



**Sunday, January 7, 2023**

**Speaker:** Pastor John VanderWindt

**Scripture:** Acts 2:42-47

**Sermon Title:** The Lord adds, our response.

This Sunday we are celebrating “The Lord added to their number.” We will have the blessing of hearing from new members what the Lord has done in their lives as well as welcome them into membership at Living Hope.

**Pastor John:** Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we thank You for today. We thank You, Lord for the gift of the Sabbath, where we may gather in Your house to worship You. And Lord, we come before You this morning, humbly asking for You to heal us and to forgive us. And Lord, we thank You that as we come before You, that You are there. And so Lord, this morning as we celebrate what You are doing within Living Hope and within the broader Church of Christ, we want to give You all the honor and the praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We have been looking through the book of Acts over the last little while. In the book of Acts, there is a piece in chapter two where it says, "**41** Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." Then a little bit further, it says in **Acts 2:47**, "**47** praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Today, we get to celebrate the Lord, adding to the family of Living Hope. Not 3,000 but there's a bunch. So if you are part of this new member class and you are being welcomed today, I want to invite you to come on up and line up right here up on the stage. Don't be shy. Let's go. Somebody's got to stand up first. There we go.

This is our group. [Clapping.]

On the far end, we have Brian and Kristan (Wilms) with their children, Sierra, Jackson and Ava. Then we have Sunday and Bola (Abodunrin) with their children, Erife, Ewafe and Enife . Then we have Stella (Edet) with her children, John, Jedidiah and Janella. And then we have Abhishek (Dandiwala), Sarah (Golloher), Allister (Rinsma), Sarah (Ducharme). And then David and Magna (Branken) with their son Declan. And then Peter (Ufoaroh), and then my assistant Connie (Reitsma). [Clapping from congregation.]

We have had the privilege of spending time with each of these people and hearing their stories. And today, we're going to share some of their stories. But part of it is just a celebration of the people that God is bringing to our church. And as we go through the class (Living Hope 101 & 201), we talk about a number of things about Living Hope and what God has for us here, and how they can be a part of it. And then we're going to ask you three questions at the end. And so what we're going to do is we're going to ask the questions, and I'll ask them to respond as a group through each question.

So the first question which we asked is, do you believe in one triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the only rule for life for faith and life? Answer: I do. Second question. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to redeem the world? Do you love and trust him as the one who saves you from sin, and with repentance and joy embrace him as the Lord of your life? Answer: I do. And thirdly, will you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, faithfully participate in the life and ministry of this church, supporting its teaching, leadership, and vision, as you fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Answer: I will, God helping me.

We would like to welcome you into the body of Living Hope. So, once again, let's give them a round of applause. [Congregation claps.] Part of the last part is, "Will you continue to grow?" So part of the theme which I want you to be thinking about is, "What does it mean to be a church today? What does it mean to continue to grow within your faith?" And we read **Acts 2:41 & 47** - but let me read **Act 2:42** now. It says this, "**42** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

To be a member of a church is to devote yourself to continual learning, to fellowship and to prayer. And to aid in that, we are giving each person here a book to help them grow in that area. A book of either learning the heart of God - one of the books that's being given out is called Gentle and Lowly by Dane C Ortlund. There's another book which we're giving out called "The Power of Prayer," for parents. And then one by Mark Buchanan, God Walk. So if we could hand them out. [Connie hands out books.]

I'd like to invite Connie up to share a few thoughts.

**Connie** - On behalf of Living Hope, I'd like to just to give you all a big hug and warmly welcome you to the family of God here at Living Hope. It's my hope and prayer that you'll feel the joy of belonging to a community that's dedicated to the first and greatest commandment - to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And I just echo what Pastor John was saying, that it was a real privilege to get to know all of you personally. Each and every one of you from the youngest all the way up, and hearing your stories or testimonies.

It just touched my heart because you all had this special, unique way of sharing how God has been working in your lives, doing amazing things. There were stories of great faith, stories of struggles and heartache, stories of oppression. There were stories of working closely with God all their lives, always trusting Jesus.

There were stories of miracles, stories of people that heard from God, stepping out in faith and doing things they wouldn't have dreamed up. There were testimonies of victories over sin. It was just a wonderful thing to hear each and every one of you share. And there was a common thread through all the stories that all of you had. Coming out of Christmas, it was Emmanuel, God with us. I heard again and again from some of you who are only here today by the grace of God, only God. So to God be Lord. What an awesome God we serve. [Clapping from congregation.]

I'd like to say that your testimonies also inspired and challenged me personally in my faith journey. I was incredibly encouraged by your deep love for Jesus, your faith, the faithfulness of God, and the Holy Spirit is working right here among us here at Living Hope. And I trust that as you have the opportunity to use and continue to use your gifts here in our community, that we're going to be richly blessed. I can't see what God's going to be doing here. And as we do this, as we journey together as disciples of Jesus following him, I believe God is going to be glorified in some amazing ways. So to him be the glory. Praise God.

**Pastor John:** At this time, I'm going to invite most of the group to sit down except for Brian, Kristan and Stella, and I'm going to ask them to share a little bit of their story. Each person has also picked out a Bible verse, which they would like to share with us this morning. So the rest of you can have a seat and we'll call you up later. Right now we'll leave it for Brian, Kristan and Stella to share their piece.

**Stella:** Hi. It's an honor to become a part of this blessed congregation. Since moving here September last year, my prayer has always been that God will lead me, and plant me in a faith based Bible believing church. And then from the moment I walked through those doors, it's been amazing. The support, the love, the encouragement, the prayers I've received. I've been blessed by the Connect groups. I've been blessed by the Coffee Break, by Ladies Night Out, by the movie nights and every program that has been organized has helped improve my Christian life. It has helped to strengthen my faith in God, which is what I was hoping for. Before I get on to my special verse, I'd like to say a little bit about how I gave my life to Christ. I have a Catholic background.

And then in 2010, I just moved to another city in northern Nigeria. And then I met this guy. He was handsome, cool, calm, and well spoken. But that wasn't the catch. What drew me to this guy was that he would always talk about God to me, he always read the Bible to me, encouraged me and then prayed for me and prayed with me. Later, he became my husband. Pastor John: Hold on Stella. [Congregation laughs.] Dennis, can you stand up for just a minute? Dennis is here right now. We need to recognize him as well. {Congregation cheers and laughs.} [Dennis stands up in the congregation.]

So since I met him, he has strengthened my Christian life and then I began to realize the importance of being together with believers to strengthen your faith. So I'm really grateful for that. So that's why, when I find myself in a new place, the first thing on my mind is my priorities.

**Stella cont'd:** To find a community of believers to where my faith will be strengthened and where I could also join hands with the believers to advance the Kingdom of God.

So my special verse is **Jeremiah 29:11**. And it says, "**11** For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." This verse is really important to me because it helps me to understand that no matter what I go through, no matter the challenges, the uncertainties, the worry, God is always by me and then God loves me so much. He wants me to excel, to flourish, to do everything for His kingdom. And so his plans for my life will always find a place. It encourages me. And the next verse is in **Jeremiah 29:12**, "**12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you." So this tells me that I also have a role to play. I will pray to God, I will study my Bible, and encourage other people. I will bring people to the knowledge of Christ. So Christ transformed my life. And so as we go into this new year as we can plan out our goals, write out our visuals for the year, I encourage us to make room for God's plan for our lives. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Kristan:** Good morning. So the verse that I chose was **2 Timothy 1:7**, "**7** For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." So when I met with Pastor John about becoming members, he had said that everyone would come up on stage. I interjected and said, "And not speak." And he said, "And speak if you want to." Again, I repeated, "And not speak." Well, God had other things in mind and gave me some not so gentle nudges. So we've been coming to Living Hope for not quite a year now in person. We started watching online last September and continued to do so for four months. After not being in a physical church building for over two years and not doing online church anywhere for over a year, we were comfortable staying at home.

God had really been nudging me to find a church. We knew we wanted somewhere that felt like community and not only did things inside the church, but also outreaches. The first Sunday we watched online, it happened to be VERSE week. So it was all about serving the community. Week after week, the sermons were really speaking to me. Sierra started attending Youth group and started bugging us to come in person. My fears and anxieties kicked in with questions of, "Will anyone talk to us? What if they all just talk about community but aren't actually community?"

Finally, after weeks of nagging, we decided to come in person at the end of last January. My fears were squashed and anxiety put at ease as we had several people that welcomed us and talked to us. Because of Brian's schedule, we were only able to come two times a month in person, but we'd only been here four times when we were invited into a Connect group. That group treated us like we had been there for years. welcomed us to do the One Million Meals with them. The following week, they invited us to a cottage that summer, all while having just met us. The answer to the question, "Are they just talk?" was quickly answered with a "No, they're legit. They are family. They're welcoming, loving and caring." We're probably here some weeks more than we are at home, from men's Bible study to women's Coffee Break, Ladies Night Out, Youth Group, Connect Group, choir and then Sunday services.

**Kristan cont'd:** I say all this to encourage you and tell you that you are doing what God has called you to do. [Kristan pauses with emotion.] For those watching online, I felt that God had wanted me to speak to you. I know there are many reasons for watching online but those who are watching out of fear, I want to specifically speak to you. I was in your shoes. A year ago, I was so full of fear walking into a building with people I didn't know. That fear was trying to keep me from experiencing all that God has for us here. God doesn't give us a Spirit of fear. Satan does. I ask you to take a simple step of faith and walk through those doors, and see just like I did, that your fear has no grounds and that God will do great things for you here. We are a family who loves and supports, not only the people within the church but those outside. So I will end the same way I started. **2 Timothy 1:7**, "7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." [Congregation claps.]

**Brian:** One thing Kristan and I discussed when we were searching for a church was that we wanted a church that not only spoke about faith, but acted. So when we started looking at Living Hope as our home church - VERSE week was the first week we started watching - and so we got to see how this church not only speaks its faith, but acts in it. And when we came to the church, we were greeted and shown again how this church not only speaks its faith, but acts on it. And again with the Connect group, speaking its faith but acting in it as well. So the verse that the Lord brought me to share is **James 2:17-18**. "17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds." Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Pastor John:** At this time, I would like to invite David, Magna, Sunday, Bola and Abhishek to come on forward. And we'll give them an opportunity to share as well. When we started this class, there were a number of us there. Actually, one person has just come in yet. We'll get him in the last group. But it's been a joy just to see how God brings people from different places, but also with different spiritual gifts and the ability to see God in many different ways. This is part of our worldwide tour. David and Magna come from South Africa. Abhishek comes from India. And Bola and Sunday come from Nigeria. So God is spreading us all over the place. So, David and Magna, do you want to share first?

**Magna:** Okay, so I told Pastor John and Connie about my background. I'm a bit shy, so I was just going to read my verse. But God led my heart this morning. I have a colorful background. I went through difficult times. [Magna expressing sad emotions.] My sister was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer, and my dad died. So my mom had severe depression. I found the suicide letters. I have a very colorful background. And I'm blessed because that enhanced my faith a lot.

So I don't see obstacles, really as a negative influence in my life. And praise God I had the opportunity to finish my studies. I sat beside my sister's cancer bed. They diagnosed her and said she had three months to live. And she's a living miracle. And a pastor out of Cape Town called us and we stayed close to Johannesburg. And he said that Jesus talked to him and Jesus said. "He is alive and he has risen up in your body." No cancer. It is now gone. [Congregation claps.]

**Magna cont'd:** I have this verse that means a lot to me. It is **Isaiah 41:10**, "**10** So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." And when you have a colorful background like mine, fear is part of it. And they will always tell you, you will not make this through. And this verse carried my whole family and God spoke it to us during that time. So yes, that's my story. And I can really justify miracles to happen. [Congregation claps.]

**David:** Good morning. So, like Magnus said, she had a lot of ups and downs in her life. When Pastor John and we spoke, I said, "Well, I have had less ups and downs and he reaffirmed that that's also fine." [Congregation laughs.] And I think part of the reason at least is, I've always had an upbringing that was where God was really prominent in my life. I would like to share this verse with you. It's **Proverbs 3:5-6**. "**5** Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **6** in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." So yeah, I think God has always been with me and he has always been a source of comfort and something to lean on. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Abhishek:** Hello, Living Hope family. Good morning. So I want to read my favorite Bible verse which is **Matthew 19:26**. "**26** Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." This Bible verse relates much with my life, because from the place where I come, I thought at a moment that it is impossible for me what God made possible. It was impossible for us as a family. But God made it possible and I'm grateful. I'm blessed that God has done the impossible things in my life, what God is doing presently, and he will do in future. I'm grateful for this lovely family. The family of Christ, the family of Living Hope church.

I'm grateful that God has provided me with very kind and nice people. I mean, you people are awesome. I didn't expect that I would get this kind of love in this church. This love and affection is welcoming. All the people are so nice. And I'm thankful and grateful for all the families who took care of me. God bless you. And I'm also grateful for my parents because of their prayers and because they believe in God, that God has done the impossible sort of things in my life. I'm thankful and grateful. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Bola:** Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Hallelujah. Amen. I'm not going to take much of your time. Living Hope church is an example of what happened in Antioch. When they saw them and they saw that they were Christ like and they called them Christians. When Living Hope comes to my mind, I think of Christ in me, the hope of glory. So I have a hope that is living. I have an orb that is alive. Everyone has thought about different backgrounds, colorful ones. I want to believe that everything we have been through or what will happen to us is as a result of what God has planned for us. Some of the challenges that come our way are just there to shape us, to mold us into what we are today. Hallelujah. My Bible verse is also from the book of **Proverbs 3:5**, which is, "**5** Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **6** in all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your path." But I'm going to do something different. I'm from Nigeria, so I'm from a part of Nigeria that is called Yoruba.

**Bola cont'd:** So permit me to read my Bible verse in Yoruba. "Gbekele Oluwa peḷu gbogbo ṣkan re ki o si teriba kii se lori oye ti ara re ni gbogbo awon ona re jowo re ati pe oun yoo dari ona re." Hallelujah. [Congregation claps.]

**Sunday:** Praise the Lord. [Congregation says, "Hallelujah."] Praise the Lord, church. [Congregation says, "Hallelujah."] The Bible passage I want to share this morning was the first Bible passage I will learn in the Bible and has been with me for almost four decades. I learned it in my own native language, which I'm going to share with you. I'm going to interpret it to you. It is taken from Book of **Luke 19:10**. "Fun omọ eniyan wa lati wa ati lati gba awon ti o sonu la." It means, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." And this Bible passage, really does say, "God came to the world and you are saved." It showcases the love of God. It showcases the extent of his forgiveness. And it's also explained that God never forsakes anybody. At every junction in my life where I think I'm lost and I don't know where to go again, God will just show up. At times, I see every other person has left me. And God will just show up. Especially where I am presently. It is God. And I want to encourage every one of you. He will send somebody to you and may say some words to you and will be able to encourage you and lift you up. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Pastor John:** Thank you. Praise the Lord? [Congregation says Allelujah.] God is moving. I would like to invite Allister, Sarah D., Peter, Sarah G. and Charles up at this time. Charles and Glory (Nnorom) were also part of our new members class and yesterday, when I was texting with them, Glory told me that she was ill with a fever. So this morning was a little hectic in that household. But Charles made it so we're going to welcome Charles as well. And actually Charles, we will start with you. Because then I will ask you the questions and you can respond, and then you can share your verse. Okay.

So Charles, do you believe in one triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the only rule for life for faith and life? Answer: I do. Second question. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to redeem the world? Do you love and trust him as the one who saves you from sin, and with repentance and joy embrace him as the Lord of your life? Answer: I do. And thirdly, will you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, faithfully participate in the life and ministry of this church, supporting its teaching, leadership, and vision, as you fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Answer: I will, God helping me.

Now, would you share your verse and a little bit of your story, Charles?

**Charles:** Good morning, church. My name is Charles. My wife is supposed to be here. She fell ill two days ago. And I wish she was here. I don't know how to talk. I'm a bit shy. I really admire my sister (in-Christ) when she read the Bible verse in the Yoruba language. I'm also from Nigeria. And I mean, we are lovely people. Nigerians are lovely people. [Congregation clapping.] So it's really a pleasure to be amongst this family. I am a third son out of five kids from my parents. I was the least taken care of. I went to school almost by myself. I struggled a lot. I left home.

**Charles cont'd:** I left my dad when I was roughly less than 20 or thereabouts. You know, usually in Nigeria, we stay longer with our parents. But I left home very early and tried to survive on my own. With the help of friends, with the help of families like you, I succeeded. I went to school. I am the breadwinner of my family. If you go to my parents and tell them about me, I'm just like a Messiah to them, just because of God's mercy and love and what he's done with me. Most times when I come to church, they see my kids and people admire them a lot. I'm blessed. And when I look back where I'm coming from, and where I am now, it's far, very far. I never expected God was going to bring me this far. I've escaped several times, several times. Some time in the last two years or thereabouts, I went to see a friend with my daughter. As soon as I left the spot where my daughter was, there was a (couldn't discern what was said). I just left and they called me like, "What happened?" They sent me the pictures and I was like, "What's this?" So God has been with me. When I say I'm blessed, I'm not trying to be proud but I'm trying to tell you that I'm really blessed.

And I love testimonies a lot because it's a great way to preach Christ. When you share your testimony, you hear people around you, you build your faith, you make them become strong. They want to believe more. It brings you under the same roof with a first class witness of what God has done. So it's really beautiful. I'm happy I found this church. I stayed almost a month when I came to Canada. I never went to any church. And when I went online, the first church that came up was this. So I really appreciate you as a family. I appreciate the love from everyone, especially from Pastor John. I mean, I'm just home now. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Peter:** My name is Ifeanyi Ufoaroh. [Congregation laughing and clapping.] I chose Peter because it's shorter and simpler. [Peter laughing.] So coming to Living Hope was a happy moment for me. So I'm from a family of eight. I have five siblings. And I'm the most adventurous one amongst them all. So I came to Canada all by myself. I landed here on a Thursday, last year. And Thursday, Friday, Saturday, I didn't eat. On Sunday I said, "I must go to church." I typed on my phone, "church near me" and Google brought me to Living Hope. And I came to live in hope. So the very first day I entered, the service was over.

There was a couple, Cindy and Dennis. So they met me. They said, "Hi." They took me somewhere, bought me chicken and fries and I ate and I was like, "Oh, this is a good sign." [Congregation laughs.] So I said, "Wow, this is nice. Is this how nice Canadians are?" And since then, it's been a great journey. I've met wonderful families. This church has been a big support to me. And through this, I found a house that I stayed in. There's countless blessings. I can't count them. So I'm really grateful for this wonderful family. I'm not really a righteous person. Since I came, even if I don't want to go to church, once I wake up every Sunday morning, I will feel the urge to come to church. It's been a great journey so far. So that's my little story. So I want to share a Bible verse from **Psalm 37:3-6**, "**3** Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. **4** Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. **5** Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: **6** He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun."



**Peter cont'd:** So this verse means a lot to me because I put my trust in the Lord and the Lord never disappointed me. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Pastor John:** Charles is just going to share his verse a minute. He forgot to do that the first time he was up.

**Charles:** One of the verses that always gives me courage is **Jeremiah 32:27**. "27 "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" So whenever I come into times where it looks like it's impossible, I look at the scripture and I say, "God, what you cannot do, does not exist. Thank you. [Congregation claps.]

**Sarah Ducharme:** Hello, my name is Sarah. As my spiritual journey has just begun, I wanted to say thank you to the friends, my family and Pastor John for helping me and supporting me and teaching me. And because of that, the verse I have chosen is **2 Corinthians 5:17**. "17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

**Allister:** Hello, I'm Allister. I'm going to keep it short and sweet. My verse is **Romans 12:2**, "2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Thanks. [Congregation claps.]

**Sarah Golloher:** Hi, I'm Sara number two, I guess. Just kind of a brief journey to Living Hope. I recently returned to church in August. I grew up going almost every Sunday with my family, from the moment I was born. Life circumstances began to compound through those years and I gradually stopped going to church kind of in my late teens. I would make excuses to family and myself. Like, "I have to work. There's not really any choice." In reality, looking back, I was feeling angry with God and quite frankly forgotten. I spent roughly the next 20 years shutting that part of my life in a way. I still checked in with God from time to time. But mostly when I was feeling a bit more desperate. I thought I was doing a pretty good job but, like any poorly built house, cracks began to form.

About two years ago, those cracks got worse. And this past summer I kind of fell apart. Since then, I've been putting in a lot of work to find healing and acceptance with the amazing support of my husband, who was the one who actually encouraged me to try going back to church. I finally walked through these doors. There were a few things that kind of pointed me here and kind of reached in and found every last little bit of courage I had to do it.

It was a little daunting being alone by myself. My husband could see what was missing when I couldn't. I now realize that God never forgot me. He was walking with me in all those hard times. I'm a work in progress, but after accepting this new reality, I'm finally feeling awake again. I now feel God in all aspects of my life and know that he walks with me all the time. I'm so grateful to Living Hope for welcoming me with open arms and making me feel at home. I'm excited to be taking this next step and becoming a new member. Thank you very much.

**Sarah Golloher cont'd:** And with that, the verse I've chosen is from **2 Corinthians 1:3-5**, "3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. 5 For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ." Thank you, everyone. [Congregation claps.]

**Pastor John:** We read from Acts 2 earlier about the church. And **Acts 2:42-47** has a piece in there of the church where it says, "42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

This is the Word of the Lord. And we should say in response to whenever we hear the word of the Lord, "Thanks be to God." Just as Bola has invited us to say "hallelujah" when someone says praise the Lord. When we hear the word of the Lord, we should always be thankful. And the way God works among people. As you have heard the stories of the people who have come and shared in the places that God has been, there are some themes that show up which are constant and equivalent to what we see in Acts 2. In verse 42, it says they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship and to prayer. Those three things, right? They devoted themselves to the Word of God. The apostles teaching at that point was teaching the Word of God. They didn't have the privilege of having a Bible like we do. When they wanted to know what Jesus had done and what Jesus had said, they had to go to someone who had been with Jesus. And the apostles were those people who would share the Word of God. And it became important to them. They were not just a receiving church. They were not just a church of fellowship and prayer. They were a learning church. Every day it says, they continued to meet. Every day they wanted to learn more and more about who Christ was.

William Barclay in his commentary says, "Because the riches of Christ are inexhaustible we should ever be going forward. We should count it a wasted day when we do not learn something new and when we have not penetrated more deeply into the wisdom and the grace of God." Last week, we talked about being intentional this year. Right? What does it mean to be intentional so that every day we look and dig deeper into the wisdom and the grace of God?

This morning, each of the people who were up here shared scripture. Scripture which has meant something to them, which has encouraged them, which has helped them through when they had questions and when they were wondering what to do. They turned to Scripture because it is God's Word specifically to each of us.

And we can hear God's Word through Scripture. When we look at Scripture, we say, "How do we know what God is saying?" And sometimes we go, "Oh, there's just too much there." But this morning, we saw gems spoken out of Scripture, which become heart verses, which in times of difficulty or in times of praise become those verses in which we turn to and it gives us a vocabulary to speak back to God. And it gives us a vocabulary to hear God.

And if we're going to be intentional, what does that mean? How do we be intentional in the Word? and so I'm going to invite you to one way to do that. In the back, you will see a sheet of paper. You can either get a sheet of paper like this or you can get a complete package. And on here is a verse of a week. So each week, we would like to invite you as a church to focus on one scripture passage they will not necessarily be connected to the sermons but they will be up here every week. They will also be in the bulletin. You'll be reminded of them. And you're invited to focus on that verse for each week. And I would invite you to, each day, read that verse. Read it in the morning. Read it in the evening. And maybe we don't like memory work, but maybe if you do that all week, by the end of the week, you'll go, "You know what? I think I almost know it by heart."

It gives God a way to say, "I am with you." So when you're going through hard times and you think back and you go, "Oh yes, I remember **Isaiah 41:10**, "**10** Do not fear, for I am with you; ... I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." Or when you're wondering where to go, you look back to **Proverbs 3:5-6** and it says, "**5** Trust in the Lord and he will direct your paths." Scripture is this place - which you heard from 13 people this morning - saying how God is working in their lives and how those verses show up. And may we make 2024 a year in which we return to the Word. And maybe some of these verses, you're like, "Oh, I know that one. Great. Check that one off that week. I don't have to work that hard this week because I already know this one. That's awesome." But that means you've already got it within you. Remember it and keep it there.

So there's apostles' teaching, and then there's this aspect of fellowship. We heard this morning the importance of fellowship. The importance of being together on Sunday morning. The importance of gathering together in Connect groups. And for those of us who are in a place of fear thinking, "Will I be accepted there?" We are reminded this morning of how God's people live in fellowship and how they extend hospitality. And now that you have joined this group, we invite each of you, whether you've been going to Living Hope since its beginning over 30 years ago, or whether you've been coming here for three months, we invite you each of you to be a part of that extending hospitality to each other and to anyone who comes.

And the third part is an aspect of prayer. May our prayer be that God continues to mold us and that God continues to open the doors of him bringing people. Back in the day. Like, way back in the day. Like, back in the day of Jesus, a pious Jew would pray three things. "Dear Lord, thank You that I'm not a Gentile. Thank you that I am not a slave. And thank you that I am not a woman." And that was the leadership at that point. Paul had something to say about that in Galatians.

Paul says in **Galatians 3:26-29**, "**26** So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, **27** for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **28** There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

And so we, as a church, believe that we are all children of God. And it doesn't matter where we come from. And it doesn't matter whether we've had a colorful past or whether we've had a past as David said, that wasn't so colorful. We are all part of that growing family of God. And God calls each of us to be a part of that family. And so this morning, we were blessed to hear from people. But there is another piece, which needs to be stated. In **Acts 2:47**. It says, "**47**... praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." And I think this is the challenge that comes out of this. When all people see you, do they see someone who is praising God, and a joyous Christian? Or do they see a gloomy Christian?

Today, we heard about the joy that comes from living with God. It's not a duty. It's simply an invitation to be in a relationship. The second Sarah (Golloher) who spoke, talked about being awakened again. There is life that is forming and joy that is coming when you spend it with Jesus. And so Jesus invites us today to say, "Let me spend it with you each and every day. So that each and every day, I may grow deeper in my knowledge of you, God, and your grace." And in that place, we live.

So they were in the Word (in Acts 2), they were in fellowship and they were in prayer. And prayer is not just individual. But prayer is done through community. And there are opportunities at church here as well in which we invite you to join other believers in prayer. That we may, as a group, raise our prayers to God. And when you hear the stories, you realize that it is prayer which has sustained these people through all of these tragedies. And it is prayer which helps us understand the grace of God and who we are. And so at this time, I would like to invite Arlene up to lead us in a time of prayer to bring us before God and to say, "Lord, here we are, your people."

**Arlene (Hough):** Let's pray. God, you're so good. You're so good to us. Your love is so amazing. Lord, we thank you for the start of a new year. As we reflect on 2023 through all the ups and downs, we know that you have always been with us, and we praise You for Your love and faithfulness to us through it all. Thank you for the stories and testimonies that we were blessed by throughout the service. You have and are working in each individual's life and we praise you for that.

Thank you for bringing them here to Peterborough and to Living Hope so we can bless them and they can continue to bless us. We join with them in community, with their joys and sorrows, their ups and downs. May you continue to drive close to each one of them. Thank you for giving them the courage to share their stories and lives with us. It was truly a blessed morning to share together. Thank you for our church, Living Hope, and everyone who has made this their home.

We thank you for all the volunteers who put in their time and energy to help everything run smoothly throughout the week. We thank you for our council, for the admin elders, the pastoral care elders and the deacons. Please bless them as they meet regularly to make decisions and to support the people of our church and community. We praise you, God for our staff, for Pastor John, Mike, Emmy, Linda and Christa. Thank you for their love for our church and for their skills and passion that they have. Please bless and protect them and their families. We thank you, Lord, for a successful hip and shoulder surgery for Emmy's mom.

We pray for quick healing, strength, and patience for Rebecca during her recovery. We pray for Pat (Pel) as she prepares for her second cataract surgery. Please bless her with good health and peace while she waits. We continue to pray for James' dad as he adjusts to living in his new residence. Please bless Jane and Mark (Mertick) as well as they have been supporting him through this process. We also pray for Kaley, Sarah, Dan, John and Allan as they all are going through cancer treatments right now. Please heal their bodies. We also pray for their families as they care for and support them through this difficult journey. We pray for our students who are returning to school tomorrow after the Christmas break. We pray for clear minds and good health.

We pray for the campus ministry at Trent University and Micah House. Being a Christian student can be difficult as they are being taught a secular worldview. We pray for courage and wisdom to continue to stay strong in their faith while also displaying Christ's love to others. We especially pray for the five young women living at Micah House for strong relationships with each other and with you, God. Please protect them from any negativity and we ask you to speak to them through the Holy Spirit. Thank You that we can freely meet here, and through it, to see to worship for you and witness to others. Let us never take that opportunity for granted. God, You're so good. You're so good to us. Your love is so amazing. Amen.

**Pastor John:** We believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. We believe in the Holy Spirit, and that Triune God goes with us each day and He gives us His Word. And so I remind you, if you would like a copy of the Scripture challenge, you can pick up a sheet or you can pick up the package with all the verses. May this be a year in which we look at, "How do we continue to use each day to grow deeper in the wisdom and the grace of God?" And that great God invites you to receive his blessing.

I invite you to extend your hands and to receive from God who says to you this, "In your journeys to and fro, may God direct you. In your happiness and pleasure, may God bless you. In care and anxiety or trouble, may God sustain you. In peril and in danger, may God protect you." May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and the God, our Father, who loved us by His grace, give us eternal encouragement and good hope. May he encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word, the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now, and forevermore. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*