

3-God's Comforting Immutability

Attributes of God

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Bible Text: Malachi 3:6; Ephesians 1-11b; Hebrews 13:8

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Ephesians 1 will be our reading this morning, the first 12 verses. Ephesians 1, hear the word of God.

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 Grace be to you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: 4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: 5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. 7 In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace; 8 Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; 9 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: 10 That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: 11 In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: 12 That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.

May God bless the reading of his sacred word to us.

Dear church family, on behalf of the pastors and their wives and families and consistory, their wives and families, we wish you and your family a blessed new year and a blessed decade in the Lord Jesus Christ. As we enter the 2020s, we pray that the Holy Spirit may anoint your family with divine grace, and that each and every member of your family may know the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity as prophet, as priest, and as king. We pray that you will be eager to follow the Lord Jesus Christ wherever he may lead you despite weakness, despite fragility, despite sinfulness and fickleness, that we would not be

distracted from God and his ways but that we would be led onward in that straight and narrow path that leads to the glorious celestial city. May your and our passion be in this year and in this decade not only to make our calling and election sure in Christ so that God's glory may be our highest goal as well as our deepest enjoyment, but may it also be our intention to disciple believers and evangelize unbelievers as we state in our mission statement, and that that lifestyle may also be contagious through us to our children and our grandchildren, and that we would be able to say of this coming year by the sheer amazing grace of God, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And to that end we wish for the consistory this year, that you may experience 1 Corinthians 15:58, "My beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." And for catechism class students, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth while the evil days come not nor the years draw nigh wherein thou shalt say, 'I have no pleasure in them,'" Ecclesiastes 12:1. And to the teachers of catechism students, "Come ye children, hearken unto me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord," Psalm 34:11. And we pray for all those in various Bible study groups and various classes, "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom and the man that getteth understanding," Proverbs 3:13. For the confession of faith class, "That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us," 2 Timothy 1:14. And for our congregational prayer meetings, may it be said of us, Acts 1:14, "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." And for our youth group, "Search the Scriptures for in them ye think you have eternal life and they are they which testify of me," John 5:39. And for the Esther Guild, "This woman, Dorcas, was full of good works and alms deeds which she did," Acts 9:36. For our custodian, "Wait on the Lord, be of good courage. He shall strengthen thy heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord," Psalm 27:14. And our organist, "Praise ye the Lord. Sing unto the Lord a new song and his praise in the congregation of saints," Psalm 149:1. For Heritage Voices as well as the men and children's choir, "He appointed singers unto the Lord that should praise the beauty of holiness, as say praise the Lord for his mercy endures forever," 2 Chronicles 20 and 21. For various teachers and helpers in all the local mission efforts in Sunday school, outreach, in HHOM, related to nursing home or various prisoner jail ministries, or food bank ministry, or missions to the homeless, "Be instant in season, out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering in doctrine," 2 Timothy 4:2. For those who labor in the distribution of the word of God through the banner of sovereign grace truth, the tract ministry, Inheritance Publishers, RHB, the tape room, the Gospel Trumpet, the radio ministry and all electronic ministries and various websites, "Cast thy bread upon the waters for thou shalt find it after many days," Ecclesiastes 11:1. For the school board, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way that thou shalt go. I will guide thee with mine eye," Psalm 32:8. For administrators and teachers, "Now therefore hearken unto me, all ye children, for blessed are they that keep my ways," Proverbs 8:32. For volunteers in other capacities for the church or the school in all kinds of areas, which I won't mention them all, "But let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not," Galatians 6:9. For our students at every level from pre-k all the way through seminary, "I love them that love me and those that seek me early shall find me," Proverbs 8:17. For husbands and wives, "Let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself and the wife see that she reverence her husband," Ephesians 5:33. For parents,

"Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it," Proverbs 22:6. For seniors and grandparents, "O God, forsake me not when I am old until I have showed thy strength unto this generation and thy power to everyone that is to come," Psalm 71:18. And to singles, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service," Romans 12:1. To widows and widowers and those with special needs, special burdens, "My grace is sufficient for thee for my strength is made perfect in weakness," 2 Corinthians 12:9. And for seminary, theological students, instructors, their families, secretaries, volunteer staff, "Take heed to thyself and unto the doctrine, continue in them for in doing this thou shalt save both thyself and them that hear thee," 1 Timothy 4:16. And for the theological college and all the ministries associated, the mission field, and by extension for the denomination, "The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me. Thy mercy, O Lord, endureth forever. Forsake not the works of thine own hands."

Well, this morning we want to take all of these ministries and all of this blessing and wishing each other blessing and we want to reduce it down to one theme, what we really need is a felt sense of God's immutability, that is, God's unchangeableness. God himself must be our refuge and our strength and our delight, and that is extremely comforting if we can rest in the immutability of the living God. So this morning I actually have three texts I want to present to you as I continue this series on the attributes of God under the theme of "God's Comforting Immutability." First, that comfort in his perfections, Malachi 3:6, "I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." Second, comfort in his unchangeable will, Ephesians 1:11b, just these words, "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." And third, comfort in the unchangeableness of his Son, Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today and forever." So God's comforting immutability in his perfections, in his will, in his Son.

Now we are living in a very tumultuous age. I think everyone would agree that our lives are in the midst of constant turmoil and change. There's never been an age where so much is changing so much as in ours, and thus we have all the more reason to find our stability, our comfort, our hope, our joy in life in that God who's a rock, that God who never changes. In the midst of darkness, we are called to trust in him who says, "I am the light." Pure unchanging light. That's why James says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning." Did you ever think about that? The lights, the sun in the sky, the moon, the stars, the planets, the comets, the meteors, they're changing, they're moving but God the Creator of all these lights is eternal light who never passes through times of shadow and who never changes. He's absolute light. In him, the Bible says, there is no darkness at all. I love the words of the Puritan, Thomas Watson, "There is never an eclipse of his brightness." Not even once in 100 years. He's always the same. He's always bright light, pure holiness. He's always who he is, the altogether lovely God. And so in all of our trials, in all of our temptations as we face the future, we must not think that God intends evil or entices us to sin, James says, but through the troubles we are called to focus on the glory of God and to understand that the clouds of trouble between us and God do not obscure the light of God anymore than our earthly clouds truly obscure the fact that the sun is still shining.

So the Bible teaches us in a thousand ways this wonderful truth, "I am the Lord. I change not therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." The unchangeability, more technically called the immutability of God is a doctrine of extreme comfort for the people of God, and it's in that truth that we embed ourselves as we enter into another tumultuous year, not just as families and in a changing world, but also nationally. We know even as we begin this year that politically and nationally it's going to be a tumultuous year, but we trust in this as the Westminster Shorter Catechism divines put it so well when they asked, "Who is God," question 4, "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being." Praise be to God for that. The beauty of God is that God can't change into something better than he is. God can't be any different than what he is. God never needs to change for he is absolutely perfect in himself, completely fulfilled and happy in himself. This glorious attribute of immutability gives us a rock under our feet. God is the Creator, God is the provider, God is the Redeemer, God is the unchangeable one.

Moses says in Psalm 90, "Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth in the world even from everlasting, everlasting past to everlasting, everlasting future, thou art God." What a comfort. Our God is not even subject to time. He's the Lord of time. What he was, he is now and he will always be. His name is the "I am." The "I am" who is always the same, past, and present, and future. He's the one you can always trust. He's the one you can always find comfort in, he's the one who will never let you down.

So God's immutability gives us hope. Psalm 102 portrays that so beautifully. It talks about a suffering lonely believer at the beginning of the Psalm and he's getting discouraged and depressed and he says his life is like smoke, passing onward like a shadow and withering like grass. But then in verse 12 as he's bemoaning who he is and his changeableness and his dying condition, he suddenly lifts himself up and he says, "But, O Lord, but, O Lord, thou shalt endure forever and thou shalt have mercy on Zion, and thou wilt build up thy people, and thou wilt gather worshipers from all nations." But why is the psalmist and why are the biblical writers so sure of this? Well, the Psalm goes on and says this, verses 25 through 27, "Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of thy hands. They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end." Do you find that comforting? I do. I find it very comforting. The skies above our heads change from moment to moment, everything falls into decay around us, and ultimately our bodies also will be laid in the grave, but the Creator of the ends of the earth is of another nature than his own decaying creation. He abides forever unchanged.

John Calvin discusses the immutability of God and this is his one sentence conclusion, "We ought therefore," Calvin says, "to seek stability nowhere else but in God." That God who never breaks his promises. That God is always true to his word. "I am the Lord. I change not therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." That's true in 2020. That's true in the 2020s. That's true to the end of the world. That's true to all eternity. God is the one who is and that's all we need to know.

He's unchangeable in every attribute. His love and faithfulness cannot change, Psalm 136. His power cannot change, Isaiah 40:28. It never declines. God's power never declines from its infinite vigor displayed in the creation of all things. That's why we begin every service, "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth," Psalm 124:8, because that God is unchangeable.

God's wisdom cannot change. Who has ever instructed him or taught him knowledge? Isaiah 40, he possesses infinite goodness and glory that can neither decrease nor increase. One of the Puritans put it this way, "God is exceedingly full of his own being as the sea is full of water and the sun is full of light. There is no possibility of receiving any other being than what he already is." This is comfort par excellence.

Now don't misunderstand me and don't misunderstand the Bible here. That does not mean when we say that God is unchangeable, that he is like a block of stone. No, he is the living, personal, active God. He's not immobile but the church father, Augustine, put it so well, he said, "God's rest is no lazy inactivity just as his activity is no hard labor, but God dwells in immutable activity in dynamic rest. Thus God is not a stagnant ocean, he is the fountain of living waters." Now we can't comprehend all of that, can we, because God is above us and beyond us, he's immutable, but he's not impersonal. That's what the Bible teaches us.

So that is comforting on New Year's Day but, secondly, God's unchangeable will is comforting on New Year's Day. Because he's immutable in his character, in his perfections, his attributes, he is also immutable in the purposes of his heart. The psalmist says, "Forever, O Lord, thy word is settled in the heavens. Heaven and earth will pass away before God's words will pass away," Matthew 5 says. "The word of our God abides forever," 1 Peter 1 says. You see, if God's plans changed over time, then God would have to periodically revise and amend his word, but Jesus says the Scriptures cannot be broken. God's will cannot fail. Ephesians 1 puts it perhaps best of all, "He will establish, he will work all things after the counsel of his own will." There is nothing that happens outside of the will of God.

So God is always true, true to himself, true to his will, true to his decrees. "God is not a man that he should lie, neither the Son of Man that he should repent and change. Hath he not set and shall he not do it? Hath he spoken and shall he not make it good," Numbers 23 says. Now sometimes the Bible talks about God repenting or changing his mind, or so it seems, but that's not in reality, that's God speaking according to human levels of understanding. We call that anthropomorphism, it's a big word that just means God speaks in our language, at our level. When God turned away, for example, from destroying Nineveh, it was in his eternal counsel not to destroy Nineveh because in his eternal counsel everything was according to the purpose of his own will. He sent Jonah to warn them and Jonah's preaching would be blessed to bring them to repentance, and God knew that all from before the beginning.

So our plans are often frustrated and have to be changed but God's plans are never frustrated and they stand forever. That's comforting. We have a God whom we can trust in. We have a God who when he promises, he will do it. God works all things according to the counsel of his own will. And now that extends even to sin and destructive things because we call that in the doctrine of providence it's also beyond our comprehension, we call that the act of cooperation, that is to say that what we do every single moment, even our sin, has been decreed by God but God never moves us to sin. It's completely our volunteer effort whenever we sin, and yet our every sin is in accord with the counsel of his will. And so of afflictions. God has purposes for every affliction and when that affliction comes, we should say, first of all, God is simply working out all things, also this affliction, after the counsel of his own will.

So God is an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast says Hebrews 6, for he reveals the immutability of his counsel, verse 19 says. So God's promises never expire. Have you ever had it, you had a coupon, you get this free or something, and you walk into the store and you hand it in and they see some fine print and they say, "Sorry, it's expired." It doesn't happen with God. God's words are true and faithful. The entire Bible flies this banner, "These words are true and faithful. No word from the Word ever has to change because the supreme author is unchangeable in the counsel of his own will. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." Samuel Willard, one of the great Puritans who wrote about a thousand pages on the Westminster Confession of Faith, just a wonderful wonderful book full of living godly divinity, he said this under the attribute of God's immutability, he said, "We must live upon this attribute. It is enough to keep up your spirits and to strengthen you with patience to run that weary and difficult race that you are called to run. It is true you will meet with many changes along the way among many creatures, yet faint not nor be weary for in all the things you encounter you will have an unchangeable God standing beside you."

So there's nothing, there is no temptation, no trial that will take hold of you in 2020 that you will not be able to bear because God will give you a way of escape that you may be able to bear it. He's unchangeable. He's true to his promises. But then thirdly and finally, God is not only comforting in his immutability to his people, in his perfections and in his will, but also in his Son. Hebrews 13 capsulizes that with these graphic words, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."

And it's beautiful, it's beautiful to see the context in which this grand capstone of comfort relative to God's immutability is couched. The verse before actually says this, Hebrews 13:7, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." You know, the Hebrew Christians had been very discouraged, lots of changes were happening, some of the pastors were being thrown in jail, Christians were being persecuted, their hands were hanging down, their knees were going feeble, but you see, the author to the Hebrews writes to them and says, "Even if your leaders are taken away, don't be discouraged. Remember the words they spoke, the lives they lived. They were all declaring this truth, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. You may lose leaders but you won't lose the word. The Christ of the word is still with you and that

Christ is the immutable God, that Christ is what he always was and what he always shall be in his divine person. True, he's taken a human nature to his divine person but he is still the unchangeable divine person, and this is your comfort yesterday, today and forever." And isn't it true that most of the book of Hebrews is just unfolding this theme of the comfort of the unchangeableness of Christ? This is what makes Christ superior in his priesthood to the priesthood of Aaron, to the priesthood of Melchizedek among many other things. The author to the Hebrews says this, "But this man," Jesus, "because he continueth ever hath an unchangeable priesthood wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them."

Now that has got to be one of the most comforting truths of all of Scripture, an unchangeable priest. What a Savior. He died for you, dear believer. He suffered for you, but he also lives for you. He's interceding for you moment by moment, unchangeably, unceasingly. This is because he continues ever in his unchangeable priesthood. He is the same in his divine person, eternal, immutable, and because he's that in himself, he's also that in his every office as a prophet, as a priest, as a king. He's the same to you in everything and this gives you hope when you look back on all your yesterdays and you realize he made no mistake, every affliction you've ever received out of his hand he's used it to bring you to where you are, to sanctify you, and to lead you to himself. You live by hope, you live by love, you live by faith in this unchangeable priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's why he goes on to say then in verse 9, "Being not therefore carried about with every diverse and strange doctrine." You see, what we need in 2020 is not something new, it's not something extra-biblical, it's not something on top of the Bible, what we need in 2020 is what we needed in 2019 and all the years of our past, and all the years of our future, we need Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

So what do you say then when you live out of the unchangeableness of Christ when affliction comes and strikes you hard? You say, "Lord, what thou doest now I know not but I shall know hereafter. I believe that thou art the same unchangeable God. I believe that all things work together for good to them that love thee. My faith looks to thee, Lord Jesus, as the unchangeable Savior who has made all things well in the past, who is making things all well now even when I can't see it with my physical eyes, I believe it with my spiritual eyes of faith, and who shall make all things well because thou art the same yesterday, today and forever."

So in this high priest, we are not only are reconciled to everything that happens to us in the past but we also surrender all our todays and all our trials today into the same high priest hand because he's unchangeable and that gives us the grace we need as we face the future, you see, to surrender all things into his hands. Faith cannot be changed in its object because it's object is Jesus and the Gospel and his truth, and that's the beauty of a living vital Christianity in a vital relationship with Christ in this life, isn't it, because everything is changing, everything is unstable. You could lose your job tomorrow. You could lose your spouse tomorrow. You could lose your own life tomorrow. Your child

could be killed tomorrow. I just spoke with a man yesterday, actually, on the phone and I hadn't talked to him for a whole year and I said, "How are you doing?" He said, "Oh, it's been a hard fall." I said, "What's the matter?" "Oh," he said, "my son, a drunk driver hit my son and he's been in critical condition for months and he's just coming out of the hospital now, and maybe he'll go to work for the first time this week. He's doing okay," but then he choked up on the phone and he said, "But my grandbaby was in the car and she died." How do you cope with that? Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. That's the answer, "My faith is in him. I trust in him. My hope is in him. I trust in him. My love is in him. I trust in him."

You see, the comfort of the immutability of God is that God doesn't change but he changes us to conform us to the image of his Son. That's what we need in 2020. We need to be changed. We need to be more conformed to the image of his Son and that's possible because he doesn't change, because he continues to do the same work, conforming us, chipping away at us, chiseling us, conforming us like a sculptor to his Son. We like to think that we've arrived, we don't need to change, and if only God would do this, if only God would do that, at our human level, our level of unbelief, we think God should change and we should not change, but when we see our sinfulness and who we are, then we know we need to change and what we need most of all is an unchangeable God. Jesus says to us, "Take up the cross and follow me and deny thyself." You see, it's not Christ's doctrine that needs changing, it's not Jesus that needs changing, it's we, it's you who needs to change.

And even though you've experienced, many of you, the great change from death to life through receiving a new heart and through bowing in repentance and faith before God, there is still so much in our life that needs to be changed. Whatever is not in harmony with Christ, whatever is not in harmony with the unchangeable doctrine of Christ needs to be changed. But if we trust in Christ and we trust in his truth, and we cling to him, and we cling to his unchangeable word, we will experience in 2020 his blessing, his abiding presence and what a comfort that is. When you ground your life in an unchangeable Savior and his unchangeable word, and you ask him sincerely to change you, to conform you to him and to his word, you will experience divine benediction in 2020. Even though you will still grieve over your indwelling sin, even though you will still feel how unfaithful you are, he remains faithful. Though we oft have sinned against him, still his love and grace abide, says the poet.

So dear friends, trust in our God. Trust in Jesus, the unchangeable one. Remember your Savior, wasn't he faithful to you in the past? Hasn't he been faithful to you today? He does not change. He does not change. Could Jesus change, then we would sink into despair and rightly so. But his unchangeableness lifts us above all the storms of life. In 2020 and in the 2020s, your Savior, dear believer, has all that love and kindness and tenderness and pity and compassion and majesty which you in every decade of your life have proved that he possesses. None of it will disappear. He who sympathized with the widow of Naan, he who had compassion on the hungry multitude, he who wept with the sisters of Lazarus is just the same now as he was then. He has the same nature, the same heart, the same divine person, the same fellow feeling with his people's plight. He is

deeply interested in your welfare, lovingly concerned to do us good, ready to help us in every time of trouble. There's not a single step you will take in 2020 which he hasn't mapped out for you on the grand chart of the eternal counsel of his will in and through Jesus, so that all your circumstances have been divinely ordered for you by infinite wisdom, infinite love, infinite goodness, flowing from the heart of an unchangeable Father, an unchangeable Son, an unchangeable Holy Spirit. So you'll meet no problem in 2020 for which his supplies will prove too little or too meager, nothing from which his heart will prove too cold, nothing for which his wisdom will prove to be foolishness. Everything awaiting you in 2020 has already been amply provided for you in the eternal counsel of his will, through his unchanging Son. The mercies you need and will need, the grace you seek and will seek, the strength you require and will require, the wisdom you pray for and will pray for, the comfort you ache for and will ache for, it's all already been provided in his eternal purposes for you. Every means you need to reach the end of this year in the fashion which he's determined is best for his glory and for your good, have all been provided for you in the eternal counsel of a Triune God and you will lack nothing, absolutely nothing.

So what's the conclusion of all this? The conclusion is you must therefore trust no one, depend on no one, look to no other source for peace, for comfort, for supply through all of this year but to Jesus. Yes, there are secondary means but you always go to the primary cause, said Calvin. You don't look at secondary causations for your help ultimately. Primary causation, it's God and he's willing in Christ, he's waiting to supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus our Lord, Paul says. Soul needs, body needs, family needs, church needs, needs in sickness, needs in health, needs at home, needs at work, needs while living, needs while dying, Jesus can and will supply them all. Ask and knock and you shall receive and the door shall be opened.

So believed that infinite unchangeable wisdom devises your way, infinite unchangeable love directs your steps. If you meet with a loss, he has taken it away that you might have more room in your soul for him. If you meet with a windfall, he has given it to you that you might be the means of showing more of his love to others. Whatever he does with you this year, he is unswervingly committed as always to your increasing conformity to his likeness and he'll spare nothing, neither the least thorn in your flesh, nor the least mercy added to your store that will further it. He loves you, dear believer, with all his heart and he will always pursue one steady course with you, one gracious design toward you as he works all things together for your sanctification and your salvation.

So despite the tragedy and the confusion of what's transpiring even now at a national level in this nation politically, he will keep his seat on the throne of grace throughout the whole year, also over our nation. He will never be absent or so engaged that he cannot attend to every need that you will ever have. He will always be pleased to see you come to him in prayer. He will always be ready to listen and supply your need, either changing you or changing your circumstances, whichever will sanctify you best and most and bring him the most glory. Therefore let him lead you, being the Shepherd that he is, and you follow him, being the sheep that you are.

So I close the sermon with this little poem,

"Dear Lord, as this new year is born, I give it to thy hand,
Content to walk by faith what paths I cannot understand,
Whatever coming days may bring of bitter loss or gain,
Of every crown of happiness should sorrow come or pain,
Or Lord, if all unknown to me thine angel hovers near,
To bear me to that farther shore before another year,
It matters not, my hand in thine, thy light upon my face,
Thy boundless strength when I am weak, thy love in saving grace,
I only ask, dear Lord, lose not my hand, grip fast my soul,
And be my guiding light upon the path till blind no more,
Like Simeon I see."

Amen.

Let's pray.

Gracious God, we thank thee so much, so very much for thy unchangeableness in thy perfections, thy glorious attributes, in the eternal counsel of thy wonderful will, but also in the unchangeableness of thy Son toward us, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. O Lord God, help us to rest in thy Triune immutability. And for those who do not know thee, may that immutability show them their emptiness and show them their need to take refuge in Jesus Christ for their own soul, and to find in him stability that nothing in this world could even come close to giving. Lord, remember each one of us and bless us in mercy for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Pastor Kuivenhoven and Pastor Beeke, on behalf of the consistory and the congregation, we wish you a blessed and a bountiful new year in Christ Jesus our Lord. Hindsight they say is 20/20 and in the year 2020 it seems only appropriate that we look back on the past decade with something of a clearer vision, and doing so it's abundantly clear to us how the Lord has blessed us richly in spiritual health and in spiritual care because of you and your service to us. You, Pastor Beeke, have faithfully served us for the past 33 years, first as our full-time pastor and more recently as a part-time pastor and as seminary president. Only eternity will reveal to us and to everyone else what influence that you had in word and deed in our congregation, in our denomination, and the broader church universal. And to you Pastor Kuivenhoven, you willingly served us over the past decade whenever and wherever our need was the greatest. You voluntarily deferred your studies for us when we were left pastorless, you shuttled between your studies and your pastoral work over the years as best served us despite the additional demands that this put on you and your family, and the additional labor that that entailed. The fact that we, your church family, unanimously affirmed our call to you at our past most recent congregational meeting, I think reflects our gratitude to you for all you've done and which you are still doing for us.

Here in your church family, both of you pastors have rejoiced with those that rejoice and have wept with those that wept over the past decade. You've baptized our children in the name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You've educated us in catechism, family living and confession of faith classes in the mysteries of godliness. You've counseled our young people to seek first the kingdom of God. You've conducted the marriages of our sons and our daughters, directing them to reflect in their own marriages the union of Christ and his bride. You've administered the bread and the wine of the body and blood of Christ here in our midst to the strengthening of the faith of the flock. You've comforted us when we were called to bury our loved ones, pointing us to Christ who is the resurrection and the life. You've encouraged us when we were sick, recommending us to the Great Physician. You've nourished us with the word of God, "For man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." In fact, the two of you along with Dr. Barrett and Reverend Kelderman and Dr. Neely and others, have faithfully proclaimed God's word from this pulpit every Sunday over the past decade so that there was never a single Sunday in which we did not hear, "This is the word of God."

As a result, not only do we esteem you pastors highly for your work's sake, but we esteem you very highly in love for your work's sake, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:13. We esteem you very highly for who you are in Christ and for the gifts that he has granted to us as a church family through you. We also esteem your wives highly in love for the selfless roles that they so graciously fill among us. Jan and Mary, we thank you for your ministry to us as pastor's wives, for the warm and loving spirit that each of you bring to this church family, for the encouragement that you give your husbands when the days grow long and their labors and your labors for us continue long into the night. We thank you for the joyful spirit that you bring to this church family. Pastors, we especially esteem you very highly in love also because we recognize that you can say with Paul in 2 Corinthians 4, "For we preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus the Lord and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us."

Congregation, you also know while we do esteem our pastors highly in love for their work's sake, that this is not where we ultimately put our confidence going forward into this new year. Our trust as a church family is not placed in office bearers, for we office bearers in ourselves are empty vessels. Our trust as a congregation must be centered on the Christ-manifested power of God, as Paul said, "that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us."

Entering this new year, God forewarns us in 2 Timothy 3 that, "In the last days perilous times shall come, for men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." And I'd like to focus just for a moment on this

last phrase in that chapter, "having the form of godliness but denying the power thereof," and children, by way of example, imagine that there were warnings on the news of a huge winter storm coming with high winds and freezing rain, and that there would be probable power outages, what do you think you and your parents would do? Do you think you would just ignore those warnings or do you think that you would probably take thought and prepare? I think that you'd like to be prepared for that storm, that you'd like to have extra food on hand, if you had a generator, that it would be functional, you certainly would want to have some flashlights on hand in case the power actually did go out.

Well, I have two identical flashlights here. I found these flashlights to be extremely useful. They are adjustable. They have clip-on heads so that you can put them on your cap and they can be hands-free. I want to compare these two flashlights, then, to two different types of people. God tells us that there are dark days coming in which people will be haters of God. Now to us, many people look the same, they lead outwardly respectable lives, they never do anything that seems externally wrong, they don't murder, they don't steal or swear, they treat others with respect, they might even attend church and be considered Christians because to our external eyes and to our judgment, they appear morally good. And these two flashlights are like that, they appear the same, the same shape and size, there's no significant outward difference to them, but I'll tell you there is a huge difference between these two flashlights. This flashlight fulfills the purpose for which it was made. It's ready for that coming storm. It's ready for the descending darkness because it has batteries in it and actually works. You can say it's full of power. This other flashlight, however, even though it may look ready, lacks any power at all. It does not meet the purpose for which it was intended. It is not ready for that coming storm or for the blackness that's coming. And this is like the two different types of people that we are talking about. They look the same to our eyes and yet one has only a form or an outside show of godliness, such people do not have any power of godliness, they are just like a flashlight without batteries. They may appear in our eyes to be ready for the coming storm and yet they are not, they are unprepared. So in one sense, this flashlight is not really even a flashlight. It does not fulfill the purpose for which it was made. It cannot give light.

You know that people were made by God to praise him and those who don't are not living up to their purpose. People who truly are born again actually are ready for the coming storm because they have the form of godliness but also they have the indwelling power of God, like Jesus said in Matthew 5:14, that such people are the light of the world. In just such a flashlight, they will only shine when it is filled with batteries, so people only shine when they are filled with the Spirit of God and with his power. Now does that mean that this one flashlight is worthless, I should throw it away? Well, you would say, no, you need to put some batteries in it, it needs some power, and that's the one great difference that we find between people. There's no difference in these flashlights themselves, the difference is that one has batteries and power and the other does not, and that is the most important question for us as people, then, that is: is God present in our lives with his saving power? This is where we must place our reliance for the coming year, in the power of God, in the Holy Spirit's blessing upon the means of grace. Anyone who finds themselves empty in this new year, that finds that they lack any presence of God and his

power, need to freely come to him and ask him for that power, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God," 1 Corinthians 1.

Now pastors, office bearers, congregation, we know that there are many storms in our society, we see the severe upheaval of political factions and all these troubles around us, as God tells us in his word that there are perilous times coming, that we also read in the Bible that there are several things that God says of himself and one is that he is a refuge in the storm, a very present help in time of need, wherefore pastors, quoting from 2 Timothy 1, "I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God which is in thee, for God hath not given us the spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel according to the power of God who has saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began but is now manifest in the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ who hath abolished death and hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel."

So this is our prayer for you this year, Pastor Beeke and Pastor Kuivenhoven, that in all the coming year, in everything that you face with us, that you may look to Christ and be filled with his power and that, then, we as a church family may face this new year filled with the Spirit and that he may make us a light that cannot be hid that we may experience God's convicting and converting power, in short to sum up in one phrase, that in this year we may experience power aplenty in 2020.