

Beloved, I bring you Grace & Peace from our Lord & Savior Jesus the Christ, Amen.

Merry Christmas! A Blessed & Happy New Year to you all.

2020 was a great leveling of expectations & life as we know it. It was certainly not what many (or any) of us expected or needed. To quote Dr. Seuss, as a year goes; it stink... stank... stunk.

I start each day listening to J. Vernon McGee & his recorded radio program 'Thru The Bible'. It is a 5-year journey, as he refers to it, on the 'Bible bus'. As you hop on the 'Bible bus', he slowly works through each book of the Bible one by one. For those of you looking for a loophole... this does not excuse you from Terry's 1 year Bible reading plan, but it is a nice supplement.

J. Vernon McGee was born in 1904, ordained in 1933, & passed into heaven in 1988. He is a "good 'ole boy" from Texas, with drawl to prove it, ending up in Los Angeles shortly after WWII.

Yet, as I listen, he keeps relating that this year, in the time that he is in, finds us in the worst moral dilemmas known to man, woman, & child. That we have fallen away from the standard of his youth, or even further in his past. He freely admits that our past was not that high a standard. For

reference, his reflections were recorded from the mid 1970's to the early 1980's. He is reflecting back further to his experiences from the 1920's, 1930's, etc.

My point being, is that perhaps things do not change as much as we think that they do from year to year... or decade to decade. Perhaps at the end of each year we feel that in our looking back, that it was the most dangerous era, at least the most dangerous era which we have ever known... because we have seen more of what the world offers... & it does not really change.

We are created to look forward. That is the point of Christianity. Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, & the empty Cross... all point forward. Then Pentecost to the next Season of Advent.

On Dec. 27<sup>th</sup> the Chicago Tribune, yes some of us old folks still read a newspaper, published an editorial titled "The best time to be alive is now". You may laugh at this. You may cry at this. You may wonder are they for real?

I do not agree with most of the reasons they provided. The sentiment & encouragement were well meant; but the thoughts are grounded in the

wrong reasons for having hope. There is a tension between this world & the next. They went with this world; I choose the next.

My preferred thoughts are better summed up in Havergal's "Another Year Is Dawning" – this is an edited version:

Another year is dawning!

Dear Father, let it be,

in working or in waiting,

another year with thee; (PAUSE)

Another year of service,

of witness for thy love;

another year of training

for holier work above. (PAUSE)

Another year is dawning!

Dear Father, let it be

on earth, or else in heaven,

another year for thee.

I freely admit that this past year the harshness of the world was fully displayed in each passing day. A constant building tension which flipped the focus for people; all too often not for the better.

A year of fear, of frustration, of outrage..., of one side versus another side. The inhumanity of people to each other. Fear of an unseen foe, a virus. Anger & frustration against the constraints of uncertainty, closures, loss, & separation. Many of you now know why solitary confinement works so well; we are not meant to be alone. God told us this all the way back in Genesis.

If you are wondering, or getting frustrated, that I am going to keep going on with this topic... well no I am not. God's Law is designed to drive us our knees, & then to turn us, to repent us, to lift our hearts, minds, & souls to focus on our need for Jesus.

We all had more than a fair share of being driven in 2020. Today is not a day for more of the same of what the world burdens us with in an endless assault... Many of you are already far beyond driven to your knees... to cry out... ENOUGH!

Today the Word that God gives, is the Word of healing & salvation through Jesus Christ. This Word is not simply just for today... it is for every day.

Paraphrasing Martin Luther 'The Law says do & The Gospel says, done'. Well, you have all been driven down by The Law, & humanity, or man's inhumanity to our fellow humans. Whereas The Gospel is given for you, to raise you up, as the Bible says... on eagles wings.

But it is hard to rise sometimes, it is hard to shuffle like a mouse at times, let alone soar like an eagle. If you are struggling, or even close to it, reach out to someone. We are not meant to go through life on our own.

My wife asked me to explain my made-up phrase 'Christmas you' that you will be hearing me use. It is the daily blessing of Christ coming into the world the first time & the anticipation of His return.

The Word made Flesh from our Gospel reading. Christ coming into your world to gift you with His love, presence & His Word. Delivering on His Promise & delivering the means of Grace. Baptism & the Lords Supper.

If you struggling, or are close to it, I suggest that you read, & then continue to re-read, Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Christ will Christmas you once again with His Word. The Power of The Gospel will grant you His perfect Peace that passes all human understanding.

You can read Ephesians in 30-45 minutes. It takes exactly 18 minutes to listen to the entire book. As a word of encouragement, Jesus has given you the strength & the ability to understand His Word by The Holy Spirit, you can do it!

How can I promise that? In our Ephesians reading from today you are promised that God has blessed you in Christ with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. God gave you every blessing you need; His Word (a Word of Promise), The Word (The Word made Flesh & dwelling among us – Christmasing you & me), & the helper; The Holy Spirit.

The Word, both figuratively & literally, makes Faith & understanding where there is none. Our Faith comes by hearing; not by sight. Our Faith is given as a gift from Christ, Christ coming into humanity, & Christ Christmasing you. Christmasing you with keeping His Promises. Christmasing by sharing His Word...The Gospel. Christmasing you by taking on your sins & dying for you.

The Gospel is love, comfort, & strength in a Word of Promise, an assurance for tough times... & for the good times. Good times, they do exist, they do happen.

God is unveiling His new & tender mercies every single day.

As John Stott says, Jesus is 'The Incomparable Christ', nothing compares to Him. Nothing can or will ever come close. He is the eternal Word who existed as part of the Godhead since the beginning who was part of the plan to create & then to rescue you... to save you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer states that in times like these, when you doubt God, & it is okay with God to doubt God. When you question God, don't... think... backwards. We do this when we ask God how & not who. The who, is the who of who has already saved you; trust in this certainty. Don't fall back on how or why; turn to the who can & has & will. Because it is an accomplished fact. It is okay to doubt this; but that doubt does not make it any less true.

If you need any more assurance that God is a God who is for you... We return to Ephesians, in fact this is so rich & lush with His promise I am going to re-read it for you now.

**3**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

**4**even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

In love **5**he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,

**6**to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

**7**In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace,

[8](#)which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight

[9](#)making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ

[10](#)as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

[11](#)In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,

[12](#)so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

[13](#)In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,

[14](#)who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

I could spend several weeks on each verse. What leapt out at me was... Baptism!

In rapid order God affirms, confirms, & adds to His promises. He blessed & blesses you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

He chose you. He chose you before the foundation of the World. He chose you, before you, were you. He chose you, knowing you would fail, & that you fail Him...

He chose you, even though you have nothing to offer Him, other than you & your sin. He made you & then He bought you back with His life.

He chose you before the foundation of the world. More importantly He chose you... in Him. He chose you as you are, then covers you, with Him. Christmasing you! So, God will see you as Christ's perfection.

He predestined you for adoption. As an adoptee, both literally & figuratively, you belong to a united family. You belong to Him. You belong to each other. You are not an accident. You are not a mistake. You are not simply molecules in motion... or matter + time + chance... as evolution claims.

You are not an after-thought... as in what does God do with you;... now that you are here. He knew you & loved you enough to make you an adopted child; through His Son's sacrifice. He knows you, yet He sees Jesus's perfection... that is why God is love.

For God so loved the world that He sent his only begotten Son...

I'll add the Son loves you so much that Jesus reaches all of the way down, to bring you..., to bring you, & you, & you... all of the way up... up, to be at the throne of God.

Jesus cannot forgive that which He did not pay for... Well, He paid, & you are forgiven.

This is God's will & Jesus's will & The Holy Spirit's will. These are the riches of His Grace... for His Grace is enough. The language here is so rich & so definitive.

He predestined you to all of this... & I return to our Gospel for a moment. That word predestination is offensive to many people. I return to Bonhoeffer, look to 'who' did this, & why I earlier said Baptism!

God, Jesus, & The Holy Spirit worked this before time existed, at the Incarnation, at the Cross, at the Resurrection, at your Baptism, & are working this today... & tomorrow... & the next day. God unveiling His rich & tender mercies which are new every morning. You want a hope for this year... & the year after that; there you have it! Done by Christ for you.

All meaning all, all things were, are, & will be made through Him. God created in the beginning with a Word. The Eternal Word, Jesus, the Christ, there is your who once again....

We will hear more about this next week. The answer key to the Bible is in our Gospel reading for today. John 1. "1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was in the beginning with God."

In predestination you, an adopted child, receive the full inheritance, Christ's full inheritance; by His choice I'll add. That in your Baptism you are, or were for those that departed, "the first hope in Christ to the praise of His Glory".

"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,"

Which occurred in & at your Baptism.

"who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."

Bonhoeffer borrowed from God in that last sentence... there is the 'who' once more.

From today's Gospel (John 1:4, 1:5, & 1:9) "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world."

The who is Christ. The light shining in the dark is Christ. The darkness cannot overcome the Christ. "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world." In your doubt you cannot dim Christ's light. The darkness, it cannot overcome the light of Christ.

He came, He Christmased you, He will come again to fully Christmas you for eternity.

The one who is over the Law, put Himself under the Law, that is what the true Christmas story is all about. He did this for you before time existed. He did for our ancestor's. He did this for you. He does this for our future generations.

It is a free gift. Ephesians 2:8-9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

The Book of Ephesians just keeps giving & giving... Christmasing you just like Christ.

Christ is coming again. He meets us here in our Baptism, He meets us here in His Word. He meets us here in bread & wine; as a foretaste of the Feast to come. The King is returning... you are redeemed! Like Mary, you can proudly exclaim, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

In Christ's mercy you are reconciled. In the year 2020 BC, the year 2020 AD, & in the year 2021. Happy New Year – Christ the King reigns!

The benevolent King who would rather be killed than to live without you for eternity makes it so. That is who He is. He is the Prince of Peace. The King of Kings. The Lord of Lords. Hallelujah & Amen.