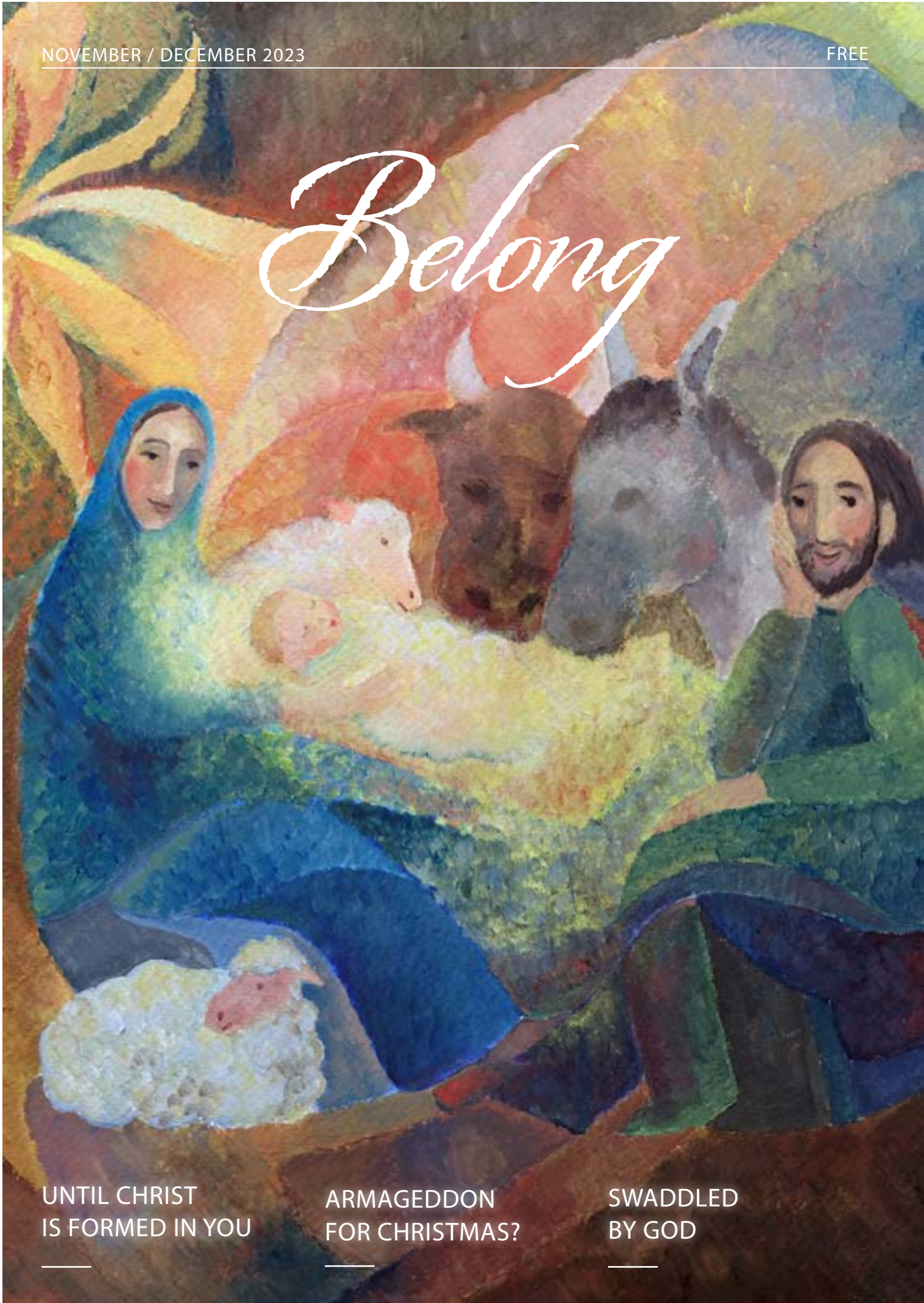


# Belong



UNTIL CHRIST  
IS FORMED IN YOU

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ARMAGEDDON  
FOR CHRISTMAS?

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SWADDLED  
BY GOD

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## UNTIL CHRIST IS FORMED IN YOU



BY AFRIKA MILLS  
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My first pregnancy was not like Mary's pregnancy with Jesus. There's the obvious difference – while my husband and I experienced the pregnancy as a miracle, our child was not immaculately conceived. There are other differences as well. I was in my late 20s while Mary was a teenager. I was married, and though Mary was betrothed, she was not yet married. I deeply desired to be pregnant while Mary's pregnancy was a surprise. I was surrounded by a village of loved ones who prayed alongside us for a child while Mary lived in a time when becoming pregnant in her context was met with societal doubt, judgment, and shaming. My experience was more like Hannah's as recounted in 1 Samuel 1. We navigated the ache of infertility, longing and praying for a child who my husband and I were unsure would ever come to be.

What our stories have in common, however – what we all have in common – is the shared experience of

**“AS WE ANTICIPATE THE  
CELEBRATION OF OUR LORD'S  
INCARNATION, MAY JESUS BE  
FORMED IN US.”**

Advent, a period of active waiting and anticipation. Though we wait, there is much happening in the waiting. It is a time filled with promise and possibility. We are being spiritually formed. Spiritual formation is the journey through which we can develop deeper intimacy with and connection to God. I committed my life to Jesus more than 30 years ago, and, for much of that time, my focus was on either doing things or avoiding doing things in the hope of keeping God from being upset with me. I didn't really know what it meant to be with, loved, and formed by God.

Last year, however, after being introduced to spiritual formation by a close friend, I had the privilege of participating in the School of Formation alongside other Christ followers as we learned about and practiced contemplative rhythms, interior examination, racial justice and reconciliation, wholeness, and missional rhythms. Through that experience, I began to truly understand what it means to be in Christ.

As in pregnancy, our spiritual formation journey can be filled with growth that is hard to see with our eyes. In the first trimester, a woman's body can appear unchanged. Without the verification that comes with changes in a woman's cycle, such as pregnancy test indicators, and ultrasound confirmation, one can wonder whether anything is actually happening.

As a woman progresses into her second and third trimesters, we begin to witness the change in the size of her belly, and the movement of arms and legs of the life inside her. We still can't see details such as the development of the circulatory and digestive systems, eye color, fingerprints, and marrow.

The same can be true with us as we practice prayer, meditation, silence, solitude, fellowship, lament, and celebration within a faith community. Although we begin to transition from attempting to perform for God to desiring to participate with Christ in becoming salt and light, it can be really demoralizing when we encounter our distractedness, selfishness, and weariness as we practice new ways of being. We can begin to wonder whether anything is changing at all. Yet we are developing and growing!

What develops in us as we wait and form is spiritual fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, goodness,



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faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, against which there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23). With practice, these ways of being can become spontaneous, like breathing, blinking, and the beating of our hearts.

In Galatians 4, Paul refers to the Galatians as his dear children for whom he is in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in them (verse 19). I am intrigued by his reference to childbirth, especially considering that it wasn't possible for him to experience it personally. What childbirth represents can be universal. This verse demonstrates it.

When our daughter was born, the years of wanting and waiting, disappointment and worry, dreaming and wondering, didn't feel like years at all. It felt like a light and momentary trouble (2 Corinthians 4:17). Her physical formation began a transformation in us into something we hadn't been before – parents. As believers, we are also in transformation as we are becoming the image of our beloved Messiah in a world desperately in need of the aroma of the kingdom of God.

As we anticipate the celebration of our Lord's incarnation, may Jesus be formed in us. And may who we are becoming bear fruit that proves to be a blessing to everyone God brings into community with us.

Following are some suggested practices as you go deeper into spiritual formation in this season of Advent:

### Week 1 – Hope

Spend ten minutes each day meditating on the hope we find in God, our faithful vine, in whom we bear much fruit as we remain in him. You may want to journal your thoughts and reflections.

### Week 2 – Peace

Spend ten minutes each day in silence with God, confessing where you may be experiencing a lack of peace in your life, and inviting him to fill you with his shalom.

### Week 3 – Joy

Spend ten minutes each day exploring verses that focus on the joy that God offers us. For example, read John 15:11 where Jesus talks about his joy being in us, and our joy being complete. Read it again and reflect on what you see God saying in this verse. Read it a third time and share with God what you notice. Read it a final time and sit quietly, listening to what God will say in response.

### Week 4 – Love

Set aside a portion of each day where you will pause other activities and responsibilities to lean into the rest that God offers as an expression of his love for you. During that time, intentionally enjoy his green pastures, quiet waters, protection, provision, comfort, and goodness in the context of your life.

*Afrika Afeni Mills, Faith Avenue Champion, GCI Charlotte*

## JOY IN EVIAN

Just under 180 people came to Evian in France for a joyous celebration in late October. It was such an uplifting event with much laughter as well as spiritual edification.

The lively Praise sessions were accompanied by an accomplished 7-member band. Opening prayers were offered in French with an English translation and were given either by individuals or by couples together. Sermons, again translated into English, covered varied subjects such as the depth of God's love, how we are more than conquerors, and how Christ loved us first. Everyone was excited to celebrate in two baptisms!

And, of course, being in Evian on the shores of Lake Leman, you could say we had free Evian water!



## BRIDLINGTON CELEBRATION



BY ZYGMUNT BARTOZ  
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The Bridlington Celebration took place at the Royal Yorkshire Yacht Club from September 22nd to 25th. The theme of the celebration was taken from Ephesians 5:1-2, reminding us of the calling we have as God's children to imitate Him and to walk in love, after the measure of Christ.

Sermons were given throughout the four days with prayer meetings in the mornings. Services began with live worship. "Sing to the glory of his name; offer him glorious praise!" says Psalm 66:2, and the singing and the praise during worship did not disappoint!

There were daily Bible readings and a number of personal testimonies, with people sharing with others their walk with God. Some were interspersed with humour but all thankful for what God had



done for them, and how His grace continues to work in their lives.

Afternoons were left free for people to be able to enjoy time with each other – the good weather helping the process. A number of evening events were held including a 'Bible Bowl' where teams competed over their knowledge of scripture.

## WE BELONG TO JESUS

That was the message of this year's Paignton event! And, what's more, Jesus is not finished with us and there is much more we can do in his name.

It was a sunshiny-rainy time for the 62 people who joined in the celebrations, but not even the British weather could deter our enjoyment of the themed services, of the quiz and games night organised by Brian Templeman, of the BBQ followed by a disco with DJ Phil Lewis, of the children's party led by Sinead Henderson, and of the Irish Party put on by Pete and Jackie Mill.

It was a spiritual feast of inspiring sermons, prayer meetings, and uplifting praise and worship. A definite highlight was the baptism of David Gent in the warm waters of Beverly Park's indoor pool –



witnessed not just by the many of us who attended but also by the pool staff. It was a cause of much rejoicing.

Come and join us next year! Details will be on [www.gracecom.church](http://www.gracecom.church) shortly.



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## ARMAGEDDON FOR CHRISTMAS?



BY JAMES HENDERSON  
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“Shalom”!

Did you see it? When, some weeks before the current ceasefire, one of the first Israeli hostages was freed, she turned to a nearby Hamas gunman, shook his hand, and said “Shalom”! For me, it was such a poignant and beautiful and hopeful moment.

Shalom. Salaam. The Hebrew and Arabic words for Peace.

As we look around the world, we don’t see much peace, do we? International tensions are getting worse day by day. Where will it all end?

Once again, the Middle East crisis seems to dominate world politics, and prophecy pundits of all faiths are having a field day. Some wonder: will there be Armageddon by Christmas, or at least by the end of 2024?

Is what’s happening prophetically significant?

Many Christians and Christian organizations have seen the current Hamas-Israel struggle as an indicator that Christ will return soon.

*It didn’t take long for many evangelical Christian groups in America to show their support for Israel. Hours after Hamas attacked the country on 7 October, killing more than 1,400 people, Christians United for Israel, an evangelical lobbying group which claims to have more than 10 million members, posted a message to on X, formerly known as Twitter.*

*“To the terrorists who have chosen this fight, hear this, what you do to Israel, god will do to you. Despite today’s weeping, joy will come because he [god] who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps,” CUFI, whose founder believes the presence of Jews in Israel is a precursor to Jesus Christ returning to Earth, wrote. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/30/us-evangelical-christians-israel-hamas-war>)*

Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists speculate that what’s happening is leading up to the influence of the Anti-Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:3-10) on God’s temple (the Church) followed closely by Christ’s Second Coming, this time with miraculous weapons of mass destruction, and then his final battle against evil at Armageddon.

Armageddon is mentioned in the Christian Bible, but not specifically in the Quran although there are strong similarities in how the end times are described in both books. In Islam the scenario is that powerful Muslim forces will be victorious over all idolatrous religions (including Trinitarian Christianity), over secularism, and over Judaism. This final conflagration may take place somewhere in Syria. In Christianity, according to many interpretations of the book of Revelation and of Old Testament prophecies, the forces of God defeat the armies of the world (including Islam), and this happens in the valley of Armageddon, which is in modern day Israel.

Amazingly, perhaps to both Muslims and Christians alike, the Quran describes how a decisive end-time battle is won by Jesus Christ when he returns to earth. Note that “Muslims, too, believe that Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) will return at the end of time...According to Islamic tradition, Jesus’ return as a Messenger of Islam will be preceded by wars led by the Mahdi (the rightly-guided one) and by the appearance of the Dajjal (the Antichrist). Jesus will slay the Antichrist and then all Jews and Christians will believe...Thus, there will then be one community, that of Islam. Good will triumph”. (Sahih Muslim 41:7023)

What are we to make of all this? Will there be one final battle, and then everlasting peace will ensue? Personally, I like the idea of everlasting peace of some sort, but does it have to be heralded by bloodshed and carnage?

In my mind it just doesn’t add up, especially on the Christian side of things. Does God, who tells us to love our enemies, decide to finish off his enemies by slaughtering them mercilessly in a fit of anger? Why does an all-powerful God need our physical help to do so? Why employ weapons of warfare?

Surely for the God of love there could be a better way? I believe there is, and that it has already happened. One of the Christian writers, a man called Paul, explained that the crucifixion of Jesus involved everyone from every race and creed throughout history being reconciled to God. Through the cross of Jesus everyone is accepted by God and need not be his enemy anymore. In Jesus, God’s position is one of grace, and no matter what you believe, that grace includes you. Of course, in



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our free will, we may choose to reject this, but on the cross no one was rejected.

So, when it comes to the end of the world, however it plays out, is it not more likely to be about the fulfillment of grace than the expression of anger?

Interestingly, in one of its descriptions about Armageddon, the Bible explains that it will be about the outpouring of grace. It’s enshrouded in mystical-type language, but its beauty still shines through. It’s taken from the New King James Version of Zechariah 12:10, which is set on the plain of Megiddo (Armageddon), “And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced.” I don’t claim to understand all that this passage means, but does it imply hope in God’s grace as people grasp what Christ’s sacrifice meant for them?

Whatever does happen, my view is that the answer to how it will end up lies in a person. And that person was born into a loving family two thousand or so years ago, died on a cross so that we can all be included in the grace of God, and he rose from the dead so that the God of peace would make us whole and holy before him and preserve us for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

Back to peace again. Salaam, Shalom. The absence of war.

It makes sense. After all, Jesus is the Prince of Peace. His coming kingdom is one of “righteousness and **peace** and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17). As we await his return, let’s live righteously, peaceably, and joyfully with others.

# SWADDLED



BY AL KURZAWA  
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Jesus was swaddled. As a parent, I learned the importance of swaddling. A newborn has been snugly protected in the womb for nine months. For the first few weeks after they are born, babies love to be wrapped up nice and tight in their blankets as it gives them the same comfort they felt in the womb. It took me a while to learn just how tight to wrap the blanket, but I had lots of practice with four beautiful children.

In Luke's birth account, Mary wrapped up the baby Jesus "snugly." She swaddled him. Something Jesus could not do on his own. The Lord of lords and King of kings, the one through whom the Father created the entire universe, humbled himself to being swaddled by his mUmmy. When the humble aspects of Jesus' birth are mentioned, it's usually about the setting in an animal's manger. But the humility of our Lord includes being fed, swaddled, diapered, and rocked to sleep by Mary and Joseph. This is part of the humility that God took on himself to be one with us, to be fully human.

*She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.*

Luke 2:7(CEB)

To be counter-cultural during the busy holiday season, perhaps we can image to the world the humility of our Lord. During Advent, it is possible to slow down, to stop and humble ourselves by



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recognising that we are completely reliant on God. Just as the baby Jesus was completely reliant on his human parents, we are completely reliant on our Father for his abundant life that he promises.

During this Advent season, let's sink into God the Father's arms. Let's allow ourselves to be swaddled by God. And let's be grateful for the humility that our Lord Jesus embraced for us.

*Prayer: Loving Father, you swaddle us, you hold us, you rock us to sleep, you feed us; you are our shelter in sunshine and storm. Thank you for your abundant provision. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for sending your Son so that we might participate in his Sonship. We give you honour, praise, and glory in the Lord Jesus Christ's name. Amen.*



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