

OUR *Greatest* GIFT

*A*  
**WONDERFUL**  
*Life* **LIFE** *Life*  
*in Christ*



MICHAEL HOY



For years at Christmastime many have enjoyed the classic Frank Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Based on the 1943 short story "The Greatest Gift," this film warms our hearts with the inspiring lesson that life is precious. These reflections pair God's Word with powerful scenes from the life and times of the film's central character, George Bailey.

Because we trust in Jesus the Christ as the life of the world, we come to see his birth, life, death and resurrection as our Greatest Gift. The threat of death is never to be the last word for us. Christ comes to spend his life with us and for us all. Redeemed in his mercy, we may then spend our own lives in love for one another and for our neighbors far and wide.

We hear the message of the angels who proclaimed the birth of this Greatest Gift in the Bethlehem skies: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" We really have a wonderful life in Christ!





## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

ISAIAH 40:1

When people are in dire straits, the first word they want to hear is comfort. They don't want to hear about what they could have done, or what they should have done or all the wrongs they have done. They need a word of comfort. That is why Isaiah conveys this message first and foremost to the people of God who had been held captive in exile for so long. To be sure, Isaiah was well aware that the people had suffered on account of the depths of their sinful wrongs. But in this time, in this moment, the prophet turns a page toward a promising word—a word of comfort. And God, who sees all and hears all, and certainly knows us all better than we know ourselves, seeks to bring such comfort and promise to his people.

The film *It's a Wonderful Life* begins with prayers on behalf of George Bailey. The last time these prayerful supporters saw him, we discover later, George was a man full of rage and blame toward his family, yelling and screaming like a mad man to the point that even he recognized some sorrow for his actions. But his family knows this behavior is very out of character for George. In this moment, they recognize he is a man in deep trouble, beside himself as to what to do. So they pray for him, "Please, God..." They pray for his comfort, solace and return. And God, who sees and hears all and certainly knows us better than we know ourselves, seeks to bring comfort and promise. This is where the Greatest Gift begins.

**Please God, comfort us in the depths of our weakness, worry and trouble. Give us the gift of life. Amen.**



## MONDAY, FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*Afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.”*

**MATTHEW 14:30**

**P**eter, when he sees his Lord walking on water, seeks to test the elements of the stormy sea. At first his faith is fixed on Jesus, and no obstacle is too big to impede him. But when the wind and waves remind Peter of his vulnerability, he begins to sink and cries for the Lord to save him. Even though Peter was weak in faith, Jesus reaches out and rescues him. The Psalmist, facing the bleak truth of his sinfulness—in which he felt he was drowning—cried out to God: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” (Psalm 130:1-2). God hears us in our crisis and God is faithful, even when we are not.

George’s brother, Harry, boasts, “I’m not scared!” as he slides down a snowy slope onto an icy lake. But when he passes the point of danger, and even before he falls through the ice, he begins to cry for help. George jumps in the icy waters to save him, pushing his brother out to safety. But there is a price. George loses the hearing in his left ear. Yet even with only one functional ear, he would still hear the cries of many others. Jesus risks so much more, the price of saving us all from our sins, and he is ever attentive to our cry.

**Lord, come to us and save! Do not let us drown  
in the depths when crises arise and our faith is weak.  
Hear us when we cry! Amen.**



## TUESDAY, FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*

ISAIAH 53:4

**T**he Christ Child does not come into a world that is pure and undefiled. On the contrary, the world has been deeply infected—with infirmity, disease, sin, sorrow and death. All of us have come to experience the pain of infirmity and disease. Yet none of us could do what this child has done for us. This child, in his life and death, bears the burden of *our* infirmities and *our* diseases. If we truly understand this, the prophet says, we would “hide our faces” to even look upon him, for he bears the truth of ourselves in his death (Isaiah 53:3). But for our sake, and the sake of the whole world, he makes these infirmities and diseases his own, so we may share in his mercy and love.

On the counter of Mr. Gower’s pharmacy lies a telegram bearing tragic news: Mr. Gower’s son, Robert, has died. Robert was a casualty of an influenza, as were so many others who suffered this most tragic pandemic. Mr. Gower, distraught and drinking on the job, mistakenly puts poison in a prescription. George Bailey sees it all, and even at his young age recognizes Mr. Gower’s deep pain. George comes to his aid by not delivering the prescription as Mr. Gower ordered. Though at first deeply angered and even abusive toward George, Mr. Gower comes to recognize the truth of his mistake. Humbled, he falls to his knees and embraces the young George Bailey. Through his tears, Mr. Gower expresses his deep gratitude. George never speaks of the incident, as if it were a confession buried in the depths of promising absolution. The life of a child can rescue the lives of others.

**Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus  
to bear the pain of all our infirmities and diseases,  
and making us whole. Amen.**



## WEDNESDAY, FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham  
and to his offspring forever. LUKE 1:55*

**M**ary sings with hope and joy about the child she bears. Even though she is an unmarried, pregnant young teenager without any meaningful social status, she claims that this child is the fulfillment of the promise Abraham trusted long ago. This child will lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things, while those who have oppressed the powerless will be humbled by the power of God's promise of peace and mercy. Such bold claims are the acts of faith.

Another teenager named Mary is singing and dancing "by the light of the moon." With her lifelong beloved, George Bailey, by her side, her heart is light with hope and joy. She makes a promising wish as she throws a stone at the old Granville house, keeping it secret until the day of its fulfillment. She hopes this old decaying house will become a beautiful home for her and George and their family. She carries that faith even in the midst of the many obstacles they will face in their life together. Our faith is rooted in a promise: that the child who comes for us will lead us on the path of hope. Faith gives us the power to sing even when the world and all its powers seek to silence us in despair. Faith gives us the power to bear love for all who have been downtrodden and afflicted. And faith gives birth to the joy of Christ's kingdom that cannot be taken away.

**Lord, give birth to your promise in our lives. Fill us with such trust in you that our hearts overflow in song! Amen.**



## THURSDAY, FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

*For God so loved the world,  
that he gave his only Son.* JOHN 3:16

**A**t the heart of the gospel is the message that God so dearly loves us all. God’s plan for the world was not carried out from a distance, but among us and with us. God sent his Son as the greatest gift of love. He sent him to live in a particular time and place, and yet to share in all times and all places. God sent his Son to be the Bread of Life and the Living Water for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. God sent his Son to grant blessing to those who had no hope, to raise up those carrying the heavy burden of their sins and those trodden underfoot by the powerful.

Peter Bailey ran the Building and Loan of Bedford Falls for many years. He cared for the poorer people of his community, taking risks in granting them loans so they could have a meaningful life and a place to call home. Mr. Potter, the town’s wealthiest citizen, only sees Peter Bailey as a “starry-eyed dreamer” seeking to do the impossible, showing unwarranted compassion for those whom Potter calls the “discontented lazy rabble.” Peter’s son, George, really wants to shake off the dust of his hometown and do something “important” in life, yet he also shares his father’s values. When his father dies, George is confronted with the ultimate prospect: either leave town once and for all or embrace his father’s world. George chooses the latter. It is the beginning of his vocation. The poor are his friends. The “rabble” are human beings needing love. For their sake, it is important that he stay with them in Bedford Falls. That choice will make all the difference in the world.

**Lord, as you sent your Son to be our Greatest Gift,  
so send us to gift all with love in our time and place,  
for the sake of your whole world. Amen.**

These devotions for Advent by Michael Hoy are based around the scenes and themes of the beloved Christmastime film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Based on the 1943 short story "The Greatest Gift," the film has warmed the heart with the inspiring lesson that life is precious. Each of the reflections in this booklet centers around the life and times of the movie's central character, George Bailey, but with a twist, placing the events in the context of our faith in Christ, who truly gives us a wonderful life through his birth among us.



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