



“The Vine”

Growing Together in Christ

Newsletter for New Hope Christian Fellowship

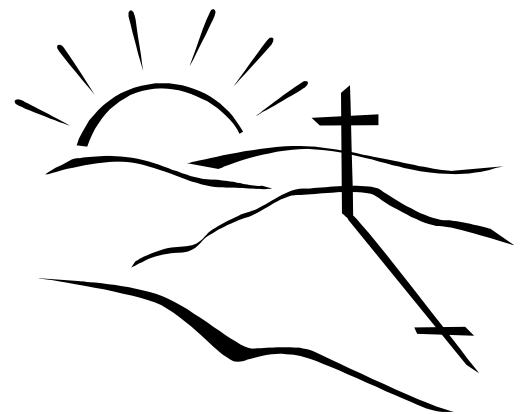


Christmas

*A Light has Dawned
Wonder of Wonders
A Christmas Poem
Christmas History*

The Gospel

*The Power of God for Salvation
The Book of Romans -
Still Changing Lives
A Helpful Tool in
Spreading It*



From Pastor Dennis



“A Light Has Dawned”

Children and adults love to see all the Christmas lights this time of year in the town squares, the shopping malls and in people’s front yards. From now through the holidays there will be bus tours around some of the more brilliantly lit neighborhoods. Soon after we are born, we learn to like light and to be afraid of darkness. Little children love to point at bright lights. They also want a “night light” left on in their room, because they are scared of what darkness may conceal.

Since ancient times light and darkness have symbolized good and evil. From Nelson’s Bible Dictionary: “Since darkness was associated with the chaos that existed before the creation, it came to be associated in historical times with evil, bad luck, or affliction. Darkness was also equated with death. It symbolizes man’s ignorance of God’s will and thus is associated with sin.”

“Darkness also describes the condition of those who have not yet seen the light concerning Jesus (John 1:4-5; 12:35; Eph 5:14) and those who deliberately turn away from the light (John 3:19-20). Hating the light will bring condemnation (Col 1:13; 2 Peter 2:17). Living in extreme darkness describes those who at the end of time have not repented (Rev 16:10; 18:23).”

“Before man was created, light was brought into being by the Creator. Throughout the Bible, light represents truth, goodness, and God’s redemptive work. Darkness, on the other hand, symbolizes error, evil, and the works of Satan. Man’s misguided fascination with light caused some cultures of the ancient world to worship the sun and moon.”

“God or God’s Word are frequently represented as lights or lamps to enlighten and guide the believer - ‘The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?’ (Psalm 27:1). Light is also used as a symbol of holiness and purity.”

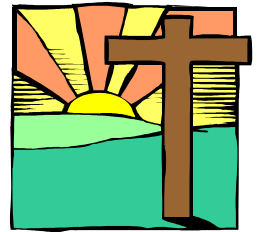
“The New Testament presents Jesus as the personification of light or divine illumination: ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 8:12). Jesus and the New Testament writers extended the figure of light to include faithful Christian witnesses, called ‘children of light’ (Ephesians 5:8).”



When Jesus began his ministry, Galilee was despised by the Jews, the place where people “lived in darkness.” Here Jesus said he came to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah 9 - Matthew 4:15-16 - “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.”

Mary’s relative, Zechariah was “filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” of Jesus before his birth - Luke 1:78-79 - “because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

When Jesus came to earth 2000 years ago, and whenever he comes to visit someone who doesn’t know him, “a light has dawned.” As you and I enjoy the lights in our neighborhood this season, may we praise the Lord of light. In Jesus we find light for our path, gracious love and everlasting life - John 8:12 - “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” May your celebration of His coming be full of joy.



The Vine

Growing Together in Christ



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Preaching The Gospel

Romans: A Revolutionary Book

It's been called a manifesto of freedom through Jesus Christ. It's been studied by millions of people over nearly two millennia. One website says, "No one has ever made an intensive study of this epistle and remained the same."

What are we talking about—the book of Romans of course. It's been described as, "...Paul's fullest, grandest, most comprehensive statement of the gospel. Its compressed declarations of vast truths are like coiled springs—once loosed, they leap through mind and heart to fill one's horizon and shapes one's life.

"John Chrysostom, the fifth century's greatest preacher, had Romans read aloud to him once a week. Augustine, Luther, and Wesley, three supremely significant contributors to the Christian heritage, all came to assured faith through the impact of Romans. All the Reformers saw Romans as the God-given key to understanding all Scripture, since here Paul brings together all the Bible's greatest themes..." (From the *Reformation Study Bible*, R. C. Sproul)

In 1816 Robert Haldane began expounding the book of Romans to a small group of students. He did this twice a week in his apartment in Geneva, Switzerland. The subsequent changes in their lives led to a religious revival in Switzerland and France.

A current radio program covering the epistle entitles their study 'the Romans Revolution.' One could go on and on describing the life-changing message of the gospel laid out in the book of Romans. We'd rather share with you some of New Hope's own 'mini Romans revolution' taking place in our own congregation.

About a year ago a Thursday night study was begun studying the book. Because of the enthusiastic response, a Thursday morning study on Romans started. It meets in the home of Mark and Marcella Houston for those who couldn't make it out at night. A few weeks ago our regular Sunday morning Bible study has taken to studying Romans.

Paul opens the book by declaring the gospel to be the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Rom. 1:16) He further tells us that, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a

righteousness that is by faith from first to last..."(17) He then goes on to explain very methodically and logically in much detail, the message of the gospel.

In doing so he uses such terms as *condemnation*, *justification*, *sanctification* and *glorification*. Religious sounding words as these can be a bit confusing at first. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the book is over 1900 years old. Letters of today do not read this way. Its style and depth of message are different than what we are used to.

Combine this with the fact that as a denomination we previously misunderstood much of the meaning of the book. Because of this a little work is required to grasp what Paul is saying.

In the course of our Bible studies a diagram of the first eight chapters of Romans developed. It was a way to help clarify its message. For some reason the diagram has really been resonating with a number of our members as they study the book. It has affectionately come to be known as "the Romans chart." Studying the book with the help of the diagram in a linear fashion makes for a clearer picture. It's easier to wrap our mind around what Paul is saying.

We thought it might be a nice idea to make the diagram available to all. It's provided to be:

- A study guide;
- A means to see where some of our former beliefs were in error;
- And as a tool for preaching the gospel.

Coming from a past background that didn't really encourage individual members to preach the gospel, it's important now to have a full understanding of the gospel to be able to explain it to others. Paul was able to reason with both Jew and Gentile. (Acts 17:17-18) To do this he had to be well versed in the gospel. The book of Romans clearly shows he was. It's our desire to help more of our members to do the same.

"The study of Romans is vitally necessary for the spiritual health and insight of the Christian." (*The Reformation Study Bible*) Hopefully "the chart" will help that study.

About the Diagram:

Keep in mind that the diagram was designed to supplement the study of the epistle of Romans. So a general understanding of the book is helpful when viewing it. In class it was drawn in stages as we went through the book. So there is a sense of progression from point to point. This may not be conveyed when looking at the completed diagram. See Romans on Page 4



Romans From Page 3

The diagram has been honed down to keep it simple. But as a tool for evangelizing, more can be added to it. It can provide an opportunity to pull out a pen or pencil and embellish it. In fact if you see someone who has attended the Bible studies you might want to ask them to explain 'the chart' to you. It will be good practice for them and may lead to a little more understanding for everyone involved.

Feel free to make your comments to *The Vine* regarding the Romans diagram. We're always looking for ways to improve it. In the next four issues we plan on explaining the diagram in more detail as it lays out the gospel.

- By John Siston

Romans: Up Close and Personal

Here is a personal testimony on the Romans Bible studies and 'the chart'.

This chart has saved my life. Most of my life I believed that Jesus Christ died for my sins. But did I really understand what that meant? Jesus died for my sins, but what was sin? Did this mean I was a bad person? He probably died more for other people who committed 'really bad' sins.

I knew I could pray to Him and He loved me; but was I really that bad? My understanding of Jesus was at best, a reverence of God that demanded respect, a fear if you will. But, what did it mean...personal Savior?

These were some of the questions and thoughts and I struggled with. I sought to find answers, but to no avail. To be honest, I didn't feel the answers were out there. I didn't feel it was meant for me to understand. Nonetheless, I cried out to God daily for a teacher, someone to help me understand who He is and my relationship in all of this. No one seemed to be able to explain it to me in a way that I understood. Basically Jesus died for our sins so we could be saved. It sounded so religious. I didn't want to be religious. I just wanted to know Him.

One Thursday evening, I stumbled into Sandy Blank's Bible study on Romans! This class changed my life. It opened up an understanding of the Bible that is life changing. Praise God!

Dr. Sandy and the Thursday night Bible study class created a Roman's chart. This chart

has proven to be a powerful tool in helping me to understand Romans and God's plan for salvation.

This chart shows all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All deserve condemnation. We were sinners even before we were born because sin entered the world through one man, Adam. What was that sin? Unbelief! Adam walked and talked with God. God Himself told Adam not to eat of the tree in the garden. Yes, Eve did take of the tree and eat, but so did Adam. They then noticed they were naked. We have all fallen into that condemnation...the downward spiraling effects of sin -- death, depravity, deception, destruction, fear. We are naturally not thankful to God and we do not honor or glorify Him.

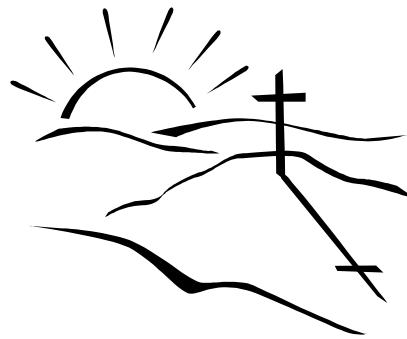
But wait, God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. So what did He do? God the Father sent Jesus to pay the ultimate price for us. The wages of sin are death! If we are sinners, we deserve death. God in his unselfish love for us sent Jesus to take on our sin and pay the penalty... death! This is a one-time act, a decree that Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. Because of this act by Jesus, by His blood, we are declared righteous in God's sight! JESUS SAVED US!!! We did not deserve this love, but He found favor in our sight. By grace, undeserved mercy and love, we were made righteous before God - not because of anything we have done. It is a gift of God, not works!

So because of this one-time act from Jesus, we no longer share in condemnation. We are saved. However, the only way to be saved is to trust and believe in what He did. Trust that He will never leave you or forsake you. Here is where the line of life changes. While in condemnation we all experience a downward spiral effect.

When Jesus justifies us by paying the penalty for death, we are in a state of sanctification. Yes, we still sin; however we have the Holy Spirit who convicts us to repent and we are forgiven. In sanctification it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to experience hope, forgiveness, mercy, and through freedom In Christ, leads us.

We live our lives in Sanctification until the Father into Glorification calls us. This is where we have eternal life, perfection, salvation!

Whew! Powerful! Praise God for his marvelous gift. - By Marcella Houston



Book Reviews

Christmas in America

By Penne L. Restad



The manger or Macy's? Americans might well wonder which is the real shrine of Christmas, as they take part each year in a mix of churchgoing, shopping, and family togetherness. But the history of Christmas cannot be summed up so easily as the commercialization of a sacred day.

As Penne Restad reveals in this marvelous new book, it has always been an ambiguous meld of sacred thoughts and worldly actions-- as well as a fascinating reflection of our changing society. In *Christmas in America*, Restad brilliantly captures the rise and transformation of our most universal national holiday.

In colonial times, it was celebrated either as an utterly solemn or a wildly social event--if it was celebrated at all. Virginians hunted, danced, and feasted. City dwellers flooded the streets in raucous demonstrations. Puritan New Englanders denounced the whole affair. Restad shows that as times changed, Christmas changed--and grew in popularity. In the early 1800s, New York served as an epicenter of the newly emerging holiday, drawing on its roots as a Dutch colony (St. Nicholas was particularly popular in the Netherlands, even after the Reformation), and aided by such men as Washington Irving.

In 1822, another New Yorker named Clement Clarke Moore penned a poem now known as "Twas the Night Before Christmas," virtually inventing the modern Santa Claus. Well-to-do townspeople displayed a German novelty, the decorated fir tree, in their parlors; an enterprising printer discovered the money to be made from Christmas cards; and a hodgepodge of year-end celebrations began to coalesce around December 25 and the figure of Santa.

The homecoming significance of the holiday increased with the Civil War, and by the end of the nineteenth century a full-fledged national holiday had materialized, forged out of borrowed and invented custom alike, and driven by a passion for gift-giving.

In the twentieth century, Christmas seeped into every niche of our conscious and unconscious lives to become a festival of epic proportions. Indeed, Restad carries the story through to our own time, unwrapping the messages hidden inside countless movies, books, and television shows,

revealing the inescapable presence--and ambiguous meaning--of Christmas in contemporary culture.

Filled with colorful detail and shining insight, *Christmas in America* reveals not only much about the emergence of the holiday, but also what our celebrations tell us about ourselves. Restad's sparkling account offers much to amuse and ponder. http://www.amazon.com/Christmas-America-Penne-L-Restad/dp/0195109805/ref=dp_return_1/105-8899595-6385243?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

Christmas Reconsidered

By Ralph Woodrow

"Most of us have heard the negatives about Christmas: Its observance is not commanded in the Bible. The Bible does not spell out the date of Christ's birth. It is highly commercialized. Some claim it all started in Babylon, that December 25th was Nimrod's birthday, that the Christmas tree honors Tammuz, that round-shaped decorations are images of the sun-god Baal, that placing a star on the top of the tree came from astrology, that "Satan" and "Santa" have the same letters, and that the very word "Christ-mas" is of pagan origin."

Ralph Woodrow, author of *Babylon Mystery Religion—Ancient and Modern*, says in his 1997 booklet *Christmas Reconsidered* that his previous writings about Christmas, "were not untrue; but *incomplete*. I was seeing only one side of the coin, and one-sided information can be misleading. To show only the pagan elements of Christmas leaves many unanswered questions."

He attempts to set the record straight. "I never regarded a person's belief about Christmas, pro or con, as an essential of the Christian faith. I never believed that differences about Christmas should bring divisions in families or churches. It was never my desire that people become fanatically anti-Christmas in their attitude."

This booklet clarifies his position on the whole subject of Christmas, since as he says, "...as time went on, I would be quoted as though I were some 'authority' on the anti-Christmas position."

This booklet, along with a few others of his, is worth looking at, considering the anti-Christmas view that dominated our former thinking. Seeing 'the other side of the coin' is instructive and can help in coming to grips with past teaching. It can also put the subject more in perspective.

- John Siston



Christmas

Wonder of Wonders

In the 2nd century BC, the Greek writer Antipater of Sidon listed the greatest buildings and monuments in existence. He chose the seven best, because that was a magic number in the Hebrew, Greek and Chinese cultures. These seven wonders of the ancient world astounded the ancient Greeks.

The Egyptian pyramids, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the statue of Zeus at Olympia, the temple of Artemis at Ephesus and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, both in Asia Minor, the Colossus at Rhodes and the Pharos of Alexandria made the list. Only the Egyptian pyramids remain to this day.

The Pyramids are still a wonder to us. We can only imagine how the Egyptians accomplished building such structures without today's technology. It's too bad the other ancient wonders didn't survive. I'm sure they would really draw the tourists.

These man-made wonders excited the ancient Greeks and stir our imaginations today. I don't know about you, but my mind boggles at the engineering, building and technological feats of humankind.

Even more mind-boggling, however, are the wonders of God. The heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), as well as everything else created by his hand. On my walks in the morning, it's sometimes difficult to keep walking, because I stop so often to take a closer look at the many flowers along the way.

Some flowers are so small most people don't ever notice them. Some are like the magnolia, so big you need two hands to hold them. There are blossoms in every size in between and in almost every color. Each one is different, yet each speaks of a gentle, creative, thoughtful mind.

Do we still have the capacity to wonder? Or do we just pass by the flowers and other miracles of creation, taking them and the intelligence behind them for granted? What about the miracle of the Incarnation? Is Christmas just another holiday? A day off from work, an excuse for a party or to overeat? Or are you still filled with wonder at the significance that God came to earth as one of us?

A mentor of Chuck Swindoll told him wonder is involuntary praise. If that is true, each time people stand in wonder at the amazing hand

of God, they are praising him even if they don't recognize or acknowledge the Creator. How much more for us who believe is the opportunity to praise the Lord every time we contemplate the wonder of creation or the wonder of Emmanuel - God with us?

Those who enter the Kingdom must become as little children (Matt. 18:3). A child is full of wonder at everything. Have you ever tried taking a walk with a little one? The pace is slow and the questions don't stop because everything is marvelous and just waiting to be discovered!

For us as adults, the world can still be like this. Let's shake off the dust and stuffiness of being grown up, and look at the world through the fresh eyes of a child. What a privilege to join with all nature in praise to our God of wonders!
- By Tammy Tkach

Christmas is Near

Christmas is near
Christmas is almost here
So at this time of year
Let's be of good cheer



Jesus came to this earth
By natural childbirth
Not as a king
With a huge giant ring

He was born
All forlorn
He was born with the beasts
Not celebrated with a royal feast
He did this even though He was God
A God to applaud
He did this for us
Over us He made a fuss

He came as an innocent child
A child very mild
Now we can have joy
Over this little baby boy

Because of this
We can have bliss
So at this time of year
Let's be of good cheer
- Linda Miller

If There Were 3 Wise Women

Three wise women would have:
Arrived on time and helped deliver the baby.
Bathed & dressed him and cleaned the stable.
Baked a casserole and brought practical gifts.
Then there would have been peace on earth ☺

- Submitted by Irma Longoria

