

Foreword by Gregory Boyle

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

TALES OF HOPE &
SECOND CHANCES

JUSTIN COLEMAN



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Chapter 1

THE HOPE OF NEW LIFE

I offer my life to you, LORD.

My God, I trust you.

Please don't let me be put to shame!

Don't let my enemies rejoice over me!

For that matter,

don't let anyone who hopes in you

be put to shame;

instead, let those who are treacherous without

excuse be put to shame.

Make your ways known to me, LORD;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—

because you are the God who saves me.

I put my hope in you all day long.

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*LORD, remember your compassion and faithful love—
they are forever!*

*But don't remember the sins of my youth or my
wrongdoing.*

*Remember me only according to your faithful love
for the sake of your goodness, LORD.*

*The LORD is good and does the right thing;
he teaches sinners which way they should go.*

*God guides the weak to justice,
teaching them his way.*

*All the LORD's paths are loving and faithful
for those who keep his covenant and laws.*

Psalm 25:1-10

JENNIFER: THE HOPE OF HOME

It was the beginning of December, and Jennifer was incarcerated. Separated from her two small children, she spent Christmas facing the possibility of up to thirty-eight years in prison. After agreeing to a plea deal and arranging to live with her mother, Jennifer began working at Homeboy Industries. At first, everything was great; she and her children were making a new life together. But then her mother kicked the entire family out of the house. After such a promising start, Jennifer and her two children were homeless, and she felt like giving up and returning to her past life, and to the drugs and alcohol that had been part of it.

But Homeboy Industries came to Jennifer's assistance, helping her to find a transitional housing program. Able now to pay her rent, Jennifer has started college, and was also able to spend this past Christmas with her children. Not only have the community

THE HOPE OF NEW LIFE

and support—her new home at Homeboy—given Jennifer this second chance at life, but also she says the love that she finds in and from her new, second family “actually gives me a lot of hope.”

THE HOPE OF CHRIST

Do you know what song was the first to be played on the radio? On the evening of December 24, 1906, Reginald Fessenden, a Canadian-born inventor who had once worked for Thomas Edison, was experimenting with what was known as “wireless telegraphy,” or radio. He read from Luke 2, played with some vinyl records, and then picked up his violin and started to play a hymn, “O Holy Night.”

It begins this way (emphasis added):

O holy night! the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till he appeared and **the soul felt its worth.**

and continues:

A thrill of hope—the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!

I know what some of you are saying to yourselves. “That’s a Christmas song. Why is he talking about a Christmas song at the beginning of a book about Advent? Advent is a time where we prepare for Christ’s birth. We need to keep from mentioning Christmas until, well, Christmas. No spoilers!”

I must tell you that I’ve never had someone say to me on Christmas Eve, “Wait! What? This is about the birth of Jesus?!”

I did *not* see that one coming.” Knowing what’s coming provides a good reminder that we need to hold a more expansive view of the season. We move into Advent reminding ourselves of what God has done and is doing in the lives of God’s children and God’s world. Advent and Christmastide—and the entire liturgical year, for that matter—aren’t just points we follow, one to the next, on a straight line. The liturgical cycle is precisely that: a cycle, where events and people and situations flow back into one another in an ever-changing web of relationships.

The hymn captures the feeling of this ever-renewed build toward the excitement of Christmas: “A thrill of hope.” I love that phrase. We talk about many feelings related to hope, but I don’t often hear people speak of the thrill of it.

That might be due to the ways many of us experience the concept of hope today, when we “hope” for things that are desired, but not real or attainable. We speak of hope as if we should not hold our breath believing that for which we hope will come true. We say things like, “Don’t get your hopes up” and, “Don’t reach too high because you might fall.” This sort of hope is ungrounded because it never expects to enter into reality. Hope defined this way is nothing more than a fanciful wish or dream.

But this is not how Scripture talks about hope. In Scripture, hope is something that is both desired and possible. In fact, it is not only possible, it is expected. For hope to move beyond a wish or dream, it has to become grounded in some deep understanding and belief about our world and how it works, both physically and spiritually. And when we understand the cycles our liturgy helps make present, that grounded hope contains an excitement, the thrill of knowing that immense good is on the horizon but that

we may have only an inkling about the forms that hope will take. When we are grounded in possibilities, our hope is thrilled by the suspense of waiting for the surprising forms in which it will be fulfilled.

**Hope is something that is both
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My hope is grounded in new life. That is to say, my hope is grounded in a theology of creation and new creation. These images bookend the Christian Bible. Scripture begins with creation—God making everything and calling it good. What follows is a sometimes-messy middle portion of Scripture where humanity struggles to return to the goodness we once experienced in the Garden of Eden, not knowing the shapes that goodness will take. In time, we see the advent of Christ and the possibility of becoming a new creation. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” Finally, in the book of Revelation, we see a picture of the fulfillment of this work of new creation as God renews, restores, and resurrects everything. This is our picture of Christian hope. God gives all of creation a second chance. Maybe one of the most famous examples of a second chance from the New Testament is the conversion of the Apostle Paul. Until he was confronted with the spirit of Christ along the

highway, the person then known as Saul was doing everything he could to persecute the followers of Jesus. Why should God have given him, of all people, a second chance? But not only did that second chance result in a change of heart and name, but also that person who seemed past redemption is also the one who wrote a large part of the Scriptures we now use to understand who God is.

Even when we move away from well-known stories of hope and reconciliation, out into the mess of the real world, my hope is grounded in this new life, this sense of creation and new creation from God. I feel hopeful when I see a child born, knowing it hasn't yet experienced any of the evils of this world, and that it has its whole life ahead of it, ready to grow in surprising ways. I feel hopeful when I see a sprout of new life from a garden, the creation of a beautiful new piece of art, or someone baptized. All new creation. All good. All just what God had in mind. During the Advent and Christmas season, it's not just that we hope Christ will save us or that we hope Christ will return, but that we enter into Christian community expecting new life. Some speak of Advent as a season of generic waiting, as if we were only waiting for Christmas presents or waiting to play Christmas music. But waiting in itself is not quite enough for me. Advent is about waiting with a sense of longing and expectation. We enter into Advent expectantly, trusting that Jesus will come again, and longing for the renewal that Christ brings.

Our hopes may be dashed, of course. And we know that even the dreams we have for children can be crushed by poverty, violence, disease, and more. As these children become adults, the only options they may have are directed at mere survival; they do what they can to stay alive and to support those who depend on

them, whether that means working three low-wage jobs or dealing drugs to pay the rent. For those who have lost their share of hope, their ability to be expectant, Homeboy Industries provides new life that reinjects that hope into their world.

LEARNING TO LIVE CHRIST'S HOPE

One of Homeboy's taglines says that it is a place where "hope has an address." I love this image. It strikes me that every church should be able to claim that it is hope's residence. Hope has an address in places where people are actively talking about what it means to be incarnational witnesses to hope: engaging in meaningful action that creates room for people to find paths to love and grace—paths to second chances. We all need second chances.

Part of what I find hopeful in the ministry that we encounter at Homeboy Industries and in the stories that make up the place is what Boyle calls the "'no matter whatness' of God."¹ This is the idea that God loves you no matter what, and that when you are among the people of God, we are going to love you into newness of life. This sounds so good. It sounds so easy. But, in fact, I think this is one of the hardest parts of the gospel to learn and to live out. We have this sneaking suspicion that God may not love us no matter what. We've heard too many Christians condemn people—for their sexual orientation, for failed relationships, for struggles with addiction—so that we're often led to believe that God looms above us with a hammer, as if life were one big cosmic game of

1 Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 52.

whack-a-mole. But if we were to trust, on the other hand, in this “no matter whatness” and believe that this is how we are loved—unconditionally—we would also have to do the hard work of loving others in similar fashion. It is simply easier, for example, to judge or act out against those who have offended us than to trust that the tender, loving kindness of God will transform us and offer us hope.

Now, at least periodically, all of us suffer from what I think of as a hope gap—the difference between our lived experience, our reality, and what we hope for. You might just say that we’re disappointed in our hopes. And we all hope at different levels. Some people hope to go to college, to land a good job, or to start a family. But others hope for basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter—hopes that many of us are lucky enough not to have experienced or even have thought of. And this is where hope gaps overlap with opportunity gaps, the lack of opportunities in life due to structural poverty or racism or violence, or to the absence of the security loving parents or family or a good education can provide. As Father Boyle says about the unequal chances people have in life, “not all choices are created equal. And a person’s ability to choose is not created equal.”² When you have a choice between no family at all and the family a gang provides, your choices are limited—and unequal to those most of us enjoy.

But instead of understanding that some people make bad choices because they have no others, we tend to abandon hope for those people altogether. In fact, we often talk about people and

2 Gregory Boyle, “The Calling of Delight: Gangs, Service, and Kinship,” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, The On Being Project, April 2, 2015, audio, 50:59, <https://onbeing.org/programs/greg-boyle-the-calling-of-delight-gangs-service-and-kinship/>.

places suffering from an opportunity gap as being godforsaken. God, though, doesn't forsake people or places. And if we're to be God's church, we can't take the easy route and dismiss economically depressed or violence-ridden communities as hopeless—as bereft of God's presence. If we are to believe in the hope God offers us, we have to extend that hope to those broken places as well.

**Not all choices are created
equal. And a person's ability to
choose is not created equal.
—Father Gregory Boyle**

HOPE IN HARD PLACES

Now, I don't know how much you know about the prophet Jeremiah. In his zeal to call his people to faithful living in God, he went to some pretty interesting extremes. We might call a lot of what he did performance art, walking around with an ox's yoke around his neck, say, to make a point. But he also used what even then was commonly recognized media: in this instance, he wrote a letter. Here's part of what it said:

*The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel,
proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from
Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down;
cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get*

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married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims: Don't let the prophets and diviners in your midst mislead you. Don't pay attention to your dreams. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I didn't send them, declares the LORD.

The LORD proclaims: When Babylon's seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. I will be present for you, declares the LORD, and I will end your captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have scattered you, and I will bring you home after your long exile, declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Let's stop for a moment and imagine where Jeremiah was coming from. Let's think about who it was he was talking to. Why

all this talk about marrying and settling down? Wasn't that always the point: to lead a good life in God's community?

The sixth century BC, when Jeremiah wrote his letter, was a pretty low time for the Kingdom of Judah—the southern half of what had once been a united Israelite kingdom. The whole region had been subject to the Babylonians for quite a while, all of it forced to pay tribute to what amounted to foreign and unwelcome rulers. The people of Judah, including their king, weren't very happy with the situation, and there had been some minor rebellions going on—small uprisings which, for the most part, the Babylonians had ignored, not seeing them as all that threatening or important. After all, they were a great power, and the little region of Judah didn't count for much in the grand scheme of things.

But then the king went too far. He made it about income, and refused to pay the tribute he owed the Babylonians to ensure a peaceful existence—a payment that worked along the same lines as a high-level, not-quite-mutually agreeable form of protection money that a mob boss would understand.

After all the rebellions, the Babylonians decided that little Judah had gone too far—and so they went in and showed the rest of the region what happened to little kingdoms that wouldn't obey their rulers. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. They destroyed the city's walls and its houses and took the kingdom's leaders and most important citizens away from their home, into exile in Babylon, where they could be watched over more carefully. The peasants were left behind to do the best they could without religious or civil leaders, without a social system, without much of anything at all.

The Babylonians saw this practice of leveling a place and exiling its people as a way of scattering former enemies to the

winds, removing them from their homes—from their bases and networks of power and support and comfort—so that they would be left disconnected and dispersed and eventually cease to exist as a unified nation able to take any meaningful action against their rulers.

This is the situation Jeremiah is writing about and to: a community that found itself in a place not its home, with everything they had known destroyed. In other words, utterly hopeless. But they were also determined not to let the Babylonians' intentions for them prevail; they were determined to keep themselves together and to maintain their unique identity as a people, one that would never accept the attempt that had been made to wipe them out. They were, in other words, trying to stay faithful to who they were, in a situation where it seemed impossible to do it. They were trying to stay faithful to God, in a place that didn't seem to know or want to hear about God at all.

It was hard to hope in these conditions, so far away from home, amid strangers and at the mercy of hostile rulers. It was hard to hope that, if they *were* able to return, there would be anything left for them. Would they have a home to go back to? Would others have turned it into *their* home? Would those who had been allowed to stay recognize the returning exiles anymore—or worse? Would they accuse them of having sold out, abandoned, and given up on those who had stayed behind? If they decided to make the best of a bad situation in Babylon—if they found work, found someone there to start a family with, found some way to make the experience in exile livable—would they be called traitors once they returned?

It may have seemed as if every answer was the wrong one, and that the best thing to do was sit and accept the misery of their

fate. This way, at least, they would still be themselves, and no one, especially God, could accuse them of being otherwise. But Jeremiah speaks directly to their fears, and shows them that God knows what they're going through.

The prophet speaks of a hope filled with anticipation; he allows the exiles to hope that they *will* be able to survive, and even thrive, until they are brought home again, without fearing the condemnation of others. And within this reassurance is contained the greatest hope-filled anticipation of all: the hope that they *will* return, plain and simple—that God will bring them home.

There probably isn't any part of their situation that they could've predicted—not how they got there, not what Babylon is like, and not how or whether they will ever be able to return home. But they should be assured—they should keep hope alive—Jeremiah tells them, because even though they don't know exactly *how* it will happen, this exile *will* come to an end. The community taken out of Jerusalem against their will *will* return home.

Indeed, God did bring the exiles back home from Babylon. When the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians, one of his official acts was to allow this group of Jewish leaders to return to Jerusalem. They probably couldn't have predicted such a thing would happen, or that their deliverance would come from God through yet another foreign ruler—but as Jeremiah had told them it would be, their hope—their anticipation—was vindicated.

BRINGING IT HOME: HOPE IN SCRIPTURE

You can hear the psalmist's longing in the verse that started our chapter. There is some deep need that is being expressed. Life is coming at the psalmist hard, and there is concern that if the

oppositional forces win, the psalmist will be put to shame. But the concern here is not only for the individual; the concern is for all who hope in God. The psalmist pleads in verse 3: “don’t let anyone who hopes in you / be put to shame.”

Verse 4 reads, “Make your ways known to me, LORD; / teach me your paths.” During Advent, we hear the cry of the prophet to prepare a way for the Lord by making paths straight (Isaiah 40:3, Mark 1:3)—or as some translations have it, “level” or “smooth.” The psalmist is asking the Lord to teach us the paths to God’s love and grace that are smooth and that can be navigated without obstruction. As has been the case with many Homeboy participants, we sometimes choose paths that lead us away from God’s love and grace—treacherous paths that lead us into hopelessness rather than hope. And when there is no hope, people often wander into life- and soul-threatening situations—drug or alcohol abuse, membership in a gang—as they seek to compensate for or numb their pain. But if the soul can find its way to paths of love and grace, all of a sudden, a new life appears—all of a sudden, there is hope.

The psalmist writes:

*Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—
because you are the God who saves me.
I put my hope in you all day long.
LORD, remember your compassion and faithful love—
they are forever!
But don’t remember the sins of my youth or my
wrongdoing.
Remember me only according to your faithful love
for the sake of your goodness, LORD.
Psalms 25:5-7*

Compassion and God's faithful or steadfast love are the catalyst of hope in the Christian life. Compassion and faithful love are part of the tenderness that God extends toward us that softens our hardened hearts and makes paths smooth so that the love of God can reach us in an increasing number of ways.

Part of Homeboy's work involves offering gang members the compassion and faithful love they have never had. Father Boyle talks about young people whose parents or caregivers may only have been there for them in frightening ways. And so, not only did they never experience a calming influence in tense or violent situations, but they also learned they could never let their guard down, that it was never safe to accept or offer kindness to anyone, even to oneself—that sometimes, the safest thing to do was hurt others before you got hurt. One of the things Homeboy offers, then, is “attachment repair,” learning to be together in—to feel safe in—mutual kinship and support.³ It's the kind of family Christian communities are called to offer each other, the same kind of mutual vulnerability among its members that allows hope to thrive and new life to emerge.

In Jennifer's case, that sort of hope gives her something to fight for. She knows she's not in the clear yet, and that it will be hard to complete her education and to raise her kids. But the hope she's found at Homeboy gives her the courage to keep working for the life she wants. Instead of the helplessness that comes along with a sense of hopelessness, Jennifer can now see the possibility of new life, whereas no life could be seen before. It is the exciting possibility of new life in Christ—of being a new creation. This is living into the thrill of hope.

3 Boyle, “The Calling of Delight.”

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As another Christmas draws near, Jennifer knows that being able to spend it with her kids isn't the only thing she has—she also has an entire loving, supportive community holding her up at every time of the year, offering her new life and an always-new creation. As we approach Christmas, let us give thanks for the people who hold us up—and let us be the kinds of people, the communities, who offer the same support and love that allow hope to be born and grow.

DEVOTION

Our souls long for hope. We are simply not made for hopelessness. Hope is an amazing gift to a world that is sometimes weary. Weariness sometimes leads to hopelessness. It is perfectly natural to feel sad sometimes. Sadness is a part of life, but hopelessness does not need to be.

My hope is grounded in new life. When I think of new life I cannot help thinking of Scriptures that speak to newness of life in Christ, like 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!”

Hope is grounded in the picture of new life that we see in Scripture. New things have arrived in our lives in Christ and this newness offers us a thrill of hope. There is a new genesis going on in each of our souls, taking any weariness and hopelessness that may be found there and transforming them into a refreshed hopefulness.

New things are arriving in Christ now and more newness of life is yet to come. Think about the picture we see in Revelation 21:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,
for the former heaven and the former earth*

had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new."

Revelation 21:1-5

Life can be hard sometimes. The circumstances of our lives can make our souls weary, but don't be discouraged. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God is working in us and through us and around us to make things new. This work of God sometimes takes time. New life often grows in stages, but we can trust that God is with us every step along the journey.

Remember God's word to us from the prophet Isaiah:

*Look! I'm doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?*

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*I'm making a way in the desert,
paths in the wilderness.*

Isaiah 43:19

*God of all creation, by your mercy, renew and restore us.
Help us to be a people who are born anew in Christ. May
the newness of life that we receive in Christ give us hope and
may we be a sign of hope to the world. Amen.*

Find hope in unexpected places

Home for Christmas brings inspiring stories of hope and second chances into the Advent season. Author and pastor Justin Coleman matches real life stories of struggle and triumph to the Advent themes of hope, love, joy, and peace to show how the light of Christmas shines brightly even in hard times. Each chapter lifts up a scripture reflection alongside tales of men and women who reflect on the Advent themes with love and longing.

Throughout each of the four chapters, Coleman captures the stories of formerly incarcerated or gang-affiliated men and women as they find work and opportunity through Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, California. These men and women share their memories and experiences in light of the hope and new life they've experienced at Homeboy.

This is not another Advent study that reminds us of things we've heard before. By inviting us to hear the Advent scriptures through the experiences of real people in challenging situations in Homeboy Industries, Justin "brings home" the love, hope, joy, and peace of Christmas in a fresh and inspiring way. The way these lives were changed could inspire changes in all of us. —**JAMES A. HARNISH**, United Methodist pastor, Longwood, Florida, author of *A Disciple's Path: Deepening Your Relationship with Christ and the Church*

One of the great joys of being a Christian is being given good work. Work saves us from the boredom that often is the breeding ground of violence. In this wise book, Justin Coleman draws on the good work of Rev. Gregory Boyle's Homeboy ministry to help us recover hope in what seems to many a hopeless world. This is a hopeful book that makes hope possible. —**STANLEY HAUERWAS**, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor Emeritus of Divinity and Law, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

Also Available: DVD, Leader Guide, Youth Study Book



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