

HOPE

Introduction

Each day of life affords us many opportunities and at times some unwanted challenges. We experience moments of joy and celebration, frustration and despair, grief and mourning, and questioning and reflection. Often, we just need to know that there is hope for a better tomorrow. God provides us HOPE through our worship, prayers, and service.

This devotional book prepared for the 2020 Advent season provides a collection of meaningful, original messages by people like you and me, and scriptures to inspire us and let us know that HOPE is possible when we hurt or are lost in the moment. I have learned in my faith journey that God's HOPE is realized through a relationship with Jesus Christ in my life. As Matthew 28:20 reassures us, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Let these personal testimonials of God's presence inspire you and provide you the comfort and the hope you need now and in the days ahead. Happy reading!

Brad Everett, Certified Lay Minister

Acknowledgment

Thank you to all who were involved in producing this devotional, especially to each person who contributed a personal story.

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Prophets Foretold the Birth of Jesus

Isaiah 9:6-7

*For unto us a child is born,
to us a Son is given,
and the government will be on His shoulders.
And He will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

Gabriel Visits Mary

Luke 1:26-34

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

An Angel Visits Joseph

Matthew 1:18-25

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call Him Immanuel—which means, 'God with us.'"

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the day that Christ Jesus returns.—Philippians 1:6 (CEV)

When I get through...it's going to be beautiful, you'll see!

Bishop Frank J. Beard

The “pandemic pounds” were becoming more noticeable, so I decided I needed to change my routine (again).

While I was out in the neighborhood, I stopped at a garage sale. In my social-distanced rummaging I found a medium-sized, old, poorly painted, wooden box that slightly resembled a “hope chest.” I opened the lid and the unmistakable cedar smell confirmed my suspicion. It was a hope chest. It was one that had seen better days but that did not stop me from haggling for it.

Melissa was not nearly as excited about my bargain as I was. Perhaps she remembered past projects that sat in the garage for months. OK, for years, but this would be different I vowed to myself, not wanting an unwinnable skirmish to dampen my excitement.

“When I get through with this box it is going to be beautiful, you'll see!” Those were my parting words as I dashed off to get some refinishing supplies.

I wonder if God ever feels that way about the projects that God takes on? “When I get through, they'll be beautiful, you'll see!”

Perhaps that is how God felt about a struggling young missionary “wanna be” pastor named John Wesley. Wesley, a bit rough around the edges, and quite a bit in need of personal restoration, yearned for more of Christ. While at a small chapel called Aldersgate, God touched his heart and started the process of transformation that would quickly spill out onto others and usher in a revival that would reshape and invigorate Christianity.

The before and after pictures are amazing! The inner work of the Holy Spirit transformed and changed John Wesley in such a dramatic fashion that his previously unfruitful work, now fueled by the Holy Spirit, was met with amazing success.

My prayer for the people called United Methodist continues to be, “Lord, do it again!” We are in need of a repair, a renovation, a restoration, a refurbishing, a remodeling, a restitution, and a renewal. This much needed transformation will only come as we yield ourselves to the restoring power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can cleanse us and make us brand new if we are willing to be reclaimed and refashioned. The Holy Spirit, when we yield ourselves, will strip away anything that keeps us from looking like Jesus. The Holy Spirit will smooth away our rough edges and allow the natural beauty that God has given to each of us, to shine with a glowing radiance.

God, I believe, is trying to strip away the painted surfaces that we have allowed to coat our work and our witness. God, through the power of God's Holy Spirit, will not stop until we show forth the glory of the one who has called us from darkness into light.

I'm working on my box and it is starting to look better. The process is slower than I'd like, but I am making progress. Keep me in your prayers as God continues working on me. I can almost hear God saying, “When I get through, he'll be beautiful, you'll see!”

God Bless,
Bishop Beard

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“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

Hope is a Game-Changer!

Rev. Jim McClarey, Directing Pastor

I LOVE the subject of hope! Maybe it's because I tend to see the world through a lens of possibility. And maybe I see the world that way because of my deep trust and belief that this is God's world, and no matter how crazy it seems, there is always the hope of new life, and of redemption! For me, a hopeful outlook is a direct result of putting my life in God's hands, for now and for eternity.

So as I prayed about writing on the subject of HOPE for this booklet, I felt led to share about what HOPE does IN me. Here's what happened:

It's no secret that Pekin has some big concerns facing us. I hear of economic woes, the increase of substance abuse, domestic “situations” are on the rise, homelessness seems to be growing. There are lots of issues clamoring for attention. And dwelling on these can be a real downer. It can make the world seem—Hopeless!

I was starting to feel down about different things, and my concern for our church was growing. In hindsight, I was letting influences other than God's Spirit dig deep into me, causing me to focus on the negatives instead of seeing the amazing ways God still works. And then God used three people to refocus my attention!

In the space of about three days I rubbed elbows with three community leaders, and their combined bright, hopeful attitude about Pekin put me back on track of looking forward with hope, instead of giving in to the negativity and despair that was starting to cloud over me.

The first was an interaction with a community leader I had asked to serve here at our church. He said “yes,” which is wonderful, but in the conversation he mentioned that he's serving our community in a couple of big ways that will be time-consuming. He said, “I'm excited about our great city, and I want to serve!” That caught my attention.

Then a couple of days later, I was at a community function (ironically at a ministry named “The Hope Chest!”) and the mayor of Pekin spoke. He was so positive about Pekin, the Hope Chest, and the possibilities which are in front of us here in Pekin. That stirred my soul.

After that, I was in a group in which the speaker was our Superintendent of Schools. She didn't speak about how awful it was that they had to do so much more with so much less, nor about the negative ways the restrictions have affected the schools. Instead, she spoke positively about the ways the leaders in the schools are adjusting to the new realities facing them. That perked me up.

*I thought, “Wow, it's amazing what I'm feeling now, regarding hope for the future of Pekin, because these three people spoke with hope and passion about the possibilities instead of the pitfalls.” The thought popped into my head, “THIS IS WHAT HOPE DOES! IT'S A GAME-CHANGER! CHANGES ATTITUDES, PUTS WIND IN THE SAILS, CHANGES THE NARRATIVE, SHEDS LIGHT, AND IT FLOWS OUTWARD TO OTHERS! **If that's what human outlook can do, then how much more impact does the hope we have in our God make when we trust Him for what's up ahead?!**”*

Since then, I'm back to whistling more, walking with spring in my step, smiling, and seeing the bright future God has in mind for His creation. Because God said it! “I know the plans I have for you...to give you hope and a future.” Amen!

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heaven: —Ecclesiastes 3:1

Hope in the Seasons of Life

Valerie Moehle

At ROCKids, a ministry of our church with the children and families who live at the Pekin Housing Authority, I asked the kids in October what they liked best about fall. Most of the answers pointed to the leaves—collecting, jumping in them, doing art projects with them, enjoying the colors. Me, too—on all fronts. But the leaves are also a part of the story of hope that God shares with us through His creation. The cycle of the leaves on the tree are a reminder of God's promises that His plan is perfect for our lives. We start in the spring with flowers and buds on the trees that soon turn into the green leaves of summer that provide shade from the hot sun. As the green changes to gold and red and orange and purple, we again celebrate the change, even though we know what comes next. The leaves then turn brown, wither and die. And we are left with barren trees. Yet in their barrenness, the trees capture the freshness of a new snow or glisten with ice. They allow the moon and the stars to shine through on a cold, clear night. And then the barrenness of winter once again gives way to the promises held in the buds of springtime. The buds don't produce what was there before, but instead something new and glorious—the same, yet different.

God holds out the same promises in our lives. Each season of our lives brings change and something different. Yet each season, in and of itself, has its own beauty even in the midst of what may look to be brown or barren. And it is only through these changing seasons that God is able to keep the sameness of who He created us to be, yet produce something completely new in us—something that draws us closer to God's image—making us into people of love, hope, justice, compassion and mercy. *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.—Romans 5:5*

“Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through Christ. We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character produces hope.”—Romans 5:1-5 (NKJ)

Hope Opens the Floodgates of Heaven

Linda Danz

When we live expectantly, we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God pours into our lives. Hope is our opportunity to look at life with excitement and anticipation. There is something about it that opens the floodgates of heaven. Not only are we the benefactors of His blessing and grace, we're given a chance to grow in the likeness of Christ in the process.

Our patience is developed and our character is refined. Our minds become more alert and our eyes stay fixed on the prize. Life is framed through a wide angle lens. All we have to do is point and shoot in the right direction. Even if we don't get the exact thing we were hoping for, life comes into clearer focus, helping us truly see our priorities.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”—Romans 4:18

And hope does not put disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.—Romans 5:5

Hope and the Fruits of the Spirit

Jane Stropes

“Hope.” I get it easily confused with “Wish.” So, I have done some research (looking into the devotionals on my Bible app—thanks, Heather Robertson!) and I came across several devotionals regarding hope that made sense to me.

Probably the devotional that really jumped out at me was the one about hope being defined as character. In the devotion by the Tim Tebow Foundation, the author had an excellent recitation: “How do you define character? The Bible defines character as a life that overflows with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).” That makes sense to me, that if and when we pray to be open to the flow of the Holy Spirit, the Fruits of the Spirit are the outcome.

I used to pray for patience. Now, I pray to be open to the Holy Spirit. I've learned if my spirit is open to God that the Fruits of the Spirit are natural by-products of being Open. I am a kinder, gentler, more patient, more joyful me.

It took me a long time to understand to not pray specifically for “patience,” or “goodness,” or “joy,” etc. And I believe that being open to the Holy Spirit will also help me to gain hope as a part of my character. I have to marinate, soak in, study, and BE in the Holy Spirit.

Yes, it is very hard for me to stay focused on God/Jesus, especially when I'm teaching. But that's when it's most important for me to “give it up to Jesus.” As God works on MY character, it is my desire, my confident expectation, my hope/wish, that in addition to the Fruits of the Spirit flowing through me, people will see me as a person of hope.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”—Jeremiah 29:11

You Might Be Part of God's Plan to Give Someone Hope

Rob Hancock, MHA

I'd heard some info about former President Obama and it inspired me to write this when I saw the theme was “Hope.” The most hopeless phrase a well-intentioned acquaintance can offer when you are down is the unsolicited advice, “Don’t Give Up Hope.” When you are down, lonely, burdened, overwhelmed, feeling like life is passing you by, that is EXACTLY when God reveals his grace and plans. It is God who had the plan to send a neighbor to your house, knock on your door, give you something warm wrapped in foil, and say “I just made some brownies and thought you might want some.” It is God who had the plan to make your phone ring a familiar tone and a recognizable voice on the other end say, “I am headed to the store. Do you want to go along?” It is God who had the plan to have a friend send a text asking, “What are you doing?” and the message started with the phrase “Thinking of You”.

Jeremiah 29:11 educates us about His plan. A little-known black man from Illinois started an unlikely journey in 2005. He announced he was going to run for the office of U.S. Senator. He persevered and won the 2006 election. One year later, with no money to start his campaign, he announced he would run for the office of President of the United States. Against all odds, Barack Obama became the first black president in 2008. The theme of both his Senate and Presidential campaigns—HOPE. Someone in Barack’s past baked him some brownies, called him to go shopping, and sent him a text starting with the phrase “thinking of you.”

Do you know someone who might want warm brownies, join you in shopping, or who might appreciate a text saying “thinking of you”? You just might be part of God’s plan to give someone else HOPE.

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

If God Were to Write Us a Letter Today, It Might Read Something Like This

Amanda DuCharme

No matter what your circumstances may be, you can find joy in My presence. On some days joy is strewn generously along your life path, glistening in the sunlight. On days like that, being content is as simple as breathing or taking the next step. Other days are overcast and gloomy; you feel the strain of the journey, which seems endless. Dull gray rocks greet your gaze and cause your feet to ache. Yet joy is still attainable. Search for it as hidden treasure.

Begin by remembering that I have created this day; it's not a chance occurrence. Recall that I am present with you whether you sense My presence or not. Then start talking to Me about whatever is on your mind. Rejoice in the fact that I understand you perfectly and I know what you're experiencing. As you continue communicating with me, your mood will gradually lighten. Awareness of My marvelous companionship can infuse joy into the grayest day.

I love you.

Sincerely,
God

*You have made known to me the ways of life;
You will make me full of joy in Your presence.—Acts 2:28*

But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in Him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.—Jeremiah 17:7-8

God is the Master Gardener Who Plants Us & Prunes Us; He Wants Us to Put Our Hope in Him

Heather Price

BJ and I went and bought flowers. Planting is not something I usually do, but for two years now I have been getting the front of my house prepared. First we had to remove the bushes, then last summer I spent the time getting the ground prepared. This spring we had to kill off some weeds, and today I planted.

As I was planting I was thinking about how this whole process is like God planting me right where He wants me. He puts me in places that need the truth and beauty of a relationship with Christ. He spends time removing things in my life that will not edify and glorify Him, things that are not really beneficial to me and my growth—things that will hurt my relationship with Him. He allows trials to help my roots grow further into him. He cultivates me, so that I can help cultivate others.

If my roots aren't planted properly in His truth and word, I can't bloom or bear fruit. I have learned so many things this past year. I don't exactly know what's in store for me, but I know it's something great. He has been working hard on my patience, trust, words, and attitude. He is speaking life into me, so that I can speak into others (I know that much).

As you think on these things, ask God to prepare you, then plant you right where He wants you. If you allow this, you will see so much beauty come out of it.

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and in His incomparable power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.— Eph 1:18-23

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.—Psalm 43:5

The Hope of Jesus

Brad Everett

2020 started out with a bang, but not the typical New Year's celebration. For me, it was falling in the bathroom and breaking my neck, followed by weeks of wearing a neck brace and then weeks of physical therapy. I endured the pain and questioned daily: What have I done to deserve this? I prayed fervently for comfort, patience, and hope.

Spring finally arrived, and I was ready to celebrate and enjoy my release from the doctor visits and the tortures of therapy to only be confronted with a worldwide pandemic. Now, my life was one of sheltering in our home for weeks, followed by a more restrictive but protective lifestyle of masks, handwashing, and social distancing (no dining out and no movie theaters for entertainment). More prayers for comfort, patience, and hope.

Summer arrived and provided some release. I never realized how much comfort mowing the lawn and maintaining the flower beds could provide in addition to the periodic washing and cleaning of the cars. I was excited about my forthcoming birthday in August, celebrating the end of another year of life and the beginning of a new one. Birthdays have taken on new meaning as I explore senior living. Then my summer allergies arrived a little earlier than expected—I thought. Little did I know that my wife's cough was really the result of COVID-19, and I was the unfortunate recipient of this illness. That meant 16 days in quarantine, monitoring by the health department, and an afternoon at the hospital to get intravenous liquids. Once again I thought, what have I done to deserve this? I focused my prayers again on comfort, patience, and hope.

On the afternoon of the day of my release from quarantine, I was looking forward to visiting my mother, whom I had not seen for almost three weeks. Prior to that, I had been spending my days and nights being her primary caretaker as she recuperated from her own medical challenges until she required hospice care in a nursing home. Our mother-son reunion did not take place because she graduated to life eternal before I could get to her. My grief and loss consumed me. I cried out this time: What have I done to deserve this? I knew it was time to focus on Jesus and turn my burdens and sorrow over to Him as I had learned to do so many times before. It's through my relationship with Jesus that I can do all things. He strengthens me and restores my joy and imagination. His voice and presence provide comfort, patience, and hope as only he can do. I serve a risen Savior who truly is in the world today! He is my hope.

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.—Isaiah 40:30-31

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

We Change; God Doesn't

Barbara Harmon

Our memories remind us of good times when we were younger and more capable and people thought “we had it all together.” You were the Care Giver, the able helper, the person to be called on for help or assistance. But as time passed, things changed. Age depleted many of your abilities. Things you felt were God-given appeared no longer to exist. Prayer that you depended on for answers and help seemed to be unheard. Covid 19 added more doubt and confusion. Unable to leave your living quarters compounded your negative thoughts. Life has become dark.

But I have the hope and assurance that even though we change, God changes not. Thank you, God, for the help you sent through phone calls and notes from church friends. I look to Your Word and pray that whatever value my being may have contributed in Your Name may be carried on in the hearts of the recipients.

Dear Father in heaven, only You know when Jesus will return. Please send Him back soon. The whole world is desperate for His coming.

“I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty. —Malachi 3:6-7

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. —Hebrews 13:8

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.—2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

God Gives Us Grace and Hope

Pati Jockisch

I was at the grocery store and heard a loud crash, something shattering. I walked around the end of the aisle and saw that an older lady had knocked over items on a shelf. They had fallen to the floor and had broken. She knelt on the floor trying to clean up the mess. People were just staring at her. I felt sorry for her, so I knelt next to her to help pick up the broken pieces.

The store manager came and said, “Just leave it. We’ll clean it up.” The lady was embarrassed and said she wanted to pay for the damage. The manager smiled and said, “Don’t worry. We have insurance for this. You don’t have to pay for anything.”

Imagine God doing the same for you! Collecting your broken pieces from all the blows life has thrown you. The bill for all your faults and sins has already been paid through the blood of Jesus. God will heal all your wounds. He wants to pick you up, clean up the mess and gently lift you to your feet again, to heal you and take care of your soul. We have insurance (assurance), too—it’s called GRACE!

David said about Him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will You let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence.—Acts 2:25-28

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

Hope is Not a Wish

Jenna Rittenhouse

Hope is a word that is used very frequently and so easily by people today: “*I hope this happens, I hope they say this, I hope this person wins, I hope I have time for.*” It has become a part of human nature to use the word *hope* as if it is interchangeable with the word *wish*. I know there were times that I would fall victim to this and it wasn’t until June 16, 2019 that the real definition of hope became very real to me. It’s hard to truly understand and comprehend what hope is until you are placed in a situation where all you have left is hope and hope alone. On June 16th, hope was no longer an “I wish” statement but the beginning of truly understanding that hope is the confident expectation of what God has promised and his strong faithfulness.

On that day my boyfriend Nathan Hays was involved in a pedestrian versus automobile accident. He was hit by a car traveling at 60 mph. I woke up to a phone call from Nathan's younger brother stating what had happened, and that I needed to head to the hospital because doctors were not sure if he would survive. I remember to this day in the mix of frantically getting ready and running down to my parents, stopping in my tracks and praying to God. This, even though I didn’t know it then, was my first instance of hope. I gave everything up to God and trusted in His plan.

From that moment moving forward, Nathan had a emergency decompressive craniectomy, was placed into a medically induced coma, suffered from several broken bones (some of which required surgical attention), was transported by Life Flight to OSF in Peoria where he spent several weeks in the Neurological Intensive Care Unit. He was transferred to three other units/rooms before he was released to come home August 24, 2019. When he returned home he completed outpatient speech, physical, occupational, and neurological therapy.

I can look back on Nathan’s accident and know with great confidence that what allowed me to get through some of my darkest days was hope. Hope for me is the light at the end of a dark road. Hope is the underlying understanding that God had and always has a greater plan. Hope is and was the strength and optimism that kept me going when I didn’t always want to keep going. Hope is bigger than all of us. Hope is waking up and knowing that it’s a new day. Hope is letting go and giving everything we are to God. Hope is celebrating all the small and big victories. Hope is trusting and not wishing.

When I look back, if I didn’t have hope, I don’t know how I would have made it through some of the worst days of my life or where Nathan would be today. To end, if I could paint a picture that accurately depicts hope it would look a lot like this: A figure of a person standing at the end of a long, dark and twisted street, staring at the solo yet dim street light in the far distance—not knowing when or how they are going to find their way there in the darkness but trusting that one day they will. From June 16, 2019 to today and for the rest of my life, I will never lose hope because hope has brought me closer to God and closer to the person I am meant to be.

He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.— 2 Cor 1:10-11

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”—Revelation 4:11

Eye of Each Alone*

Bill Harmon

There is beauty all around us some that we miss
Do we see beauty of the birds that sing to us each day

Do we see the beauty of the wind that cools us
Or the beauty of the sun rays that nourish the trees

There is beauty in the fallen snow that we fail to view
The beauty of a small child who lights his parents' eyes

God gives us many beautiful things that we seem to overlook
There is beauty here among us that our eyes pass by

There are many beauties that become like that old thing
Yet that old thing in somebody's eye is just perfect

And yes we take these many things for granted because
The eye of the beholder can make all things beautiful

*12/22/2014

You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations. Those living far away fear your wonders; where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy.—Psalm 65:5-8

Be strong and take heart, all who hope in the Lord.—Psalm 31:24

A Retrospective on 2020 & Hope in God's Word as an Anchor

Sue Hurd

From my perspective, this calendar year initially began with family celebrations and concerns as well as personal involvement in church activities and various volunteer projects. To my chagrin, the announcement in March by Governor Pritzker that suggested various mitigation efforts be instituted in response to a global Coronavirus pandemic was greeted by me and others with general denial. To my way of thinking at that time, the entire situation would quickly be resolved if all citizens of the United States of America worked together to prevent the spread of the virus. Slowly the realization came to me that the virus wasn't going away quickly, and the devastation and ravages of the infection drastically interrupted “normal/routine” activities. My only constant in turmoil was dependence/reliance upon God, Jesus and the Bible in resolving my concerns.

The mitigation strategies employed signal basic care of self and others in the community. As an additional mainstay, I pursued the concept of hope in order not to experience emotional havoc. In my version of the Bible, I found more than 20+ references to *hope* to serve the believer. There are many more referenced in the BlueLetterBible.org.

Only by seriously studying these passages and contemplating on them, does one understand that Hope will only come from God. This “bottom line” comes from my perspective as a senior adult whose meaningful interactions with church personnel and family members have been significantly interrupted and forever changed; life’s journey has slowed-down as a result of Covid-19.

I urge everyone who is feeling the losses I have expressed to read the Bible, the Word of God, for guidance, peace and hope in order to alleviate much of the anxiety and impact of this pandemic experience. Pray and think on hymns for solace, too. Many hymns are scripture put to music. I find that singing some of the old Methodist hymns to myself reminds me where my hope rests: “His oath, His covenant, His blood support me in the whelming flood. When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

If you're anything like me, your anxieties may go away, but then will resurface like the proverbial bad penny. Like many prescriptions for medical maladies, this “prescription” for anxiety (prayer, reading the Bible, singing or listening to hymns and uplifting music) is a daily “med,” and should be taken as needed.

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.—Psalm 62:5

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give the reason for the hope that you have.—1 Peter 3:15

The Bible: God's Book of Hope

Sylvia Heidemann

It has often been said that the Bible is God's instruction manual for life, but it's more than that. It is full of true stories that give us hope—regardless of who we are or what we have done that doesn't meet God's standards of holiness. Even Martin Luther, who started the Protestant Reformation, struggled with trying to measure up to God's standards of righteousness. To try to earn God's acceptance, he deprived himself of physical comforts, prayed, fasted, slept without a blanket on the cold, hard floor of his monastery room, and even flagellated himself. Nothing gave him any peace. He feared the wrath of God because of his sinful nature.

After years of these practices, Martin Luther had a spiritual breakthrough and found the hope for which he had been searching. He said: “At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.”

Think of all the familiar characters in the Bible. Most were ordinary people like you and me (full of human flaws and shortcomings) whom God used to accomplish His purposes. For example:

- Abraham was a shepherd in the pagan Canaanite region. He did not follow after the pagan gods, but instead trusted and obeyed God—even up to the point of being willing to sacrifice his son. As a result, God credited him with His righteousness and made him the father of many nations.

- Moses, adopted by pharaoh's daughter and raised in the Egyptian courts, murdered a man for beating a Hebrew slave and fled for his life. When God reached out to use him, he complained that he was not good at public speaking, so God drafted his brother Aaron to help him in God's plans to free the Israelites.

- Esther was an outstanding beauty, but not bold by nature or a champion of causes. She caught the attention of King Xerxes, who made her his wife and queen, not knowing she was Jewish. When the lives of her people were threatened with genocide through the wiles of the evil Haman, Esther prayed and fasted. God then helped her use her wits and courage to save her people.

- King David started out as a poor shepherd, but became known as God's friend, even though he was guilty of adultery and murder.

- Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a poor young girl. Her outstanding trait was her willingness to be used by God to do His will.

- The original disciples of Jesus were unschooled fishermen, with the exception of Matthew (a tax collector) and Luke (a physician).

- Saul, hater and persecuter of Christians, was hand-picked by Jesus to serve Him. He wrote the majority of the books in the New Testament.

We could go on and on naming people in the Bible who were nothing much to begin with, but who became heroes in their service to God. Hebrews 11, known as “the Hall of Faith,” lists many individuals who were mightily used by God—some who lived without receiving the fulfillment of God's promises, namely Jesus Christ, who is the resurrection and the life. They trusted God and obeyed, and put their hope in Him. Their lives should give us hope that no matter who we are, wherever we are, God wants to use us to glorify Him.

Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.—Martin Luther (November 10, 1483 – 1546)

The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register:

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The Visit of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. ' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Escape to Egypt

Matthew 2:13-14

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

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Editor's note: This devotional booklet is the second one to be timed to coincide with the season of Advent. The 2019 devotional focused on *peace*. We borrowed the concepts of hope, peace, joy and love from the traditional Advent Wreath in which there are four candles symbolizing them. A fifth candle in the center of the wreath is the Christ candle, and it is lit on Christmas Eve to signify the birth of Jesus. While we concentrate on hope, joy, love and peace during Advent, the exploration and demonstration of them should not be isolated to that season. They are meant to be practiced and lived out every day of our lives.

