

# Standard LESSON QUARTERLY®

## KJV BIBLE STUDENT

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HOPE IN THE LORD

▶ International Sunday School Lessons

# Hope in the Lord

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## Contributors

Lesson Development.....	Omar Palafox (1–3, 11), Jon Miller (4), Jason Hitchcock (5), Kevin Youngblood (6), Mark Hamilton (7–9), Doug Hoffer (10), John Mark Hicks (12–13)
Involvement Learning.....	Mark Taylor (1–3, 5), Jon Miller (4), Andrew Wood (6–9), Connie Chandler (10–13)
Editorial Team .....	Jane Ann Kenney, Taylor Z. Stamps

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# Glorious Riches

Devotional Reading: Galatians 3:19-29

Background Scripture: Colossians 1:19-2:5

Today's Scripture: Colossians 1:24-2:3

## I. Paul's Status Colossians 1:24

**24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:**

24a. By use of the word *who*, Paul refers to himself. From the outset, Paul's ministry was to be characterized by *sufferings*. That reality is a recurring theme in his letters (2 Corinthians 1:5-7; 6:3-10; 11:23-27; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 3:10; 2 Timothy 1:12; 3:11; etc.). But Paul was not complaining about random aches and pains as we might do. Rather, his sufferings had a purpose: they were *for you*, as the next thought indicates.

24b. As we read this half-verse, we may come away with more questions than answers! What does *fill up* mean in this context? How can Paul be so bold as to connect his own sufferings to *the afflictions of Christ*? How can Paul's sufferings be a benefit to the believers in Colosse (that is, *for his body's sake*)? Recognizing that the word *behind* refers to something lacking (as it does in the English translation of the same Greek word in 1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 11:9), what is the "lack" in the afflictions of Christ that Paul's sufferings fill up?

Dealing with the last question first, Paul is crystal clear elsewhere in this letter that there is nothing lacking about Christ's afflictions regarding what they were intended to accomplish (Colossians 2:9-15). One proposal is that the phrase *in my flesh* is the key to understanding here: that which is lacking completeness is not Christ's sufferings in and of themselves, but rather it is Christ's sufferings in Paul that are not yet complete. The church is the body of Christ, and Paul suffered for that body as he traveled to preach the truth of the gospel.

## II. Paul's Intent Colossians 1:25-29

**25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;**

**26 Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:**

**27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:**

**28 Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:**

**29 Whereunto I also labour, striving**

**according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.**

25a. This is the second time Paul has identified himself as a *minister* in this letter (the first time is in Colossians 1:23). The English word translated “minister” comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, from which we also derive the word *deacon*. Paul is not using this word to refer to an office of the church. Rather, he is depicting himself as a “servant,” which is how the word is translated in Matthew 23:11; Mark 9:35; John 12:26; and elsewhere.

25b. *The dispensation of God* of which Paul speaks is recorded in Acts 9:15; 22:14-15; and 26:16-18. We could call those passages Paul’s “mandate” or “marching orders.”

25c. The phrase *for you* establishes the believers at Colosse to be the beneficiaries of Paul’s tasks; the phrase *to fulfil the word of God* establishes the benchmark by which to measure the accomplishment of those tasks. Both facts are stated in very general terms here.

26. Paul uses the word *mystery* numerous times in his letters in different ways. The passages that are closest to the usage of that word in the verse before us are Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7; and Ephesians 3:3-9. In those, as here, the word refers to the content of Paul’s preaching that is foundational: the good news of Jesus, once hidden but now revealed. In doing so, Paul was drawing on Jewish ideas about the mystery of God’s plans, which culminate in Christ.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ indeed was a mystery until it began to be disclosed by Jesus. But even though He brought, modeled, and explained the gospel message personally, people often did not comprehend, even right up to the day of His ascension.

27. In Greek, this verse is a continu-

ation of the preceding verse rather than the beginning of a new sentence. The phrase *among the Gentiles* acknowledges the inclusiveness of the gospel message. Not all Gentiles accepted the message, of course, even though the truth of *this mystery* was available to them. Paul wants his readers to make no mistake regarding the content of the mystery: it’s *Christ*. Not only Christ in and of himself, but Christ *in you*. Not only is Christ in us, but we are also in Him.

Thus what has been made known in terms of *the riches of the glory* of the mystery is explained in terms of the presence of Christ being *the hope of glory*. This is the future orientation that fulfills God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:5-6). Christ is the believer’s hope for participation in the glory of Heaven.

28. The opening word of this verse tightly connects its content to “Christ” per His mention in the previous verse. Following that word *whom* comes a statement of two methods of conveying the message of the Christ: *preach[ing]* and *teaching*.

The content of the message—whether preached or taught—has a singular goal of presenting everyone as *perfect in Christ Jesus*. But how is it possible to be perfect, even though Jesus commanded it in Matthew 5:48? The word in the original language translated “perfect” occurs 20 times in the New Testament. Depending on context, it can mean “perfect,” “mature,” or “something that has reached its goal.” As we sift through the options, it’s important to remember that “explaining” which is correct runs the danger of “explaining away” alternatives that we don’t like. In the case at hand, it’s best to leave the word *perfect* just like that. Indeed, it’s not possible to attain perfection in this life. *But that doesn’t mean we lower the standard!* We keep aiming for perfection, and we ask forgiveness when we fall short.

29. The church has God's power or energy working within it. Paul's successful evangelist endeavors are evidence of that fact. This power is not exclusive to the apostle Paul; it was working through others as well. The purpose of the church is for her members to be not only reconciled (justified) but also to be complete in holiness (sanctified). God's working is directed toward both.

### III. Paul's Labor Colossians 2:1-3

**1 For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;**

**2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;**

**3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

1. Paul desires that his readers know of his ministry of prayer on their behalf (see Colossians 1:9-12). The word translated *conflict* is a form of the same word translated "striving" in Colossians 1:29 (speaking of Paul's own labor) and "fervently" in Colossians 4:12 (speaking of Epaphras's laboring for them in prayer). Paul greets someone by name in Colossians 4:17, and he knows other Christians in Colosse (compare Philemon 1-2 with Colossians 4:10-17). Even so, the phrase *for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh* is widely accepted to mean that Paul had not been to Colosse.

*Laodicea*, approximately 10 miles from Colosse, is another city in the Lycus River valley. Although many within this letter's audience are strangers to Paul, they are still objects of Paul's concern that arises

from the unity believers have in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 4:16).

2a. Scripture often uses the word *heart* to designate the person, especially one's center of moral and ethical deliberation, will, and attitudes (Genesis 6:5; Exodus 4:21; Matthew 9:4; 12:34; etc.). The verb translated *comforted* communicates more than offering solace; one is encouraged and strengthened in the kind of comfort Paul means (see also Ephesians 6:22; Colossians 4:8).

2b. *Knit together* suggests a unity of purpose and thought. The same term appears in Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 2:19 to speak of a unity derived from the church's attachment to its head, Christ. The love that unites believers has its source in their devotion to Christ, who empowers us to love one another. Only a love built on the knowledge of what Christ has done and a desire to serve others can unite the church.

2c. Paul desires his readers to have the confidence and power that comes from an ability to distinguish between true and false teaching. The focus of this *understanding* is to be *the acknowledgement of the mystery of God*. Regarding Paul's use of the word *mystery*, see above on Colossians 1:26-27.

3. This verse speaks against any false teachers who claim to have hidden truth to which only the spiritual elite have access. In contrast, Christ is the one *in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Isaiah 11:2). Wisdom and knowledge are not the same, although they are related. Knowledge is the mental grasp of truth; wisdom is the ability to use knowledge appropriately. Believers can access the wisdom and knowledge revealed in Christ, but that remains hidden from those who reject Him (Matthew 13:13-15; quoting Isaiah 6:9-10).

# Involvement Learning

## Glorious Riches

### Into the Lesson

*“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”*

—Fred Rogers

Who are “the helpers” in our world today?

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Mr. Rogers could move through an uncertain world when he heeded his mother’s advice to look for helpers. Today’s text shows us grand thoughts about hope from the apostle Paul.

### Into the Word

Read today’s Scripture text. Mark the following sentences as *True* or *False*.

1. Paul knows he’s supposed to suffer, and it has ruined his life. \_\_\_
2. Paul is repeating here what most people had understood for many centuries. \_\_\_
3. Believing in Christ makes little difference. \_\_\_
4. Maturity comes in many ways; Jesus can help. \_\_\_
5. What Christ did is easily and universally understood. \_\_\_
6. Paul’s suffering is a very personal and private thing; he doesn’t expect much result for the church. \_\_\_

Write verse references that prove whether each statement is true or false. If necessary, write out true sentences based on the verse(s) referenced.

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### Key Verse

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

—Colossians 2:2-3

### Into Life

How do we find hope in suffering without elevating suffering as good in itself?

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What is one way we can pass along the type of spiritual comfort we received in our times of distress?

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### Thought to Remember

Access the mystery of Christ!

# Bold Ministers

**Devotional Reading:** Deuteronomy 31:1-8  
**Background Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 3:5-18  
**Today's Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 3:5-18

## I. Paul's Expertise 2 Corinthians 3:5-6

**5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God;**

**6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.**

5. As Paul further explores the nature of his apostolic ministry, he uses a word that is translated *sufficient* and *sufficiency* several times in this letter. In so doing, he makes clear that although he has confidence in the results of his ministry, it is God who must have the credit, not Paul and his fellow apostles. Any sufficiency is from *God*.

6. The English words *minister* and *ministers* occur four times as a noun in describing the leadership function of those commonly designated today as “pastors” (here and in Colossians 1:7; 4:7; and 1 Timothy 4:6). These ministers were tasked primarily with preaching the Word, while other leaders—commonly called “shepherds”—attended primarily to non-preaching tasks of caring for the church.

The term *new testament* refers to the new covenant. Several Old Testament passages refer to God’s plan for such a

covenant. Particularly clear on this point is Jeremiah 31:31-34. The covenant foreseen by Jeremiah was brought into being by Jesus himself. A primary feature of the old covenant—the Law of Moses—was that it brought death by condemning people as lawbreakers. This was through no fault of the law; the benefit of following *the letter* of the law was learning God’s ways, not earning salvation. The new covenant, by contrast, *giveth life*. Therefore, life under the new covenant is connected with *the spirit*, a concept introduced by Jesus (see John 6:63) and stressed by Paul (see Romans 2:29; 7:6).

## II. Paul's Interpretation 2 Corinthians 3:7-11

**7 But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away:**

**8 How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?**

**9 For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.**

**10 For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth.**



**11 For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious.**

7-8. Paul now begins a series of conditional if-then statements. This kind of argument takes the form of “if such-and-such is true, then so-and-so must be true as well.” Often the word *then* does not appear in this kind of argument, but its intent is understood to be present nonetheless. In the case at hand, the force of the word *then* occurs just before the word *how*.

Paul often walks a tightrope when he talks about the old law (the old covenant of the Law of Moses). He knows that the new covenant—the *ministration of the spirit*—is far superior to the old one—the *ministration of death*. But that doesn’t mean that the old covenant was defective or had failed in some way. Indeed, the old covenant of law was flawless in what it was intended to accomplish: establishing God’s expectations in no uncertain terms. This left Israel with no excuse regarding knowledge of sin. It’s reasonable that in creating humans in His own image, God would expect us to be holy because He is holy. That expectation resulted in God’s giving His requirements for holiness not just to *the children of Israel* but to Gentiles as well.

But what constitutes a holy life? That’s the question that the old law answered in terms of a code of behavior. That body of law was so important that it was *engraved in stones* (Exodus 32:16; 34:1-5, 28; contrast Romans 4:15; 5:13). Contrast that with our modern expression “it’s not written in stone” when we want to stress that a document is just a first draft or that it is otherwise changeable. If anyone *could* keep the law perfectly, that person would have led a perfectly holy life. A person is not made holy by the corruptible things or the tradition of the elders.

One is made holy by the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:17-22).

9-10. Paul moves to his second if-then conditional statement. Again, the word *then* isn’t explicitly used, but its force is understood to be present nevertheless, just before the word *much*. The point about the *glory* of the old covenant in relation to the glory of the new covenant is essentially the same as in 2 Corinthians 3:7-8. What’s new here is the introduction of parallel descriptions: the “ministration of death” in 3:7 is the same as the *ministration of condemnation* here in describing the old covenant (Deuteronomy 27:26). And the “ministration of the spirit” in 2 Corinthians 3:8 is the same as the *ministration of righteousness* here in describing the new covenant in Christ. Therefore, the new covenant is superior because those who merit condemnation for sin receive instead imputed righteousness because of Christ.

11. This is the third and final if-then argument that contrasts the old covenant (*that which is done away*) with the new covenant (*that which remaineth*). As mentioned above, the word *then* does not appear as such.

### **III. Paul's Application 2 Corinthians 3:12-18**

**12 Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech:**

**13 And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished:**

**14 But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ.**

**15 But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart.**



**16 Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away.**

**17 Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.**

**18 But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.**

12. *Hope* is an important theme for Paul. Certainty derives from hope. A person with a sincere hope of finishing a race has a significantly better chance of doing so than someone who enters the race convinced that he won't be able to finish. In Paul's case, his hope reveals itself in his boldness, expressed as *great plainness of speech*. Imagine how ineffective Paul's message of the gospel would be if his voice conveyed the lukewarm overtones of "maybe," "perhaps," and "possibly"!

13. Exodus 32–34 is Paul's source of illustration to demonstrate the superiority of the new covenant over the old. Specifically, the reference here is to Exodus 34:33, 35. The illustration and its intended effect on Paul's first-century audience are essentially the same as in 2 Corinthians 3:7-8 above, but with the detail of a *veil* (veil) added. We know it was some face covering, but it is difficult to determine what it was made of, its shape, etc.

14-15. The Scriptures often use figurative language to describe a lack of perception. Such language often involves the senses of seeing and hearing. Considering the word *blinded* in the verse at hand, we see the same word used in Romans 11:7 and 2 Corinthians 4:4.

16. Paul says the same thing in Romans 11:23, using an agricultural comparison: "They also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again." The

way this happens is when hearts *turn to the Lord*. It's not enough merely to turn away from sin; that's only half the solution. The full solution is to turn to the Lord in repentance.

17. The phrase *the Lord is that Spirit* reflects Isaiah 61:1, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19. Both passages stress the freedom or *liberty* that Christ has brought. In contrast to the Israelites, who most often had a human leader mediating between them and God, Paul's audience had access to God through the indwelling Spirit. Paul stresses that it is through the Spirit that they have freedom. Through the covenant of the Spirit, they were liberated from the veil. Unlike Moses, they did not have to place a veil over their face. The same face that Paul turned to the Lord was the same face that the people were able to see. Because now the glory never wears off.

Paul now moves to contrast specifically those who erroneously choose to remain veiled with those who wisely choose not to (*we all, with open face*). Unlike the glory of the old covenant that was only given to Moses, the benefits of the new are available to everyone in Christ. In this sense, we can see at least a glimpse of *the glory of the Lord*. Our current view of Him is not crystal clear, given that we yet view Him as a reflection in a mirror (*as in a glass*). We do not yet have the full view that we will eventually be blessed to have: "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

Even so, our reflected view is sufficient in this life for conforming us ever more closely to the *image* of the Son of God. Could there be any greater tragedy for choosing not to do so? See 2 Corinthians 4:4-6.

# Involvement Learning

## Bold Ministers

### Into the Lesson

Consider these two sentences:

*After sunrise, streetlights are useless.*

*The enemy of the best is the second best.*

List examples from history, current events, or everyday life to illustrate why the sentences are true.

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Today we will look at a vital reality that echoes the truth of these two statements. It is a truth that changes lives for eternity.

### Into the Word

Read Exodus 24:1-8; 34:29-30; and 2 Corinthians 3:5-18. Compare and contrast the texts by recording similarities and differences under the appropriate headers below.

*Old Covenant*

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*New Covenant*

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Write a devotional that emphasizes the benefits of living under the new covenant. Use 2 Corinthians 3:5-18 to list points to be made before writing the devotion.

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Compare and contrast the veil of 2 Corinthians 3:5-18 with the curtain in Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; and Luke 23:45. What does each one signify that the other does not?

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### Key Verse

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

—2 Corinthians 3:18

### Into Life

How does the image of transformational change in 2 Corinthians 3:18 relate to that noted in Romans 12:2?

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What are some ways to recognize the Spirit's desire to change us?

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What can we do to open ourselves to that work of the Spirit?

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### Thought to Remember

Be unveiled.

Be bold.

# Empowered Servants

Devotional Reading: Philippians 2:1-13

Background Scripture: Romans 15:1-13

Today's Scripture: Romans 15:1-13

## I. What to Do, Part 1 Romans 15:1-4

**1 We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.**

**2 Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.**

**3 For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.**

**4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.**

1. Paul thinks the attitude of the *strong* toward *the weak* in this verse is so important that it's a variation of what he has already said in Romans 14:1.

Note the all-encompassing nature of this imperative: the two groups of strong and weak means that it applies to everyone. So far in this letter, there have been three issues dividing these two groups: what kinds of food can be eaten (Romans 14:2), the value of certain days (14:5), and the use of wine (14:21).

Note that Paul is not talking about merely tolerating those who are weak in the faith. Rather, the strong ought to *bear* the infirmities of those weaker in the faith. Our stance toward others is active, not passive, pursuing unity in positive

support, not just coexistence through benign neglect.

2. The phrase *please his neighbour* here is the flip side of the imperative "not to please ourselves." The idea here is that of pleasing a fellow believer rather than ourselves. Living that way will build the faith of one's fellow Christians .

We should note that the word *neighbour* in this context refers to fellow believers. It echoes the command of Leviticus 19:18 to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If God's love compels love for all around us, how much more does it compel love for our sisters and brothers in Christ!

3. Paul moves directly from the exhortation of the previous two verses to the example of *Christ*. The quote from Psalm 69:9b illustrates this further. The psalmist, recounting the way the righteous are often blamed for the sins of the wicked, anticipated the work of Christ, who took the guilt of sinful humanity on himself on the cross. Christ's sacrifice is the supreme expression of God's love that overcomes divisions and boundaries.

4. If anyone asks you what value there is in studying the Old Testament now that we're in the New Testament era, the answer is in this verse. But we should not view this verse in isolation in that regard since Paul writes it immediately after quoting from the Old Testament.

There is a process between *our learning from the scriptures* and the *hope* that ultimately results. That process involves (at least) the two intermediate effects of *patience and comfort*. The word *patience* is closely related to *endurance* and *perseverance*. Through the Scripture, God works to give patience and endurance to Christians.

## II. What to Do, Part 2

### Romans 15:5-12

**5 Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus:**

**6 That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**7 Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.**

**8 Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers:**

**9 And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.**

**10 And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people.**

**11 And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people.**

**12 And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust.**

5. If the church is to be unified in its diversity and diverse in its unity, it will only be so because of the good news of Jesus and the work of God the Father. God is characterized by *patience*, His capacity to bear with the failures and rebellions of humanity while continuing to offer them forgiveness. God is characterized by *con-*

*solation* or encouragement, His constant provision of the tangible and intangible resources His people need as they navigate life's challenges. The supreme expression of God's patience and consolation is in Jesus, God's true king, who willingly gave His life for the unworthy.

This is the God who calls His people to pursue unity in their diversity. Paul recognizes that it is not within the flesh's capacity to unite with one another. Thus, this verse requests God to *grant* or give readers this ability.

6. The unified *mind* of God's people leads to unified praise of *God*. Paul gives us an image of a church gathered with members from every imaginable background and identity but with every voice raised in praise to God. But that expression of praise is not simply in corporate worship. It is vividly expressed in the concern for others more than oneself that each Christian demonstrates, the exercise of the unified mind in all the Christian's relationships. To glorify God is to praise God for what He truly is and has truly done. The true God is the *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, who died and rose for unworthy humanity. That one is the ruler of all, the one to whom all God's people and ultimately all of humanity will bow.

7. Paul ends this section with a pointed summary. What should I do with this person who prefers things I do not like, accepts things I reject, and rejects things I accept? The answer is to respond to that person as *Christ* responded to us. Christ did not forgive us because we started pleasing Him. No, He forgave us in our sins. In our gratitude we sought to please Him, but first, He received us as we are. Of course, He continues to receive us, even in our ongoing failure. That is the supreme model of how *God* calls us to respond to one another.

8. Paul now puts the work of *Christ* in

the frame of the major division in the Roman church, between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He affirms that Christ's work fulfilled God's promises to Israel, that Christ was a servant (*minister*) of those who received circumcision as a sign of God's covenant and promise. The God of Israel was never content to be just the God of one tribe. He always pointed forward to the peoples of the world joining with that tribe to be God's people.

9. Paul cites several passages from Israel's sacred Scriptures. This reminds readers that God always intended His *people* to be diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, this section connects to Paul's earlier comment (see verse 4). Paul's ministry was built around this divine intention. To believers in Jesus of different backgrounds, he repeatedly taught that Christ's church must express the promise of God to redeem all people as the church expresses love across lines of ethnicity, class, and custom.

10. This quotation comes from Deuteronomy 32:43. Again, the picture is of former pagans who have joined with God's people in worship of the true God. God has always sought diverse people to worship Him in unity. The picture is not of Gentiles becoming Israelites to join God's people but of Gentiles joining Israelites to praise God as His diverse people.

11. The third quotation comes from Psalm 117:1. This very short psalm calls on people from all the world's ethnicities and tribes to join in God's praise. It is little wonder that so short a song of praise would focus on the promised diversity of God's people. The God who created the world and its diverse peoples ultimately seeks for all the diverse peoples of the world to worship Him together as one.

12. The final quotation comes from the great prophet *Isaias*, also known as Isaiah. In Isaiah 11:10, the root of Jesse

refers prophetically to Jesus, the descendant of David, the son of Jesse. Jesus, as that root, is the one who fulfills God's promise of David's descendant who will rule over the nations without end. His reign is not tyrannical or incompetent, like many of Israel's kings. People of all nations will trust Him as a good, wise, and powerful ruler, just as He demonstrates in making the nations His people despite their rebellion against Him.

### III. How God Can Help Romans 15:13

**13 Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.**

13a. God's *peace* is not merely the absence of hostility. Rather, it is positive, active goodwill toward others, living in active harmony and active service for one another. Likewise, God's *joy* is more than a pleasant state of mind. In joy, we respond to the experience of God's love, as we receive it from God and as we receive it through one another. The peace and joy will be in each of them and shared among them as they express Christ's reign by living in harmony, deferring to one another in love.

13b. The prayer continues, asking for abundant hope and a positive view of the future based on the believer's confidence in God's goodness and power. The hope of the future is grounded in the experience of the present. The *Holy Ghost* living in the Christian provides the proof of God's commitment to His people, assuring us that He will complete at Christ's return the salvation He began at our conversion. God's hope is not mere optimism. It is grounded in what God has done and is doing, expressing confidence in what God promises yet to do.

# Involvement Learning

## Empowered Servants

### Into the Lesson

Using your smartphone, find pictures or headlines that show or imply a weak person. What was it about the person that indicated “weakness”?

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How do “stronger” people react to those in your example?

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How easy is it to respond positively to those who are “weak”?

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The apostle Paul has something to say about how Christians should respond to weakness in one another.

### Into the Word

Read Romans 15:1-13. For each command you find in the text, write it in the first column; then write in the other column a reason to obey it.

*What Paul Commands*

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*Reason to Obey*

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List everything Romans 15:1-13 says about Jesus.

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List everything Romans 15:1-13 says about the church.

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### Key Verse

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Romans 15:5-6

### Into Life

How can bearing with the “weak” lead us to be stronger?

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In what ways can we “bear with” their weaknesses?

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### Thought to Remember

Christ creates one church united in Him.

# Full Assurance

Devotional Reading: Psalm 23

Background Scripture: Hebrews 6:9-20

Today's Scripture: Hebrews 6:9-20

## I. Promise Made Hebrews 6:9-12

**9 But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.**

**10 For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.**

**11 And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end:**

**12 That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.**

9. The opening *but* indicates that what follows contrasts in some way with what has just been said. In the verse immediately before the one at hand, the writer of Hebrews wrapped up his or her negative cautions to switch to a discussion of *better things*. The writer does not define or give specifics about these better things, saying only that they are things to anticipate.

10a. Having declared the promise of better things, the writer transitions to speaking of the one who makes the promise: *God*. In using the description *not unrighteous*, the writer employs a form of rhetoric known as *litotes*. This de-

vice occurs when a writer or speaker creates an understatement by expressing an affirmative by means of a negative to the contrary. In other words, we might affirm that something is “good” by declaring it “not bad.” Therefore, the fact communicated here is that God is righteous. The premise of God’s righteousness is connected with His unwillingness *to forget*.

10b. The recipients of this letter had *ministered* in ways that visibly witnessed to their salvation. We know that good works result *from* salvation; they don’t result *in* salvation. Salvation is by grace through faith and not by works. Jesus had said that the world would know His followers by their *love* for one another. The love we demonstrate is (or should be) a result of the grace and forgiveness received in Christ.

11. The writer’s concern for consistent and continuous pastoral care continues. This was not only for the benefit of the one receiving the care but also evidence of the recipients’ *full assurance of hope*. So that they do not get discouraged in their work, the author directs their attention to the finish line.

Scholars disagree about whether *the end* refers to the end of the lives of the original readers of Hebrews or the end of the age. Either way, the imperative of uninterrupted faithfulness is paramount. The apostle



Paul saw life as a race to be finished for the hope of reward (Acts 20:24; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:7-8).

12. The opposite of being diligent is to be *slothful*. The underlying Greek word occurs in only two places in the New Testament: here and in Hebrews 5:11. There, the translation is the word *dull*, found in a context that warns against failing to hear. We know that a failure to listen will sometimes result in a failure to act accordingly. The author hopes the readers will both hear and minister according to the truth.

## **II. Promise Fulfilled** **Hebrews 6:13-20**

**13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself,**

**14 Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.**

**15 And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.**

**16 For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.**

**17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:**

**18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:**

**19 Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;**

**20 Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.**

13. The patriarch *Abraham* is mentioned by name 10 times in the book of Hebrews. Clearly, he is a pivotal figure to

this writer. Even so, the emphasis here is on God, who *made* a certain *promise* to that man.

The promise in view is found in Genesis 22:15-18. Before we delve into the nature of that promise, we note that making a vow or swearing an oath is virtually the same thing. Psalm 132:2 depicts the two actions in parallel lines. It was permissible in the Old Testament era to swear by the name of Israel's God because He was the only true God (Deuteronomy 6:13; Isaiah 65:16). Thus, when God himself makes a promise or swears an oath, He must *swear . . . by himself* because no one *greater* in the universe exists by which to swear. The original readers would have been encouraged by this reminder that God's promises are assured since His unsurpassed greatness confirms them.

14-15. The quotation from Genesis 22:15-18 continues. *The promise* from God was that through Abraham's vast number of descendants, all the nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 18:18; 22:17-18). While Abraham (Abram) was at Haran, God had promised him many descendants. God began fulfilling that promise 25 years later when the 100-year-old Abraham had a son named Isaac. The staggering result some 620 years later is seen in Numbers 1:1-46.

Abraham's main task during those 25 years was to wait *patiently*, as such would demonstrate his trust in God. That man's patience wore thin after 11 years of waiting when he tried to help push God's plan along by the conception and birth of Ishmael. But, in God's timing, the promise was indeed fulfilled as Abraham learned patience over the course of an additional 14 years until the birth of Isaac.

As with other cases in the Bible, God's intent was eventually distorted by self-serving human tradition and pride. By the first century AD, a widely held belief

was that physical descent from Abraham was the ticket to being right with God. But the more important issue was (and is) to be a spiritual descendant of Abraham.

16. This verse reflects Exodus 22:10-11. A person swearing *an oath* in that context was inviting God to witness the truth of the testimony. Ideally, this served to put *an end to all strife* of the case at hand. The compelling idea here is that people take oaths in light of something or someone who is *the greater*. And there is nothing or no one greater than God.

17. In taking the oath, *God* communicated on the level of humanity's understanding at the time. He did so in order that there would be no doubt regarding His intention and commitment to implement His plan. This resolve is reflected in the phrase *immutability of his counsel*. The word *immutable* means "unchanging." The underlying Greek word occurs in the New Testament only in this verse and the next.

18. A trick question sometimes asked of Christians is, "Do you believe that God can do anything?" The trap is that if the response is *no*, then the Christian has admitted to following a deity who is less than omnipotent (meaning "all-powerful"). But if the answer is *yes*, then the Christian can be asked a follow-up question such as, "So, you believe that God can make two plus two equal seven?"

The correct response to the first question is to state that God cannot do anything that would violate His own nature. God is the one who created all the rules that order the universe. This fact reveals Him to be a God of order, not disorder. Regarding the second question, to violate a rule that requires two plus two always to equal four would be for God to violate His own orderly nature. This is not a sign of weakness—in fact, quite the opposite!

In the verse at hand, we see an affirmation of all this in the fact that it is *impossible for God to lie*. That is one of the *two immutable things* in view in the verse at hand.

The second of those two things is that God sealed the promise with an oath, as already discussed. We should not lose sight of the fact that an important goal of the writer is to prevent the readers from falling away from Christ (Hebrews 6:4-6). The stress on the absolute reliability of God's promises serves to achieve this goal. How foolish to abandon this *hope!*

19-20. The focus on *hope* continues as the author weaves metaphors together to illustrate the message. Anchors bring to mind thoughts of stability. This verse is the only instance in the New Testament where *an anchor* is used to illustrate Christian hope.

The second metaphor involves the temple *veil*. The veils in the temple in Jerusalem served to divide areas. As the writer later notes, behind "the second veil" was "the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all" (Hebrews 9:3; compare Exodus 26:33). Rules for going behind that veil to enter the Holiest place were highly restrictive (see Leviticus 16; Hebrews 9:7). The Gospels record that the temple's veil was torn from the top to the bottom when *Jesus* died on the cross (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Thus *Jesus* was in some sense *the forerunner . . . for us* in that regard. The writer of Hebrews explains this further in Hebrews 10:19-25.

The primary reference in the Old Testament to the mysterious *Melchisedec* is Genesis 14:18, with another one found in Psalm 110:4. The writer closes this section of the book of Hebrews by reflecting on the imagery of this psalm, as he did earlier in Hebrews 5:6, 10. Reference to this ancient person invites further explanation—an explanation that follows immediately in Hebrews 7:1-17.

# Involvement Learning

## Full Assurance

### Into the Lesson

List examples of contracts that you have signed. Then name common elements of those contracts.

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People make deals, but God makes promises!

### Into the Word

Read Hebrews 6:9-20, then list the many characteristics of the listed individuals by looking in and beyond the lesson text.

*God*

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*Audience of Hebrews*

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*Abraham*

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What advantage do the characteristics of individuals bring to the story, and how does this help readers today in terms of diligence to be exercised?

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### Key Verse

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.  
—Hebrews 6:19-20

### Into Life

Write a thank-you note to God using the word *thanks* as an acrostic.

*T* \_\_\_\_\_  
*H* \_\_\_\_\_  
*A* \_\_\_\_\_  
*N* \_\_\_\_\_  
*K* \_\_\_\_\_  
*S* \_\_\_\_\_

### Thought to Remember

Be assured that our future is ensured.

# Hope through the Generations

by Jon Miller

One dictionary defines *hope* as “to want something to happen or be true” or “to desire with the expectation of attainment or fulfillment.” In popular use, hope is often closely associated with a wish; there is not necessarily an expectation that this “hope” will come true.

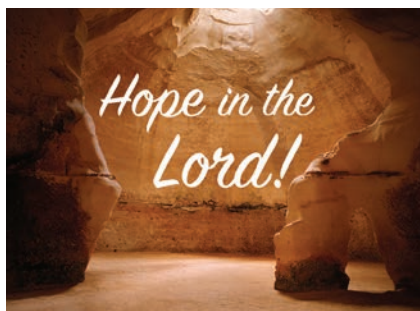
But Christian hope is based on nothing less than God’s promises and the confidence we have based on His faithfulness to His promises. We do not *wish* God would honor His promises; we *hope* He will. This quarter of study traces the concept of hope through the generations.

## Hope and the Church

The five lessons of Unit I, “Experiencing Hope,” consider hope through the lens of those whose faith in Christ gave shape to the early church. In Colossians 1:27 (lesson 1), Paul tells the Colossians that the mysteries of God become known to them as their hope in Christ transforms their lives. In 2 Corinthians 3 (lesson 2), hope in Christ leads to an even greater boldness than was possible for Moses because believers are able to see the glory of God “with open face” (3:18). Lesson 3 points to the hope that is inspired in those around us when they see the salvation that is being worked out in us by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:1-13). In lesson 4, we find encouragement, as did the writer of Hebrews, in the spiritual lifeline we have to God through Christ (see Hebrews 6). The unit closes with a lesson from Acts 26:1-11 and a testimony of Christian hope from Paul’s own lips as he defends himself before King Agrippa.

## Praise and Hope

Unit II, “Expressing Hope,” turns attention to the prayers of ancient Israel as a model for offering to God our praise and petitions. These Hebrew prayers are also expressions of Christian hope. The first lesson of the unit is from a song of lament in Lamentations 3. The author of Lamentations describes hope as fleeing from the people of Israel until the author remembers God’s faithfulness. This memory leads the author to worship God and proclaim, “great is [God’s] faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:23, lesson 6).



The remaining lessons of the unit are drawn from the Psalms, the hymnbook of the ancient people of God. These ancient songs express hope in God’s intervention, as the psalmist petitions God to “be not far from me . . . make haste for my help” (Psalm 71:12, lesson 7). The psalmist found hope in God’s graceful giving of the righteous law (119:73-80, lesson 8) and the forgiveness that God promises His people (Psalm 130, lesson 9). These hopes find their fulfillment in Christ.

*Continued on page 48*

# Fearless Witness

Devotional Reading: Philippians 3:1-14

Background Scripture: Acts 26:1-11

Today's Scripture: Acts 26:1-11

## I. Paul Begins His Defense

### Acts 26:1-8

**1** Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. Then Paul stretched forth the hand, and answered for himself:

**2** I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews:

**3** Especially because I know thee to be expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews: wherefore I beseech thee to hear me patiently.

**4** My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews;

**5** Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

**6** And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers:

**7** Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews.

**8** Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

1. *Agrippa* is short for Herod Agrippa II, the last of the line of Herodian kings. They ruled Judea as the clients of Rome. Paul had reason to fear this king: his father, Herod Agrippa I, had arrested and killed the apostle James.

But Paul was no novice at interacting with authorities. By this time, his 26 years as Christianity's chief proponent had made him a seasoned debater. Thus he was practiced in the habits of defending his actions, counteracting personal attacks, and dividing his opposition.

Paul's case was difficult for civic authorities to grapple with, somewhat like the case of Jesus was 30 years earlier. The authorities were primarily interested in maintaining law and order. But how was order to be maintained when it involved bodily harm due to issues of personal religious belief and practice?

2. Exhibiting deference to a judge is wise, and Paul indicates that he is *happy* to do so. His defense will comprehensively address *all the things the Jews* have accused him of. Those charges to this point in the narrative are that Paul has (1) been causing divisions among the Jews and (2) desecrated the temple. More accusations will be mentioned below.

3. Paul acknowledges Agrippa's familiarity with Jewish matters, as Paul does again in Acts 26:26. Herod's family was

outwardly Jewish. They made a point of following aspects of the Law of Moses. But it was equally obvious they were more interested in being loyal to Rome.

4-5. Paul's *manner of life* in being brought up as a Jewish boy was beyond reproach. By mentioning his upbringing in Jerusalem, Paul noted his previous status as an "insider." He had been zealous for his faith. Although born in Tarsus in Cilicia, Paul was "brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers" (Acts 22:3). Furthermore, Paul described himself as a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (23:6).

The word translated *sect* is something of a chameleon, able to "change color" depending on the context. The word in the original language appears nine times in the New Testament, and it may take on a positive, neutral, or negative overtone in its various possible meanings of "faction," "sect," "school," or "heresy." Along these lines, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus mentions five branches of Judaism of his day: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and Herodians.

6-7. What Paul is referring to in his three uses of the word *hope* in these two verses is found in Acts 23:6-8; 24:15: *The hope of the promise* is the resurrection of the dead. The *fathers* are the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to Hebrews 11:10, 13, their faith in things far off was an example of faith. Resurrection was viewed as a reward that Jews were seeking, which is why they gave such devoted service to God *day and night*. Since what Paul is being *accused* of by *the Jews* is part of Jewish belief, there is no wrongdoing—at least from the viewpoint of the Pharisees' doctrine. What drew the ire of the Pharisees is Paul's claim that the resurrection of Jesus is the basis of the future resurrection of people (1 Corinthians 15).

8. This rhetorical question binds together even tighter the "hope" of the previous two verses with belief in resurrection. Again, the basis of Paul's claim is the fact that the resurrection of Jesus anticipates and guarantees our own. In this light, Paul could mean, "Since you, King Agrippa, accept that God will *raise the dead*, why is it so strange that God started with Jesus?" Or perhaps Paul is still referring to a belief in the general resurrection. In any case, Paul is seeking common ground with his audience, which is an important strategy when trying to persuade.

## II. Paul Summarizes His Error Acts 26:9-11

**9 I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.**

**10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.**

**11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.**

9. The designation *Jesus of Nazareth* occurs more than a dozen times in the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus identified himself this way to Paul (as Saul) on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:8). People who lived in ancient times did not have last names, so they had to be identified in other ways, particularly if a person's name was common. The name *Jesus* was fairly common, being an adaptation of the Old Testament name Joshua, meaning "save"—thus the need to use other methods to distinguish one person from another who had the same name. The

designator used for Jesus was a fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 2:23).

Designators can be used to cast something or someone in a positive or negative light. In the case of Jesus, the designator “of Nazareth” was probably used by opponents in a negative, dismissive sense, given the poor reputation of that town (compare John 1:46; 19:19; Acts 6:14).

10. There is a subtle connection between this verse and the one just before it. In the previous verse, Paul spoke of having done “many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth”; that is what he is referring to when he admits the actions we see in the verse before us. To persecute or neglect Jesus’ followers is to persecute or neglect Jesus personally.

Paul’s persecution of Christians was so notorious that his infamous reputation had spread at least as far as Damascus. Earlier, Paul had publicly admitted his culpability in the stoning death of Stephen (Acts 22:19-20; compare 7:54-60).

The phrase *I gave my voice against them* would seem to imply that Paul (as Saul) possessed voting authority concerning punishments meted out, even though he was “young” (Acts 7:58). On the other hand, this phrase could be a rhetorical device to indicate Paul’s sense of responsibility in intending to highlight his role. In either case, the phrase *received authority from the chief priests* lines up with Acts 9:1-2 in leaving no doubt that Paul had been authorized to stamp out this new system.

11. To his horror, Paul had been harming people who were in the right. He was so threatening that many could not believe his change of heart at first.

This admission reveals the extent of the Jewish leaders’ plan to root out Christians; to be *punished* in synagogues was a continuing fulfillment of what Jesus predicted in Matthew 10:17. For Christians to attend *synagogue* shows they still

considered themselves Jewish, even while accepting Jesus as Messiah.

The author does not clarify the meaning of *blaspheme* as used here. But examining the Greek word’s approximately 35 uses in the New Testament, we get the idea that it is equivalent to our modern word *slander*. Such speech results in the slandered person being reviled or defamed. Forcing a Christian to deny Christ was undoubtedly one of the goals of the persecution campaign of Paul (as Saul).

We may think that Paul had an odd way of defending himself before King Agrippa! What good did it do to admit to the bloody and oppressive details of his former way of life? But this method of beginning his defense at trial served an important purpose—a purpose Paul had two years to perfect. That purpose seems to have been to convince Herod Agrippa that a man who would admit doing such horrible things wouldn’t be lying about anything else.

As Agrippa listened to Paul, one cannot help but imagine that the testimony brought up memories of the persecution of Christians conducted by his father, King Herod Agrippa I, about 16 years prior (Acts 12:1-4). The son knew all too well the blood on his father’s hands. And now here was someone by the name of Paul admitting to doing much the same thing!

This fact introduced complications. If it had been OK for his father to do such things, was it not permissible for Paul to have done so as well, as long as he didn’t violate Roman law? But more importantly, what could have accounted for such a massive change of heart—a change so profound that Paul’s men who were once colleagues were now his deadly enemies? Paul hinted at the answer in Acts 26:8. He explains the reason in the text that follows the passage of today’s lesson: Paul’s intent is to vindicate himself and evangelize.



# Involvement Learning

## Fearless Witness

### Into the Lesson

Which, if any, of the following statements are true for you? Why?

1. *I have been wrongly accused of a crime.*
2. *I'm a different person than I was 20 years ago.*
3. *Specific difficulties have prepared me for life now.*
4. *One big event changed my life.*

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When forced to defend himself, the apostle Paul referred to a singular event that changed the direction of his life. Let's see how and why.

### Key Verse

Now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers.

—Acts 26:6

### Into the Word

Read Acts 26:1-11 and answer the following questions:

How is Paul's use of the word "sect" in Acts 26:5 similar to or different from the way that word is commonly used today?

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What three words would you pick to describe Paul's life while he was still called "Saul," considering also Acts 7:58-8:3; 22:2-5?

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Why did Paul begin his defense as he did?

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### Into Life

Use today's text to help construct a response to the statements below.

1. *Dealing with the past.* "I know you say the church is for those who need to be forgiven, not those who already have their act together. But you don't know all the sordid details about my past."

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2. *Trying to testify.* "I try to tell my friends about Jesus, but I feel if they knew some of my secrets, they'd never believe in him. My failures are keeping me from sharing the gospel."

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### Thought to Remember

If God is for us, no one can stand against us!

# Ceaseless Love

Devotional Reading: Psalm 30

Background Scripture: Lamentations 3:16-24; Psalm 30; Jeremiah 52:1-30

Today's Scripture: Lamentations 3:16-24

## I. Remembering Judgment

### Lamentations 3:16-20

**16 He hath also broken my teeth with gravel stones, he hath covered me with ashes.**

**17 And thou hast removed my soul far off from peace: I forgot prosperity.**

**18 And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD:**

**19 Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.**

**20 My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.**

16a. Our text begins amid an extended reflection on how God has behaved like one of Judah's vicious enemies, seemingly seeking the people's annihilation. The imagery is of extreme humiliation. Breaking teeth with *gravel* conveys the experience of being thrown to the ground with such force that the rock-covered ground knocked the victim's *teeth* out.

The poet's physical posture of lying injured on the ground points to the more profound and lasting reality of being brought low spiritually. Ironically, David twice requested that God break the teeth of his wicked enemies (Psalms 3:7; 58:6). Though this fate may have once been reserved for David's and Judah's enemies, it now enters Judah's own experience as David's descendants and the nation

they governed became enemies of God through their persistent rebellion.

16b. The humiliating experience is exacerbated by the poet's sense that God has personally forced him down into the dust. *Covered me with ashes* does not convey the full violence of this image. The Hebrew indicates the act of forcing someone down and keeping him down, perhaps by pressing one's foot down on his back. A contemporary way of putting it might be, "He made me eat dirt."

The poet attributes this action directly to God, though no doubt it was the Babylonian invaders who treated the poet and his fellow Judeans harshly. In one sense, this is due to our human tendency to project onto God the cruelty we experience at the hands of human beings. While this is an understandable reaction insofar as God was using the Babylonians as agents of His judgment, it also indicates how traumatic experiences and suffering tend to cloud and confuse our perception of God. We, like the poet, believe that God is in control and might erroneously attribute the evil actions of others to God's own hand.

17. Here the poet reflects on the significant losses he and his community sustained in the wake of their tragedy. Chief among them was any sense of well-being or hope for future prosperity. The poet uses the familiar Hebrew word *shalom*

(translated *peace*), known to most English speakers as the common greeting in Israel to this very day. The word conveys a broad sense of holistic well-being, of both material security and deep spiritual contentment. Not only had all sense of this security and contentment fled the poet's experience, but he could not even remember what *prosperity* was.

18. It is not clear to whom the poet *said* this. Did he speak to himself, share with fellow sufferers, or address it to God in prayer? Whatever the case, it captured the utter despair that inevitably followed the poet's loss of any sense of well-being, contentment, or even the ability to recall pleasant memories from Judah's past.

In strikingly absolute terms, the poet dismisses any possibility of a future return to *strength* or reason for *hope*. In the immediate aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction and all the pain and suffering that came with it, the poet saw no way forward, no path by which he could imagine God advancing His plans for His people.

19. The poet captures a nauseating sense that all of life has turned sour and lost all of its taste and delight with the use of two vivid words: *wormwood* and *gall*. These two extremely bitter-tasting plants were often used in medicinal elixirs and teas; the plants were notoriously hard to swallow without gagging or vomiting.

20. The poet reflects on the overall effect this all-consuming memory from Lamentations 3:3-19 had on the poet. The vivid memories served only to darken the poet's outlook further and depress him. Indeed, they were hardly memories at all, but more like flashbacks, as though the poet relived the experience each time he recalled it.

## II. Remembering Mercy Lamentations 3:21-24

**21 This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope.**

**22 It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.**

**23 They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness.**

**24 The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.**

21. As if recognizing the danger of continuing down the dark path of bitterness, the poet suddenly turns his thoughts in a very different direction. He draws from the rich tradition of prayer and praise that he undoubtedly knows from his own education beginning in his boyhood. His recollection interrupts the downward spiral of despair with memories that are deeply ingrained through years of study and more profoundly formative than the traumatic memories of recent suffering. The poet can call to *mind* convictions powerful enough to challenge and hold in check the despondency threatening to dominate his thoughts. His *hope* is revived as he begins to view his situation from the perspective of revelation and tradition rather than personal experience.

22a. The poet confessed the truth of divine mercy with language reminiscent of the book of Psalms. The phrase *the Lord's mercies* recalls, among others, Psalms 89:2 and 107:43 and refers to God's long track record of forgiveness and grace that had preserved Israel by withholding the full penalty of the people's sin. This sentiment seemed to inspire the poet to turn his attention to this traditional recitation of the long list of God's merciful actions and faithful interventions on his people's behalf and to remind his fellow sufferers of this. With this in mind, the poet can see that his survival and the survival of his fellow sufferers is no accident of history but is instead evidence of God's enduring love.

The poet caught himself in a common theological error—the error of pitting

God's love against God's wrath as if the two were mutually exclusive. However, divine wrath is a function of divine love. God's anger over Judah's persistent sin was his love taking disciplinary form. His purpose was not to destroy Judah, nor was it to forsake her and give up on his covenant. Rather, the judgment was a kind of radical surgery performed to save the patient.

22b. The poet uses the plural form *compassions* to hint at numerous, discrete divine actions motivated by God's amazing tenderness for Judah. The word the poet uses for divine compassion is related to the Hebrew word for "womb" and has strong connotations of warmth, intimacy, and maternal tenderness. This is a striking and unexpected choice of words on the heels of such vivid descriptions of the carnage and destruction that the poet and his community recently endured, seemingly at God's hand!

23a. The significance of the poet's use of the plural "compassions" again takes center stage here with the assertion that God's compassions *are new every morning*. In other words, a new expression of divine compassion greeted the poet daily. The poet's previous experiences of the manifold nature of divine mercy assured him that he and his community would somehow experience yet another new depth of divine mercy. God's mercy would be equal to the task of healing the deep wounds of Jerusalem's destruction.

23b. This is the only one of the poet's statements expressed directly to God as a prayer. In the rest of the text, the poet either addressed himself in an attempt to keep his own faith afloat, or he addressed his community in an attempt to rally them to persevere in faith with him. This is an interesting shift in the poet's rhetoric, considering that elsewhere he seemed to view prayer as an impossibility. Nonetheless, between those two statements as-

serting God's unwillingness to hear, the poet prays quite confidently, if briefly. While this may strike readers as odd and perhaps even contradictory, it makes sense considering the circumstances under which the poet wrote these words. In this time of crisis, his faith waxed and waned, ebbed and flowed as it does for us in our moments of intense trial.

The fact that the poet prayed these words rather than addressing them to himself or others raises the possibility that he was looking for reassurance from God that His *faithfulness* really is *great*.

24a. The poet drew once again from Israel's prayerbook as he desperately sought resources to support his faith through this trial, this time from Psalm 16:5. The word *portion* refers to the land plots distributed to the various tribes of Israel according to Moses' instructions. This is significant considering that the original land distribution had been disrupted by the exiles of first Israel and then Judah due to their sin. With the land under the control of the foreign power by which God judged His people, these original land grants were effectively rendered meaningless. Aware that Judah had now forfeited the physical manifestation of God's fidelity to His promise due to sin, the poet made perhaps one of the boldest and most beautiful assertions of faith in all of Lamentations.

24b. The poet concluded these reflections with a simple statement of his determination to fix all of his hopes on God. Given all that he remembered of God's past faithfulness, both from his personal experience and from the collective memory of previous generations carefully preserved in Scripture, liturgy, and tradition, the poet can find reasons to *hope*. His was a hope that all the evil in the world could not ultimately sink. After the tears had been shed and the grief, anger, bitterness, and doubt expressed, hope remained.

# Involvement Learning

## Ceaseless Love

### Into the Lesson

Consider an event that you now recognize as creating a “before” time and an “after” time. Then brainstorm words and phrases to describe what “before” was like and what “after” was like.

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The writer of Lamentations had experienced a horrific split between before and after. Our study today contains poetry written as he grappled with what these events meant for his faith in God.

### Into the Word

Read Lamentations 3:16-24 and answer the following questions:

What evidence can you give that the writer of Lamentations was *correct* in saying that God did these things to him?

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What counterevidence can you provide that the writer was *incorrect* in saying that God did these things?

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How did the writer turn his despairing thoughts in a hopeful direction?

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### Key Verse

This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.  
—Lamentations 3:21-22

### Into Life

Describe a time when God led you through and out of a season of despair.

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Write down a prayer of thanks for God's faithfulness in that time.

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### Thought to Remember

Have hope in God's compassions and faithfulness.

# Continual Proclamation

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 3:1-13

Background Scripture: Psalm 71:12-21

Today's Scripture: Psalm 71:12-21

## I. God of Help

### Psalm 71:12-16

**12 O God, be not far from me: O my God, make haste for my help.**

**13 Let them be confounded and consumed that are adversaries to my soul; let them be covered with reproach and dishonour that seek my hurt.**

**14 But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee more and more.**

**15 My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof.**

**16 I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only.**

12. This verse responds to the enemies not by returning their insults but by asking for God's presence. The psalmist asserted the enemies' accusations were baseless and false, and that God would prove their error and vindicate their victim.

The verse's two requests are closely related. First, God's nearness allows Him to save the psalmist. Making *haste* emphasizes God's nearness and His desire to respond to the prayerful request for *help*. Requests like these also occur in other psalms of lament or petition.

This standard appeal for God's merciful presence depends on two prior ideas. First, God has shown himself to be a

helper as defined by His being the one who provides needed aid unobtainable from anyone else. Second, humans often experience the need for God's aid as urgent, not as a pleasant future desire but as a present need. God's relative speed in responding to such pleas is less about a timeline than about attentiveness and care. The psalmist assumed that God wants to help in ways that bring hope—not from afar and not with needless delay.

13. Verses 10-11 identify the psalmist's *adversaries* as the source of mistreatment. Whether the psalmist had any power in the relationship with these enemies, the psalm itself suggests a lack of power. As such, God is the one who shifts the power from the evildoers to the psalmist who has been mistreated. This change of fortune is entirely in God's hands.

The verse at hand turns back to those people (or the attitudes they represent) and asks God to change *them* in two ways: by altering their minds (confounding them) so that they can no longer sustain their attacks and by exposing their sins to public scrutiny (*reproach and dishonour*). This second request would lead to everyone else recognizing the injustice and cruelty of the enemies' words and deeds. The language of shame does not refer only to individuals' internal feelings but to their status in society.

14a. *But* marks a shift from the request for God's vindication to what the psalmist promises to God. Verses 14-16 work together as a vow of *praise*, in direct contrast to the enemies' insults. The faithful person commits to a life of celebrating God's gracious deeds. That commitment implies a willingness to look for evidence of grace and reasons for *hope* in all aspects of life. This expresses the poet's desire for steady confidence in God's promises. The statement is also a commitment to God and a bid for favor. The faithful person's desire is always to live in hopefulness, even when events and feelings challenge that attitude.

14b. This second clause of verse 14 is difficult to translate. A more literal translation would be, "I will continue your praise in all." But all of what? "All situations" or "before all people" would be reasonable completions of the translation. Regardless, the psalmist commits to learning the art of praising God with *more and more* skill.

Humans do not praise God for His sake, since God neither requires flattery nor needs to be informed about our lives. We *praise* God as an act of truth-telling and orientation to reality. This praise happens primarily in a community of like-minded people who encourage each other to see the joyful world God seeks to create for humanity. The commitment is to a lifetime of praise, whether in the midst of trouble or peace.

15a. Verse 15 builds on the ideas of verse 14 by clarifying the content of praise. God's *righteousness* and actions to save all become the subject of these praises. The psalmist could enumerate evidence of God's justice and compassion in specific terms. But we can imagine that the psalmist needed a manageable psalm at the end of the day and so did not go into every detail of God's saving work. Therefore it becomes necessary to speak *all the day* long.

15b. The Hebrew word used here for *numbers* occurs only here in the Old Testament, though related words from the same Hebrew root are common. The main idea is clear: God's deeds are so numerous that humans should spend time enumerating them while also realizing our inability to finish the list.

16. *Go* here means to go to the temple for worship, as it also does in verse 3. The psalmist joins the community of the faithful at prayer in the place where Israel could gather for prayer. The one praying does not enter timidly, fearful of God's rejection or indifference, but confidently drawing on God's *strength*.

While in the presence of God in the worshipping community, the psalmist will carry out the commitment made in the previous two verses to mention God's fundamental commitment to fair and loyal treatment for all. Since God's *righteousness* will be the subject of each individual's prayer, the whole community of faith will praise God's pursuit of justice and join in it themselves.

## II. Lifelong Learning

### Psalm 71:17-21

**17 O God, thou hast taught me from my youth; and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works.**

**18 Now also when I am old and gray-headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, And thy power to every one that is to come.**

**19 Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee!**

**20 Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, And shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth.**

**21 Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side.**



17a. A shift begins with a new address to *God*, paralleling the one that began in the previous section in verse 12. Furthermore, this verse begins a new section in the psalm, shifting the imagery from prayer to learning.

Once again, the prayer turns to God, this time as the teacher. The learning process begins early and operates through the many dimensions of life. Some learning may occur in school, but that environment is only part of the whole. Learning occurs everywhere, just as long as the person pays attention to life's experiences and receives proper guidance from wise teachers.

17b. Here the psalmist states the core curriculum in God's school: the *wondrous works* of creation and salvation. The (one) Hebrew word translated *wondrous works* can refer to the liberating plagues in Egypt, relief in an invasion, or repeated acts of deliverance. The marvels also include the sustenance of the creation itself.

18. The psalmist's education began in youth and continues in *old age*. The psalmist seeking wisdom asks God never to *forsake* the role of teacher, not because the writer believes God might do so, but because it is valuable to express the desire for God's presence during all phases of life.

The psalmist aims to learn and become wise in part so that he can teach the next *generation* as well. The psalmist takes responsibility for the learning he has acquired, seeing it as a sacred trust rather than just a chance for self-promotion or even self-satisfaction.

19. Some people could be said to have done *great things*, but by questionable means. God's *righteousness* permeates all His actions; every incredible act of creation or recreation, of love or mercy or justice, is done perfectly by the Lord. Unlike human beings, *God* does not waste time on trivialities but works for the good in all things. God's righteousness be-

comes tangible in ways that humans can identify and understand. For this reason, the poem speaks of God's incomparability. No one else in Heaven or on earth can bring about the good outcomes righteous people experience every day.

20. This verse amplifies the role of God as teacher. God has allowed the faithful person to experience *troubles*, since much learning can occur under difficult circumstances. But God can also bring a person back to life, in this case figuratively. The psalmist acknowledges such an experience. A person's trials may resemble death itself, but God can revive even the dead.

*The depths of the earth* can refer to a space that God has created or overcome through creation. It can also be a metaphor for extreme suffering and death as well as for the magnitude of God's mercy. Suffering cannot have the last word because God has the power to *quicken* a person *again* and *bring* that person out of whatever depth he or she experiences.

21a. The psalmist expects God to increase the praying person's *greatness* rather than allowing him or her to suffer social isolation and disgrace. This is not the request of a boastful or already successful person for even more power. Rather, this is the hope of an oppressed, downtrodden person to receive the honor due to all human beings who trust in God. This hope is rooted in God's character. The prayer asks God to reverse the painful situation that the psalmist experienced because of the slanders of the enemies.

21b. As in most other psalms of individual lament, Psalm 71 concludes by praising God. The terrible present, with its rivalries among human beings and its moral struggles, gives way at the end to a world of healthy, ordered social relationships and deep spiritual engagement. Fittingly, this prayer and others like it conclude by either praising God or promising to praise God.

# Involvement Learning

## Continual Proclamation

### Into the Lesson

Which Bible stories do you remember most vividly from your childhood? Why did they make such an impression?

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How has that story helped form your faith in adulthood?

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How do favorite stories or verses help when you are feeling stressed, guilty, or ashamed?

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Today's Scripture text shows how one poet maintained hope in the face of adversity.

### Into the Word

Read Psalm 71:12-21, making note of the reasons the psalmist might have felt fearful and reasons the psalmist might have praised God.

*Reasons for Fear*

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*Reasons for Praise*

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Then using the same Scripture text and real-world examples, fill out reasons under the following headers:

*Faithful Reasons for Hope*

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*Secular Reasons for Hope*

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### Key Verse

I will hope continually, And will yet praise thee more and more.

—Psalm 71:14

### Into Life

Why are “faithful” reasons for hope superior to “secular” reasons?

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### Thought to Remember

Cry out to God and be comforted.

# First-Century Worship and Hope

by Kenny Boles

Nine of the thirteen lessons of this quarter come from Scripture texts set against the backdrop of life in the Roman Empire. Rome ruled the known world of the first century AD, the setting of the New Testament. Rome's marvelous stone roads connected the far-flung cities of the empire. Her navy and merchant ships roamed the Mediterranean Sea. This "physical openness" allowed different cultural, philosophical, and religious ideas to flow across borders relatively freely.

## Old Religious Practices

Each locality in the Roman Empire likely had its preferred deity. Some such examples of these deities are "Jupiter" (Acts 14:13) and "the great goddess Diana" (19:27). By the time of the New Testament, however, the gods of Rome were losing sway in the hearts of the people. Philosophers had taught the people to doubt; experience had taught them to despair. The people still served the classical gods but with little enthusiasm. The worship of the emperor as divine grew cold and lifeless after the death of Nero in AD 68.

Practically speaking, the citizens of the empire worshiped their money more than their gods. The worship of idols was primarily an attempt to use the gods for their own purposes rather than giving themselves to serve the gods.

## Religious Competition

Into this vacuum of lifeless religion came new religions with new gods. The cult of Cybele, a fertility goddess in Asia

Minor, had followers who emasculated themselves in a frenzy of devotion. The cult of Dionysius spread religious frenzy and wine-induced ecstasy all over Italy. From Egypt came the worship of Isis, the goddess of motherhood and fertility. Devotees of Mithras met in caves to share sacred meals and to initiate converts with the blood of a sacred bull.

These religions emphasized the "mystery" of secret knowledge and rituals. Because of the confusion that arose out of competing religions, Rome created an official list of "licit" religions. Any new, illicit religion faced opposition from the government and eventual extermination.



## Jewish Faith and Worship

The Jewish people, by contrast, worshiped their God without any idols or images to represent Him. Despite this

unusual practice, Rome had accepted Judaism as a “licit” religion by the first century AD. Jews everywhere could worship their invisible God freely. Some Romans even had a grudging admiration for the one-God outlook of the Jews, in contrast with their own cluttered pantheon.

But living in cities throughout the empire, far from the Jerusalem temple, the priests, and the sacrifices, Jews were forced to ask themselves, “What rituals and acts of worship can we observe in order to maintain our distinctiveness?” Their answer: the practice of circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the eating of kosher food. These could be practiced wherever Jews lived, with local synagogues as focal points. The transition from temple to synagogue became permanent everywhere when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in AD 70.

### Christian Faith and Worship

Worship in synagogues became a

model for the earliest church. But there was a problem: the Romans eventually realized Christianity was not a minor variation of Judaism but a new religion. Thus, Christianity was illicit and subject to elimination. While the Jews could build synagogues as places to practice their “licit” religion, Christians did not erect any houses of worship for at least 200 years. Christians worshiped more privately than publicly, sometimes even secretly, to avoid persecution.

Today, we are familiar with Christianity’s struggles regarding what worship “should” be and how to do it. Perhaps some reflection on the earliest struggles to worship will help! Further, as this quarter considers expressions of Christian hope both in this present age and in the glorious future, how might your worship reflect the hope that you have?

*What is the connection between Christian worship and Christian hope? How does your hope in God lead you to worship more and more?*



# Hope in This Life . . . and to Come

by Ronald L. Nickelson

*Hope* is our focus for the quarter. Perhaps a good working definition of *hope* is that it is the ability to envision and expect a better future.

We see this human ability throughout the pages of the Bible. Indeed, if you count the expressions of hope (and lack of hope) in the Bible, you will find dozens and dozens of occurrences. But what did hope (and lack of hope) mean to God's people?

One way to enrich our understanding of biblical hope is to examine it against the backdrop of how the pagan world of antiquity understood this concept. We can look at the ancient pagan's concept of *hope* in terms of two broad categories: what people hoped for in this life, and what people hoped for in the next life. We will consider these two categories in reverse order.

## Hope Regarding Life After Death

Ancient pagan people often expressed a bleak view of what human existence after death. Because they had such a despairing view of the afterlife, they ended up with a very "this worldly" focus regarding hope. In other words, we are considering the pagan outlook on hope for the afterlife first because their dismal outlook in this regard forced them to look to this life as the primary place for any hope.

An influential figure in creating a bleak outlook on the afterlife was the Greek poet Homer. He may have lived in the eighth century BC, about the time of biblical prophets such as Amos. In his work, *Odyssey*, Homer imagines Odysseus, king of Ithaca, taking a trip to the underworld, the abode of the dead. Odysseus finds this place (Hades) to be one of misery.

In this underworld, Odysseus meets Achilles, a dead hero of the Trojan War. Achilles laments that he would rather be enslaved to the lowest person among the living than be king of all the dead of Hades. Existence in this kind of afterlife was not something to be anticipated!

This wasn't the only pagan viewpoint, of course. Some philosophers proposed the possibility of a blissful afterlife, reincarnation, the rebirth of the earth after its destruction, etc. But these seem to have been minority viewpoints. One concept never considered in a positive light was that of resurrection. Acts 17:32 notes the scoffing of pagan philosophers when Paul mentioned this idea.

## Hope in This Life

Since ancient pagans saw little to hope for in the hereafter, they tended to focus on what could be gained in this world. Greek mythology had a goddess of hope named *Elpis*. The Roman equivalent was the goddess *Spes*, and the Romans built temples in her honor. The mythology behind *Elpis/Spes* is rather complicated. But the bottom line seems to be that human imagination created a goddess who could provide whatever humans hoped for.

These hopes included many things we value today, such as personal, family, and stability. The most "enduring" thing a pagan could hope for was a good name, a good reputation that would outlive oneself. Perhaps Paul was reflecting on the emptiness of this viewpoint when he wrote, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

# Delightful Precepts

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 30:1-9

Background Scripture: Psalm 119:73-80

Today's Scripture: Psalm 119:73-80

## I. Request for Wisdom

### Psalm 119:73-76

**73 Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments.**

**74 They that fear thee will be glad when they see me; because I have hoped in thy word.**

**75 I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.**

**76 Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant.**

73a. One of the challenges that Scripture writers encountered was communicating God's works in earthly terminology. Here the psalmist uses a common practice of ascribing human traits to God, anthropomorphism, even though the reader would know that God is a spirit and does not have a human physique.

This section opens by confessing belief in God as the Creator. God did not create only *me* (the psalmist), but the psalmist is representative of any person who acknowledges God's work in the world, which begins by giving life to every creature therein. The two verbs of creation mean essentially the same thing, though the Hebrew word translated *fashioned* emphasizes the ongoing nature of God's

work. It could be paraphrased, "You have put the finishing touches on me." God's creative work did not end long ago at creation but continues in each individual life through creation and re-creation.

73b. Since the psalmist acknowledges God as the source of life, it makes sense to ask Him for the gift of *understanding* that life. Unlike all other creatures known to us, human beings are self-aware and capable of curiosity and existential questioning. We desire to understand. The psalmist knows, of course, that we can learn from many sources, but the plea here is for God to take up the role of a teacher. As Creator, God knows all things and cares deeply for all creatures. Therefore, God is in the best position to teach a person how to live.

This is why the psalmist asks for God's help to grow in knowledge, especially about His *commandments* and their requirements. This text assumes that God's laws are not simply orders that compliant people obey without question or feeling. Quite to the contrary, the commandments invite the believer into a world of wholeness and wonder. Understanding their meaning and interconnectedness requires a lifetime of attentiveness. That attentiveness, in turn, requires God's help if comprehension is to result.

74. Psalm 119 often mentions the wicked who resist God (Psalm 119:53, 61, 95,



etc.), but here our text introduces a different group: those who *fear* God. These people share the speaker's confidence in God's promises, and they rejoice in finding a like-minded person in the psalmist.

But when do they *see* such a person? Most likely, this is a reference to an audience hearing the psalmist read or sing his praise at the temple. In such a situation, they would *be glad* because they recognized the truth of the psalmist's words. This was only possible because the psalmist *hoped in God's word*, not human sources of knowledge or wisdom.

This verse underscores the nature of the faithful community. This community exists because it has found hope in God's promises, learning from divine revelation the vastness of God's care for the creation and each human in it. The members of that community have come to see the world not as totally evil but as potentially good. They find their lives meaningful. That is why they rejoice in finding a like-minded person. This emphasis on acceptance by other faithful people contrasts with the theme in psalms of lament of persecution by evil persons.

75a. Alongside words of hope come words of evaluation and reformation. The Hebrew word translated *judgments* can also mean "custom" (1 Samuel 2:13) or "manner" (Joshua 6:15). This verse seems to play with these nuances and on judgments as God's ordinances for His people. *Right* should be understood as "righteous" or "just"; the image of the righteous life as following a straight and narrow path is fitting here. Following God's instructions creates the conditions required for human thriving. God's prescribed patterns of life create in those following them a commitment to just dealings with all others, without which no one can please God.

75b. The second clause repeats the ba-

sic idea of the first but takes it in a new direction. The psalmist perceives God's judgments as naturally flowing from God's *faithfulness*. Another way of saying this would be that if God did not judge sin, He would be unfaithful to His character and word. God has rightly *afflicted* (with the sense of being humbled, as in Exodus 10:3) the person praying.

76. The *kindness* of God is not a random act but is better understood as the expression of His covenant loyalty. It comes from a deep relationship based on God's promises and the human acceptance of those promises. Just as Abraham and Sarah had a child in their old age after they trusted God to do the impossible, the psalmist stands in a relationship of deep trust in the Creator, whose promises come true in time.

The last clause assumes that God has promised to console and that God's *word* can be counted on. Based on the psalmist's knowledge of God's promises, he asks that God in mercy will work to *comfort* the psalmist amid suffering. The heavenly teacher provides proper support when the lesson is the hardest to learn. Therefore, the person of faith can count on God's statements of favor and promises to deliver, just as Moses did when arguing for God to forgive Israel after the episode of the golden calf.

## II. Hope for the Future Psalm 119:77-80

**77 Let thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live: for thy law is my delight.**

**78 Let the proud be ashamed; for they dealt perversely with me without a cause: but I will meditate in thy precepts.**

**79 Let those that fear thee turn unto me, and those that have known thy testimonies.**



**80 Let my heart be sound in thy statutes; that I be not ashamed.**

77a. The idea that God shows mercy is common in the Psalms and texts about Israelite worship more generally (Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalms 111:4; 112:4; etc.). Without such mercy, no one could not survive, let alone thrive.

77b. The second part of this verse explains the basis for the prayer and the confidence that God will answer it. The psalmist takes pleasure in the *law*. The Hebrew word translated *delight* is relatively rare in the Old Testament. Isaiah 5:7 uses it (there translated “pleasant”) to refer to Judah. Proverbs 8:30 speaks of Wisdom herself as God’s source of delight, similar to a favorite child, and then 8:31 speaks of the pleasure God and Wisdom take in the human race. Most occurrences, however, appear in Psalm 119 itself (vv. 24, 77, 92, 143, and 174). In each of those cases, the human being finds pleasure in God’s commandments because they can preserve life, protect from various enemies, and provide stability in an unstable world.

The instructions in wise and righteous living that the Torah—given to Moses by God for Israel’s benefit—provides foster joy in the person dedicated to following those laws. The person who pursues life in and with God will experience joy, even amidst trials. Far from being a burden to be endured, the law orients a faithful person to a deeply meaningful pattern of life. By taking seriously the role of the student, the psalmist enters into a deep relationship with God. This relationship is filled with delight at learning God’s ways.

78. In contrast, some people become so consumed by their pride that they attack those like the psalmist who try to live virtuously. To deal *perversely without a cause* can be understood as slandering or lying. In doing so, *the proud* brought the

righteous person harm. By meditating on God’s *precepts*, the psalmist can avoid becoming a perpetrator of the abuse he suffered at others’ hands.

God’s instructions provide a different mindset and pattern of life for the faithful person. We can imagine how, if all people were striving to keep God’s laws, we would be more protected against evil. But even without others committing to a righteous path, those who choose it can learn to reject unjust words and actions and find a centered, joy-filled, meaningful life even during a time of trouble.

79. This verse picks up the theme of verse 74. Focus turns from the individual back to the group. It invites anyone listening to join the psalmist in a way of life—to enroll in God’s school, as it were. The congregation hearing this psalm, the ones who *fear* God, should *turn* to the psalmist and join in the song. These fellow worshipers have the correct stance toward God and the correct knowledge. They are fellow students of their Creator, aware of the long legacy of promises and fulfillments in Israel’s history, steeped in its stories and ethical and spiritual commitments.

80. The section ends as it began, by asking for help in learning with not just the right intellectual skills but the right attitudes and dispositions of the *heart*. The Hebrew word translated *sound* can imply perfection, being without blemish or spot, and/or sincerity. The attitude matters as much as the method of thinking or the results of learning God’s *statutes*.

All of these elements must go together for the educational experience to succeed fully—that *I be not ashamed*. The psalmist is fully committed to learning and carrying out the details of the law. In doing so, he would not suffer social stigma or be humiliated. Rather, the person who does this joins a great company of like-minded persons across the ages.

# Involvement Learning

## Delightful Precepts

### Into the Lesson

Do you agree or disagree with the statement, “Good laws encourage human flourishing”? If not, what caveats or amendments would you make to improve the statement?

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Obedience to laws rarely elicits great joy. But the psalmist experienced delight from his quest to learn God’s ways and obey them. Our study today encourages us to do the same.

### Into the Word

Read Psalm 119:73-80, then list the qualities and actions of God that gave the psalmist confidence and hope.

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Which of these qualities or actions is most meaningful to you?

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Based on today’s verses, what characteristics do you think the psalmist exhibited. Consider when those characteristics mimic God, are a reaction to God’s characteristics, or fall into some other category.

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### Key Verse

Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: Give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments.  
—Psalm 119:73

### Into Life

Read Psalm 119:73-80, then write down one of the verses that is the most personally meaningful.

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Write a word or two that helps you identify why that verse is meaningful and briefly write why that is so.

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### Thought to Remember

Learn what the Lord desires!

# Expectant Watchfulness

Devotional Reading: Matthew 25:1-13

Background Scripture: Psalm 130

Today's Scripture: Psalm 130

## I. Address to the Lord

### Psalm 130:1-6

**1 Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.**

**2 Lord, hear my voice: Let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.**

**3 If thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?**

**4 But there is forgiveness with thee, That thou mayest be feared.**

**5 I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, And in his word do I hope.**

**6 My soul waiteth for the Lord More than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning.**

1. The phrase *out of the depths* might be a shorter form of the phrase “the depths of the waters” (Ezekiel 27:34). Isaiah 51:10 speaks of “the depths of the sea.” While the Hebrew word here translated *depths* only occurs in these instances in the Bible, images of the watery deep were frequently used as an image of danger or chaos, especially the horror of drowning.

Additionally, the concept of depth is linked to Sheol, the place of the dead. Depths and Sheol should not be conflated, but neither should the possible link between them be neglected. Like Jonah crying from the belly of the great fish, the

psalmist speaks metaphorically of having descended to the realm of death, to Sheol. Though not an equivalent of the place we would call hell, Sheol was generally considered far from God's presence; no one worshipped God there. These characteristics of Sheol give insight into what death entailed to ancient Israelites' way of thinking. The cry from the gates of the realm of death, Sheol itself, points to the many sorts of problems humans may face, including our mortality and proneness to sickness, as well as the hostile attitudes of wicked people or the irresistible power of some historical or natural events. The depths may take many forms.

The psalmist is not in danger of drowning and may not literally be about to die. But many different forms of suffering can feel like a death—from physical ailments to relational estrangements and beyond. In all circumstances—even as far from God as Israelites could imagine, at the bottom of a body of water—we can still call on the *Lord*.

2. The opening address to the *Lord* continues with a petition to listen. These two clauses express essentially the same thing, repeating both the sense of the verb *hear* and the direct object *my voice*. This poetic device of synonymous parallelism reinforces the importance the psalmist places on receiving God's full attention.

The second clause asks for tangible but unspecified expressions of God's favor. His care begins with listening attentively to the content of the *supplications* and acting to alleviate those specific concerns. As is common in psalms, we do not know the specific occasion for writing—a feature of the poems that invites us to consider our supplications.

Similar language appears several times in psalms of lament. Psalm 28:6, for example, offers a counterpart to the request for God to hear by celebrating that God already had heard. All these psalms expect that God desires to listen to sincere requests for help and will respond with speed and compassion. We do well to remember, however, that God's timing is not our own, and a perceived lack of an answer from God does not mean He has not heard or has no intention of acting.

3. The psalmist affirms God's mercy in the form of a question, as if to remind Him of His choice to exhibit mercy. God could obsess over human sin to keep meticulous tabs on every stray thought, word, and deed. A similar use of the verb *mark* appears in 1 Samuel 1:12, which says that Eli "marked" Hannah's mouth when she prayed for a son. In the context of 1 Samuel, the verb suggests close observation, as it does here. If God decided to *mark iniquities*, no person could be counted as righteous.

Furthermore, a God who rigorously punished all evil immediately would leave no space for human survival. But a God who ignored evil-doing altogether would cause great harm to humanity; we might consider the fear of God's abandoning His people as exemplified in Lamentations. The God of Israel, however, engages with human beings to reform their lives.

4. *But* ties this verse closely to verse 3, implying a sequence of closely related events. The experience or even observa-

tion of God's forgiveness and its consequences for human life create a sense of awe in the impressionable human. Here the psalmist's knowledge of God's inclination toward mercy becomes clear.

But the sequence of thoughts may seem odd at first. How does the reality of *forgiveness* create an awe-filled sense of fear? Contrary to the possible view that God's hatred of sin or ferocity toward evil will so terrify people that they will live better lives, this verse suggests that God's mercy toward sinners inspires them to honor Him more. Instead of being mired in sins and paralyzed to choose or do better, forgiveness creates a new path. Divine gentleness with the people inspires awe in part because it seems so different from human inclinations toward one another. In contrast to the pitiless ways in which we often respond to mistreatment or wrongdoing, God exercises mercy.

5a. The Hebrew word translated *soul* has a more robust meaning than we might consider in English. Ancient Israelites did not believe in a soul that merely inhabited a body (like Greek thinking). Instead of a divide between body and soul, the Israelites thought of the human being as an integrated whole, a body-and-soul unity. The soul was the animating force, the piece of the body that made a person alive. This integration of body and soul remains central to Christianity, which rests on the hope of our bodily resurrection rather than the immortality of a disembodied spirit or soul.

In saying *my soul doth wait*, then, the psalmist claims to anticipate God's saving work with every fiber of his being. The psalmist's faith involves an orientation to a future in which the problems of the moment find a solution.

5b. To *hope* here is a synonym for waiting on God. We never hope in vain when we place our hope in His promises. God's

*word* refers here to His promise of salvation given first to Abram, which becomes the focus of the faithful person's life. Having confidence in that promise shapes behavior for a lifetime as well.

6. This verse repeats *more than they that watch for the morning* for rhythmic purposes; we might recognize this convention in our hymns. The repetition also expresses the intensity of waiting for God's saving act. The waiting involves a person's entire being.

What this particular phrase means, however, is less than obvious. The emphasis could be on waiting at a specific time—during the night. Or it could be emphasizing *they*—the sentinels who are watching. In either case, an analogy is drawn. Just as nighttime sentries eagerly await the dawn and the relative safety of daytime, so does the one praying wait for a new day in which God will act. Once again, the psalmist's faith requires hope in God's future action.

## II. Address to Israel

### Psalm 130:7-8

**7 Let Israel hope in the LORD: For with the LORD there is mercy, And with him is plenteous redemption.**

**8 And he shall redeem Israel From all his iniquities.**

7a. In the last two verses, the psalm shifts focus from an individual psalmist to the whole community. This sort of shift frequently occurs in psalms of lament. But this one lacks any transition, as the psalm turns from the address to God to the address to the people. The hope, especially in God's *mercy*, that the psalmist expressed for his personal circumstances is prescribed for the gathered community.

7b. The Hebrew behind this phrase is difficult to understand and translate. One reason for this is the scarcity of

biblical uses of the precise Hebrew word translated *redemption*. However, the related verb is more common, which gives us confidence that redemption is the appropriate translation here.

While we don't often think of it this way, redemption is a legal metaphor. In ancient Israel, the term often applied to the purchase of slaves to free them. The language is prevalent in texts describing God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Here, however, the liberation does not involve political oppression (or at least not just that), but the oppression of human sin in all its forms. The psalm anticipates God acting to free Israel from sin's power. This redemption is the ultimate fulfillment of God's ancient covenant with the ancestors.

8. As laments often do, the psalm ends with an expression of deep trust in God. This ending repositions the whole poem because it moves readers from focusing on the individual to God's care for the whole people. In God's great mercy lies hope for *Israel* and everyone within it. This psalm probably lies behind the promise of the angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:21. For Matthew, Jesus became the sign and instrument of God's redemption of Israel and to the larger world.

There is a tight connection between the individual's experience and the community's proclamation. The people of Israel were the community whom God rescued from evil in all its manifestations, of which we are the spiritual descendants. The people announced and celebrated the good news that such deliverance had occurred, and they sought more of it. And of course, that understanding also applies to the church, the community grafted into Israel. We also experience, both as individuals and as a community, the power of God's forgiveness, which we imitate in our dealings with others.

# Involvement Learning

## Expectant Watchfulness

### Into the Lesson

Consider a time when you had to wait for something. Were you waiting for something you needed or just wanted? What made it easier or harder to wait? Did you display patience as you waited?

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Has waiting become easier with age? Why or why not?

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We're going to read Psalm 130, in which the psalmist waits hopefully for God's answer to His prayer for forgiveness.

### Key Verse

Let Israel hope in the LORD: For with the LORD there is mercy, And with him is plenteous redemption.  
—Psalm 130:7

### Into the Word

Read Psalm 130. Write down several themes from the psalm.

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Compare and contrast the main themes of Psalm 130 to the themes of Psalms 71:12-21 (lesson 7) and 119:73-80 (lesson 8).

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Does God make us wait a long time before He answers our petitions?

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How can Psalm 130 help one continue to hope when our sins seem insurmountable?

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What should we do as we wait on the Lord's answer to the longings of our hearts?

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### Into Life

After rereading Psalm 130, choose which verse speaks to you the most and explain why.

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Write a paraphrase of that verse to personalize it without changing the psalmist's original intent.

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### Thought to Remember

Faith celebrates our hope in God's forgiveness and calls others to do the same.

# The Word of God

Devotional Reading: Psalm 121

Background Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

Today's Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5

## I. Thanksgiving

### 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

**13 For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.**

**14 For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews:**

**15 Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men:**

**16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.**

13. The phrase *this cause* introduces the reason for Paul's thankfulness: the Thessalonians' receptiveness to *the word of God* as being just that. Today we rightly identify the Bible as the Word of God, which acknowledges its divine origin and character. The same was true in the first century AD. But when Paul began his missionary journeys, none of the 27 books of the New Testament had yet been written. Therefore

the Word of God they heard was Paul's oral testimony to them. Paul's original readers recognized the supernatural origin of Paul's message and responded fittingly.

14. The conjunction *for* links this verse with the preceding one. It also alerts the reader that what follows is the evidence that the Word of God is working daily in their lives. To be active *followers* of someone else's example is sometimes a good thing and sometimes a bad thing. Paul has already acknowledged the readers' wise choice in this regard (1 Thessalonians 1:6). We might call that "active imitation."

But active imitation doesn't seem to be the sense of the verse before us. Paul here seems to have in view more of a "passive imitation" in that the Thessalonian believers are undergoing the same kind of persecution as are *the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus*. The Thessalonians had not chosen to be persecuted; rather, persecution has been inflicted on them. Paul doesn't minimize this fact. Instead, this seems to be his way of providing assurance, comfort, and encouragement by telling his readers that they are not alone.

15. A small group of Jewish leaders had ensured the judicial murder of *the Lord Jesus*. This was entirely consistent with how the *prophets* in the Old Testament had been rejected and condemned. In



such context, Paul noted the Jewish leaders' culpability in continuing this pattern of opposition not only to *God* but to *all men* who opposed their agenda.

16a. The general hostility toward *the Gentiles* of the time is well known. Such hostility reaches back into the approximately 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. The literature of that time tells of the periodic desecration of the temple and Jerusalem by Gentiles. Those transgressions eventually resulted in the Maccabean revolt of about 167–160 BC.

The Thessalonians had personally witnessed persecution against Paul and Silas. Paul's criticism of his persecutors here echoes Jesus' pushback on the scribes and Pharisees in His final week.

16b. The divine *wrath* that *is come upon* the Jewish leaders may include a future punishment, but the main idea is that of the present at the time Paul writes. The word translated *uttermost* can take at least eight meanings, depending on how it is used in a given context. A reasonable conclusion here is that *uttermost* is to be understood in the sense of "completely."

Luke 18:5 is another case that shares this same likelihood: "Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." The phrasing at issue is the translated word *continual*. The sense of "continuing to pester me until I'm completely worn out" is a very reasonable interpretation.

## II. Encouragement

### 1 Thessalonians 2:17–3:5

**17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire.**

**18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us.**

**19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?**

**20 For ye are our glory and joy.**

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**1 Wherefore when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone;**

**2 And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow-labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:**

**3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.**

**4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.**

**5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.**

17. After spending at least 15 days in Thessalonica, mob violence had resulted in Paul's hasty exit from the city under cover of darkness. The phrasing *being taken from you* indicates a departure that was less than voluntary. This fact undoubtedly was a key factor in Paul's intense desire to return.

But Paul quickly reassured his readers that "out of sight, out of mind" was not his method of operation. The phrase of being absent *in presence, not in heart* indicates quite the opposite; he undoubtedly realized that his having been in Thessalonica for less than a month was inadequate.

18. Paul's inability to make a return visit was not due to a lack of desire. *Satan* was to blame, although the text does not tell us what specific method he used. Some propose that it was an illness. Oth-

ers theorize that the city leaders of Thessalonica may have forbidden his return, given the disturbance his work in the city caused. Neither options should distract us from the main point: Satan, the enemy and accuser of God's people, was responsible for Paul's extended absence. He may have been responsible for other travel hindrances, but some cases involved Paul's juggling his ministry priorities.

19-20. Old Testament prophets sometimes received no assurance that their ministries would result in changed hearts and changed behavior. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah was told that his prophetic ministry would *not* succeed! No wonder Jeremiah is called "the weeping prophet."

Paul's ministry was not like that of Jeremiah's, however. Paul did have opposition, but he also had a successful harvest of souls that was evidence of a God-given ministry. And Paul does not take this for granted. Rather, he communicates its results loud and clear with the rhetorical question: *For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?* The answer comes by the declaration, *For ye are our glory and joy.* As affirming as this harvest is, Paul knows that it's not all due to his efforts.

1-2. Having escaped from Thessalonica, Paul and Silas then traveled 45 miles to the west to preach the gospel in Berea.

But Paul was soon forced out of that town as well, making his way south to Athens under escort. As he dismissed his escort, their task having been completed, he sent instructions back to Berea with them for "Silas and Timotheus . . . to come to him with all speed" (Acts 17:15).

There is some debate regarding whether that reunion took place in Athens or happened later in Corinth. The latter seems more likely, as there is no hint of Timothy's coming to Athens. Research indicates that Paul wrote his letters to the Thessalonians while in Corinth, perhaps in AD 51.

3. In speaking of *afflictions* as they intersect the Christian life, a more modern way to say what Paul says here might be, "The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress" (Frederick Douglass, 1818–1895). The Bible itself has much more to say about oppression. Consider Jesus' words in John 15:18: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you." Paul used to be one of the haters (Acts 8:3), and he's been on the receiving end of hatred as well (16:22-23).

4. Having been forewarned, the Thessalonians should not have been surprised when the predictions of *tribulation* came true (*even as it came to pass*). Paul later argues that suffering with Christ is linked to eventual glory with Him (Romans 8:17). Suffering was (and is) unavoidable; it is a key part of the way that God makes us into Jesus' image. Hardship can result in distinguishing between those of deep and shallow faith. It's an issue of counting the cost of becoming a disciple.

5. At the same time, Paul was concerned about the state of the Thessalonians' faith. He had been with them such a short time! Now having received the left foot of fellowship from Thessalonica, he feared the worst. Since Satan had been hindering Paul from visiting them, what harm might he be doing in Thessalonica?

When Paul wrote that he feared *the tempter had tempted* them, he probably was not referring to the common temptations to sin. Paul knew that such temptations were part of earthly life. What concerned Paul was the temptation to reject Christ to escape suffering. If that happened, Paul's ministry in Thessalonica might turn out to be *in vain*. The antidote for the tempter's poison was encouragement, so Paul sent his trusted "son in the faith" to bring that encouragement to the Thessalonians.

# Involvement Learning

## The Word of God

### Into the Lesson

On a separate piece of paper, write a note of encouragement to someone in your life. Mail the note in the week ahead. What's your reaction to writing a note like this?

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Sometimes it's challenging to know how to encourage others from a distance. But it is important for those needing encouragement to know that they haven't been forgotten.

### Into the Word

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5. What levels of resistance have you seen for accepting the Word of God as being just that?

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What frustrations did Paul express to the Thessalonians?

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When have you experienced a time when you were unable to be with someone who cared about you?

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How can knowing Paul's story help you deal with future frustrations?

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### Key Verse

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.

—1 Thessalonians 2:13

### Into Life

In the space below, suggest ways to offer encouragement to fellow believers.

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Think of a fellow Christian whom you haven't seen in a while. How will you encourage that person in the week ahead?

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### Thought to Remember

Encouragement is a defense against despair.

# Reading Someone Else's Mail

by Jon Miller

When we read the New Testament letters, we are reading someone else's mail. Of the 27 books in our New Testament, 21 of them are messages between the author and a particular church or individual. In the Greco-Roman world, letters served a personal function and were considered a substitute for the writer's physical presence. The letters were commonly read aloud by the deliverer to the community (examples: Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27).

The challenge for the modern reader is the attempt to interpret the texts and understand them in the same way as the first-century audience. The letters best serve us after we know the historical and literary world in which these letters originated.



## Historical Context

Persecution plagued the first-century church. Not long after the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41), the apostles were ar-

rested and threatened (5:17-41), and other church leaders were executed (example: 7:54-60). As a result, many early believers fled Jerusalem and scattered throughout the eastern Mediterranean region (example: 11:19).

Following his own transformation from persecutor to apostle (1 Corinthians 15:9), Paul clashed doctrinally with the Jews in the synagogues, which led to his persecution and imprisonment (Acts 13:45-52; 16:16-24; 24:27). While in prison, Paul wrote four of his letters, which are collected in our New Testament (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). Modern-day students call this collection of letters the "Prison Epistles." They are still prized as letters of encouragement and hope for believers facing persecution.

## Literary Context

Greco-Roman letters generally followed a standard format. First, ancient letters contained a salutation in which the writer briefly introduced himself and identified the recipient of the letter (examples: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; James 1:1). Next came a prayer of thanks or greeting (examples: Romans 1:7; Colossians 1:2). Then followed the body of the text that ended with a benediction (examples: Philippians 4:21-23; 1 Peter 5:14).

The book of Hebrews is unique compared to other New Testament letters. This book breaks the mold of the standard letter by excluding the routine introduction, including the name of the author. Therefore, some students believe

the text aligns with the genre of a sermon rather than a letter. The writer of Hebrews knew that his or her recipients had a strong understanding of the Old Testament, which the writer cites more than 30 times. The original audience had endured great suffering and conflict, and the writing was intended to encourage them.

One of the ways the text of Hebrews encouraged the original audience was by using the Greco-Roman rhetorical skill of comparison (example: Hebrews 9:11-13). The author uses this literary device wisely and does not compare two opposite things. Instead, the author of Hebrews compares the good things of Judaism with the best of Christianity, Jesus. In the final chapter, Hebrews 13, the author concludes with an appeal.

The recipients are reminded that they are connected to Christ in persecution and expectation of a future city (13:13-14). The connection to Christ in persecution is a literary way to remind the Christians of the words of Jesus (John 15:18-27).

## Conclusion

Given the often-personal connections that the Christians of the first century had with those who wrote the letters that are now the New Testament, it is clear how these letters brought them hope and encouragement. Keeping in mind the who (both the writer and the audience) and why of a letter can help us better understand how the Spirit wants to encourage and teach us through reading the early believers' mail.

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## Hope through the Generations

*continued from page 19*

### Hope and the Future

The four lessons of Unit III, "Eternal Hope," consider facets of the promised future that God is preparing for those who call on the name of Jesus. What does hope look like as we wait for Jesus to come again in glory and finally set things right? Paul anticipates the nearness of Christ's return when he tells the Thessalonians how excited he is to brag about them (1 Thessalonians 2:13–3:5, lesson 10), even as he worries about the problems that might rock their faith in his absence from them. Similarly, 1 John (lesson 11) anticipates Christ's return so that in seeing Christ, we might become like Him, "for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

The final two lessons of the quarter come from the book of Titus, where we hear Paul's appeal to live out the

present moment with a hope rooted in God's grace-filled future, made certain in Christ's death and resurrection. Our hope will be fulfilled at the second coming, the "glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (see Titus 2:13, lesson 12).

Thus, the foundation of hope is Jesus Christ. Through the death and resurrection of Christ and the promise of His coming, believers live in daily encouragement and strength. The knowledge of Christ's second coming prevents us from complacency in our present situation and invites us to lives as "heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7, lesson 13).

*In the upcoming week, how will you communicate the hope that you have because of the resurrected Christ Jesus?*

# The Love of God

Devotional Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Background Scripture: 1 John 3:1-10

Today's Scripture: 1 John 3:1-10

## I. The Love of God

### 1 John 3:1-3

**1 Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.**

**2 Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.**

**3 And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.**

1a. John draws the attention of his audience to the *love* of God *the Father*. This love was *bestowed* on humanity through the Father's sending of His only Son, Jesus, to earth for our sins. There was nothing that humanity could do to deserve God's love. No amount of human love for God could influence *what manner of love* God has for humanity.

When people demonstrate faith in Jesus, they become *sons* and daughters of *God*. This adoption occurs through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit so that we might share in God's glory. Therefore, adoption into God's family comes not through physical birth but spiritual birth.

1b. The underlying Greek word translated *world* appears 23 times in 1 John. In John's writings, the term can refer to all humanity in general (examples: John 3:16; 1 John 2:2), the location where humanity lives (example: John 17:11), or to the sinful individuals and structures that oppose God and His people (examples: 1 John 2:16-17; 3:13; 5:4-5).

It is the final option to which this verse refers. In contrast to the children of God, *the world* has failed to know God and His abundant love revealed through Christ Jesus. Therefore, the world is also unable to know the children of God. As a result, believers can anticipate facing hatred from the world.

2a. The greeting *beloved* reveals the relationship that John had with his audience. Although he was an older man when writing this epistle, he felt a close connection with them. He counted himself with them (*we*) as being children of *God*.

2b. As God's children, we do not fully know God's plan for our lives. But we know we will someday be changed. What we eventually *shall be* has not yet been disclosed fully. Even so, we know this: when Jesus *shall appear* at His second coming, *we shall see him as he is* because we will see Him face-to-face.

3a. The verse before us contains the only usage of the underlying Greek noun

*hope* in any of the writings of John. *This hope* comes from what has been promised to believers regarding the future return of Christ. Hope, however, is not simply a positive outlook or feeling. Instead, our hope comes from the trustworthiness of God's character. We have hope because of what God has promised to do *in* Christ.

This verse contains only the second usage of the Greek word translated *purifieth* in the writings of John. Thus, we have two rare (for John) words back-to-back, drawing our attention. *Purifieth* refers either to (1) ceremonial purification per the Law of Moses, (2) taking a vow when the word is used with a particular grammatical construction, or (3) moral purification. Its usage in the verse before us reflects the third option.

3b. *He* refers to Christ. It is He who *is pure*, meaning He is sinless. Christ's blood shed on the cross is the means through which our purification from sin occurs. This does not mean believers are "off the hook" from living upright and righteous lives. Instead, believers should purify themselves and avoid the stain of sin. Such purification occurs when believers put an end to all sinful behaviors. As we do so, we develop lives of righteousness.

John's directives in this verse mirror Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5:48. Human perfection is impossible on earth. However, we should make every effort to live pure and upright lives as children of our perfect heavenly Father.

## II. The Mission of God

### 1 John 3:4-6

**4 Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.**

**5 And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.**

**6 Whosoever abideth in him sinneth**

**not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.**

4. Having established the life of purity required for God's children, John presents the danger that believers face: sin. The human inclination toward sin is unavoidable for all people—believers included. Scripture describes *sin* in various ways. Sin is foolishness, the opposite of faith, falling short of God's glory, a willful failure to do good, or any "unrighteousness." Ultimately, sin turns people into enemies of God.

5. The Greek word translated *know* appears 15 times in 1 John. Its use reveals the apostle's emphasis on knowing the person and work of Jesus Christ. But simply having knowledge of Jesus is not enough. Instead, believers should seek understanding of Christ and conform their lives to that knowledge.

Only one person could take away humanity's sins: Jesus Christ. Only Jesus has the power to deal with sin because He was the sinless Son of God. He and He alone could *take away our sins* through His sacrifice on the cross.

6a. John begins a contrast of two types of people. The first is the person who *abideth in* Christ. Jesus taught that believers should remain in Him because He is the source of spiritual life. Believers do so by receiving His teachings and obeying them. Doing so does not mean that believers will be perfect and without any sin. Rather, when we follow the perfect, sinless Savior, we can pursue lives of holiness and righteousness.

6b. The second type is the person who has neither *seen* Christ nor *known him*. Some people in John's original audience had apparently claimed that they could know God but continue to live sinful lives. This false belief led to a strong correction from the apostle: it was not possible to both love God and love sin.



### III. The Children of God

#### 1 John 3:7-10

**7 Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous.**

**8 He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.**

**9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.**

**10 In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.**

7. John's nine uses of the expression *little children* in 1 John reveal the care that he felt for the original recipients of the letter. They were all children of God, but John had a unique relationship with his audience—one like a spiritual father and his children.

Some people in the community had attempted to *deceive* the believers and lead them astray from the truth. Although we do not know the content of their teaching, we can assume that these teachers had wrongly taught that a person could be *righteous* without behaving righteously.

8a. In contrast to the righteous person is the person who *committeth sin* and disobeys God's law. People who willfully oppose God and His truth are following the devil's lies. This spirit of disobedience results in a person's spiritual death.

*The devil* is another name for Satan. Since the introduction of sin at *the beginning*, the devil has opposed God and the people of God. The devil's opposition comes through temptation. Therefore, believers should not "give place to the devil"

(Ephesians 4:27). Instead, we should make every effort to resist the work of the devil.

8b. Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*, came to earth as a sacrifice for human sin. By doing so, He triumphed over the devil. Although Christ has already won the victory, the devil has power in the world for a time. That power, however, is limited. Someday, Christ will return to *destroy* the devil and the *works of the devil*.

9. The Greek word translated *born* appears 10 times in 1 John. All instances of that word in this letter refer to a person's spiritual birth into being a child *of God*. People who have experienced this birth do what is right, know God and love others, believe that Jesus is the Christ, overcome the world, and will not continue to sin.

God's children will continue to wage war against sin and its effects. Although we have been released from sin and freed from its condemnation, our sinful nature will continue until Christ returns to deliver us. When John says that believers *doth not commit sin*, he does not mean that we will live perfect lives. Instead, John's words are meant to encourage us to seek godly and upright lives.

Believers can avoid a life of sin because they have the *seed* of God in them. This seed is "planted" when believers receive the gospel and the Holy Spirit. Only through the power of God's Spirit that *remaineth in us* can we fight sin.

10. This verse presents a rubric to distinguish *the children of God* from *the children of the devil*. Children of God act with *righteousness*. Further, a person's status is also measured in how he or she loves other members of the family of God. As the love of God fills believers, there will be a natural outpouring of love among believers. The person who habitually fails to act with righteousness or demonstrate love is not a child *of God*. The rubric is clear, and it is pass-or-fail in this regard.

# Involvement Learning

## The Love of God

### Into the Lesson

Complete the following sentence:

*A frequently appearing trait in  
my family is . . .*

When we exhibit inherited family traits, others can recognize which family we belong to and whose children we are. As we study today's Scripture, consider the "family traits" that the children of God possess.

### Key Verse

Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God; therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.

—1 John 3:1

### Into the Word

Print a copy of 1 John 3:1-10 if you do not want to write in your Bible. Then follow these instructions:

- Draw a circle around any word or phrase related to children or offspring.
- Underline any word or phrase that refers to the work of God.
- Double underline any word or phrase that refers to the work of believers.
- Triple underline any word or phrase that refers to the devil.
- Draw a thin line through any word or phrase that refers to sin or sinful behavior.
- Draw a square around any word or phrase that describes the appropriate behavior for the children of God.
- Draw a question mark next to any word or phrase you find challenging to understand.

What does it mean to be a child of God?

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What is the connection between spiritual maturity and purity?

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How does this Scripture describe the work of God? the work of the devil? the behavior of the children of God?

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### Into Life

Why should believers consider having an accountability partner?

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How can an accountability partner encourage resistance to sin?

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### Thought to Remember

The rubric is clear: God's children love Him and seek lives of righteousness.

# The Rules of Life

Devotional Reading: Psalm 37:27-40

Background Scripture: Titus 1:1-3; 2:11-15

Today's Scripture: Titus 1:1-3; 2:11-15

## I. The Messenger

### Titus 1:1-3

**1 Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness;**

**2 In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;**

**3 But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour.**

1a. An ancient letter typically began by naming its author and its intended recipients. Paul's other New Testament epistles reflect this tendency. In the first verses of this particular letter, *Paul* identified himself as its author and named his intended audience: Titus.

In Romans 1:1 and Philippians 1:1, Paul identifies himself as a servant of Jesus Christ. But nowhere else in the New Testament does he identify himself as *a servant of God*. His self-description reflects his humility—a required attitude for a leader of Christ's church. Humility did not preclude him from leading the church. Instead, it was a prerequisite to being an *apostle of Jesus Christ*.

1b. Paul's purpose in writing was to

strengthen *God's elect* people. This designation is rooted in God's gracious and generous choice of a people to be His own. Paul's mission as an apostle was to strengthen the elect's *faith* so that they may better understand their salvation.

Paul also wrote to mature their knowledge of *the truth* of their salvation through Christ Jesus. Doing so was part of his task as an apostle. When people understand and accept the truth of salvation, they will repent and live new lives rightly ordered by God's truth. Together, faith and knowledge produce *godliness*: behavior that follows God's standards revealed by Christ Jesus.

Some Cretans were known for their ungodly behavior. Therefore, it was appropriate for Paul to address such behavior from the start of his letter. Paul expected that Titus would take on the mission of leading the church in Crete to maturity through the gospel message.

2. The word *hope* often implies wishful thinking, like, "I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow." That is not how Paul uses the word in this verse. For Paul, *hope* is an assurance because the subject of this hope was Jesus Christ. Jesus is life, and He has life in himself. God has promised that people can experience *eternal life* when they enter into a saving relationship with Him.

3. Though God's promise existed since before creation, only *in due times* did He reveal Christ as the fulfillment of that promise. God's timing in this regard was perfect; Christ came to earth at just the right time and in just the right context. Thus, Paul emphasizes that God is at work in human history to accomplish His plan and purpose.

The underlying Greek word translated *preaching* conveys the idea of both the act of proclaiming the good news and the content of that proclamation. Part of Paul's task as an apostle was to commit himself *according to the commandment of God our Saviour* to proclaim that salvation had come in and through Christ Jesus. *Through* Paul's *preaching*, he served as a herald, announcing the good news of salvation.

## II. The Message

### Titus 2:11-15

**11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men,**

**12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;**

**13 Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ;**

**14 Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.**

**15 These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee.**

11. Having described how believers should live, Paul then explains the reason for that way of living: *the grace of God*. Such grace is a gift given to us by God for our justification and *salvation*. Grace is necessary for salvation because, without

it, we are incapable of attaining salvation by our own merit. Grace is not deserved or earned. Instead, it is based exclusively on the love of God.

The Greek word for *appeared* shows up only four times in the New Testament, two of which are in the letter to Titus. The word carries the connotation of light appearing and shining in darkness. The grace of God, revealed in Christ Jesus, has *appeared* to bring salvation to a sin-darkened world. The gift of grace is available to all people, but not everyone will accept it. For those who do receive this gift, their lives will bear the fruit of godliness.

12a. God's grace has a formative effect on His people. Not only has this grace appeared for our salvation, but it has become our instructor, *teaching us* the habits of righteousness and godly living.

Outside of Christ, *everyone* stands condemned for their sins. When we accept the gift of grace, God gives us His Spirit to teach us. The Spirit bears the fruits of righteousness through us.

God's grace forms us to want to renounce personal and systemic sin. *Ungodliness* is a generic word for any evil behavior blatantly against God's righteous nature. *Worldly lusts* refer to the selfish passions of the flesh. Because God calls believers to a life of righteousness, we should deny any such behavior that opposes God or is inconsistent with His character.

12b. God's grace instructs believers to replace ungodly behavior with righteous behavior. Living *soberly* suggests prudence regarding our passions and desires. To live *righteously* and *godly* summarizes the required attitudes and behaviors that conform to God's standard. Righteousness is God's standard, and He desires the same from His people.

13. Many unbelievers dread what the future may bring. Believers, however, have a *blessed hope* of Christ's return and

eternal life in the presence of God. Even though we may experience trials and suffering on earth, we can take hope that God will be faithful to His promises and bring redemption and renewal to us and our world. This hope will be fulfilled at the *glorious appearing* of Christ to earth. At His return, we will experience glorious renewal and resurrection life.

God revealed His grace through the incarnation of Jesus. This very same grace will again be on display at the return of our *great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ*. As a result, we are to have lives of holiness and godliness in eager anticipation.

14. Believers eagerly await Christ's glorious return, and our hope is based on what He accomplished for us in His first coming to earth. God's grace was displayed when Jesus *gave himself for us* on the cross. In Jesus' giving of himself, He voluntarily did something that no one else could: rescue us from the grasp of sin and death and give us life.

The purpose of Christ's self-giving was two-fold. First, He came to *redeem us*. He did this by being the ransom that sin requires. The underlying Greek word for *redeem* is also used in the Septuagint to describe how God ransomed His people from their bondage. Christ's death on the cross paid the ransom for our sin and freed us from the bondage of our *iniquity* and ungodliness.

Second, the shedding of Christ's blood cleanses us from the impurity of our sins. Our purification from sin leads to our sanctification into holiness and godly behavior.

The result of our redemption and purification is that we become identified as the people of God. In the antique English of the *King James Version*, the word translated *peculiar* doesn't mean "odd" or "eccentric." Instead, it conveys a deep sense of ownership. Christ's work has created

an "elect" people (Titus 1:1)—redeemed and purified—as God's own.

As God's redeemed people, we wait for Christ's return and the resurrection of the body. In this season of waiting, we should become *zealous* to do *good works* that result from God's grace. These good works flow from our love that results from a life filled with God's Spirit.

15. Paul concludes this section of his letter by imploring Titus to action to encourage people to lead holy lives. First and foremost, Titus needed to address the problems at Crete. God had set Paul apart to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. From this position of authority, Paul encouraged Titus to strengthen the faith of the believers.

Titus would *exhort* other believers to do good works indicative of their life in Christ. Exhortation was an aspect of Paul's mission, and so would be the mission of Titus.

This verse is the third time in this letter that Paul uses the underlying Greek word translated here as *rebuke*. Ungodly behavior had abounded in Crete. Therefore, Titus would have to call it out and offer a correction for godliness.

Titus could exhort and rebuke because of the *authority* that Paul had given him. There was a specific "chain of command" in this letter. Titus received authority from Paul, who had received his power as "a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (Titus 1:1). As Titus boldly and confidently proclaimed the gospel, he followed in the footsteps of Paul.

The command *let no man despise you* is very similar to Paul's command to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12. Although there is no mention of Titus's age, he was likely younger than Paul. Titus could have confidence that his words to the believers in Crete were authoritative and valuable for their growth in godliness.

# Involvement Learning

## The Rules of Life

### Into the Lesson

Under the following headers, give examples of how you must wait during the given time frame.

*Daily*

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*Weekly*

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*Quarterly*

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*Yearly*

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### Key Verse

The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
—Titus 2:11-13

### Into the Word

Read Titus 1:1-3. Compare it to the following: Proverbs 8:12-26; John 17:3-24; 1 Corinthians 2:6-7; Ephesians 1:4-6; 2 Timothy 1:9-10; and 1 Peter 1:18-20. What do these texts reveal about God's eternal nature?

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How should the promise and hope of eternal things impact how we live today?

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What hope do you find in these texts?

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Read Titus 1:11-15. What should believers do while waiting for the "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) of Christ's return?

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What is the connection between our salvation and our good works?

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How can we have lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly?

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### Into Life

Reread Titus 2:12 and write down a step-by-step plan for how you will eliminate one area of ungodliness and pursue one area of godliness instead.

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### Thought to Remember

We have a "blessed hope"!

# The Washing of Regeneration

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

Background Scripture: Titus 3:3-11

Today's Scripture: Titus 3:3-11

## I. Gospel Reminder

### Titus 3:3-8

**3 For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.**

**4 But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared,**

**5 Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;**

**6 Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour;**

**7 That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.**

**8 This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.**

3a. In order to highlight the power of the gospel, Paul first had to acknowledge the human situation. Every person has sinned, and no one is entirely righteous. By stating *we ourselves*, Paul included himself as among those who had sinned.

This particular vice list begins by mentioning the *foolish* person who stubbornly refuses to accept God's truth. Such a person becomes *disobedient* by rebelling against the standards of God and others.

Sin can lead people to deceive themselves regarding right and wrong. Therefore, Paul frequently warns against being *deceived* (examples: 1 Corinthians 15:33; Galatians 6:7). Such self-deception causes people to become captive to the *divers lusts and pleasures* of a sinful world.

3b. Sin affects not only a person's mindset and actions but also his or her relationships with others. *Malice and envy* are feelings of wickedness directed at another person. These two feelings tend to go hand-in-hand; the underlying Greek words occur together also in Romans 1:29 and 1 Peter 2:1. These feelings result from sinful desires and can lead to anger or other sins. Rather than be filled with love for others, the envious person becomes filled with hate that leads to further sin.

4. The phrase *but after that* points to a change of status for humanity. The previous verse's description of human sin does not have to be the final status for humanity. Instead, God has provided a way to free us from sin and evil. This divine initiative for salvation arises from God's character, particularly His *kindness and love*. This truth is the core of our faith.



God has revealed His kindness through His gracious benevolence to help sinful humanity. The ultimate example of His kindness has come through God's sending of His Son, Christ Jesus, to pay sin's price through the sacrifice of himself on the cross. This display of kindness would lead humanity to repentance.

5a. The good things we do—*works of righteousness*—do not earn us salvation. Our righteous acts are like “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6) that do not benefit us for salvation (57:12).

Despite human sin, God delights in showing *mercy*. This is because God is “rich in mercy” for our salvation (Ephesians 2:4-5). Our merciful God has provided a way for salvation that does not require our righteousness. Instead, He has initiated our salvation through His gift of grace. By His mercy and grace, we are justified by faith, and we are *saved*.

5b. Students of the text have long discussed what Paul meant by the phrase *the washing of regeneration*. One possibility is that Paul was referring to the practice of baptism. Through baptism we are “buried with [Christ]” (Colossians 2:12), and those who have been baptized “put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). The other possibility is that Paul is referring generally to the spiritual cleansing from sin that results from our salvation. When we accept God's gift of grace, His Spirit fills us and transforms us. This transformation comes as the Spirit empowers us to remove the sinful self and receive new life.

This new life is one where we are dead to the ways of sin. Our old selves were held captive to foolishness and disobedience. But because of God's gift of grace, salvation is available to us. When we accept that gift, *the Holy Ghost* transforms us into new people devoted to following God and obeying His commands.

6. This verse reminds readers of the

events of Pentecost when God poured out His Spirit. The underlying Greek word translated *shed* is also used in Acts 2 to describe how God promised to “pour out” His Spirit (2:17-18). By using the phrase *on us*, Paul includes both himself and Titus as among those who had experienced the presence of God's Spirit.

The pouring out of God's Spirit on His people is not like the trickle of water from a drying creek. Instead, God has *abundantly* poured His Spirit out as a rich resource of His grace and love. The Spirit's presence brings renewal and sanctification to the lives of believers. All people who have accepted God's grace are invited to receive and “drink” of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Paul's explanation of our salvation in verses 5-6 reveals the work of the Triune God. All three persons of the Trinity are either mentioned or implied in these verses. The personal pronoun *he* refers to God the Father who has sent the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit proceeds from both God the Father and His only Son, *Jesus Christ our Saviour*. In this verse, Paul has affirmed the role of all three persons of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for our justification and sanctification.

7. Only through God's *grace* and our faith in Christ's sacrifice are we *justified*. Although we are guilty of sin, we are counted righteous when we accept God's gift of grace. Our justification results in a new status and our hope for the future. Because of this justification, we become the children of God. As such, we are *made heirs* of God and become benefactors of God's promises regarding glory.

As heirs, we have a unique hope as we await our future. To have *hope* does not mean wishful thinking. For Paul, *hope* is a certainty; it is a confidence that the promises made by God to His heirs will come

true. In this case, the hoped-for promise is that God's children will someday experience glorious *eternal life* with Him.

8a. The phrase *this is a faithful saying* or its equivalent is found in five places in the Pastoral Epistles. As a mentor to both Timothy and Titus, Paul sought to remind them of the trustworthy doctrine that they could then proclaim in their churches.

*These things* include what Paul had taught up to this point in the letter. This teaching included the human condition, the kindness and love of God, salvation through grace, purification by the Spirit, and hope of eternal life.

8b. When the gospel is proclaimed, heard, and *believed*, it will create a people devoted to obeying *God*. Having faith and doing good go hand-in-hand.

The *good works* of a believer come as a result of the presence of God in that person's life. Good works are the result of salvation, not the source of it. God has blessed us so that we might do good works. The good works that Paul has in mind *are good and profitable* for all people. By this, he means that good works are a way to obey God and are a benefit for others. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to shape our habits and mindsets, we become eager to do good works. In the process, we please and obey God.

## II. Gospel Behavior

### Titus 3:9-11

**9 But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain.**

**10 A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject;**

**11 Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.**

9. Having established what defines "profitable" behavior in light of salvation (Titus 3:8, above), Paul describes those *unprofitable* behaviors for believers pursuing godliness. In this verse, Paul addressed false teachers that had infiltrated the Cretan church. Their *foolish questions* and *contentions* had divided the church. Rather than being a community known for love and good works, the Cretan church risked conflict over *vain* debates by following these teachers.

The mention of *genealogies* and *strivings about the law* provides clues regarding the identity of the false teachers. Their teachings had been influenced by certain Jewish ideas from the people "of the circumcision" (Titus 1:10). Some of the teachings concerned aspects of the Law of Moses and human ancestry. Such things had no value for human salvation in light of the work of Christ Jesus.

10-11. We typically use the word *heretic* to refer to someone who espouses false teaching. However, that meaning is not in view in this verse's mention of *a man that is an heretick*. Instead, the underlying Greek word in this verse refers to someone who causes division. Rather than build up the body of Christ that is the church, this type of person creates discord and disruption. Therefore, believers should avoid such a person.

In response to such a divisive person, Paul describes an early form of church discipline. Paul's directives reveal a certain level of patience. Divisive people could receive two warnings. After the *second* warning the church should outright reject the person. By allowing two warnings, Titus would give the troublesome party ample opportunity to repent and change. This event was not Paul's first experience handing out warnings and discipline. The church in Corinth had received such warnings from Paul (2 Corinthians 13:2).

# Involvement Learning

## The Washing of Regeneration

### Into the Lesson

Recount a story about the most significant mess you have ever encountered and how you cleaned up the mess.

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### Key Verse

But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.  
—Titus 3:4-5

### Into the Word

Print a copy of Titus 3:3-11 if you do not want to write in your own Bible. Using four different colored pencils, complete the following instructions:

- Underline with one color the words or phrases that describe sinful humanity.
- Underline with a second color the words or phrases that describe the work of God.
- Underline with a third color the words or phrases that describe the process of salvation.
- Underline with a fourth color the words or phrases that describe saved and redeemed humanity.

In light of the lesson context, what is notable about the ways that Paul describes sinful humanity?

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How would you summarize the work of God described in Titus 3:3-11?

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How would you summarize for an unbeliever the process of salvation as described in Titus 3:3-11?

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What actions are “profitable” for your class to undertake in the upcoming week?

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### Into Life

In the space below, give examples of attributes for profitable and unprofitable spiritual conversations.

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### Thought to Remember

The only thing truly profitable is the gospel!

### June 3-9

- ☐ Mon, June 3
- ☐ Tue, June 4
- ☐ Wed, June 5
- ☐ Thu, June 6
- ☐ Fri, June 7
- ☐ Sat, June 8
- ☐ Sun, June 9

### June 10-16

- ☐ Mon, June 10
- ☐ Tue, June 11
- ☐ Wed, June 12
- ☐ Thu, June 13
- ☐ Fri, June 14
- ☐ Sat, June 15
- ☐ Sun, June 16

### June 17-23

- ☐ Mon, June 17
- ☐ Tue, June 18
- ☐ Wed, June 19
- ☐ Thu, June 20
- ☐ Fri, June 21
- ☐ Sat, June 22
- ☐ Sun, June 23

### June 24-30

- ☐ Mon, June 24
- ☐ Tue, June 25
- ☐ Wed, June 26
- ☐ Thu, June 27
- ☐ Fri, June 28
- ☐ Sat, June 29
- ☐ Sun, June 30

- Acts 28:23-31
- Exodus 19:9-11, 16-25
- Hebrews 12:18-29
- Acts 4:23-31
- Exodus 34:28-35
- Deuteronomy 31:1-8
- 2 Corinthians 3:5-18

- Luke 22:25-30
- Acts 1:1-11
- Isaiah 61
- Psalms 133-134
- Ephesians 4:1-7
- Philippians 2:1-13
- Romans 15:1-13

- Psalms 42
- 1 John 5:1-13
- 1 John 5:14-21
- Psalms 23
- Isaiah 12
- Hebrews 6:1-8
- Hebrews 6:9-20

- Psalms 27
- Philippians 3:1-14
- Galatians 1:13-24
- Isaiah 41:1-15
- Daniel 12
- Acts 9:1-9
- Acts 26:1-11

### July 1-7

- ☐ Mon, July 1
- ☐ Tue, July 2
- ☐ Wed, July 3
- ☐ Thu, July 4
- ☐ Fri, July 5
- ☐ Sat, July 6
- ☐ Sun, July 7

### July 8-14

- ☐ Mon, July 8
- ☐ Tue, July 9
- ☐ Wed, July 10
- ☐ Thu, July 11
- ☐ Fri, July 12
- ☐ Sat, July 13
- ☐ Sun, July 14

### July 15-21

- ☐ Mon, July 15
- ☐ Tue, July 16
- ☐ Wed, July 17
- ☐ Thu, July 18
- ☐ Fri, July 19
- ☐ Sat, July 20
- ☐ Sun, July 21

### July 22-28

- ☐ Mon, July 22
- ☐ Tue, July 23
- ☐ Wed, July 24
- ☐ Thu, July 25
- ☐ Fri, July 26
- ☐ Sat, July 27
- ☐ Sun, July 28

- Matthew 6:9-15
- Jeremiah 52:1-15
- Jeremiah 52:16-30
- Hebrews 4:12-16
- Hebrews 8:6-13
- Psalms 30
- Lamentations 3:16-24

- 2 Corinthians 2:12-17
- Psalms 107:1-9
- Psalms 107:10-22
- Colossians 1:3-12
- Ephesians 3:1-13
- Psalms 71:1-11
- Psalms 71:12-21

- 2 Timothy 3:10-17
- Matthew 4:1-11
- Proverbs 30:1-9
- Colossians 3:12-17
- James 1:19-27
- Psalms 119:57-72
- Psalms 119:73-80

- 2 Peter 1:16-21
- 2 Peter 3:1-15a
- Psalms 59:1-9, 17
- Matthew 25:1-13
- Matthew 25:14-21, 24-30
- Lamentations 3:25-36
- Psalms 130

# In the Word

## July 29–August 4

- ☐ Mon, July 29
  - ☐ Tue, July 30
  - ☐ Wed, July 31
  - ☐ Thu, Aug. 1
  - ☐ Fri, Aug. 2
  - ☐ Sat, Aug. 3
  - ☐ Sun, Aug. 4
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Hebrews 10:19-25  
2 Chronicles 30:21-27  
Ecclesiastes 4:7-12  
Galatians 6:1-10  
Psalm 121  
1 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5

## August 5–11

- ☐ Mon, Aug. 5
  - ☐ Tue, Aug. 6
  - ☐ Wed, Aug. 7
  - ☐ Thu, Aug. 8
  - ☐ Fri, Aug. 9
  - ☐ Sat, Aug. 10
  - ☐ Sun, Aug. 11
- 2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Deuteronomy 6:4-13  
James 2:8-13  
John 13:31-35  
Zephaniah 3:14-20  
Jeremiah 31:1-9  
1 John 3:1-10

## August 12–18

- ☐ Mon, Aug. 12
  - ☐ Tue, Aug. 13
  - ☐ Wed, Aug. 14
  - ☐ Thu, Aug. 15
  - ☐ Fri, Aug. 16
  - ☐ Sat, Aug. 17
  - ☐ Sun, Aug. 18
- Deuteronomy 32:1-6  
1 Corinthians 6:9-20  
Romans 12:9-21  
Proverbs 15:20-25  
Psalm 37:27-40  
Jonah 2:1-9  
Titus 1:1-3; 2:11-15

## August 19–25

- ☐ Mon, Aug. 19
  - ☐ Tue, Aug. 20
  - ☐ Wed, Aug. 21
  - ☐ Thu, Aug. 22
  - ☐ Fri, Aug. 23
  - ☐ Sat, Aug. 24
  - ☐ Sun, Aug. 25
- Proverbs 3:27-35  
Proverbs 31:1-9  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
James 2:14-26  
Isaiah 30:18-26  
Matthew 5:13-20  
Titus 3:3-11

Your weekly Sunday school time will be enriched when you come to class each week prepared. One aspect of good preparation is continual contact with the Word of God. Of course, Bible reading is more than preparation. It is a vital link with the Father. Coupled with prayer, it is the most important item on your daily agenda.

There are a variety of Bible reading plans available. We offer this one because it is designed to enhance your weekly Bible study of these lessons with an adult class.

Your devotional time can be enriched if you add to these Bible readings a time of prayer and meditation. The quarterly booklet *Devotions*® combines these same readings with a meditation, daily Scripture verse, a hymn, and prayer thoughts. *Devotions*® is available from your local Christian bookstore or from David C Cook (order no. 4629324; order no. 4629524 for large print).

REMOVE THIS PAGE, FOLD, AND KEEP IN YOUR BIBLE  
FOR REFERENCE.

## May 27–June 2

- ☐ Mon, May 27
  - ☐ Tue, May 28
  - ☐ Wed, May 29
  - ☐ Thu, May 30
  - ☐ Fri, May 31
  - ☐ Sat, June 1
  - ☐ Sun, June 2
- Isaiah 43:8-13  
Psalm 113  
Galatians 3:19-29  
Proverbs 10:19-25  
Matthew 6:19-24  
Matthew 6:25-34  
Colossians 1:24–2:3

# Quarterly Quiz

## Lesson 1

1. Paul was filling up Christ's \_\_\_\_\_ in his flesh. *Colossians 1:24*

2. In Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. T/F. *Colossians 2:3*

## Lesson 2

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ kills, but the Spirit gives life. *2 Corinthians 3:6*

2. Moses hid his face with what? (nothing, a veil, a mask) *2 Corinthians 3:13*

## Lesson 3

1. The \_\_\_\_\_ ought to bear the failings of the \_\_\_\_\_. *Romans 15:1*

2. Paul quoted Jeremiah regarding the root of Jesse. T/F. *Romans 15:12*

## Lesson 4

1. God promised to bless and multiply who? (Abraham, Jacob, Moses) *Hebrews 6:14*

2. God confirmed His promise with an \_\_\_\_\_. *Hebrews 6:17*

## Lesson 5

1. Agrippa gave Paul permission to speak for himself. T/F. *Acts 26:1*

2. Who did Paul put into prison? (criminals, Gentiles, the saints) *Acts 26:10*

## Lesson 6

1. "We are not consumed" because of the Lord's what? (mercies, judgment, inattention) *Lamentations 3:22*

2. Great is God's what? (faithfulness, wrath, indifference) *Lamentations 3:23*

## Lesson 7

1. The psalmist began to learn from God at what stage of life? (his youth, during his marriage, on his deathbed) *Psalms 71:17*

2. The psalmist trusted that God would bring him home from a foreign prison. T/F. *Psalms 71:20*

## Lesson 8

1. God's \_\_\_\_\_ made the psalmist. *Psalms 119:73*

2. God's law is the psalmist's delight. T/F. *Psalms 119:77*

## Lesson 9

1. The psalmist cried out to God from where? (his home, a mountaintop, the depths) *Psalms 130:1*

2. My soul waiteth for the Lord \_\_\_\_\_ than they that watch for the morning." *Psalms 130:6*

## Lesson 10

1. The word the Thessalonian believers received was from men. T/F. *1 Thessalonians 2:13*

2. Paul called the Thessalonian believers his \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. *1 Thessalonians 2:20*

## Lesson 11

1. We are now called God's what? (treasure, sons, soldiers) *1 John 3:2*

2. Jesus came to destroy the devil's work. T/F. *1 John 3:8*

## Lesson 12

1. God promised the hope of what kind of life before the beginning of time? (eternal, easy, fair) *Titus 1:2*

2. God's grace offers salvation to most people. T/F. *Titus 2:11*

## Lesson 13

1. We are saved because of God's \_\_\_\_\_. *Titus 3:5*

2. Our works, good or bad, no longer matter when we have trusted in God.

# How are you living?

## Do (Virtue):

Live self-controlled,  
righteous, godly lives

Galatians 5:22-25

James 3:13, 17-18

2 Peter 1:5-7

Titus 2:1 1-13

Titus 3:1-2

## Do Not (Vice):

Embrace ungodliness  
and worldly desires

Galatians 5:19-21, 26

2 Timothy 3:2-5

James 3:14-16

Titus 2:1 1-13

Titus 3:3, 9-11