Even if you’re not called by God to leave your home in America to go to a foreign country, you are called to support those who do. Support them with your prayers and your sacrificial giving. There are so many wonderful ways you can participate in world evangelism and missions. For more details go to imb.org.

Joy to the World!
The Lord is Come

“Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”
(Psalm 51:12)

In these days of much political, societal and interpersonal conflict, many are asking: where is the joy in life? The global pandemic has increased suffering in the form of physical hunger, poverty and discontent as well as anxiety, depression and despair. Many who are blessed materially and financially still suffer broken relationships, illness and emptiness.

The world views joy in the context of feelings and emotions affected by circumstances that may be out of one's control. It is no wonder then that there is no joy in the world. Even we as Christians can take our eyes off the true source of joy and wonder, “Where are you God?” David experienced despair due to his sin and in his lament appropriately cried out to God, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

But there is good news! For joy, in the purest sense, is the result of abiding in Christ and experiencing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Joy that is constant and dependable is only born in us through understanding, accepting, abiding in the Word, and the good news of Jesus' coming — His birth, death and resurrection. It is through that belief that the Holy Spirit fills us and forms in us His fruit ... love, JOY, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23)

Nehemiah said, “The joy of the Lord is your strength!” (Nehemiah 8:10). On days when I don't *feel* joy, I still *have* joy because it is born within me by the Holy Spirit; it is the joy of the Lord! This joy gives hope and strength and enables me to face trials, face failure, face enemies ... face the day!

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10–11)

Let us remember that this JOY is for ALL peoples! When we believe in and experience the power of this JOY, it should compel us to share the source — the good news of Jesus!

Charles Clark
Vice President of Mobilization, IMB



Pause to Pray

“A few new leaders at a university here in Taiwan are seeking to work more closely with missionaries on campus. Pray for the Christian club on campus to reach more students. Ask God for outreach and discipleship opportunities for us and for the Christian teachers who are starting to meet regularly for prayer!”

IMB MISSIONARIES IN TAIWAN

FOR YOU A SAVIOR

“And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!’”
(Luke 2:10–11)

Greek scholar A.T. Robertson says that “the people under Rome’s rule came to call the emperor ‘Saviour’ and Christians took the word and used it of Christ.”¹⁰ The angel announcing Jesus’ birth was the first to use the title, but others would follow suit. The townsfolk who heard the testimony of the woman Jesus encountered at Jacob’s Well called Jesus Savior: “They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the “Savior” of the world.’” (John 4:42).

When the Sadducees had the apostles arrested and jailed “an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors ... and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life’” (Acts 5:19–20). They did just as they had been commanded by the angel, which was in opposition to what the council had commanded. When confronted about their disobedience to the council, Peter answered for them: “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised Jesus. ... God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:29–31).

Today there are more than 7,000 unreached people groups in the world, comprised of approximately 4.5 billion people who are less than 2 percent Christian. Even worse, a little over 3,000 of those 7,000 people groups are totally unengaged with the gospel of Jesus Christ — no missionary presence, no Christian among them, no church planting effort, nothing. Most of these unreached people think of someone or something as their “Savior.” Perhaps a works-oriented religion, the natural world around them, or a totalitarian government, a despotic ruler or even a socialistic or benevolent king, queen or dictator is beheld as “Savior.”

The reality, as you know, is that there is only One Savior. His name is Jesus. It is for our salvation that He was born, lived a sinless life, died a cruel death, and was raised a victorious Savior! The angel’s announcement was 100 percent accurate. “I bring you good news ... that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior...” He is Christ the Lord! OUR Savior! Let us herald this good news to the nations until we have no breath. For the joy of all peoples.

10. Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume II: The Gospel According to Luke (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1930), p. 24.

UNSPEAKABLE JOY

“Though you have not seen him, you love him.

Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.”

(1 Peter 1:8)

The International Mission Board has partnered with Southern Baptist churches since 1845 to send thousands of God-called, Spirit-empowered, joy-filled missionaries to the nations. Is their joy like the happiness caused by comfortable circumstances or trouble-free relationships? No. Their joy is much deeper than the superficial realities of life. The joy Peter speaks of is rooted in Christ and is evidenced in the life of a believer who bears the Spirit's fruit (Galatians 5:22). Joy is a sign and expression of confident, God-focused faith despite current circumstances.

Peter wrote that Christ-centered joy doesn't depend on seeing a physical Jesus but is the result of an unwavering belief in Him and love for Him! Samuel Zwemer, often referred to as the Apostle to Islam because of his long and storied missionary career in the Muslim world, often wrote about the joy of suffering for the cause of Christ. More than 100 years ago Zwemer wrote:

The pioneer missionary, in overcoming obstacles and difficulties, has the privilege not only of knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection, but also something of the fellowship of His suffering. For the people of Tibet or Somaliland, Mongolia or Afghanistan, Arabia or Nepal, the Sudan or Abyssinia, he may be called to say with Paul, **“Now I rejoice** in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions” (Colossians 1:24).¹¹ (emphasis added)

Peter's words were first sent to those believers scattered across the Roman Empire because of persecution. Yet he (really the Holy Spirit) speaks to those chosen exiles about “rejoicing” and “inexpressible joy.” Today those same words come to us. **Regardless of our current circumstances our assignment to “disciple the nations” has not changed. Thus, we join saints across the ages who, like Adoniram Judson, trusted God beyond what they could see. A fellow prisoner with Judson in a Burmese dungeon “asked with a sneer about the prospect for the conversion of the heathen. Judson calmly answered, ‘The prospects are as bright as are the promises of God.’”¹² Friend, they still are. What joy!**

11. “The Glory of the Impossible,” by Samuel Zwemer. Perspectives on the World Christian Movement (William Carey Library: Pasadena, CA, Third Edition, 1999), p. 312.

12. Ibid. p.314.

JOYFUL FAITH

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,
always in every prayer of mine for you all
making my prayer with joy.”
(Philippians 1:3–4)

Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi is commonly referred to in two ways. Most often it is identified as one of Paul’s “prison epistles.” But other scholars have also dubbed it as Paul’s “joyful letter,” because of his repetitious use of various forms of the word “joy.” Ironically Paul’s joy is framed in the context of being a prisoner of Rome. Prison, or prison-like circumstances, is not that unusual for cross-cultural missionaries like Paul. However, as Paul clearly indicates in his letter to the Philippians, a believer’s joy is not constricted by the prison bars he or she may be peering through.

In his short letter, Paul mentions four things in his relationship with the Philippians that enrich his joy in the Lord:

- » **Remembering with fondness their mutual partnership in the gospel (1:3–5).**
- » **Hearing that others are proclaiming Christ as a result of his imprisonment (1:12–18).**
- » **Seeing them embrace the humble posture of Christ as their own (2:1–11).**
- » **Warning them to renounce any confidence in their own strength or abilities (3:1–11).**

In short, Paul was a joyful prisoner because (1) “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (1:13), and (2) “in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed” (1:18), and (3) “that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:20).

During COVID-19, year 2020, many IMB missionaries were forced to deal with “prison-like” circumstances — living in religiously-restricted countries with additional COVID-19 restrictions making their work even more challenging. But as with Paul and the Philippians, God proved Himself more than adequate for the season. Through their ceaseless and faithful efforts to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14), your missionaries and their partners saw God increase their effectiveness in every category of the missionary enterprise:

- » **New believers: 144,322**
- » **Witnessing encounters: 769,494**
- » **Churches planted: 18,380**
- » **Leaders trained: 127,155**

**GOD IS AT WORK!
LET’S PRESS ON IN JOYFUL FAITH!**

THE LORD'S JOY

**“And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength”
(Nehemiah 8:10b)**

After the fall of Jerusalem in 586/87 B.C., God's people were in exile for 70 years in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:10). Once released, their rebuilding of the city and the temple was recorded and influenced by Ezra and Nehemiah. Yet the people still needed to be restored to the ways of God, and so they “gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses. ... And he read from it ... from early morning until midday. ... And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:13).

The people were moved to grief and conviction when they heard the reading of God's Word, but Nehemiah admonished them not to grieve because “this day is holy to our Lord” (Nehemiah 8:10). Confession of their waywardness and of their neglectful disobedience would come later (see Nehemiah 9), but that day was holy, a day to renew their relationship with God, a day to discover anew the strength available in the Lord's joy.

Their rebuilt temple and rebuilt walls surrounding the city were not the things from which the people should find strength to persevere. Instead, Nehemiah's words exhort the people to find their strength in the joy that is their's through the realization that God has redeemed them from captivity and is restoring them in relationship with Himself!

In many places where your missionaries serve there is a plethora of human needs, including widespread poverty, disease and hunger. Two-thirds of the world's population lives within the 10/40 window, the rectangular region of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia roughly between the latitudes of 10 degrees and 40 degrees north. There live most of the world's Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Millions of the people there exist on less than \$5 a day. These people, focused on survival, are often looking for their strength to come from the people or resources who can supply their needs. Your missionaries, however, carry the same message as Nehemiah and Ezra. Strength for living comes from the joyful knowledge and experience of God's redemption and restoration. It is the joy of the Lord!

Today, visit peoplegroups.org and become acquainted with some of the more than 7,000 unreached people groups, most of whom live in the 10/40 window, and pray for them to hear, receive and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ so that they can experience the Lord's joy.

URBANIZATION AND SATURATION

“So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.”
(Acts 15:3)

In their book *Why Cities Matter*, Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard describe the rapid urbanization of our modern world:

We find ourselves in the middle of the fourth and greatest wave of urbanization; it is being identified as the era of the megacity, the megalopolis, the post-colonial city and the global city. Today’s reality is the cities are larger, more diverse, more powerful, more innovative, and more global than ever. ... in 1900 only 14 percent of the world’s population lived in urban areas; that number had grown to 30 percent by 1950. In 2008 the world’s population was evenly split between urban and rural areas, but in 2011 the world became predominantly urban. ... in developed areas, on average, 74 percent of the population lives in urban areas. ... the UN Population Division’s massive study on World Population Prospects suggests that by 2050 the world will be 68.7 percent urban.¹³

What will bring joy to the billions of city dwellers in the 21st Century? The only thing that ever has: the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ!

These two realities — global urbanization and gospel saturation — are why the International Mission Board has adopted as one of their five-year targets the intentional engagement of at least 75 of these global cities with comprehensive strategies between now and 2025. Urbanization will make many people groups, once distant and unreachable, much more accessible to engage with the good news.

Also consider that between the years 2000 and 2100 researchers expect approximately 25 billion people will have lived on the planet. This can be compared to just 16 billion people who have lived on earth the past 300 years, from 1700-2000. **The Great Commission has never been more challenging. Still, however, Jesus has given us all the resources we need to accomplish the church’s mission of discipling the nations. We have the Word of God, His message of redemption in Christ alone; we have His Holy Spirit to empower and equip us for whatever challenges are presented; and we have the promise of joy for all who believe! Let’s go!**

13. *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*, by Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard (Crossway Books: Wheaton, IL 2013), pp. 25-26.

WORSHIP HIM

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”
(Matthew 2:10)

The Tyndale New Testament commentary on Matthew suggests that it is impossible for us to imagine exactly how the star the Magi saw and followed led them to “the place where the child was” (Matthew 2:9). But that it did is no mistake. Just think of all the pieces of history God orchestrated for wise men from the east to have discovered a promise associated with the appearance of a star, and then the actual discovery of that star and the trip to follow it!

These men may have started their journey as scientific researchers of their day, or as sorcerers and star gazers, but one thing is certain from Scripture — after they met Jesus, they were never the same. When they saw “the Child with Mary His mother, ... they fell down and worshiped him” (Matthew 2:11).

Your missionaries have a front row seat to this kind of response one person at a time all over the world among hundreds of people groups, as men and women encounter Jesus and “fall down and worship him” (sometimes literally). Last year your missionaries and their partners shared the gospel over three-quarters of a million times. As a result, nearly 150,000 persons professed faith in Christ! Hallelujah! What a Savior! That means that one out of every six gospel conversations resulted in someone “falling down and worshiping Jesus” (perhaps not literally falling down, but you understand).

Imagine. You followed a dead religion based on human merit with no assurance of forgiveness of sin or eternal life. Someone befriended you and shared the message of Jesus Christ and His offer of forgiveness, peace with God, meaningful life now, and eternal life with our Creator in heaven forever. You bowed your head and opened your heart to Jesus and immediately you “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy” joining the wise men from the east and every person across the ages who has believed on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! Salvation secured! Old is passed. New has come. Changed.

This is why your missionaries do what they do. **And this is why your exceedingly generous gift to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® for International Missions this year will propel the gospel ever deeper into the darkness of humanity. Thank you for giving. Thank you for praying. Please don't stop.**

Celebrate the Greatest Love

“All you need is love!” When the Beatles sang those words half a century ago, they were primarily thinking about romantic love. We smile realizing romantic love will not pay the bills, or put food on the table, or provide a host of other things people need. But in a sense, they were right. Another kind of love, the greatest of all love, combines affection with action, and when the Lover is God, that love provides everything we need, both in this life and in the life to come.

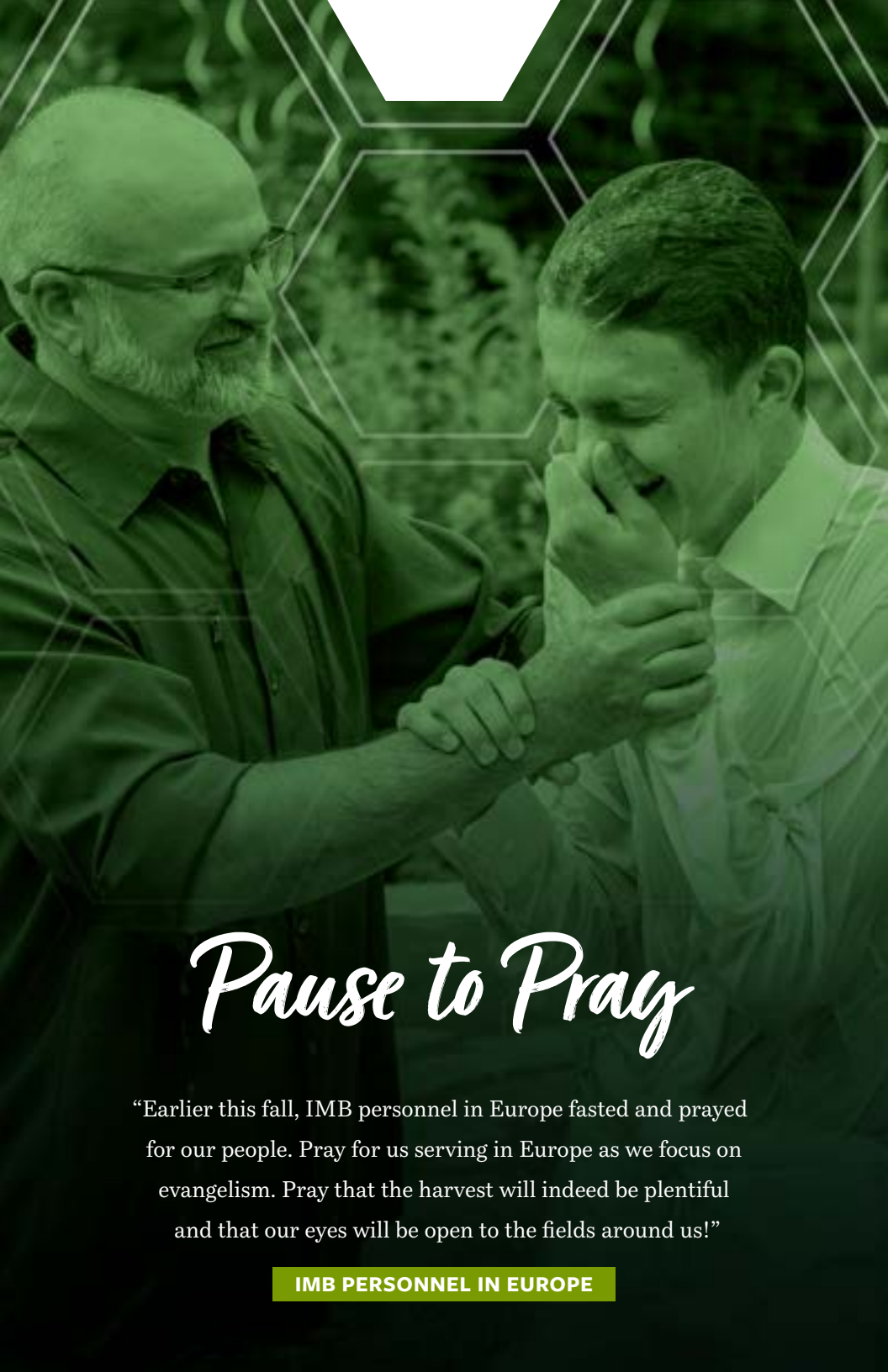
God is love. So John tells us (1 John 4:8), and he goes on to insist that those who know God must love other people as well. This love of God does not depend on anything in the life of the one who is loved. It isn't earned or deserved, and it cannot be lost because of something the beloved does. It does not depend on the mood of the Lover. God will not wake up one morning in a bad mood and decide He doesn't love His people anymore. Divine love is an affection, in the oldest and deepest meaning of that word, but it is an affection that acts decisively to do what is good and provide what is needed for the one who is loved.

This love of God is not the sentimental love celebrated by our culture. It does not automatically approve and support whatever someone wants to do. Genuine love cares too much for that. If someone God loves wants to do something He knows is wrong, His love demands that He oppose that desire. God's love is gloriously relentless in pursuing what is best for us, even if God's best runs completely contrary to our fleshly desires and worldly ambitions. From a worldly point of view, the love of God is most certainly not safe!

The love of God manifested itself most clearly and dramatically in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Because this may be the most familiar verse in the Bible, we often miss its radical force. We, the human race, rebelled against God, disobeyed His commands, and messed up His world. He would have been perfectly just if He had simply wiped the slate clean and destroyed us all. Instead, He loved the very people who spited Him. He loved us so much that He gave the ultimate gift, His Son, to live the life we should have lived (but didn't), die the death we deserved to die, taking on Himself the wrath we deserve for our sin, and then conquered sin and death by rising again. This is amazing love! During Advent and Christmas, we celebrate the greatest love that has ever been shown in the universe. Christmas is about love, in the best sense of the word.

Zane Pratt

Vice President for Global Training, IMB



Pause to Pray

“Earlier this fall, IMB personnel in Europe fasted and prayed for our people. Pray for us serving in Europe as we focus on evangelism. Pray that the harvest will indeed be plentiful and that our eyes will be open to the fields around us!”

IMB PERSONNEL IN EUROPE

THE GREATEST LOVE

“But God shows his love for us in that while
we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
(Romans 5:8)

In his book, *Stronger Than Steel*, R. C. Sproul tells of a young, 19-year-old man named Wayne Alderson who was involved in the European Campaign of World War II. He was the point man for Company B of the 3rd Division of the U.S. Army Infantry. This meant when his troop moved out, Alderson went out far in advance of the rest of his men. In fact, the history books record Wayne Alderson was the first American infantryman to cross the German defensive line, the Siegfried Line, just over the border of France into Germany. He was the first American soldier into the trenches on March 18, 1945.

It was in that titanic battle that Wayne Alderson was severely wounded. When he jumped into the trench, he landed face-to-face with a German soldier. The German soldier threw a hand grenade and ran in the opposite direction. The grenade landed at Alderson's feet and exploded. Alderson, out of his mind with pain and not knowing what he was doing, straightened himself up, exposing his head to enemy fire. His position meant certain death for him.

Just then Alderson's friend, Red Preston, rushed to his side and cradled Wayne's head to his chest. As he did that, Preston exposed himself to German machine gun fire. He was instantly killed. Red Preston died shielding the severely wounded body of his friend. Wayne Alderson lived the rest of his life as a man who knew what it meant to owe his earthly life to the sacrifice of another human being.

We think about this — a man dying for his friend. Jesus said there's no greater love than that. Red Preston gave up his life so that Wayne Alderson's life could be extended. He died so his friend could live. That's amazing. We can compare that to the sacrifice Jesus Christ made on our behalf. However, there's one big difference. Red Preston laid down his life for his friend. Jesus didn't sacrifice Himself for us while we were His friends. Jesus laid down His life for us while we were His enemies.

Suppose Alderson jumped on that grenade to save the life of the enemy who was trying to kill him. That goes beyond our ability to comprehend. Yet, that's exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us. The cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of love!

Take time to praise God for His unfathomable love.

Now, pray for others, all over our world, to come to faith in Christ and personally experience the overwhelmingly amazing love of God.

LOVE CONQUERS FEAR!

“Perfect love casts out fear”
(1 John 4:18)

Man is plagued by fear. The Greek word “phobia” is used to identify excessive fears and anxieties. Among the most common are acrophobia, the fear of heights; claustrophobia, the fear of enclosed spaces; and cynophobia, the fear of dogs.

The phobia that overshadows all others is thanatophobia, the fear of death. Ultimately, it’s the fear of judgment. Instinctively, everyone knows this life is not all there is because God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The distressing thoughts — “What’s beyond the grave?” and “Will I have to give an account for the way I lived my life?” — torment people all over the globe, regardless of their worldview.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that through His death and resurrection, Christ came to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:15). Removing the fear of condemnation is a major result of God’s love. Those without Christ have plenty to fear — “whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18b). Wondrously, once a person is in Christ, the fear of judgment is gone. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:18a).

Understanding the love of God comes in comprehending that God’s judgment fell on Jesus instead of on us. “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5). “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

During this season, our celebration focuses on the overwhelming culmination of God’s love for us in sending His Son. “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). God’s love has conquered our fears! “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16–17).

As you pray today, thank God for His astonishing love. Also, please remember the multitudes of people all over the world who are still in bondage to the fear of death and judgment. Pray they will hear the good news of the gospel and be transformed by God’s love.

LOVE EXPERIENCED

“Keep yourselves in the love of God.”

(Jude 21a)

Does that Bible verse seem strange to you? Is there the possibility we could do something that would cut us off from the love of God? If so, how does that square with Romans 8:39, which says, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”? Do Jude and Paul disagree? Does Paul say nothing can separate us from the love of God, but Jude corrects him and says, “Paul, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to take issue with you on this matter.” Is that what’s happening here? No. When Jude tells us to keep ourselves in the love of God, he’s telling us to keep ourselves in the place where the blessings of God’s love can always have their wonderful effect on us.

Luke 15 records Jesus’ story of the prodigal son. You know it well. Question: When the prodigal son was in the far country (which represents sin), did his father still love him? Absolutely. He never stopped loving him. Second question: Was the father’s love doing anything for the son while he was living in rebellion? No. In fact, the son woke up one day and said, “This is ridiculous! My father has everything I need. But because I haven’t kept myself in my father’s love, even though I’m a son, his hired servants are far better off than I am.”

Look around and you’ll see people who have no relationship with Christ, yet they seem to be getting along better than a lot of Christians. How do you explain that? Maybe it’s because too many of God’s children have not been keeping themselves in the Father’s love.

In the story of the prodigal son, it’s obvious the father deeply loved his son. However, because of his rebellion, the son had removed himself from the place of his father’s blessing. The father/son relationship was still intact, but the fellowship had been broken. When fellowship was restored, the relationship took on new significance and the blessings, again, were experienced. Like the prodigal son, we must return to the Father. We must continually put ourselves in the place where God can provide all He desires to share with us.

During this Advent season, pray for yourself, as well as your brothers and sisters in Christ, that we will prioritize, not just our relationship but also our fellowship with God. Pray that, as children of the Father, we will “seek first the kingdom of God.” Pray we will be actively engaged in kingdom service, namely, the Great Commission.

LOVE'S NEW IDENTITY

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us,
that we should be called children of God!”
(1 John 3:1)

You might not recognize the name Lawrence Harvey Zeigler. But I'm guessing you know the name, Larry King. Have you ever heard of Maurice Micklewhite? Probably not. But I'm pretty sure you've seen some of the movies featuring Michael Caine. Samuel Clemens thought his books would sell better if they were written under the name Mark Twain. Have you ever listened to any of Reginald Dwight's music? I'm sure you have. The name he's been going by for half a century is Elton John.

Anyone can change their name. People do it all the time for a variety of reasons. However, changing your name is superficial. When we come to God through faith in Christ, He doesn't just change our name, He changes our nature and our identity.

If you've gotten complacent with what God calls you now, it's probably because you've forgotten what you used to be called before you put your faith in Christ. We were once identified as “sons of disobedience” (Colossians 3:6), “children of the devil” (1 John 3:10), and “children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3).

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked what was the greatest theological thought that ever crossed his mind. He quickly responded, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” That's what the Apostle John is saying here. That's why he uses the word “behold” when he says we are now identified as the children of God. This is a word of utter amazement and astonishment! God doesn't just change our destiny ... He has changed our identity!

Take some time to praise and thank God for His compassionate, transforming love. There is nothing about us that is worthy of His love. Yet, for reasons beyond our ability to comprehend, God has set His affection on us. The greatest demonstration of His love is that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). **Meditate on the amazing fact that the God who spoke everything into existence loves you.**

Then, think about someone you know who needs a relationship with the Father. Take some time, right now, to pray for them. Ask God to remove any barriers and hindrances. Pray that even during this Christmas season they will come to God through faith in Christ. Pray they will experience the celebration of joy John describes as they are also able to exclaim, “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!”

COMPELLING LOVE

“For the love of Christ compels us. ...”
(2 Corinthians 5:14)

Time, a few years ago, chronicled a huge shift in American culture. America’s favorite Christmas movie used to be *It’s a Wonderful Life*. But George Bailey has been replaced by Ralphie Parker in *A Christmas Story*. It’s a funny movie for sure, but it inverts the moral. According to *A Christmas Story*, Christmas is about receiving, not giving. Or, as *Time* puts it, “It’s the individual Christmas that matters. It’s not about angels getting their wings. Christmas is about kids getting their due.”

Those familiar with *It’s a Wonderful Life*, would say it’s not a Christian movie. It’s just a sentimental film that’s set in the most enchanting of all seasons — Christmas. True, it’s not a theological treatise of the incarnation or the nativity. But what the movie accomplishes, in a powerful way, is captivating our hearts with a message of redemption. What matters most, according to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, is not what we achieve for ourselves but what we give of ourselves.

Contrast that with *A Christmas Story*. There’s not a single reference, symbol or event that even suggests Christmas is about the birth of Christ. *It’s A Wonderful Life* is rich in Christian ideals and songs that celebrate Christ’s birth. The climax of the movie is marked by a spontaneous outburst of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” *A Christmas Story*, on the other hand is marked by the total absence of anything religious ... much less, Christian. There are no nativity scenes ... no church services ... no Linus reciting Luke’s account of Christ’s birth.

Much more than just the Christmas narrative, this reflects the new state of faith in America. You and I are living in a post-Christian era. As the church, we have our work cut out for us. What do we do? Do we sit back and complain about how bad things have gotten and pine for the “good old days”? No. We don’t curse the darkness; we shine a light!

You and I can make a difference in our world. Through our sacrificial gifts to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering®, we support missionaries who are taking the gospel to unreached people all over our world. That’s fantastic! Yet, there’s even more we can do. God is also bringing the nations to America. That’s called the “diaspora,” which simply means “the dispersion of any people group from their original homeland.” **Look around. Check out peoplegroups.info. Chances are there are unreached people and people groups living near you. What can you and the churches in your area do to reach them?**

The love of Christ compels us to reach out to those who don’t know Christ. “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:20). Let’s take advantage of this Advent season to help people understand and experience the true meaning of Christmas!

REDEEMING LOVE

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve,
and to give His life a ransom for many.”
(Mark 10:45)

Charles Wesley, in his incredibly powerful hymn, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” wrote:

Love’s redeeming work is done,
Fought the fight, the battle won.
Death in vain forbids Him rise;
Christ has opened paradise!

Redemption: To buy out of captivity. To pay a ransom and set someone free.

You’ve heard the phrase, “He demanded a king’s ransom.” Do you know where the term “a king’s ransom” originated? It speaks of the amount of money that was required to secure the freedom of Richard the Lionheart, King of England. The ransom paid was 65,000 pounds of silver.

That’s a staggering amount. In today’s market it’s pushing \$25,000,000! That’s a hefty sum! Yet, that’s not even a drop in the bucket compared to what Christ paid for you. Ephesians 1:7 says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” What price can be put on the blood of Christ? Its value is priceless!

Redemption is what God does for people whose lives have been stolen and wrecked by sin, and who’ve been used up and tossed aside. The world says you’re worthless. God, on the other hand, says you’re worth a king’s ransom! Then He goes to the greatest lengths to rescue, redeem and restore us. “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13–14).

This news is far too wonderful for us to keep to ourselves. It must be shared with those who are hopeless captives to the bondage of sin. Every day, all over our world, more than 155,000 people die. Most of them step into eternity never even having heard the gospel. That has to change! Your gifts through and partnerships with the International Mission Board mean that the good news of Christ’s redemption is proclaimed to unengaged and unreached people groups.

We began with a hymn by Charles Wesley. Let’s close with one by Isaac Watts:

When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.



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