

**PARTICIPANT GUIDE**



## **CONTENTS**

by Ted Schroeder

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, Illinois 60631

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why a Retreat Resource for “Normal” Couples?

**“The other evening we got out the piece of wedding cake we saved. Everyone saves one for the first anniversary, they said. It was still there, all right--all neatly wrapped and carefully stuck away in the corner of the freezer. We just sat there and stared at it. You could tell it was wedding cake, it still had some of the little pink flowers on it. But it looked so sad. The frosting was falling off and the cake was all dried up. It was nothing like that beautiful cake we had that night. Then everything was perfect. We were so happy. We had such great plans. We shared so many dreams. Now I guess our marriage has gotten to be like that tired out cake. Nothing seems to be like it used to be. They used to say, ‘Just wait till honeymoon is over.’ It’s over now, all right. And it makes me want to cry.”**

The thoughts are not unusual. Many marriages struggle when the honeymoon is over, when the glow of that romantic love that carried us down the aisle runs up against the reality of what it means to live together day after day. Somehow all of our spouse’s faults that seemed so inconsequential as we made the wedding plans, loom larger and larger all the time. Somehow the wonder and beauty of the wedding turns into the work and worry of getting on with our lives.

Some have even suggested that “romantic love” is really an illusion--a trick of nature to get us through the marriage ceremony. Romantic love cannot last, they say. Indeed that love that carried us through our engagement and marriage is not permanent. We cannot stay romantically in love all of our lives. Like every human emotion, love changes. Like every human relationship, the marriage relationship also changes. The question is not, “Will our love and our marriage change?” The questions are more like, “How will they change? What will we do about the changes? How do we want them to change?”

Love--real, committed, “lasts a lifetime” love-- is more an act of will than emotion. It is more a conscious decision to take the promise of faithfulness seriously and to work out what that commitment means for living together as husband and wife.

No one says it will be easy. When we’ve fallen off our pedestal--worse, when our spouse has fallen off and we turn out to be simple, failing, sometimes thoughtless, often erring, well intentioned but not always able to carry out our intentions, individuals. When we find ourselves in a relationship that requires something like perfection to survive and find that perfection is a distant dream, it’s going to take thought, intention, effort, and even more importantly, the power of God’s gracious love and renewing promise to make the marriage work.

Relationships don’t ordinarily get better by themselves. Marriages that have crashed up against the reality of what it means to live with a less than perfect person in a less than perfect relationship, don’t usually get stronger by wishing or hoping or complaining. Renewal of the promise of our marriage relationship will take intentional effort and specific action. This retreat can be the first

step in the intentional, ongoing renewal that may become the beginning of a promising love that will indeed last a lifetime.

**This resource will help you, by the power of the Spirit, renew the promise your marriage relationship started with and build on that renewal into the future.**

The activities here offer no magic formula for taking all the hurts out of living together. You won't find a plan guaranteed to make the future smooth and safe. But the activities and Bible study here can be the start of a renewal for you that can put new life back in your marriage and bring new wholeness to your relationship.

### **Materials Needed**

You will want to take with you--in addition to what you need for living at the retreat center:

- ‘ Your Bible
- ‘ A copy of the Wedding Service used at your wedding or from the hymnal or service book used in your congregation
- ‘ Your wedding pictures



## ASSESSMENT--WHERE ARE WE NOW?

### 1. A Tour of Marriage

Read the following statements about marriage. Take turns--read one quote to your spouse, listen as he or she reads another. React and discuss each statement. Who is saying it? What sounds true? What words seem familiar? What pluses and minuses about a relationship does each statement reveal?

‘ ***“He used to come home smiling. He’d bring me flowers or a gift he’d picked up during the day. He’d always have something to share, some joke to make me laugh. And we’d sit in the evening and dream--make plans for all the good things that would happen in the coming years. Now he barely speaks when he comes home. He never thinks to bring me flowers and the laughter seems to have gone. Why did it happen? When did it happen? How could the joy have gone so quickly?”***

‘ “Next time you go to a restaurant, look at the couples around. You can tell which ones are married and which are going together or whatever you call it. It has nothing to do with age, or wedding rings or what they order. You can tell the married couples because they sit at the same table and don’t talk. Oh, you might say it’s because they feel comfortable with each other even when they’re silent. But we know better, don’t we? It’s because they don’t have anything to talk about.”

‘ ***“She pushed his wheel chair around the mall. She was 25 maybe. He must have been the same, but his body was so broken by the disease that was overcoming him, it was hard to tell. She took him where he pointed. I don’t think he could speak much anymore. She patiently wiped his face when he drooled and held each thing for him as he admired it. Could I do that? Could I care that much to do that? Could I love that much?”***

‘ “I never knew a baby could make things so different. When we were waiting for her to come, we were so happy. We shared everything, even the kicking in the night and the cravings for foods I’d never heard of before. But now the baby is everything. No time for cooking. No time for going to a movie or a night out. Not even time for love. I guess I’m just around to pay the bills and run to the store when the baby needs medicine. This is no marriage. It’s a baby home and I’m one of the visitors.”

‘ ***“It’s different now. I don’t know--we were so much in love when we first went down the aisle. No one could tell us anything about love. We were in it and it felt good and we were sure it would never change. But it did change. He fell off his white horse and my crown went in the trash long ago. But I think we love each other more now than we did then. Oh, it’s not the kind of love that shows off much. We don’t spend a lot of time holding each other hands anymore. But our love is better than it was--deeper. It means more. He doesn’t call me his little sweetheart now. He calls me, Hon. And it means more.”***

‘ “Sometimes he gets so busy with things that I wonder if I’m important to him at all. But when I ask him he just says, ‘You mean everything to me.’ That sounds real nice, but last night came the test. We’d made the date to go out a week ago. He knew I was counting on it. I’d been sitting alone evening for a week. And then his mother called. She dropped her ring down the drain and needed Sonny to come and fish it out for her. I bet she did it on purpose. And what did he do? You got it. He left me sitting in the living room holding my expectations while he ran off to tend to his mother. ‘You mean everything,’ he says. Oh, really?”

## 2. To What Can I Compare our Marriage?

The quote in the introduction compares a marriage to a saved piece of wedding cake. The other quotes are from people who have strong thoughts about what their marriage has become. How would you describe your marriage right now? If possible, don’t use words. Say it with a shape or image. Try it. Fashion a shape or an image of your relationship as it seems to you right now. Don’t try to plan the shape you will make; just let your hands do the work. Form a piece of newspaper or clay into a shape that has meaning for you. When you’re finished, share what you have made with your spouse.

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**Note on Sculpture:** The suggestions that you attempt sculptures during this retreat are not asking you to create lasting masterpieces. You are simply asked to let your hands express something of your thoughts or feelings as you think about what has been suggested. You can even close your eyes as you do these shapings. Take newspaper or clay and simply let your hands create a shape as you reflect. The finished product does not have to “be” anything but a representation of what you want to express. The shape you create may surprise even you. Use what you have created to share your thoughts and feelings with your spouse. As you listen to your spouse tell you about his or her sculpture--do not criticize or judge the creation. Simply listen to what is shared and then thank your spouse for the creation.

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## 3. A Love Letter

On the lines on the next page (use additional sheets if you need more room) Write a love letter to your spouse. **Tell what you are feeling** right now about yourself, about your relationship and about this experience.

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**Note about Letters:** The love letter you are asked to write throughout this design are not intended to be literary masterpieces. You are simply asked to write a letter to your spouse **that states your feelings** as clearly as you are able to say them. After the letters are completed, in each case, you are to read your letter aloud to your spouse. When your spouse reads his or her love letter, listen without comment. Do not correct, judge, or attempt to



*improve what has been written. Listen and accept the words as a gift. Thank your spouse for his or her letter. Then read yours. After the letters have been read, you may discuss insights that came clear to you during the exchange. **But do not criticize or second guess the letter.***

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My Dearest \_\_\_\_\_:

#### 4. Bible Study—A Family Prayer

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***Note About Bible Studies:** The Bible studies in this resource are designed to be done together as a couple. Some of the activities within each study ask you to read and respond on your own. But the entire study is to be shared. It is through sharing the Word that the Spirit acts to renew us, assure us of God's love in Christ, and strengthen and encourage us and each other.*

- a. Paul wrote a beautiful prayer for families. Read it aloud from Ephesians 3:14-19. Now work together to put the prayer into your own words. See if you can agree on a restatement of the meaning of the prayer in writing.

b. Assume that Paul has written those words about you and your relationship. Take a few minutes to think individually about what the gifts he prays for you might make in your relationship with each other. Share your thoughts and impressions with each other.

c. Each of you write a prayer for your relationship. Let the prayer express what you hope will happen for you on his retreat. Seek God's help and blessing for the specific things you need. Ask for the help and guidance of the Spirit.

### **MY PRAYER**

## **Devotion**

For your evening devotion together, each of you in turn, read your prayer aloud.

Say a word of blessing to one another.

Then pray together Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3:14-19, substituting 'we' for 'I' and 'us' for 'you' wherever it appears in those verses

## **REMEMBERING—A LOOK AT THE PAST**

Anniversaries cause us to remember. We relive the happy memories as we savor the celebrations and special days of the past. But we also find ourselves fretting about past mistakes—things we wish we could do over. Remembering can be good for us as it enriches the present. But it can also drag us down and cloud our lives as we remember past hurts and use them like a weapon on ourselves and others.

As you think about renewing your relationship, do some focused remembering—remembering how your relationship used to be so that you can see better how it has changed. Then take some time to think about some of the hurts of the past so that you can intentionally forgive them and set them aside.

### **1. “Memories of the Way We Were”**

Remember a happy day from your courtship or early marriage—one that seems especially meaningful to you.

First, spend some time alone. As you do, think about the event of remembrance that comes to mind. Then do a paper or clay sculpture or image that reminds you of that day or that event. As

you work, let your hands describe the event and its meaning for you.

Share what you have made. Remember, don't criticize the creation, but do talk about the shared joys you have brought to mind. What other memories do you now recall? What bittersweet events? Talk about as many of them as you have time for.

How do your remembrances compare? What emotions do you rediscover? What do you share?

## **2. "The Way We Were" (Optional Activity)**

During the next several hours (you determine the amount of time) pretend you are still living at the time of your remembrance—the time of your courtship or early marriage. Call each other by the names you used then. Do some of the activities together you used to do. Treat each other the way you did during that time in your relationship.

At the conclusion of the time, discuss the experience with each other. What has changed in your relationship? In the way you treat each other? In what you do together? What do the changes say to you about your relationship? Do the changes reflect growth or deterioration? Why? What strengths in your relationship can you discover from your look back?

### **3. Memory and Forgiveness**

Not every memory is happy. Sometimes when we look back, we see mistakes, hurts, many missed opportunities to show love, the many times when we acted before we thought or sought revenge when we should have been forgiving.

Think of one of those times—not a time when you were hurt, but a time when you caused pain or did an injustice to your spouse. Write a brief description of that happening. Describe that time and your feeling as carefully as you can. Begin your writing with the words:

“I confess to you \_\_\_\_\_(name) \_\_\_\_\_”

Share what you have written. Take turns reading your description to your spouse.  
**(Option:** The one to whom the confession is read takes the paper, drops it in the fire or tears it up into tiny pieces that cannot be read). As you hear your spouse's confession, say something like:  
**"For Jesus sake, I forgive you this sin and all sins committed against me. I offer this forgiveness freely, for I am freely forgiven. I offer my love, because I am loved."**

If there are other sins or hurts that must be confessed and forgiven, you may do so now. Avoid blaming, recrimination, scolding. Seek God's help to offer forgiveness to one another.

#### **4. Bible Study– Our Forgiving God**

‘ Read the following texts aloud each other. In each case, see if you can “get into Peter's skin.” Try to think his thoughts, feel his feeling, experience the event as if you were Peter.

Matthew 16:13-20 and 21-23

Matthew 26:30-35 and 69-75

John 21:15-17

‘ Put yourself in Peter's place. Reflect on these events as though you were the apostle looking back to his life. Do a sculpture or word picture that these events might bring to mind. Share that and your reflections with each other.



‘ Talk about it: What do Peter’s actions say to you about yourself? About your weakness?

‘ What does the fact that Jesus came to Peter mean to you when you have failed? How do you know that Peter was forgiven?

‘ What does Jesus’ attitude toward Peter say to you about God’s attitude toward you? About our attitude toward each other?

‘ Look at the word “Forgiveness” below. In free writing (writing whatever comes to mind) put down what the word means to you and you marriage. Write for several minutes. Then share what you have written with each other. What does our forgiveness have to do with our freedom to live our lives together?

## **FORGIVENESS**

## **AFFIRMING–BUILDING EACH OTHER UP**

One of the things we quickly learn in marriage is that we all bring baggage with us. Some of this is good stuff—our sensitivity, ability to relate, determination, etc. Much of it is bad— even destructive: our faults, favorite sins, weaknesses, learned behaviors from our families, and the like. Unfortunately, it often becomes a game in marriage for spouses to continually point out the faults and failings of the marriage partner.

*“Do you have to make that noise all the time?”*

*“You know you can’t wear those two things together.”*

*“You sound just like your mother.”*

*“Don’t correct me in public.”*

And the list goes on. In fact, we may become so adept at finding fault, that we forget how to compliment and affirm one another. How often do these words happen in our exchanges: “Thanks for...; I appreciate...; I love the way...; I’m grateful for...; I’m so glad that you...; I really like...; I think it’s great when you...; I’m proud when you...; It mean so much to me that you...”?

### **1. Pass The Good Words Please**

Let’s intentionally practice affirming each other. Even if we’ve been married only a year, we know each other well enough not only to know the bad stuff, but the good as well. All of us as children

of God are blessed with talents, gifts and graces—perhaps more than we can even number. Let's help each other see clearly what we “love” about each other.

First, sit facing one another. Hold both hands and look each other's eyes. Take turn describing each other to each other. In this description **you may use only positives**. Describe each other to each other using only positive words and phrases.

After you've each had a turn, tell how it felt to describe each other in that way, and to listen to the description. Why does it sometimes make us feel uncomfortable? Why do we so often avoid the positive? What do we lose by avoiding the positive?

## **2. The Shape of our life (Optional Activity)**

Do a sculpture that represents your spouse (not a realistic outline of his or her form, but something that your hands tell you reminds you of your spouse). Keep it positive.

Share your sculpture. What does it reveal about your attitudes? About what you cherish in your spouse? About the value you have for each other? Talk about how you might use these sculptures to affirm one another.

### **3. Bible Study—A Model of Love**

‘        Read 1 Corinthians 13 aloud together.

Talk about it. How do the words in that text describe your relationship? To what extent are the words an ideal you have not yet achieved? What difference in your relationship would it make if such love were a part of your daily living?

‘        Rewrite the chapter together. Use “we” for “I”.

Put the benefits of the unselfish love that Paul describes into your own words.

c. Talk about it. 1 Corinthians 13 describes a love that only God can give. Why is God's involvement in your love important? How does God's love in Christ affect your relationship with each other? How does God's love make it possible for you to affirm each other?

### **CELEBRATING OUR ONENESS**

Often in our rushed and rapid world, our relationship suffers the effects of over busyness—demands of jobs, friends, children, parents all take their toll. We find ourselves going hours or even days without really talking to our spouse or sharing time or tasks with him or her. Such over-busyness can easily lead to ignoring each other for granted.

One couple solved the problem—not by cutting out activities (they both had careers to tend)—but simply by celebrating their relationship in many ways. In addition to worshiping together, they often expressed their gratitude to God for each other and for the life they shared. It became their habit to leave notes for each other. These notes often carried information or simply reminded the other of something that had to be done. But each note ended with a specific word of thanks: “Thanks for listening today.” “Thanks for being there when I needed you yesterday.” “Thanks for remembering to empty the dishwasher.” “Thanks for taking me to lunch.”

These little thanksgivings became the stuff of the prayers they were able to say daily as they expressed their thanks to God for each other and for the gifts they offered one another.

### **1. A Thanks Letter**

Write a love letter list that expresses your thanks to your spouse. What gifts and graces, acts and actions, words and wishes has your spouse brought to you recently and in the past? (Use additional paper for more room to complete your list or letter.)

Start your list like this:

“I thank my God for your...

‘ When your list are done. Share them with each other. Do this privately. Again, sit facing one another. Hold hands. Look each other in the eye.

‘ Express your love for each other—not only in words but in a way that is natural for you and says what your words have said in a physical way.

## **2. Bible Study—A Relationship Made New**

a. Paul’s words to the Colossians in Colossians 3:12-17 were at first directed to the people in a congregation. They also fit as God’s word to your relationship. Read the verses together.

b. Talk about what you have read. Which of the instructions seems most important for your relationship? Why? Which seems the most difficult to attain? Why?

‘ What does it mean to have “unity” and “peace” in a marriage relationship? What do they have to do with love and forgiveness? How do they affect our decisions?

‘ How can we be thankful in everything? How can we express that thanks together?

‘ What does it mean to do everything in Jesus’s name?

‘ What difference would that name make in our life together?

Write some of your responses, insights and conclusions here:

## **Devotion**

Read Psalm 145 aloud together. Take turns telling how God has protected and helped you in the past, how God's love sustained you. Write your own "psalm" of praise to God for the gift of each other. Take turns offering words of thanksgiving for the special gifts you have listed.

## **RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT**

The words of promise we exchanged at our wedding are supposed to last a lifetime. That promise of faithfulness and love made before God is the very core of our relationship—the "glue" that holds it all together. Unfortunately, though we may have saved some wedding cake, most of us never intentionally returned to that promise to either think through its meaning or to renew it. In the context of worship, we want to re-view and renew our marriage promise.

### **1. That Central Promise**

Very likely at your wedding you spoke some form of this promise (check the order of service used at your wedding, if possible):

**"I take you \_\_\_\_\_ to be my wife/husband from this day forward, to join with you and share all that is to come, and I promise to be faithful to you until death parts us."**

‘        Read the words aloud. Remember your wedding as best you can. Share your memories.

‘        Look over your wedding pictures, if you brought them along. What feeling and hopes and dreams can you recall?

‘ (Option) Do a sculpture or write a word picture that comes to your mind as you think about your wedding. Let your hands form a shape that the memory creates for you. Share these with your spouse without criticism. Talk about how they are similar and different. What feelings can you identify?

## **2. Bible Study– A Model Promise**

Read Ruth 1:16-17 aloud together. Though the words were not originally used to describe a marriage relationship, they are often used at weddings to express intention of those involved.

‘ Speak those words to one another now. How do they express the feelings of your heart? How are they like or different from the promise you made at your wedding? How might such words be used often in your marriage.

‘ Rewrite the words from Ruth. Put the promise into your own words. How might you express those thoughts and feelings?

Share what you have written with each other.

## **Worship–A Promise Renewed**

If possible, recreate your wedding ceremony—at least the part of it that you participated in at the altar. Of course, you don’t need get out your wedding dress or rent another tuxedo. But you may want to repeat the Scripture lessons that were shared, the words that were read, the promise you spoke. If a pastor (perhaps the pastor who officiated at your wedding) is available, ask him/her to go through the wedding service with you. You need not have people in attendance. Simply use the occasion to again express your love, your faithfulness, and to seek the blessing of God. If a pastor is not available, speak your promise to one another and share your prayers for each other.

You might write your own “vow” for the exchange, rather than using the one prescribed in the service. What promise of love and faithfulness might you now make? How will the promise this time be different from the first?



## **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Conventional wisdom often reminds us that “life has its ups and downs.” Certainly every year of marriage affirms the truth of that seemingly casual observation. If we look over the past years, we can detect lots of peaks and valleys in our relationship together. There were times when we were “on top of the world,” content with each other and happy with our marriage. Other times brought us into the pits. We may even have thought of separation or divorce.

We know that those peaks and valleys will be repeated in the future. There is no guarantee that our renewed commitment will lighten any load or avoid any pitfalls that may be before us. But our growing relationship may make it easier to enjoy the peaks and climb out of the pits.

## **1. “Blest Be The Tie...”**

A familiar hymn contains these verses:

**“Before our Father’s throne we pour our ardent prayers; Our fear, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.**

**We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, And often for each other flows, the sympathizing tear.”**

How do these verses express your intention to share the good and bad of the future? How might you put the same thoughts into your own words? What does it mean to have someone to share fear, hopes, comforts and cares, Why is that kind of sharing a cause for rejoicing?

The last verse of the hymn says:

**“From sorrow toil and pain, and sin we shall be free;  
And perfect love and friendship[ reign, through all eternity.”**

Talk about it: How does the truth that we are building an eternal life together affect our past, present and future? What does God’s gifts of life mean for us as we plan for our future? What strength for facing the valleys of our daily living do we find in God’s promise?

## **2. A Love Letter (Optional Activity)**

Write a love letter to your spouse expressing your attitude toward your future together. What fears do you live with? What needs do you have? What hopes and dreams do you cherish? Write as much as honestly as you can ( Use a separate sheet if necessary.)

**My Dearest**

Share what you have written without criticism. How does what you have written depend on your commitment to each other? How does it depend on the grace and presence of a loving God?

### **3. A Visit To The Future**

Imagine that you are sitting together five years from now at another retreat. You've lived out the peaks and valleys in between. You've shared the days and the years. From that future time, look back in your imagination "recalling" what has happened. Describe this to each other. What good things did you see? What positive gifts have you offered and received? From that vantage point, what do you see for the five years beyond that time? List some of those things:

Talk about each why each decade is important and what those years will mean for your relationship.

### **4. Bible Study—A Prayer and Promise**

‘ Read again Paul’s prayer for families in Ephesians 3:14-21. How has your understanding of that prayer and what it means to your relationship changed during this retreat? What new insights into God’s love and your love for each other have you gained?

‘ What potential for “length and breadth and height and depth” in the love of Christ do you see? In what way will you be sustained by the power of God?

‘ Read Ephesians 5:21-33. What do Paul’s words of encouragement to husbands and wife mean to you now? How can willingness to “submit” to one another help bring peace and joy? What does it mean to love one another as Christ loved us or as we love ourselves?

### **5. A Letter for a Time to Come (Optional Activity)**

On a separate sheet of paper, or on the back of this booklet, write a love letter to your spouse—one that is not meant for now, but one that can be shared in the future. Think about a time when you might be in one of the valleys that lies ahead—a time of grief or guilt or trouble. Write a love letter of encouragement to your spouse. What would you want to say to him or her? What of this weekend’s experience would you want to remember? What word from God’s word might you share? Keep the letters for later use.

### **6. A Plan For Growth**

Before you leave or as soon as possible after your return home, make a commitment to work on one aspect of your relationship in the coming days. If you need to be more affirming, promise to make that a priority. If you need to exchange forgiveness more often, make a commitment to do so. If there are problems that need to be resolved, plan to meet at a specific time to discuss them and work toward a solution. Write your plan here. Use additional paper, if necessary.

## **OUR PLANS FOR OUR LIFE TOGETHER**

Agree to meet again in two weeks at a specific time to check out how you are doing on your commitment and what other steps you might take to continue your growth together.

Some of these actions may be helpful. You might choose one or more to help you:

- ‘ Write a love letter to each other every day.
- ‘ Meet at the same time each day for devotion and prayer.
- ‘ Set aside one night a week to go somewhere to talk.
- ‘ Agree to take a 2 mile walk every day so that you can share the happening of the day.
- ‘ Read a book and discuss the meaning of that book for your relationship.
- ‘ Make sure to speak one compliment or one word of affirmation every day.
- ‘ Give an unexpected gift to each other.
- ‘ Organize a small group of couples for Bible study and prayer.
- ‘ Meet with another couple and share your experiences and your hopes.
- ‘ Promise yourselves another retreat at specific time in the future.

Add others of your own.

## **Devotion**

Before you return home, offer a prayer together that has these elements:

Thanksgiving for the gifts you have shared

Thanks for the gift of each other

Petitions for help in the future

Forgiveness for the faults of the past

Petitions for power to keep your relationship growing.

**Go in peace serve the Lord, rejoicing in God's mercy. And the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord.**

