



SAMUEL

Enduring Beliefs
of the
Christian Faith

THE SILENT MOMENT

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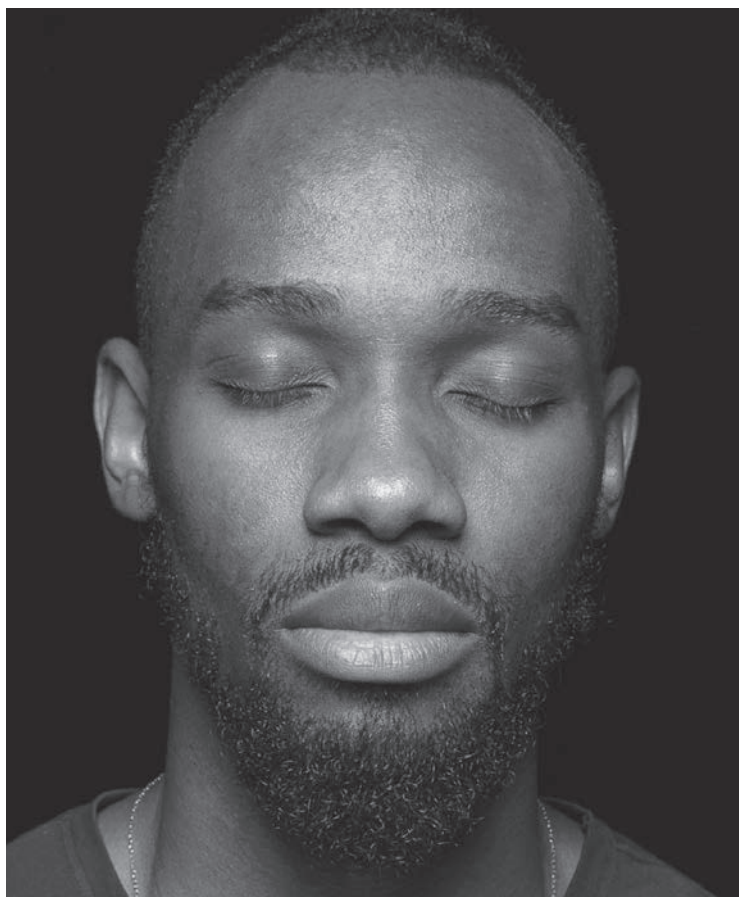
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The Silent Moment

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

—— Hebrews 11:1



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Enduring Beliefs of the Christian Faith

For those of us who've grown up in church, the Scriptures in this unit of devotions may feel like a walk down memory lane. The title alone may bring to mind stained-glass windows, beloved old hymns, and flannelgraph Bible characters. The Exodus, the parable of the lost son, Peter's confession, the Great Commission—some of the Bible's most precious, empowering, life-giving words are featured in these passages.

Yet, the truths of these Scriptures are just as marvelous and meaningful to those who are hearing them for the very first time, perhaps even more so! God's words fill our hearts with a sense of hope, of purpose, of promise from the first time we read them until the last—and they will forever do so. In the midst of an ever-changing world, they are constant and sure . . . but not because of us.

The foundations of our Christian faith endure because of who breathes life into them, who sustains them, who proves them over and over and over. They have stood the test of time, and they will continue to do so, because they are rooted in the One who is timeless—the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, He who never changes.

We need not see Him to know Him. We need not understand Him to trust Him. We need not fathom Him to follow Him. As Christ-followers, our confidence, assurance, and faith rest solely, securely, and safely in our holy God. Forever and ever. Amen.

Blessings and peace,

Karen

Approach Each Day with a Heavenly Perspective

Using these devotions, you'll read the recommended text of the Bible, consider how its message applies to your life, then use the brief prayer to begin a conversation with God.

If you follow the ISSL Series, you'll likely notice that these devotions align with the ISSL Home Daily Bible Readings. Every day you pick up this devotional, countless people around the world are reading and studying the same verses as you. Opening the Bible each day invites us to a deeper fellowship with Christ as we apply God's Word to our lives.

Effective Management

But they need not account for the money entrusted to them, because they are honest in their dealings. (2 Kings 22:7)

Scripture: 2 Kings 22:1–10

Song: “He Leadeth Me”

I have worked in organizations of various sizes—a mid-sized church, a small school, a large university, and a multinational organization. They all shared two characteristics that are crucial to accomplishing your mission effectively. First, you need staff with the character and competence to do their jobs. Second, you need to trust that staff to do what they know how to do without micromanaging. Giving people the freedom to do their jobs without breathing down their necks is the most effective way to accomplish your mission.

Josiah was a great king. Unlike many of his predecessors, Josiah’s heart was set on doing what God desired. He took bold steps to rid the country of idolatry, and he installed trustworthy, God-honoring managers to oversee important projects such as repairing the temple complex. One byproduct of entrusting godly people to these tasks was the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple.

It’s tempting to take shortcuts to achieve our goals. But God calls us to be faithful in every aspect of our work, including our interactions with others. It might take time for our faithfulness to pay off fully, but we can take comfort in knowing that God is in charge of the timing.

Father, may I be trustworthy in all the work You give me to do. And may I trust You to take care of the rest. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

God's Unabridged Word

“Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD’s anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book.” (2 Kings 22:13)

Scripture: 2 Kings 22:11–20

Song: “Song of Repentance”

Freedom of the press is a bedrock of life in the United States. As established in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, freedom of the press provides checks and balances on the information available to citizens. Our world has witnessed many examples of the devastating effects produced by authoritarian regimes who strictly control the messages their people are and are not permitted to hear, see, and access.

King Josiah heard troubling news when his secretary, Shaphan, read from the newly discovered Book of the Law. Shaphan’s reading revealed that God was angry with His people because of their disobedience. Rather than hide this news, Josiah ordered the high priest and his attendants to inquire of the Lord and of Huldah, the prophet, about these words. Even though God’s Word contained a message so disturbing that Josiah tore his robes, the king chose to bring this news into the light.

Sometimes God’s words are troubling. Scripture has much to say about sin and its consequences. However, God also has much to say about repentance and grace. Like Josiah, we can face difficult teaching with a spirit of humility and willingness to change.

Father, I confess my sins and acknowledge my shortcomings. Thank You for Your everlasting grace and mercy toward me through Christ. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Clear Vision

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. (Luke 24:30–31)

Scripture: Luke 24:25–32

Song: “Open My Eyes, That I May See”

One afternoon, I visited some friends who had purchased a new 85" television. Standing about 15 feet away from the screen, I removed my glasses and tried to read the words in an advertisement. Unfortunately, I could not make out a single word, even on that giant TV. Like nearly 1.7 million adults in the United States, I need corrective lenses to see clearly.

This passage in Luke tells of two men and their powerful encounter with the risen Christ as they travel to a village near Jerusalem. Downhearted and spiritually blind because of the news about Jesus' crucifixion, they are unable to see that the person walking beside them is Jesus Himself! After reprimanding them for not understanding what the prophets had written about Him, Jesus instructs them in the Scriptures and compassionately reveals His identity while breaking bread with them. This revelation fills their hearts with joy, and they enthusiastically set out to tell others that Jesus has risen.

Jesus gives us many opportunities to know Him. He reveals Himself in Scripture, through others, in church gatherings, and through nature. It is our responsibility to open our eyes so we can see Him in all the ways He shows Himself to us.

Father, thank You for raising Jesus to life. Help me see clearly how to live as His disciple. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Listen to the Law

He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. (Nehemiah 8:3)

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1–8

Song: “Thy Word”

I once served on a jury for a lengthy trial. Before our deliberations, the judge read over 50 pages of the law to us. All jurors’ eyes and ears were attuned to the judge as he read the words that would guide our decision of innocence or guilt. No one nodded off or looked away in boredom. The high stakes we were facing demanded that we absorb every last word.

Ezra read God’s Word to the people of Judah as they embarked on a new era in their history. The crowd assembled before him knew what it was like to be exiled from their homeland because of their nation’s unfaithfulness to God. Ezra and the Levites instructed the people in the Law to ensure that everyone thoroughly understood God’s Word.

The people of Judah who assembled before Ezra serve as a model for us today. From daybreak until noon, everyone listened attentively to Ezra as he read God’s Word. They knew that their future well-being depended on it. Attending to God’s Word is as vital to our future as it was to the men and women in Ezra’s day.

Father, may I read, study, and apply the words You have given in Scripture with even greater seriousness than jurors who must understand the law used to render a verdict in court. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Expert Testimony

And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. (John 5:37–38)

Scripture: John 5:37–47

Song: “Holy Spirit, Truth Divine”

Expert testimony is a foundational element of many court cases. I was a juror in a trial that involved several expert witnesses. We heard from pathologists at prestigious hospitals, forensic scientists who have worked with some of the most famous celebrities and businesspeople in the country, and a policy-maker who helped author the rules for medical billing. Some decisions we rendered had to be based on the testimony of these expert men and women.

In John 5, Jesus wants His audience to understand that the Scriptures they revere point to Him. But it's not just the Scriptures that testify about Him. The Father Himself declares that Jesus is the one the people have been waiting for. Unfortunately, these experts in the law misidentify the central figure to whom Scripture points in God's plan of salvation.

No person has ever produced a better reference letter than Jesus. The entirety of Scripture, God's very Word to humanity, testifies that He is the Messiah, sent by God so that we might have life in His name. May we listen carefully as Christ guides us into relationship with God and one another.

Father, thank You for sending Jesus to show me the way to eternal life. May I hear and obey His words. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Commissioning Ceremony

“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:18)

Scripture: John 17:14–19

Song: “Lord, You Give the Great Commission”

Taking part in a ceremony or special time of blessing is inspiring when you are starting a new assignment. I remember how meaningful it was to me to be prayed over by my church and other Christians before moving to Thailand as a missionary. Some institutions, such as the U.S. military and police academies, have reverent commissioning ceremonies to signify that a person is ready to be sent out into new and potentially dangerous work.

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus spends time praying for His followers. He recognizes that His disciples are now so transformed that their lives are radically different from people of the world. However, His prayer is not one of retreat. It is a prayer of strength that these disciples will be faithful to their commission to bring good news to the world, just as He has been faithful in carrying out the assignment His Father gave Him.

Jesus’ commission to these disciples applies to us as well. While our everyday lives certainly look different from theirs, the core message has not changed. We are to offer to others the good news of Christ—not just in words, but by living as people who are set apart for a radical, holy purpose.

Father, help me live a holy life and protect me from evil as I share the gospel with those around me. Give me courage to carry out Your commission. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Sweet Akha Honey

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:10)

Scripture: Psalm 19:7–13

Song: “More Precious Than Gold”

The Akha people are an ethnic group who live in the hills of various Southeast Asian countries. There are numerous Akha villages in northern Thailand, where I used to work. Many Akha people are adept at farming produce that grows in the forests. One of the most delightful treats I received from an Akha friend was natural honey that had been collected directly from a hive. The naturally sweet flavor was magnificent compared to the highly processed honey I was accustomed to eating.

The psalmist compares God’s law to items of exquisite value in his culture—honey and gold. In fact, the psalmist says that God’s words to mankind are more precious than gold and sweeter than honey straight from the honeycomb. The Lord’s statutes, decrees, and commands refresh our souls, not the transitory things of the world.

Today’s passage invites us into a relationship with God’s Word. Reading Scripture is not an act of drudgery. Instead, it is an opportunity to listen to God as He teaches us about Himself, His love for us, and how we can best live in the world He created and lovingly sustains.

Father, thank You for giving us the Bible. I pray that my study of Scripture will allow me to know You more fully as I learn how to live in a way that reflects Jesus’ love. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

His Compassions

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. (Isaiah 49:13)

Scripture: Isaiah 49:13–17

Song: “Desert Song”

My husband, infant daughter, and I lived on the desert mesa of northern New Mexico, miles from neighbors. One day as I looked across the sagebrush plateau, I gaped at a massive thunderhead cloud roiling up, until the mountains below it formed its toes. The thunderhead paused, and I turned to see what it was facing. A second thunderhead unfurled in response, ready to step over its mighty mountain range. The expectant earth held its breath, waiting for their battle to unleash much-needed water.

Nature speaks the merciful glories of God! Sometimes our afflictions can grind us down (like the barren grime of the mesa) or frame our lives (like the mountains I looked upon every day) until misery is all we notice. In today’s passage we see the contrast between our thinking and God’s.

As we focus on our own trauma, we imagine God has forgotten about us. God declares boldly that He never, ever forgets any of us—we are engraved upon His hands. His compassions never fail. We can count on it. The heavens and earth rejoice in that truth, and we can too.

Father, open my eyes to see Your glory, Your comfort, and Your renewing work in my life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

True Worshipers

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”
(John 4:23)

Scripture: John 4:20–24

Song: “Revelation Song”

Before I became Christian, I had been the student of a Sikh guru who instructed me to worship God through certain paths of righteousness: initiation under a “Master,” mandatory vegetarianism, and reincarnated life terminated by meditation. One day I was confronted with God’s words: there is only one Master, Jesus Christ (Matthew 23:8); food does not commend us to God (1 Corinthians 8:8); and there is only one life and death (Hebrews 9:27). God’s truth brought me to Christ, whose Spirit opened the way for true worship.

Most Westerners don’t follow Sikh gurus. However, our faith may be centered in religious practices, good deeds, or family connections. The woman at the well in Sychar believed that her people’s heritage gave them favor with God to worship Him. Jesus met her right there in her false spiritual assurance to introduce her to Himself, God’s own Messiah (Savior). Her whole city discovered that salvation—true favor to enter God’s presence in worship—is found only in Christ.

Just as Jesus invited that woman to put her confidence in a relationship with God through the Messiah, so He calls each of us to become true worshipers who joyously enter the presence of God through Him, in Spirit and in truth. That’s why He was born.

Father, empower me to worship You in the Spirit and in truth. In Jesus’ name I pray.
Amen.

Not Hidden

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”? (Isaiah 40:27)

Scripture: Isaiah 40:27–31

Song: “On Eagle’s Wings”

When Corrie Ten Boom was shoved into a compact freight car with her sister Betsy and some 80 women, she knew that the seven months they’d already spent in a Dutch prison and concentration camp held nothing compared to what was waiting for them in Germany. How could it be, when liberation was marching toward Holland, that they would be buried alive in enemy territory instead of delivered by the Allies? Those women despaired, hidden from any possible rescue.

Like the Israelites in Isaiah’s message, many of the captives thought God was blind to their brokenness, their lives a lost cause. The Lord responded by sending Corrie with a secret Bible to tell these women the truth of God’s devotion to them. Betsy’s faith and vision blossomed, even as she was dying. Isaiah similarly redirected the focus of his people to who God really is and to what God does for His chosen ones. That’s where we come upon the immortal lines of verse 31, that those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. In fact, they will soar.

Our challenge is to wait upon the Lord, isn’t it? As we approach Christmas, let’s lean into His inexhaustible strength and grace. As we quietly meditate on His unsearchable understanding, may we mount up with wings like eagles.

Father, thank You that You are my source of strength, hope, and life. In Your light, I see light. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Unexpected

For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
(Isaiah 64:3)

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1–8

Song: “Hosanna”

One summer while driving a back road to Portland, Oregon, the kids and I were delighted when it opened into a beautiful rift valley town. I called out loud to God, “Someday I’d like to live here!” Then I promptly forgot about it. Well, we have a God who does not forget. Thirteen years later, teaching in Bend, I purchased my first home in a nearby town. Imagine my surprise when the Lord pointed out that this was the town I had asked for.

In Isaiah 64, the writer reflects how impossibly sinful we are, yet how God is so merciful. One of our sins is taking God for granted. Isaiah pens, “when you did awesome things which we did not expect,” and he recalls the days of Moses and Joshua, “when you came down, [and] the mountains trembled before you.”

However, we know of even more astonishing things—like God coming down to become human, as a baby boy born to a teenaged, unwed mother in an occupied land. It’s astonishing to think of the all-powerful Divine submitting Himself to humanity. We serve a wonderful God who wants to enter into close personal relationship with us, doing awesome things we don’t expect. Let’s not ignore Him!

Father, thank You for sending Your Son, unexpectedly, into the hard places of human life to meet us where we are. Help me to embrace Your presence in rich appreciation. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

God of Wonders

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. (Psalm 103:11)

Scripture: Psalm 103:1–5, 10–14

Song: “God of Wonders”

When we measure our affection, we tend to open our arms wide—about 6 feet—as if to suggest a huge hug. Shepherd-poet-king David often contemplated God’s wealth of love as reaching to the heavens. How high are the heavens above the earth? If you have flown in an airplane, the atmospheric “heaven” enveloping our earth is imaginable. Still, earth’s atmosphere extends about 6,000 miles outward! And if one is speaking of the great expanse of universe beyond that, even our modern science has yet to measure that heaven. That’s a lot of love!

David’s poetry stirs the minds of songwriters and scientists alike, and his words and thoughts must have profoundly influenced his own son, Solomon—a poet, naturalist, and philosopher (according to 1 Kings 4) who also pondered God’s love. For three thousand years, people have cherished the psalms, filled with wonder at the immensity of God’s passion for mankind.

And soon we will celebrate another distance-defying love: Christ coming down from His heavenly position of divine power to humbly dwell with us on earth. This season is cause for great pause and great delight.

Father, help me show reverence to You, for You redeem my life and crown me with love and compassion. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Don't Be Deceived

But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. (James 1:14)

Scripture: James 1:13–18

Song: “In the Secret (I Want to Know You)”

So many things tempt me. Sometimes it's escapist temptation—imagination-packed hours spent lost in books or video fantasy. Other times it's self-accusatory thoughts, driving me to quit, to languish, to overeat or not eat, to focus on complaints rather than gratitude. Sometimes I get snared by the lust of the eyes, drawing me to shop, to covet what I don't need, to start comparing and finding fault, and for many, to commit sexual sin. James warns us that none of these attractions come from God.

Bottom line? James declares, “Don't be deceived.” It's all a trick of Satan so we won't see the truth that “every good and perfect gift . . . [comes] down from the Father . . . , who does not change like shifting shadows” (v. 17). Those other things don't satisfy, don't last, and only end in misery. God's gifts bear eternal fruit that remains. What a difference!

Christmastime stirs up many temptations to shop, to compare, to long for an imaginary or past experience. Yet it also speaks to a wondrous truth: “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (v. 18). As we walk with Christ in each new day, may we press onward through His purposes, building eternal fellowship.

Father, focus my mind and attention that I might celebrate Your good gifts this season and not be hindered by empty temptations. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Do Not Worry

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33)

Scripture: Matthew 6:24–34

Song: “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God”

In the Ukraine, bombing wrought desolations that threatened people’s very existence. Christian organizations worked together creatively to provide stoves that used available fuels to cook meals and heat whatever shelter people had found. Bags of medical supplies, blankets, food, water, and other necessities were flown in and distributed, and recipients wept with relief. Tent cities were raised, along with temporary hospitals. Friends of mine in England and Poland took in mothers and children who waited and prayed for their soldier father-husbands back home.

God is the Lord of provision. Jesus told us that we are not to focus on money, nor on our material wants or needs. I am not in a war-torn country, yet it is easy for my gifted hours to be spent in worry! Inflation, medical demands, friends in crisis—these things can weigh on me. Yet, all I have to do is look, and I see how God engages His people to care for one another.

As Jesus points out, worry actually won’t fix anything; it only generates fear and distrust. The reality is that we are in good hands with our heavenly Father. When we listen to Him and do our part, His good purposes will be fulfilled.

Father, help me to seek first Your kingdom and Your righteousness, knowing that all the needs of this world are in Your hands. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

The Unexpected

The LORD says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” (Psalm 110:1)

Scripture: Psalm 110

Song: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”

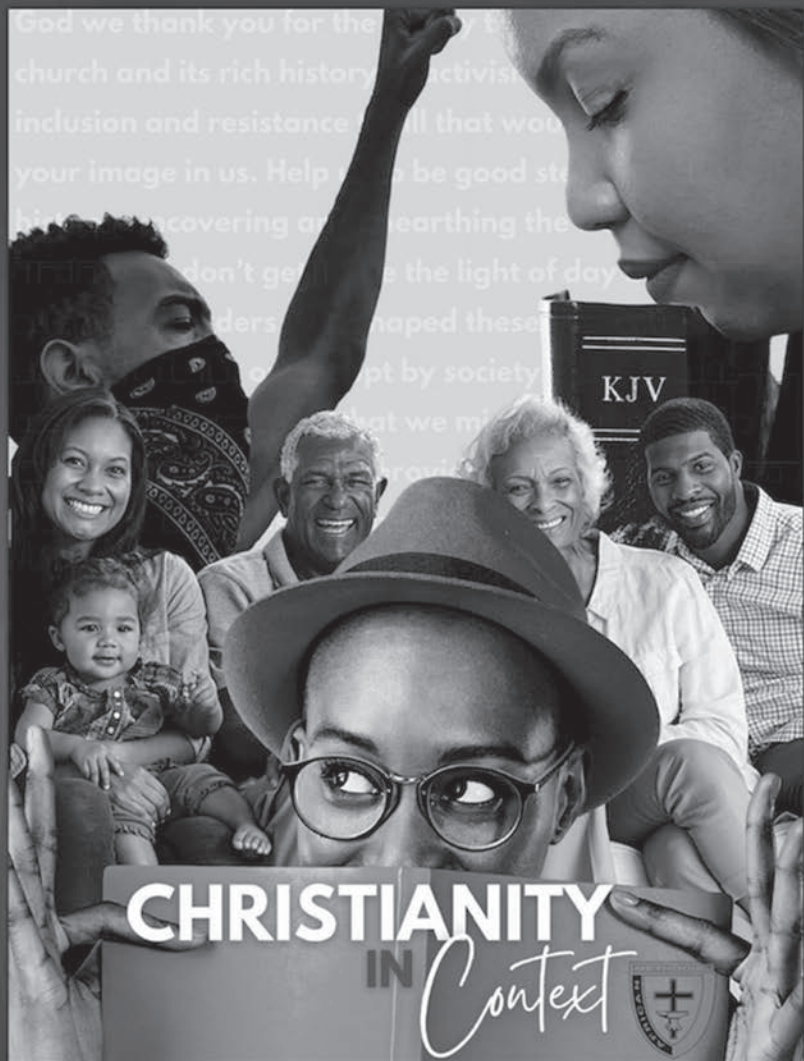
We had been trying for several years to get pregnant, and when we finally did, I knew beyond doubt that we were having a boy. I was so sure, in fact, that I convinced my husband we didn't even need to choose a girl's name. In the delivery room when the doctor said, “It's a girl!,” I was speechless and even a little disappointed. Then the doctor laid my daughter on my chest, and as I stared into her dark brown eyes, every ounce of doubt washed away.

Ancient Israel expected a warrior king because, for generations, one had been prophesized. A military ruler would come to set the Jews free from their oppressors. But instead of a warrior, the world received a Prince of Peace, one who came to bring victory over sin and to rule hearts and lives. He came not to conquer His enemies but to turn them into His children.

Many were disappointed by this “King of the Jews,” but not those who had eyes to truly see and ears to truly hear. The ones who could set aside their expectations and receive Jesus for who He truly is were overcome with love and eternal salvation.

Father, help me to set aside my expectations this Advent season and welcome Your Son. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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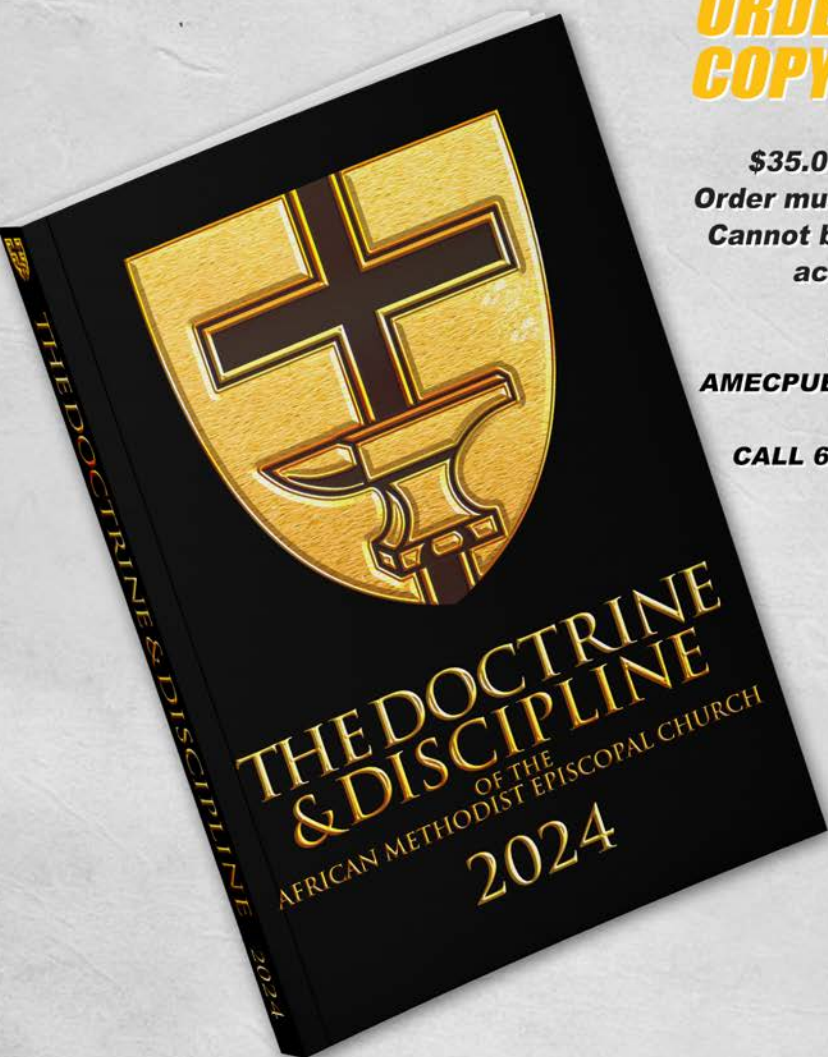
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