



ADVENT
REFLECTIONS
& DEVOTIONS



BETHEL
BIBLE CHURCH



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advent | 'ad, vent | noun
:: the arrival of a notable
person, thing or event.





INTRODUCTION

“He that was without mother becomes without father (without mother of His former state, without father of His second). He who is not carnal is incarnate; the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever.” (Gregory of Nazianzus, 329-389)

It is so fun as a dad to experience Christmas through the eyes and ears of my children. It is refreshing to see them caught up in the wonder of all things that make Christmas so special.

One of the funniest things I remember about my children being little was their ever-expanding Christmas wish list. At virtually every commercial or ad in the newspaper you can hear them say, “I want that!... I’ve wanted it all my life...”

What is true about you at five years old is also true about you at 25, 35, 55, and 75. There is nothing on this earth that you could unwrap on Christmas morning that is going to completely satisfy you.

C.S. Lewis said, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

In his search for what would satisfy almost 3,500 years ago, Solomon came to this conclusion: “That God has put eternity into a man’s heart...” (Eccl. 3:11).

His point is that the things that are temporal—money, pleasure, security, and significance—will never be fully satisfying. They can’t be. They are here today and gone tomorrow. We were designed with eternity in our hearts, and nothing less than that which is eternal will satisfy us.

What is true on this Christmas was true on the first Christmas. We tend to forget God initiated the first Gift exchange. God is the greatest Gift Giver.

Perhaps the greatest Christmas verse in the Bible is the one most familiar to us, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

According to John 3:16, God gave us the most unbelievable and costly gift. He gave us His Son, Jesus Christ—a gift that expresses the depth of His love for us and desire for a relationship with us.

And the way we receive that gift is by believing.

By believing it was God’s Son who was born in that Bethlehem stable.

By believing it was God’s Son who died on that middle cross.

By believing it was God’s Son who was buried in a borrowed tomb.

By believing it was God’s Son who was raised from the dead on that Easter morning.

And that is the truth about Christmas.

As much as we might love the trappings and the traditions of Christmas, we need to be more impressed with its truth. I think most of us would say Christmas is our favorite time of the year, but it is also the most stressful. We get excited about it but we are always glad when it’s over. One of the reasons for our exhaustion is that we get too caught up in the earthly gifts and not caught up enough in the Heavenly gift. We get too easily distracted by all the glitter around Christmas and miss the glory of it.

The Glory of Christmas was revealed by the angels to the Shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth.

“Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10).

The Good News is that on that first Christmas morning, a Savior was born to us:

A Savior who can forgive all our sins.

A Savior who can give us new life—eternal life.

A Savior who can strengthen us and guide us and protect us.

A Savior who can bring order and purpose to every area of our lives.

The only question is, do you believe in Jesus?

Have you trusted in Him as your Savior?

If you are finding yourself this season caught up in the spirit of Christmas but uncommitted in your heart to the person whose birth we celebrate, God is offering you His Christmas gift.

It's the gift of a personal relationship with His Son, Jesus Christ.

Advent literally means “coming” or “arrival.” Our hope is that these devotionals will help to kindle in you afresh the joy of the coming of Christ this Christmas season. And while you remember and celebrate the “arrival” of Jesus at Christmas, may there also stir in you a longing for return—His future coming, the second Advent.

May this be one of the sweetest and best Christmases you have ever had—not because of the gifts you might give or receive, but for the gift of the Savior you have received and long to see when He returns.

Merry Christmas!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ross Strader". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "R" and a cursive "Strader".

Ross Strader
Senior Pastor | Bethel Bible Church





HOPE

ADVENT | Week 1

Hope is a word we hear often during Christmas or the Advent season. It is important to make sure that our understanding of this powerful word is correct because the New Testament idea of hope is very different from the way the world thinks about hope.

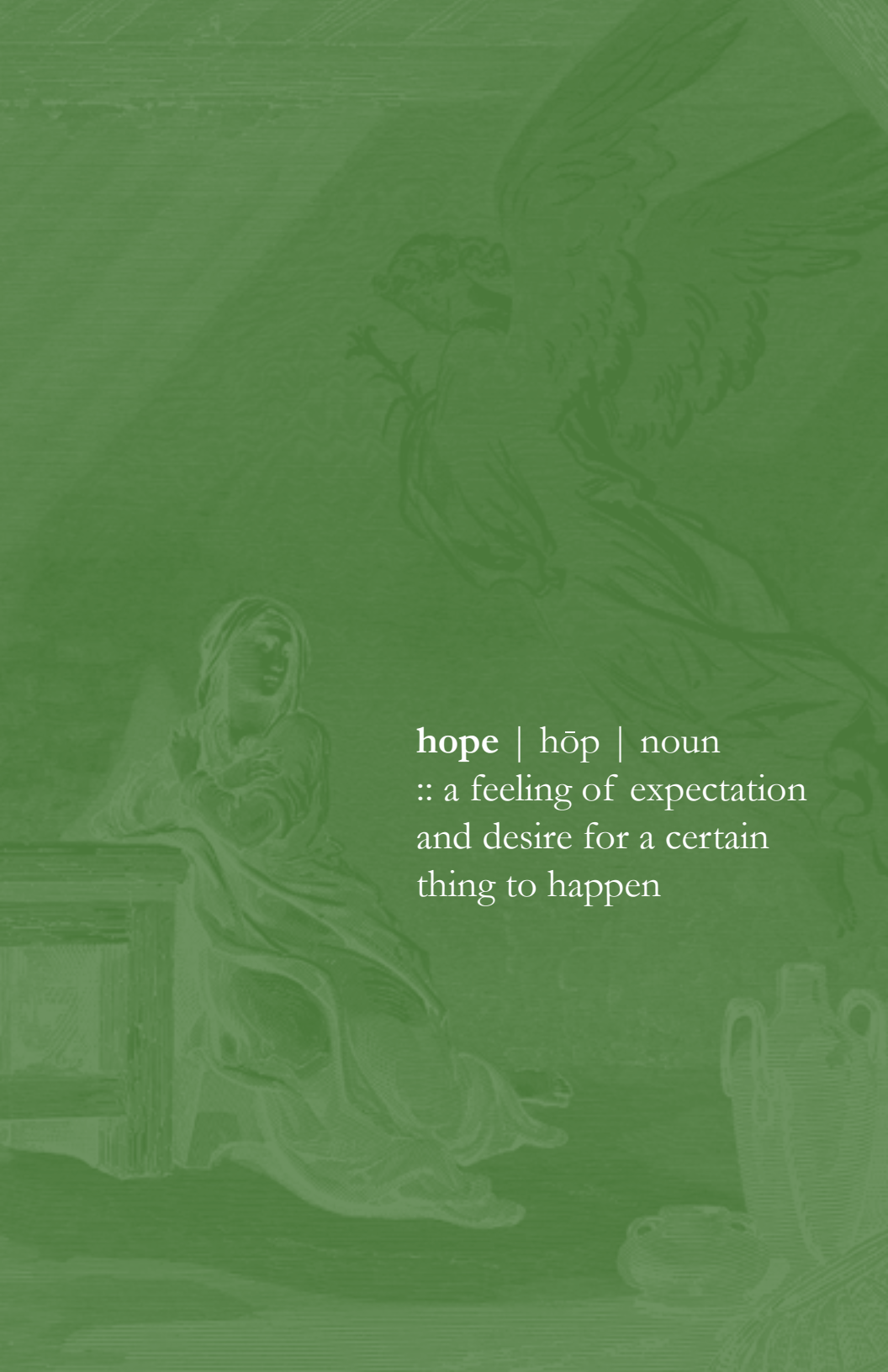
We might hear someone say, “Will the Cowboys win the championship this year?” And someone will respond, “I don’t know, I hope so!” Someone might stop and ask, “Do you think it will snow on Christmas Day?” And often the reply will be, “I’m not sure, but I hope so.” Hope is commonly thought of as a desire for some future event or circumstance that we cannot be certain will come to pass. But that is not the way the New Testament speaks about hope.

Titus 1:2 “...in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began.”

Hebrews 3:6 “...but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.”

Hebrews 6:11 “...And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end...”

We have a fully assured hope because it is based on a God who never lies. We have a fully assured hope because it is based on the faithfulness of God’s Son, not ours. We have a fully assured hope because of the countless saints that have gone before us.



hope | hōp | noun
:: a feeling of expectation
and desire for a certain
thing to happen

DAY
1

Christmas Priorities

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”

Romans 13:11 (NIV)

How would your Christmas plans change if you knew Christ would return on December 25, 2019? Would His arrival affect which Christmas parties you attend? Which family members you spend time with? Which gifts you need to purchase? How you write your end-of-the-year Christmas letter to your friends and family?

As believers, we know Christ will return. We also know that we should live as if His return is near. But we’ve been waiting for a long time and while we continue to believe He will come, it doesn’t seem likely that it will happen any time soon. Paul likens this mentality to spiritual slumber and warns of its negative impact.

Romans is written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. Paul did not plant this church but received news that the church was flourishing. He very much desired to visit but was frustrated in his plan. So he wrote them a letter instead, the majority of which was designed to put them on a correct theological foundation regarding the basis of salvation—namely that salvation is a gift of God, not of works.

“... salvation is
a gift of God,
not of works.”

In God’s sovereignty, it would be this letter that would become the basis of the Protestant Reformation a thousand years later as Luther meditated on Romans 1:17, “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

In chapters 12-15 of Paul's letter, he turns from laying a theological foundation to focus on practical application. He likely felt that a church in Rome was somewhat vulnerable. Not only had he not visited the church, but they were geographically distant from the birthplace of the Church, Jerusalem. There was also a growing time distance from the birth, life, death, and resurrection of their Savior. And finally, the culture of Rome was deceptively spiritual and focused on indulging the flesh even in the pursuit of religion.

Paul warns the Romans to wake up spiritually and be prepared for the return of Christ. Remaining in a state of slumber and adopting the spirit of inertia gives us a false sense of safety. Dabbling in the dark deeds listed in verse 13—carousing, drunkenness, immorality, debauchery, dissension, jealousy—sounds like the culture's definition of the holidays, doesn't it?

Paul reminds us to hang on because our salvation is not complete. We were saved—justification—when we trusted Christ for our salvation. We are being saved—sanctification—in this life as the Father conforms us to the image of His Son. We will be saved—glorification—when Christ returns and we are united with Him eternally. It is this third sense of salvation that Paul refers to in verse 11: "...our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."

Maintaining a wakeful state and reminding ourselves that Christ is coming helps us put aside the deeds of darkness listed above. Who wants to be caught in any of those activities if Christ were to suddenly show up?

So have yourself a merry little Christmas. But as you plan to celebrate the first coming, leave plenty of room for the second.

Prayer

Father, thank you for sending your Son. We celebrate His birth this season. As we do, keep us mindful that He is coming again soon. May that impact our thoughts and actions, not just at Christmas, but throughout the year. Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. If you knew Christ was coming back on December 25th, what changes would this make to your holiday plans? What would Christmas day look like?
2. Duke Ellington is quoted as saying "I don't need more time, I need a deadline." What do you think he meant and how might that apply to living like Christ's return is near?

3. Paul uses the concept of spiritual wakefulness to illustrate the impact of living expectantly of Christ's return. One of the current virtues of secular culture is being "woke," which means being sensitive to social injustice. How does Paul's sense of being awake in Romans 13 correspond (or not) with the culture's sense of being "woke"?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. How would you spend Christmas Eve if you knew Jesus was coming on Christmas day?
2. Name three things you can do before Christmas to express your love for your neighbors.

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

DAY 2

The Recipe for Hope

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 (ESV)

We really like the word “hope.”

We see it used in political campaigns and charity fundraising and especially at Christmas. Let’s be honest—if you attend a church any time around December, you’re going to hear about hope.

And it’s true. Christmas is absolutely about hope. All those preachers and speakers and songs are right to talk about finding hope during the Advent season.

We like the concept of “hope” because we can attach whatever meaning we want. It’s a nice, warm fuzzy word that’s pretty easy to throw around. But it can be difficult to know exactly what hope is.

“... it can be
difficult to
know exactly
what hope is.”

That's why 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 is helpful for us. It defines hope. This passage opens by telling us that we have all the gifts we need as we wait for the "revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 7). As we live and exist in a dark world, it can feel a little hopeless, but this verse tells us we have the skills and ability to live in hope of the coming King.

And then, amazingly, it tells just what those gifts are. It describes these wonderful promises that are actually the very gifts that bring us hope. First, we know we'll be able to endure because Christ sustains us to the end (v. 8). What a promise! We can have hope because Jesus will see us through. But there's more.

"This is the recipe for hope. To know that even when it's dark... God has promised to keep His children whole..."

The second gift is even sweeter because God's Word then tells us that Christ will present us guiltless (v. 8)! When Christ returns and makes everything whole and right, His children will stand before the Father completely blameless because of the mercy He's shown.

This is the recipe for hope. To know that even when it's dark—even when it seems like there's no way out of the mess the world is in—God has promised to keep His children whole and steadfast.

And when that glorious day comes when Jesus returns, we won't be marred by sin and death. Because we belong to Him, He'll present us as His own, blameless and free. If you don't know Christ, pray and ask that He would reveal Himself to you. Then confess and believe, and gain a hope that will never run dry.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth begins with the word "grace" (v. 3). What is "grace," and from whom is this grace given? How do we see God's grace at work in this passage?
2. What actions or activities does Paul attribute to God in this passage? To Jesus Christ?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. As believers in Christ, Paul says that all believers are given gifts (v. 7). What spiritual gifts have you been given by God, and how have you used them?
2. Count all the promises God makes to His people in this passage. How many did you find? What are those promises, and how do they give us hope in this life as we wait for the day of Christ's return?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Be On Guard

“Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore *stay awake*—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

And what I say to you I say to all: *Stay awake.*”

Mark 13:33-37 (ESV, emphasis added)

So there we were, sitting with nervous excitement waiting for the action to be unleashed.

The crowd jumped as a boom shook the air and artillery rounds answered one another across the field. Green plumes of smoke slowly snaked through the air, testing the nerves of the anxious observers. Soon, figures appeared. First one man, then ten emerged—camouflaged, armed, and cautiously following their commanding officer.

Like a scene from a movie, the crowd watched in anxious anticipation, their stomachs tightening over what would come next during this “shock and awe” weapons display. Few were prepared to feel as they did on this particular day. After all, this was not a mission-turned-nightmare-trip to Syria; this was a graduation

ceremony from Army Basic Training in Fort Benning, Georgia—a surprising place for lessons on what it means to be “on guard” and “awake!”

Jesus often taught important lessons to His disciples when they least expected it and used striking and memorable images. In Mark 13—known as the Olivet Discourse—Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives with Peter, James, John, and Andrew looking across the great Kidron Valley toward the temple. Instead of glorying with His disciples in its “wonderful stones” and towering beauty (v. 1), Jesus instead offered them a lesson in eschatology, foretelling the coming day of destruction for not only the temple and all of Jerusalem, but for the entire unbelieving world.

In the passages that follow, the Light of the World foretold of a time when the earth would be consumed by darkness (vv. 3-32). During this time, sin would be darker than any other time in history. Man would fight to destroy man, the forces of the natural world would fight to destroy man, and the Antichrist would fight to destroy all. The only ones who would be saved from destruction would be the believers who were awake and on guard. But, no one can know when this great Day of the Lord will come (v. 32).

Jesus then told a story to help His disciples understand why this matters. A master goes on a journey and puts his doorkeeper on guard to protect his estate, commanding him to “stay awake” and await his return, which could be at any time of the day or night. That means sleep is not an option. Likewise, Jesus’ command to be on guard and awake was not optional. In fact, it was repeated *three times* in these five verses for emphasis.

Thankfully, this is not a command to a constant physical state of alertness. Only “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4). Other passages of Scripture help us understand that for believers, staying awake is a call to a *spiritual alertness* and a rousing to action in strength that only comes from the Lord.

God-given strength is described throughout Scripture as a “garment” or piece of clothing. The prophet Isaiah cries, “Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on your beautiful garments” (Isa. 52:1). These powerful images are meant to convey a powerful truth: God gives His image-bearing children weaponry that ensures victory over the spiritual forces of darkness that daily battle against us.

During the holiday season, it is right for us to ponder and celebrate the *First Advent: the first coming of God the Son to the earth*. The First Advent reflects the first half of the gospel message: because of God’s love for us, He sent His only begotten Son into this sinful world! But some may honestly wonder, why did Jesus need to be sent to the earth?

“... because of
God’s love for us,
He sent His only
begotten Son into
this sinful world!”

The *Second Advent: the Second Coming of God the Son to the earth* answers this question. The Second Advent reflects the second half of the gospel message: God sent His Son into the world to rescue us from the certain destruction that will come from His judgment of sinners. Mark 13 reminds us that His judgment is coming for every person and that we don't know when it will come, so we must be ready! We must be ready and prepared to die, and we must also be ready and prepared to live!

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I praise You for you have come and You will come again! Thank You, Lord my God, for saving me from destruction by calling me to faith in Your Son, Jesus. Thank You for the gift of Your Holy Spirit, which indwells me and gives me the hope of glory that will come. But until that day, Lord, open my eyes as I meditate on your Word. Let me always be clothed in Your holy garments of truth, righteousness, peace, salvation, and faith. Give me confidence that Your Holy Spirit will guide the words of my mouth and the work of my hands so that in both living and in dying, I will bring glory to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Are you prepared to die? If not, pray for the salvation of the Lord through faith in Jesus.
2. Are you prepared to live? What are some things you can do to be spiritually awakened?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What is the message of the gospel?
2. What is the First Advent and how does it reflect the first half of the gospel message?
3. What is the Second Advent and how does it reflect the second half of the gospel message?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

DAY
4

Unconquerable

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

John 1:1-5 (ESV)

This summer, a team from Bethel went to Spain for a mission trip and visited the town of Gerona. Gerona has quite a history. In the early 19th century, Napoleon set out to conquer all of Europe, and he largely succeeded. One of the few exceptions was Gerona. The French army tried to defeat the city on no less than three occasions, but Gerona remained unconquerable. Our passage today talks about a light that is unconquerable. Though there is a darkness that may appear to be as powerful as the armies of Napoleon, it will never overcome the light of Jesus Christ.

John knew his fair share of darkness. As the last living apostle, he experienced the martyrdom of many friends. The Church endured vicious persecution under the emperor Domitian, and it was during this time that John was exiled to a barren island called Patmos.

Yet, John begins his Gospel not with doom and gloom, but with hope and certainty. He says in verse 5 there is one thing this darkness cannot overcome—light. The light of Jesus is unconquerable.

John had plenty of reason for his hope. Persecution had only grown the Church, not destroyed it. He lived to see Paul, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Silas, Luke, and so many others zealously spread the gospel. But, the foundation of John's hope wasn't any particular event or circumstance. His hope was in Jesus. Jesus is more than a man; He is God. And as God, He is eternal, creator, and the giver of life. Only God is unconquerable.

John starts his Gospel at the very beginning; his first words echo Genesis 1:1. John is saying that before our beginning, Jesus already existed in eternity past. To illustrate his meaning, John calls Jesus "the Word" or "Logos"—a Greek word that is packed with meaning. "Logos" describes established moral and scientific order and the force that gives life to all living things. John says this eternally existing, life-giving truth is a person—Jesus.

John says Jesus was God and was with God. John is communicating a unity of place and purpose with God the Father. There is complete shared intimacy and essence. All that is true of God the Father is true of Jesus the Son. They are one in the same.

**"All that is true of God
the Father is true of
Jesus the Son."**

As God, Jesus is also Creator. Verse 3 says that everything was made through Jesus without exception. He is the very same Creator of Genesis 1:1. Many in John's day believed Jesus was a sort of demi-god, created by God before everything else. But this belief far underestimates who Jesus is. Jesus is not a creation; He is the Creator.

Finally, Jesus is God because He gives life. The word John uses is *zoe*. It meant more than just breath and a heartbeat. It meant vitality, movement, and energy. Jewish thought understood it as a divine gift to be cherished.

Have you ever been to a place so beautiful it took your breath away? Or experienced such joy and peace that you said something like, "This is the life!" John is saying Jesus is, "the Life." In the same way God breathed life into Adam in the garden, Jesus gives "the Life" to us.

Notice John doesn't say that life was from Jesus, as if life and Jesus could be separated. Life is in Him. John says the life we get from Jesus is the kind of light that is unconquerable by any amount of darkness. The light is unconquerable because it comes from the eternal, creating, life-giving God. That very same God put on flesh and walked among us. His name is Jesus.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What specifically do you think John means by darkness? To help, read

John 1:9, 3:19. Where do you see traces of this darkness in the world around you? In yourself?

2. In what ways do we underestimate who Jesus is? What consequences might that have in how we follow Him? In our obedience, worship, devotion?
3. What are some ways you find yourself placing your trust in the things Jesus does instead of who He is in His nature?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Have you heard people say that our world was not created by God? What are some ways people may live differently if they believed there was a God who created them versus those who don't?
2. Have you ever had a nightlight in your room? Why did you like having that light at night? What does that tell you about why John used light as a picture to describe Jesus?
3. Do you feel like you've ever experienced knowing Jesus as a person instead of simply seeing the things He does? Think about the same question in regard to your parents or a friend. How is knowing them different than knowing only some things they do?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

DAY 5

The Hope of Days to Come

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (ESV)

What makes you hopeful this time of year? Is it the assurance of colder weather or the chance to rest after a hectic school year? Is it the traditions that will be carried on, gifts that will be opened, or memories that will be made this Christmas? Maybe your hope lies instead on the promise of a new year and a new beginning after a season filled with pain and disappointment.

To hope is to “cherish a desire with anticipation” or to “want something good to happen or be true.” Hope is not just a hallmark of the Christmas season, but the very anchor of our faith (Heb. 11:1). It is the emotional reservoir that propels us to walk through seasons of uncertainty; without it, our spirits become downcast, and discouragement quickly sets in.

“Hope is not just a hallmark of the Christmas season, but the very anchor of our faith.”

By the time we reach Jeremiah 33:14-16, the people of Judah were on the verge of hopelessness. For nearly 50 years, Jeremiah had warned of divine

judgment that would come if the people persisted in chasing after false gods. Now, his prophecy had come to pass.

The armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon were quickly closing in. Within a matter of months, the streets of Jerusalem would be filled with the victims of war and the great temple of Solomon would be reduced to rubble. Those who survived the bloodshed would be carried away by the enemy and forced to remain as exiles in Babylon for the next 70 years.

The people of Israel had no security, no safety, no control, and no way to escape their enemies. With their lives in shambles and their futures uncertain, they would have longed for a time when relief would come, for a ray of hope to shine through the darkness of their desperation.

Perhaps you can relate.

In verse 14, God breaks through the Israelites' (and our) fearful realities with words of promise about the future: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made..." This "promise" refers back to Jeremiah 29:10, when God assured His people that He would eventually bring them "back to this place" (Jerusalem) after their time of exile.

The words that followed this hope-filled promise are some of the most often quoted in all of Scripture: "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11, emphasis added). God is telling His people that their despair will not last forever; the time will come when He will fulfill His promise to restore them, physically and spiritually. Until then, they are called to trust Him.

"Since the moment God spoke of His promise... God's people have hoped for a Savior."

Verse 15 goes on to state God's greatest promise to Israel—the promise of a "righteous Branch," a King-Messiah that would emerge from David's line to rule and reign on his throne forever (2 Sam. 7:8-17). A similar image is found in Isaiah: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit" (Isa. 11:1). Both images depict a restored hope for the future: new life emerging from what appeared to be a dead stump.

Since the moment God spoke His promise of a "seed" to Abraham in Genesis 22:17-18, God's people have hoped for a Savior—One who could forgive their past, redeem their present, and secure their future.

In this passage, God says that "seed" will become the Branch that brings the coveted blessings of salvation, security, justice, and righteousness to the earth.

Through this promised One, God's people would experience a physical (and more importantly, spiritual) rescue and restoration. Through Him, they would be called righteous.

As they sensed the enemy advancing, these were the promises Israel clung to. This was their hope.

Today, God's people are given a different perspective. Whereas Israel was looking ahead to the fulfillment of these promises, we look back on them. We know that God kept His Word. Just as He promised, Judah returned from exile in Babylon at the end of 70 years. The people eventually rebuilt the war-torn walls of Jerusalem as well as the temple and, thereafter, a great spiritual revival occurred in Israel (Ezra 6; Neh. 11-12).

Most importantly, God kept His promise to send this Righteous Branch—His own Son, Jesus Christ. Through Him, our enemy—Satan—is defeated. Death is conquered, and those who believe in Him can dwell securely in His hands knowing our sins have been forgiven and our souls have been saved. God kept his promise to send us a Savior, and through Him, we are called righteous.

For the Church today, these are the promises we cling to. This is our hope.

The Advent season is not simply a countdown to December 25th, but a compass that directs our hope. While the world is waiting to open gifts, longing for the thrill of Christmas morning, and anticipating a better, brighter new year, the Church waits for the day of Christ's return, longs for the hope of Heaven, and anticipates a future of peace, love, wholeness, and mercy with the coming of a new millennium.

“Behold, the days are coming...”

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Review Jeremiah 33:14-16. What specific promises does the Lord make to Israel? How do we see God's grace (unmerited favor toward mankind) on display in this passage?
2. How would you define a believer's "hope," and how is this different from the type of hope held by the world?
3. What kinds of things can cause our hope to become derailed, even as believers in Christ? How can fixing our hope on the Lord (Ps. 130:5-7), rather than on people or things, guard against discouragement and disappointment?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Psalm 130:7 tells God's people to "hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him there is plentiful redemption." What do you think it means to have "hope" in the Lord?
2. In Jeremiah 33, the Israelites had disobeyed and turned away from God, but God still promised to send them a Savior who would one day rescue them from their enemies and bring them to safety. He promised to save them even though they hadn't (and couldn't) do anything to earn His forgiveness or love. We call this "grace"—receiving something good from God that you don't deserve.

Read the passages below aloud.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast...For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 2:4-9; Romans 6:23

What do these verses tell us about God? How is He described? What "gifts" does the Lord offer us that other people or things cannot? Why are these gifts better than anything we could hope for this Christmas?

3. How does the gift of your salvation give you hope for the future, rather than fear or discouragement?

Listen to | ***"My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less"***

by Edward Mote (1834)

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus Christ, my righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.

When darkness veils His lovely face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;

In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.

His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my hope and stay.

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in Him be found;
In Him, my righteousness, alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

Notes:

Year: _____

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Can True Happiness Be Found?

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”

John 1:6-9 (ESV)

What would bring you true lasting happiness?

This has been a question that people have been searching to answer since the beginning of time. Take a moment and think about your answer. Perhaps it would be more money in the bank, or a better relationship, or your children to be more obedient. If you have ever stayed at a Motel 6 or heard one of the commercials, you are familiar with the name Tom Bodett, the man famous for the phrase, “We will leave the light on for you.” When Tom Bodett thought about the question of happiness, he said that everyone needs three things: someone to love, something to do, and something to hope for.

That is a pretty good list until the person you love does not love you back, you cannot find something to do, and the thing you hope for never comes to pass. So can true happiness be found?

In John 1:6-9 we are introduced to a man named John. John was often referred to as John the Messenger or John the Baptist. God had a unique plan for John’s life, and like many of us, probably nothing he would have selected for himself. John

was chosen by God to carry out a particular mission. This mission was to bring a message of hope that pointed to one specific person: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

John's purpose and mission from God was to bear witness or proclaim that a light, the true light, had finally came to the world. John was not the light but was to testify or share the truth that the light had finally arrived. This Light came to give light to everyone. But, for 400 years, the light of God had remained hidden from the world when God remained silent.

**“... a message
of hope that
pointed to one
specific person:
Jesus Christ, the
Son of God.”**

Three hundred years before God's silence, He had promised that a faithful and trusted ruler would be sent. This promise was proclaimed by the prophet Micah: “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days” (Mic. 5:2). But in the days of John, 700 years had passed since that promise, so it is easy to imagine that many people began to lose hope and had even given up.

Then one day a strange man who wore clothing made of camel's hair and ate bugs for breakfast began telling all those who would listen that God was faithful to His promise. A trusted and faithful Ruler had finally arrived, and this Ruler was coming to bring them light. This light is what we celebrate and commemorate during Advent, the coming of the promised Light.

Tom Bodett was right when he said that happiness can only be found if we have something to hope in. But it is not the amount of hope that we have that matters. What matters is *what* we are hoping in. If our hope is found in our financial security, that hope can be easily lost. If our hope is found in whether our children excel in school or sports, that hope can be easily shattered. If our hope is found in what others think of us, that hope can easily crumble. If our hope is placed in anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, happiness will always evade us.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, there are so many things and people that I have placed my hope in. I confess that I have chased after happiness in many ways. Help me to believe the truth that true happiness can only be found in the true light that You sent into the world. Shine Your light on the areas of my life where I need to hope more in You. Thank You, Lord, for sending the true Light that can give me light. Without this Light I would be completely hopeless. In Jesus name, Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How is the biblical meaning of hope different than what you usually think?
2. Where in your life do you find yourself losing hope?
3. What promise of God can you use to fight against where you are losing hope?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What would bring you more happiness right now?
2. How could that happiness then be lost or taken away?
3. What is the only thing we can look to for happiness that can never be taken away from us?
4. How can we as a family celebrate the One that came into the world as the true Light?

Notes:

Year: _____

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Abiding Hope in Christ

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”

And again it is said, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”

And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

Romans 15:4-13 (ESV)

You have probably heard that hope is **H**aving **O**nly **P**ositive **E**xpectations. And for glass-half-full kind of people, this acrostic probably works splendidly. But for those of us that tend toward anxiety and despair and depression, it seems kitschy and unworkable. Hope is harder for some of us to access. But in this passage in Romans 15, Paul, the master lawyer and logician, is building an argument for hope and giving us a roadmap for how to get there.

By the time Paul gets to this penultimate chapter in his letter to the churches in Rome, he has argued for the primary doctrines of his theology: condemnation, justification, sanctification, and the sovereignty of God. Beginning in chapter 12, though, Paul turns to applying these doctrines to the everyday life of the believer with a series of imperatives. He tells them, in view of all of these things I have said about God and His character, here are some things that you should do.

In Chapter 12, he admonishes the Roman Christians to “present [their] bodies as... living sacrifice[s].” In Chapter 13, he tells them to be “subject to the governing authorities” and that “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” In Chapter 14, he tells them to avoid quarrels over insignificant details and not to “put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”

This is the backdrop for Chapter 15, which starts with a completion of Paul’s thought from Chapter 14 about the appropriateness of certain foods for the believer. Paul encourages the Roman Christians to lay aside their own rights in favor of their neighbors and for the sake of unity. Intermingled with his discussion about unity, Paul is simultaneously discussing hope for the individual.

Like any good debater, Paul starts his discussion of hope in verse 4 with his premise. He tells us that that everything that was written in former days was written for our instruction. Given Paul’s background as a Pharisee of Pharisees, we know that he has the Old Testament in view here when he discusses “whatever was written in former days.” But he makes it clear that at this point in his life, the scriptures are not just an intellectual pursuit. The goal of this instruction is that “through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” For Paul, Scripture was not written primarily to make us smarter, it was written to make us more hopeful.

“For Paul, Scripture was not written primarily to make us smarter, it was written to make us more hopeful.”

Paul’s argument for hope starts in earnest in verse 8 where he tells us the two-fold purpose of Christ’s coming: to fulfill the promises made to the patriarchs; and in order that Gentiles—us—would glorify God for His mercy. Paul then supports his argument with three verses from the Old Testament: Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, and Psalm 117:1.

In Psalm 18:49, David is celebrating a military victory by praising God in the presence of the Gentiles. David's praise is reminiscent of the promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3 that in him "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Paul then quotes Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 117:1 as admonitions to the Gentile to praise the Lord. Why should Paul admonish the Gentiles to praise? Because, like in the battle referenced in Psalm 18:49 where David was victorious, God has been merciful.

Paul ends his argument by quoting the prophet Isaiah, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." For Paul, the line between, Jesus, the "root of Jesse," and hope could not be any straighter. And this is what we celebrate at Advent: the coming of the root of Jesse, the coming of the personification of mercy, and the coming of hope. Jesus was of the "house and lineage of David," and it is in Him that we have been shown mercy. It is in Him that we have hope.

Thus, in Paul's argument, David sets the example for praise as he praises the Lord for His mercy in giving him a military victory "among the nations." He praises the Lord for His salvation and because He "shown steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever." He then twice admonishes Gentiles to praise in unity with Israel. But he wraps up his argument by telling us that we praise because the root of Jesse has come.

At bottom, what we find out is that hope—as it is revealed in Scripture—is not mere kitsch. It is not an emotion or a destination to escape to or even an expectation. Real abiding hope is found only in a Person. And that Person is revealed in a Book.

Paul tells us that the source of hope is Holy Scripture. Not because words on a page or old stories "written in former days" are inherently hopeful, but because those words and stories point us to a Person—a Person that put on human flesh and walked where we walk and felt what we feel. He came near to us and He became like us so He could relate to us. And show us mercy. And trusting in His present and future mercifulness, we can be hopeful.

Prayer

Take time to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the hope that He gives through Scripture and His son, Jesus.

Our Father, thank you for the gift of your Word and how it redirects us to the source of our hope, Jesus.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Considering today's passage, how would you define hope?
2. Would you normally describe this time of year as hopeful? Why or why not?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Are you a glass half full or a glass half empty kind of person? Why do you think you are the way you are? Does the way you respond to life in that way glorify God?
2. How can your faith in Jesus and His promises of great things help you live with hope in your heart?

Notes:

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PEACE

ADVENT | Week 2

Peace is one of those words that we are all familiar with, whether it is used to describe a calmed spirit, the ceasing of war, or a casual greeting. Peace has its own iconic symbol that can be seen on bumper stickers and at the center of social movements.

It is a word that is also significant to the biblical story.

The angels announce “peace” to the shepherds on the hillside the night of Jesus birth (Luke 2:14).

Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus Isaiah prophesied, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end...” (Isa. 9:6-7).

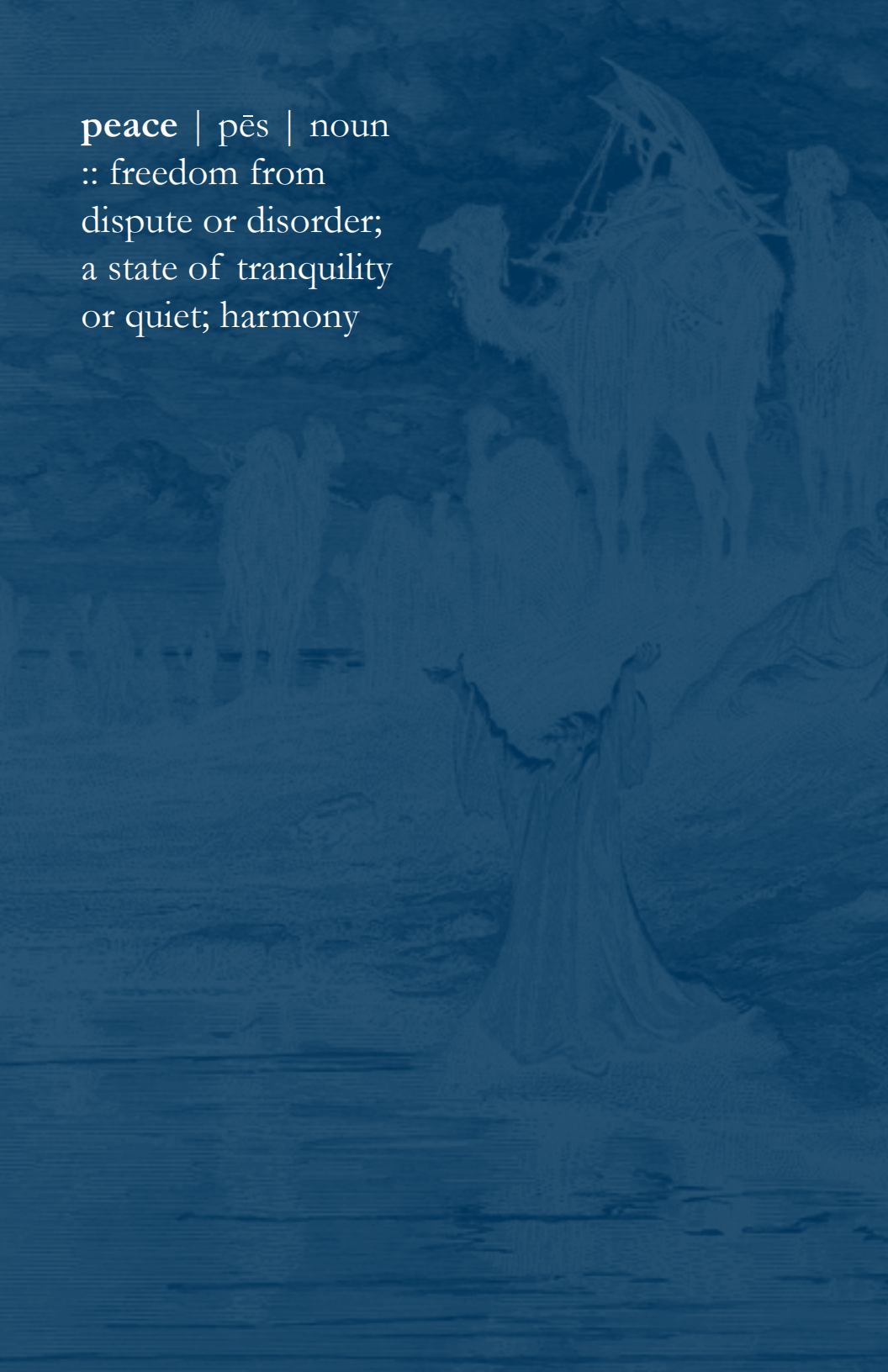
The Gospel writer Luke records the days when Caesar Augustus was summoning the world under the name of peace to increase the burden of taxes. God was summoning the world to fulfill His Word, to establish the throne of His Son, and to make the way for a peace that will have no end.

God’s glory is revealed in the coming of His Son Jesus. God’s peace comes everywhere His Son is received. And the eternal promise is, of the increase, there will be no end!

Isaiah is looking forward. Luke is looking back. Both are looking at the same event. Both are seeing the same day. Isaiah writes with hope. Luke writes of fulfillment. Peace is announced. Peace has come!

peace | pēs | noun

:: freedom from
dispute or disorder;
a state of tranquility
or quiet; harmony



Delightful Disruption

"Send out your light and your truth;
 let them lead me;
 let them bring me to your holy hill
 and to your dwelling!
 Then I will go to the altar of God,
 to God my exceeding joy,
 and I will praise you with the lyre,
 O God, my God.
 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 and why are you in turmoil within me?
 Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
 my salvation and my God."

Psalm 43:3-5 (ESV)

Imagine yourself waking up in the middle of the night needing a glass of water. You're half asleep, trying to maneuver through what you thought was a familiar bedroom only to find yourself tripping over a stray shoe or bumping into a wall you could have sworn wasn't there before. You don't want to turn on the light because it would disrupt the comfort of your eyes and your sleepy disposition. We've all been there. We'd rather trip, stumble, or even fall before we try to turn on the light.

In Psalm 43, we see David seeking after God after he has been attacked by his enemies and sees injustice surrounding him. Some scholars believe he has turned away from God and is seeking Him again for deliverance (v. 2). Others believe he is writing this psalm in reference to his fleeing from Absalom (2 Sam. 17). Though David is known as the man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), what he knows about God and what he is experiencing are going head to head with each other (v. 5).

“Send out Your light and Your truth...” (v. 3a). David is seeking the One he knows can bring not only clarity to his current circumstance, but more importantly, peace. David isn't just saying a rote, religious prayer; he makes it personal. Twice he says “my God” (vv. 4-5). He calls out to his God who delights to bring light and truth. Light and truth are part of peace and allow David (and all who call on the Lord) to dwell in perfect communion with Him.

“Where there is joy, there is peace.”
“... let them [light and truth] lead me... Then I will go to... God my exceeding joy...” (vv. 3b, 4) David is asking for God's direction to His presence—the very place he will find peace. He is relying on the One who is his “exceeding joy” (v. 4), in whom there is the “fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11) even in the midst of his circumstances. Where there is joy, there is peace.

“Why are you cast down... Hope in God...” (v. 5) David is preaching the Gospel to himself. He is reminding his heart and mind to not lean on his feelings or the season he is in, but to trust in the Lord. He is reminding himself of the future faithfulness of God—“... I shall again praise Him...” (v. 5b)—and the constant mercy of God—“... my salvation, my God” (v. 5b) all which bring him perfect peace.

Peace is a central theme seen throughout the Advent and Christmas season. As believers, we know that Christ is the Prince of Peace, and often we tend to overlook this because it becomes like white noise, especially this time of year. But when we realize the beauty and the astronomical price Christ paid to be our peace (Eph. 2:12-19) and to bring us peace (Isa. 9:6; John 14:27; Rom. 5:1; John 16:33), we should stand in awe. Jesus delightfully obeyed and descended to earth so that we could have peace. He came in human form, felt the things we feel, experienced the same temptations (but didn't sin), and most importantly endured a death we should have died all so that we could know Him and therefore have ultimate peace.

“Jesus delightfully obeyed and descended to earth so that we could have peace.”

There are many times we find ourselves walking in dark seasons, whether that is the result of our own sin, the sin of others, or simply because we live in a fallen world. If we try to find peace on our own or solve problems by making our

own “peace,” we are just like the person walking around in the dark, tripping over obstacles and end up causing more harm to ourselves and sometimes others.

We must have light and truth in order to have peace. Light reveals truth; truth brings peace. We cannot make these happen on our own, though we try. God exposes our sin through His Word (truth) and through Christ (light), just like turning on a light would reveal the obstacles that are in a darkened room. In the moment, it disrupts our comfort and causes us to sometimes complain but, in the end, it is for our eternal good and for His glory. Just like the night Christ entered the world and disrupted the plans of the enemy: He began to shine His light in darkness thus paving the way for our peace.

We cannot rely on this world or our feelings in the dark seasons or any season in our lives. Our feelings are very real, but they are not reliable. We must rely on the light and truth we know and read in God’s Word. The truth is yes, we will feel hurt, disappointment and maybe depression, but for those in Christ, we are not without hope (2 Cor. 4:7; 6:10a).

“Our feelings are very real, but they are not reliable.”

Our hope isn’t that God will remove us from the suffering but that He is with us in the midst of it. He is Emmanuel (God with us). He is our Prince of Peace. He is our empathetic High Priest (Heb. 4:14). We can rejoice in all seasons of life, not because everything is going well or we have everything we want, but because our most desperate need has been met in the person and completed work of Christ. He has shown us His light and His truth. He has become our peace and will forever be our peace.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for being my peace and the price You paid by coming to earth and sacrificing Your life so that I may know you and have peace with you. Help me to continually run to you when circumstances are difficult and when life is going well. Lord, help me to rely on You and the Holy Spirit when my feelings overwhelm me and open Your Word in every season of life. Thank you for being my source of light and truth. Thank You that You are with me and you have good plans for me.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. When you find yourself in a difficult season, who or what do you tend to run to? Does God feel far away or closer?
2. When life’s seasons aren’t difficult, do you feel you are as close with God?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What does the world tell us brings us peace? What does God say brings us peace?
2. How can we remind ourselves to go to God when difficult things happen in our lives?
3. When things are going right in our lives, how can we remind ourselves to continue to go to God?

Notes:

Year: _____

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God Is Holy

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.”

Isaiah 6:1-4 (ESV)

Holiness is the only attribute of God’s that is repeated three times. But what exactly does it mean, and why does it matter? God’s holiness is the foundation of the gospel!

It’s a fact of the human experience that sometimes things have to get darker before we can actually see the light. When everything around us is going well and we are enjoying prosperity, it’s difficult for us to keep our eyes on the Lord. More than 2,700 years ago, the prophet Isaiah was experiencing a profound season of darkness, but he was about to see a light unlike any other!

The first five chapters of Isaiah detail the drifting away of the nation of Israel from covenant faithfulness to their God. Israel was on the brink of social, economic, religious, and moral collapse. Throughout the indictments against Israel’s leaders, God repeated that He is holy, and that He would execute judgment and

justice for His oppressed people. But at least there was one good man in Israel, and he happened to be the king—King Uzziah. But in chapter 6, King Uzziah has died, and it is very dark indeed.

Isaiah was transported to the temple in Jerusalem, and he saw the Lord God, high and lifted up, seated on a throne. Remember, this is the temple, and kings weren't permitted to enter; only priests could go in. That's actually what got Uzziah killed. But the King that Isaiah saw here was special—He was a Priest-King and was no ordinary man. The description of His grandeur and glory is really beyond human comprehension. The hem of His garment alone filled the entire temple, and Isaiah saw that while he was face down!

Isaiah then saw massive angelic beings encircling this Priest-King, and even though they were themselves sinless, they could not bear to look directly upon His glory. They proclaimed to one another that He is holy, holy, holy—repeating this reality for emphasis and effect. Surely it must mean more than He is separate and unique, or that He is moral and pure.

Holiness is God's covenantal commitment to bringing about His character of righteousness to the world, no matter the cost. To demonstrate the cost, in Isaiah 6:6-7, one of the angels took a burning coal from the altar of sacrifice and touched it to Isaiah's mouth to pay for the sin that Isaiah carried with him so that Isaiah could remain in God's presence. Something innocent had to die so that someone guilty could enjoy and experience God.

Several centuries after Isaiah, the Gospel of John was written to tell us about the coming of Jesus into the world. John wrote that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. John also said that not only was Jesus with God, He *was* God (John 14:1), there at the moment Isaiah was face down before His glory and splendor in the temple! John then wrote how Jesus suffered innocently on the cross for the sins of the whole world—something innocent died so that the guilty could enjoy and experience God.

How committed is God to bringing about justice and righteousness to the world? The same One seated on the throne in glory stepped down and became the burning coal of sacrifice. God is holy; this is the gospel. Christmas reminds us that we serve a God who will stop at nothing to bring about justice for His people.

“... we serve a God
who will stop at
nothing to bring
about justice for His
people.”

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How does the holiness of God make us grow in affection for God?

2. How does the holiness of God help us to trust Him more on a daily basis?
3. How would you define holiness in your own words?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Since God is holy, what do you think it means when the Bible tells us to be holy?
2. How does this story of God's glory help us to think about our own sin?
3. Why did Jesus have to become human, and why did He have to die?

Listen to | “*Holy, Holy, Holy*”

by John Bacchus Dykes (1861)

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;
holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee,
casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee,
who wert and art and evermore shalt be.

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,
though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see,
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee,
perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea;
holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Notes:

Year: _____

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Who or What Do You Fear?

"The Lord is my light and my salvation—
 whom shall I fear?
 The Lord is the stronghold of my life—
 of whom shall I be afraid?
 When the wicked advance against me
 to devour me,
 it is my enemies and my foes
 who will stumble and fall.
 Though an army besiege me,
 my heart will not fear;
 though war break out against me,
 even then I will be confident.
 One thing I ask from the Lord,
 this only do I seek:
 that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
 all the days of my life,
 to gaze on the beauty of the Lord
 and to seek him in his temple.
 For in the day of trouble
 he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
 he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
 and set me high upon a rock."

Psalm 27:1-5 (NIV)

When days of trouble come, what steals your peace?

- The military representative that comes to your front door when you have a family member who is serving in active duty in a war zone.
- The school secretary that comes to get you out of class when your mother is in the hospital in the final stage of cancer.
- When some of your children have chosen not to walk with the Lord as adults.
- When a long and satisfying marriage becomes more difficult.
- When your spouse or child suffers with depression and anxiety or another mental illness.
- When your life as a younger or older adult doesn't look like you thought it would look.

What steals your peace? You can fill in the blank.

Many things may have stolen Mary's peace. Being chosen to bear the Messiah was the highest honor, but it also created questions and probably some anxiety in Mary's heart. Being engaged and pregnant (not in the 21st century when it is culturally more acceptable), traveling far from home by foot or donkey when nine months pregnant, no place to stay when tired and close to giving birth, labor and delivery in an unsanitary stable, fleeing to Egypt when Herod threatens your child's life. Who else would know that her son was the Messiah? What would life look like with this special person in the family? Even the mother of the Savior must have had some moments of stolen peace.

Lawsuits, lenders, jealous co-workers, unfair bosses are all modern day enemies. People who work in law enforcement face real enemies who wish to physically destroy them. As believers, we face a real enemy, Satan, who is like a lion and desires to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8). But in all these things, we can be confident and go through the day unafraid. The Lion of Judah has already overcome, and walks with us.

**“The Lion of
Judah has already
overcome, and
walks with us.”**

If you trust in your strength or your wisdom, then you have plenty of things to fear. If He is the stronghold of your life, and you don't fall back on your own understanding, then you should fear no one and no thing. This yielding is a daily battle. Our prayer must be, *Lord, on this day, please help me to put all my confidence in you alone.*

A life free of fear isn't easy to grasp. It involves the daily discipline of asking and seeking to be in Christ. It is a present desire and a future desire. If it includes “all the days” of my life, then daily renewal is essential. While we dwell with the Lord, we can trust that we are safe, even if that means pain and suffering on this

earth. When we feel threatened, we should gaze on the beauty of the Lord and trust in Him.

God offers all of us light for a dark and uncertain path; salvation for those who seek and ask; a stronghold of protection from attacks that will come; safety and peace in His dwelling; shelter in the form of His provision and comfort; perspective and wisdom in the midst of fear.

“In essence, there is only one thing God asks of us—that we be men and women of prayer, people who live close to God, people for whom God is everything and for whom God is enough. That is the root of peace.” *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, by Brennen Manning.

Prayer

Lord, as Mary found her peace in trusting You, may we daily trust You with our lives. Be it big struggles or daily anxieties, let us find our peace in You. We trust in Your promise to meet us where we are and to give us light for our dark paths. Thank you Lord. Amen

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Who or what do you fear?
2. What can you do today to deal with that fear?
3. How can we focus on God and not on what we fear? (See Ps. 27:4-5.)
4. What can we do to dwell in the house of the Lord?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What is something that has been hard for you this week?
2. Is there something that makes you feel afraid?
3. What does it look like to give the hard things to God?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

The Word and the Light

"Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light for my path.
I make a solemn vow to
observe your righteous judgments."

Psalm 119:105-106 (NASB)

Can you remember a time when you were in total darkness? No nightlight, no stars, not even the red power light on the television. Without a source of light, when the darkness is all consuming, the way to go is unclear. We are left to stumble blindly, groping about and guessing what it is we are surrounded by. What a difference a light makes! Even a small amount of light can shatter the darkness, giving shape to one's surroundings and making the pathway clear.

Psalm 119:105 is nestled in the longest chapter in the Bible and tells us that God's Word is the light that makes our path clear. When otherwise we would be lost in darkness, when we do not know the way, His Word guides us and shows us the next right step.

But this is not often how we live. Rather than turning to His Word, we look to friends, self-help books, Google, Netflix, or ESPN to provide advice or escape. By contrast, the author of Psalm 119 writes, "O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (v. 97), and "the law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." (v. 72) In fact, almost all of the 176 verses in this chapter mention God's Word. The author of Psalm 119 clearly has a high view of God's written word.

We see evidence of this in verse 106: “I have sworn and I will confirm it, that I will keep Your righteous ordinances.” Not only does the author swear an oath, he confirms it. He pinky promises and crosses his heart. This is a reference to Nehemiah 10:29. The Jewish exiles had returned to the promised land, the wall was finished, and now they were inspired and determined not to fall back into their pattern of forsaking God. They took “on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God’s law...to keep and to observe all the commandments of God our Lord, and His ordinances and statutes.” If they failed to walk in God’s law, they were inviting a curse on themselves. We know from Nehemiah 13 that these promises were not kept. Even though they knew it was valuable and to forsake it would be inviting a curse, they were unable to keep God’s law.

How often do we do the same thing? The way of God *is* winsome—it is beautiful and perfect and right, it restores the soul, makes wise the simple, causes the heart to rejoice, is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (Ps. 19). It *should* inspire in us a desire to seek it, to learn it, and to drink from it deeply. But

**“The way of God...
restores the soul, makes
wise the simple, causes
the heart to rejoice, is
more desirable than
gold and sweeter than
honey...”**

oh, how fickle we are! How quickly we forget that the things of this world will not satisfy, that the messages our culture inundates us with are lies. God’s Word is not the problem; *I* am the problem.

Hundreds of years later after Psalm 119 was penned, the apostle John introduces his account of Jesus’ life with these words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Jesus Himself is the Word referenced in Psalm 119, the Word that illuminates our paths. He Himself shows us the way. John continues, “In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (vv. 4-5). John portrays Jesus as being a double fulfillment of Psalm 119:105: He is both the Word *and* the Light.

Jesus does more than just show us the perfection and beauty of God’s law; He enables us to “fulfill” verse 106. Where previously we were left helpless, without peace, torn between our desire to follow His perfect way and our inability to follow through, Jesus came and made a way for us.

By living a perfect life, dying on the cross in payment of our curse, and rising from the dead to sit at the right hand of the Father, He allows us be dressed in *His* righteousness, in *His* perfection. When the angels appeared to the shepherds on that first Christmas two thousand years ago, they proclaimed, “On earth, peace among men with whom He is pleased” (Luke 2:14). The good news of Christmas

is that we can have peace both with God and within ourselves because the perfect Light and the perfect Word has come.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. When I feel lost in darkness, what do I turn to for light and guidance instead of God's Word?
2. Do I feel the constant strife of doing what I know I shouldn't and not doing what I know I should? Am I continually making new promises to God to do better next time? Why is this futile?
3. Do my actions demonstrate that I trust that what Jesus did is enough?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Try to enclose yourself in total darkness. If any light is present, can darkness overcome it? How much light does it take to shatter the darkness? How does this help us understand Jesus as the Light of the World?
2. What competes with God's Word to show me the way to go? Can you think of a time where God's Word has proven itself better?

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DAY 12

The Light of Peace

"So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them."

John 12:35–36 (ESV)

The absence of visible light diminishes one's ability to see, perceive, and discern. Colors are indistinguishable and objects are indiscernible. What can be recognized clearly in light is often reduced to a mystery in darkness. Darkness can transform a landscape of beauty into footsteps of fear and uncertainty.

John announces at the beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the light that has come into the world (John 1:4-5). For John, the darkness represents the cosmic enemy. It is the blanket of hopelessness seeking to suffocate humanity.

In Genesis, creation begins in darkness. A darkness filled with chaos and nothingness. God's first recorded words are, "Let there be light!" And there was light. The darkness was vanquished, chaos was tamed, and what was nothing became something. The first words spoken by God brought peace on earth.

Adam and Eve were created in the light. They were made for the light. Tragically, it did not take long before they turned to the darkness. And once again,

by the invitation of humanity, darkness moved in and cast its shadow of chaos and nothingness. Humanity turned from living in the light and trusting God, to trusting in themselves and loving the darkness (John 3:19). We stepped out of God's peace into chaos. We gave up light of God and exchanged it for the nothingness of darkness.

That is why John describes Jesus' arrival into humanity as the light shining in the darkness. It is the same reason Zechariah sings in Luke 1:79, "the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." And it is why the angels, shining in the night, announced to the shepherds keeping watch over their sheep, "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14).

Christmas comes as God's word of peace once again: "let there be light, and there was light." His name is Jesus. This word of God comes to us as an invitation—"believe in the light, that you may become sons of light" (John 12:36).

**"Christmas comes as
God's word of peace
once again: 'let there
be light, and there
was light.'"**

That is the way to life and light. That is the only hope of finding peace, ceasing to trust in yourself or in anything else of this world, and stepping into the light of Jesus. Believe He has come to rescue, save, and redeem you from the darkness.

"I have come into the world as light," He said, "so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness" (John 12:46). That light is still shining, and through Him you can have life everlasting, life abundant, life in Christ.

During Advent, we light a candle each Sunday when we gather to worship. A light to shine in the darkness. One of the observations we often make is that candlelight is fleeting—it is fragile. With a puff of breath, or a breeze, and the light is easily extinguished.

Jesus came into the world as the light that can never be extinguished. He will never be blown out. In fact, He is the light that will never be overcome by darkness.

In Revelation 22, where John describes a glimpse of the new creation, he writes, "And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:5). It is as though John has witnessed the darkness being blown out and the chaos extinguished. No more night, only light. Peace forever and ever.

Prayer

Father, thank you for sending your son Jesus as the light to overcome the

darkness. I pray that the light of Jesus will expose the dimness of every fragile and fleeting flame that I chase after in search of peace. Kindle in me a longing for the light of life. And as you have created me in your image and caused me to be born again as a son or daughter of light, I pray that the light of your glory would shine through my life into the darkness around me. In Jesus name, Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What is one specific area or situation in your life where you have grown accustomed to the darkness?
2. In what way do you notice or experience a lack of peace in that area?
3. How would that area or situation look different if it was brought into the light?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Do you remember a time you were in the dark and were afraid?
2. Discuss what it is like to be in a dark room when a light is suddenly turned on.
3. Since Jesus is described as the light of the world, what is one way we can specifically illustrate aspect of the Christmas story in our decorations and traditions?

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This Christmas, Think Trick or Treat

"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light."

Ephesians 5:6-14 (NKJV)

This is not your traditional Yuletide passage. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul knocks at the door, and—instead of bursting forth in song and carols—he says, "Trick or treat?" This is not what you are expecting to hear at Christmas, is it?

Perhaps if he had costumed as Batman, Paul might have knocked on the door and quoted him in that gravelly whisper, "It's not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me." That line plays well in the movie theatre, and might be true for one who lives in darkness, but it is not true of one who lives in light. Paul is not Batman. Paul writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and he wants his readers to know, "IT'S WHAT IS ON THE INSIDE THAT DEFINES ME!" Paul wants his readers to be able to distinguish between the deception of living in darkness from the truth of living in light.

In this amazing passage, Paul warns his fellow saints not to be tricked! Do not rationalize your sin. Do not let others deceive you. Sin is sin. Sin is darkness. What is “the wrath of God”? That’s being turned over to one’s sin nature—the gravity of depravity. Who are the “sons of disobedience”? Believers can and do sin, some to the extent of living a lifestyle according to their sin nature (as opposed to their divine nature). They are living in darkness. So, Paul first warns, do not be tricked; those who live in disobedience will eventually be turned over to their sinful ways.

Paul goes on to give two more warnings: do not associate with those who are living in darkness and do not associate with the works of darkness. Paul does not say don’t minister to them. He does not say to not love them. He warns us, however, not to associate with the behaviors of darkness. Darkness is not something to trifle with.

When you trusted in Christ as your Savior, you were given a divine nature. God is light, and that light is in you. You can be like Batman and choose to live in darkness, or you can choose to live in His light. Paul says, “walk as children of light.” Walk refers to lifestyle. Throughout Scripture we read that we are to be imitators of Christ. Yes, we have a sin nature, but as believers in Christ we also have a divine nature and a light within.

We read passage after passage that says we are to walk by the Spirit, to walk in the light as He is in the light. And, as you search the Scriptures you find that those who “walk” in the light and by the Spirit experience the fullness of God’s joy and ultimate fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Therein is the greatest treat one can have. Fill your bag and let it overflow!

It has been said that “peace” is oneness with God. Don’t let the world trick you into darkness this holiday. Live in His light; abide in Him by abiding in obedience to His Word. Discover the joy of oneness with God. Walk by the Spirit, and He will fill your stocking with the greatest treat of all—“And Christ will give you light.”

"Don't let the world trick you into darkness this holiday."

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. *Light*: God’s love language is obedience. “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). And, what did Jesus command? To believe and to love one another. What can you do this day to be in obedience to Christ and demonstrate His love toward someone?
2. *Darkness*: Even though, as believers in Christ, we have His light in us, we still battle our sin nature. However, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). What unconfessed sins are you carrying today?

3. *Peace*: In that act of confession, God is faithful and restores fellowship and intimacy with us. In this is peace. In this is oneness with God. Yes, your sin has been nailed to the cross. But, unconfessed sin is a barrier to experiencing true joy and peace. Bring it to God and agree with His standard. The light will displace the darkness and bring renewal to the soul.

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. *Light*: “Walk prudently when you go to the house of God,” (Eccles. 5:1a). A literal translation would render, guard your feet when you go to worship God. By application, it means behave yourself, behave righteously. As a family, share some behaviors that you have observed in another family member that demonstrates that he or she is “walking prudently.”
2. *Darkness*: “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good morals’” (1 Cor. 15:33, NASB). Reflect on your life and share with your family a time when you made a poor decision in terms of picking friends. What were the consequences?
3. *Peace*: Psalm 85:8 says, “I will hear what God the LORD will speak, for He will speak peace to His people and to His saints; but let them not turn back to folly.” We have a choice in life: to walk in light or to walk in darkness. Share with your family a time when you knew you were in the light and a time you knew you were in the darkness. Describe the peace in one and the lack thereof in the other.

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Built Upon the Rock

“... you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

1 Peter 2:5-9 (ESV)

Do you know the name George Herman Ruth? What about Babe Ruth? You know that name—He’s the Great Bambino, the Sultan of Swat, the Colossus of Clout. Babe Ruth is considered by many to be the greatest baseball player of all time. His batting records, including most career home runs and most single season home runs, stood for decades. In fact, he still holds some major league batting records, nearly a century later.

So why is this baseball phenom known by an infantile nickname? Babe’s first coach discovered him as a teenager in a Catholic orphanage. He was so unfamiliar

with life outside the orphanage that he followed his coach around like a child, or “babe.” Others attribute the nickname to his youthful appearance when he began the sport. In either case, the nickname stuck. Nicknames can be that way. The Apostle Simon had a nickname, too. And Jesus gave it to him.

In Matthew 16 Jesus asks the disciples who the world says the Son of Man is. There are many answers, but none of them are correct. Then Jesus asks who the disciples say He is, and Simon answers, “The Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” The eternal truth of this confession is so consequential that Jesus gives Simon the nickname that he is known by today—Peter, which means *stone*. Christ then says that upon this *stone* (the confession that Jesus is Christ), He will build His Church.

In 1 Peter, the apostle wrote to this growing Church built by God. The Gentile Christians had been rejected and persecuted by the Roman world around them. In Cappadocia, the Christians had resorted to living in caves to escape Roman persecution under Emperor Nero. Peter encouraged them by reminding them who they are in Christ. In these verses the man Jesus nicknamed “stone” is encouraging believers that they too are “living stones” built upon the true “cornerstone” that is Christ.

In the face of persecution and rejection it would be easy for these early Christians to cry out. Their decision to follow Christ may have cost them their homes, their occupations, and maybe even their family relationships. Who are they when everything is stripped from them? Peter is teaching them that their identity, hope, and security is found by answering a greater question: *Who do you say that Jesus is?*

“Who do
you say
that Jesus
is?”

As Peter explains, Jesus is the stone that God the Father is laying in Zion. Either you are built upon Him or you stumble over this “rock of offense.” There is no middle ground. It is not enough to call Jesus a good teacher or to consider Him a great man. Even the demons know that Jesus is the Messiah, but they do not believe (James 2:19). Christians confess that Jesus is Christ, and they believe in Him.

The rewards that follow faith in Christ far outweigh the persecution these believers endured. Why else, Peter reasons, would God say in Isaiah 28 that He is laying a cornerstone in Zion, if He did not intend to build upon it? Just as earthen stones were used to build God’s temple, Christians as “living stones” are being built by God into a spiritual temple. Before Christ, only the tribe of Levi from the nation of Israel would serve the Lord as priests, but now God is calling Gentiles and Jews to a “holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices.” Before, only the high priest had access to the Holy of Holies where God’s presence dwelt. But now, every believer in Christ has access to God through His indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph 2:18).

God calls believers out of the darkness into His marvelous light to be a “chosen a race,” a “royal priesthood,” and to become His very own possession. The world will reject Christians as surely as the world rejected Christ, but those who believe in Him become His possession. Nothing can separate the believer from God, because nothing and no one can take what belongs to God.

This divine assurance means that Christians can be at peace with a world that rejects them because God has chosen them. More importantly, Christians can be at peace with a holy God because He has saved the believer for His own glory. Consider who is doing the work in these verses. God is building the spiritual house. He lays the stone in Zion. He has chosen His people. He calls the believer from darkness into His light.

God does all this for His glory, through the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ, the cornerstone.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. If you are a believer in Christ, in what ways is Christ your cornerstone or foundation?
2. Who would the world (friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) say that Jesus is? Who do you say that Jesus is?
3. What comfort do you take from this passage regarding the security of your salvation?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Do you have a nickname? How did you get it?
2. How does it make you feel to know you are chosen by God and one of His treasured possessions? How should that affect the way you live each day?

Listen to | “*In Christ Alone*”

by Keith Getty & Stuart Townend (2002)

In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought
and storm.

What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all—
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied;
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live.

No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the pow'r of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain;
Then bursting forth in glorious day,
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory,
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me;
For I am His and He is mine—
Bought with the precious blood
of Christ.

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ADVENT | Week 3

What the world needs is joy. At some level, we all know that, but really internalizing that truth changes the way we see the world around us and the people living in it. Ultimately, just about every activity we pursue and every relationship we nurture is in the pursuit of joy. We want to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. And yet, we never seem to succeed. It's just not enough.

But we are a species that was created intentionally by a loving God to resemble and reflect Him in this broken world. This Creator God is a God of joy because He lacks nothing. That's instructive. The sovereign God of the cosmos is full of joy—and His great desire for every human heart is that they experience joy as well. What if we really lacked for...nothing?

Joy is the outcome of fulfillment.

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11, ESV). God the Father sent the Son so that the redeemed would actually “enjoy this life with Jesus’ enjoying.” He wants His joy to be our joy. What God has is enough; He is fulfilled. What He has given us is enough, even in the midst of a corrupt context. We are fulfilled, and the free gift of grace is not merely everlasting life, but never-ending joy!

It's like the great old hymn, *Joy to The World* by Isaac Watts reminds us:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| No more let sins and sorrows grow, | Far as the curse is found |
| Nor thorns infest the ground; | Far as the curse is found |
| He comes to make His blessings flow | Far as, far as, the curse is found. |

The ground we walk on has been cursed because of sin. But the King of glory has reversed the curse and made joy available to all mankind. May we all experience and appreciate true and lasting fulfillment this Advent season. Joy to the world!

It's Time to Rise and Shine

“Arise! Shine! For your light arrives! The splendor
of the Lord shines on you!”

Isaiah 60:1 (NET)

“It’s time to rise and shine” is a pleasant way to ease into the morning. Those words are meant to gently rouse a sleeper out of the bed and into the day. But those round metal alarm clocks are anything but gentle. No one likes waking up to the loud buzzing of that clock. It leaves us shaking with a heart pounding after a restful slumber.

Isaiah was a prophet who preached several messages to Israel. In one of the first messages he preached, he told Israel they would be taken captive by the Babylonians. Like the loud buzzing of an alarm clock, this was not good news for God’s people. Their hearts must have been pounding after that wake-up call.

They had been worshipping idols and not being the light to the nations God had called them to be (Isa. 43:10). Their lives and their land were filled with evil and darkness; so, God was going to discipline them. But Isaiah also told them God promised to rescue them. He would send a Redeemer (Isa. 59:20) and would make a new covenant with them—enabling them to fulfill their calling by giving them a new heart and a new spirit (Isa. 59:21; Jer. 31:31).

“Fear not...I am the one who helps you, declares the LORD; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 49:14). They didn’t know when this Redeemer would come but they put their hope in God’s promise and waited for the day He would come and set them free.

Isaiah 60:1 is God’s “gentle alarm clock” for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. When they heard the words, “Arise! Shine! Your light arrives,” they would have risen out of bed with a smile on their face and excitement in their hearts. They may have even jumped out of bed and run to their neighbor’s house to see if they had heard the good news.

That is what we celebrate at Christmas: the coming of the Redeemer God had promised. John calls Jesus “the light of mankind,” who “shines in the darkness” (John 1:4-5). Jesus Himself said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

“That is what we celebrate at Christmas: the coming of the Redeemer God had promised.”

We were not meant to live in the dark. In fact, nothing can grow without light; we need it to survive.

Jesus said, “*I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness*” (John 12:47). Jesus came to illuminate the darkness, showing us the way into life and out of sin. The way out is through the forgiveness He offers to those who believe in His Name (Acts 10:43).

Just as God promised the Israelites that a Redeemer would come and set them free from the Babylonians and make them a light to the nations, Jesus—whose name means *God is salvation*—came to free us from the darkness of sin and enable us to be a light to the world.

Prayer

Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to free us from the darkness of sin and enable us to be a light to those around us. Thank you for the gift of the New Covenant and keeping your promise to send a Redeemer. Help us rise and shine each day and share the joy of the good news of God’s love and forgiveness with others so they don’t have to remain in the darkness. In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Do you remember a time in your life when God was trying to wake you up and get your attention?
2. How did you respond?
3. Is there anyone you can pray for or share the good news with that might not know Jesus and joy of his forgiveness?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Have you ever been afraid of the dark?
2. What made you feel better when you were afraid?
3. Have you ever been forgiven or forgiven someone?
4. How does it feel to forgive someone? How does it feel to be forgiven?

Additional Resources

Download a free printable Advent Calendar with ways for children to be a light during Christmas at <https://mothersniche.com/kids-can-light-world-advent-calendar-free-printable/>

Notes:

Year: _____

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The Glory of God in the Face of Jesus

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

2 Corinthians 4:3-6 (ESV)

Here’s a snapshot of where we are today: A woman’s choice to kill her unborn child is celebrated by many as an essential freedom. Gay marriage is legal and not only socially approved, but celebrated. A growing number of people believe one’s gender and sex have no connection, and a dizzying array of new gender descriptions have been suggested: transgender, non-binary, bigender, pangender, genderfluid, and agender. Those who disagree with these positions may be labeled misogynists or bigots.

How can it be that people can see things *so* differently?

Make no mistake, this is the work of the enemy. Can’t you hear his voice, as in the garden to Eve, “Did God *really* say...?” Listen as he undermines God’s authority to define good and evil, God’s design for life, for personhood and for marriage. He

is still whispering in humanity's ear as in Eve's, "Do what seems right to you?" And the end is always destruction (Prov. 14:12).

In the apostle Paul's final letter to the Corinthians, we see this spiritual battle in the forefront of his mind as he encourages believers not to give sin a foothold, "that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs" (2 Cor. 2:11). In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 Paul addresses how it is that people can celebrate evil and abhor the good designs of a holy God: the god of this world, Satan, has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the truth of the Gospel.

Paul makes great use of contrasts (dark/light, blind/seeing, veiled/unveiled) to illustrate the dramatic transformation that happens at the moment of salvation. How interesting that Paul's own miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus involved being blinded by a great light and gaining his spiritual sight! As someone who formerly persecuted the church, Paul is uniquely qualified to say that the "message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, NIV).

Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church is complicated. In 1 Corinthians, he lovingly but directly addresses their sinful strongholds, divisions and spiritual confusion. False apostles had crept into the church and were assaulting Paul's character and misrepresenting the gospel of Christ. This was a source of huge stress and grief to Paul.

He writes, "I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (2 Cor. 2:4). Because he loved them, he told them some hard truths. Paul demonstrates humility and love as he brings the conversation continually back to Christ: "What we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." He is not concerned so much with their allegiance to him but their allegiance to Christ.

In verse 6, Paul turns our minds back to that awesome moment of creation, when God created everything from nothing by His Word and by His will. Specifically, he goes back to the moment when God illuminated the darkness, reminding us that He is the same all-powerful Creator God who illuminates our hearts and minds to see the truth of the gospel and believe in Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:19).

Jesus described the moment of salvation as being spiritually "born again" (John 3:3). "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). The mark of this new creation is that he has the indwelling Holy Spirit of God to empower, counsel, teach, convict, comfort, help, strengthen and lead him. What depths of joy that brings!

And while this new creation doesn't come with a new physical body on this side of eternity, Paul comforts us in that too: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18). We have a glorious inheritance awaiting us! We will be with Him again.

During the Advent season, we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of Christ. This is nothing short of God clothing Himself with humanity. He is Emmanuel, God with us. When we behold Jesus' face in the manger, we behold the glory of God in the fullest!

**"He is Emmanuel,
God with us."**

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. Paul uses light/dark, seeing/blind, unveiled/veiled contrasts repeatedly referring to the condition of the hearts of believers vs. unbelievers. If you have trusted in Christ for salvation, think back to that moment when the lights came on for you spiritually. What was it that "flipped the switch"? Praise God for His work in your heart.
2. Paul goes on to say that believers have this "treasure" of the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ in "jars of clay;" that is, common, fragile vessels that show off the spectacular power of God in our weakness. Reflect on this truth in your life. What are some ways that His power has been made perfect in your weakness? (See 2 Cor. 12:9.)

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Do you have any friends, family members, or co-workers that see the world very differently from you? How do you stand firmly in your beliefs and interact with them in love?
2. Have you ever thought differently—or, wrongly—about an important spiritual issue? What did God do to change your mind?
3. What can you do this Christmas season to experience the full joy of your salvation as a new creation in Christ?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

The Battle Between Light and Dark

“And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

1 John 1:4-7 (ESV)

If you’ve ever watched the original *Star Wars* movies in order, you know this was a story that was meant to be told in a certain way. You remember the tension, watching Luke Skywalker fight the man who was the commander of all things dark. Luke wasn’t just fighting for his life; he was fighting for his soul. He had just learned that the man he was fighting wasn’t just the infamous Darth Vader, but that man was his father. The dad he never knew but longed to know. The man he dreamed about as a kid and asked his uncle about all the time. It was his father that was Darth Vader, and it was his father he was fighting. It was the green versus red lightsaber. Good versus Evil. Light versus Dark.

Perhaps, as you watched this story unfold, you wondered if you too would have been strong enough to resist the dark side. Luke was being coaxed to join his father so that they could rule the galaxy... together. Luke was stronger than any of us would have been. The battle continued, Luke prevailed, and he ended up saving his father in the process.

It's easy to think of the Lord in the same way. The first Christmas morning 2,000 years ago, when Jesus came into this world, the battle between light and darkness took center stage and the match was going to be epic. It seemed like it was going to be a close battle, and the world had a front row seat to see who would prevail.

But that's not even kind of how it works is it?

God doesn't just squeak by and barely defeat the enemy. To say He crushes him is even an understatement.

John tells us that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all! What happens when we turn on a light switch in a dark room? Does the light have a hard time pushing back the darkness? Does it struggle to overcome it? Not at all! Even the darkness in the darkest closet in the darkest part of your house completely disappears when the light switch is turned on. Its power is neutralized when confronted by light.

That is how strong our Lord is. But, there is even greater news for us—we can have that same light that is in Jesus. Of course that's why John tells us that his joy is complete. We can have that same joy! As we align ourselves with Jesus, we can experience and identify with that very same light. We also get to do this together as Christians. This is how we get to fellowship (or really enjoy) each other. Because we have light that will push away the darkness, we are forgiven and we can truly be free from sin and darkness.

“There is evil casted around us, but it's love that wrote the play” —David Wilcox

Futher Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How have you experienced the power of God in your life?
2. What gives you joy?
3. What makes your joy “complete”?
4. What does “completed joy” feel like?

Further Reflection | Family Activity

1. Listen to David Wilcox's song “Show the Way.” What stuck out to you? Talk about it.

“... the battle between
light and darkness
took center stage... and
the world had a front
row seat to see who
would prevail.”

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

He Gave His Only Son

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

John 3:16–17 (ESV)

Imagine Christmas morning with presents bursting out from under the tree. The smell of coffee and cider and cinnamon rolls in the air. Stockings full of surprises. A crackling fire glowing in the fireplace against December’s chill in the outside air. “Joy to the world” playing softly in the background. There is an excitement every parent knows, anticipating the joy and laughter that will soon fill the home.

In reality, Christmas Day doesn’t always turn out like a Norman Rockwell painting. But, a tree, some gifts, a cup a coffee, and a child or two to watch tear through some wrapping paper is always a great day. There is a joy that comes with watching a present being opened. On Christmas morning, the joy of giving intersects with the excitement of receiving.

Most parents love to give gifts to their children. There are few things in life that compare to watching joy flow over in those you love with all your heart.

That is why it is almost impossible—not to mention disheartening—to imagine that a Christmas morning filled with so much promise would be met with disinterest and ambiguity. This isn’t referring to the kind of indifference you see

when a 6-year-old (who used to wake you up at 4 a.m. wanting to know, “Is it Christmas yet?!”) transitions to a teenager (who might casually roll out of bed at 9:30 a.m. so as not to appear to “excited” about anything).

No, this is about a complete and total apathy. It’s hard to imagine a Christmas morning brimming with decorations, anticipations, expectations, excitement, and unopened gifts without a soul to step in and enjoy the moment. In fact, there would be nothing sadder than a celebration that is discarded.

John 3:16-17 has Christmas morning celebration written all over it. The artistic ability of Norman Rockwell can’t come close to capturing the heavenly joy, anticipation, excitement, and eagerness that our Father God experiences when the story of his Son, Jesus, is heard for the very first time—or remembered all over again for the 10,000th time. The joy of Christmas never gets old, or does it?

C.S. Lewis captures the misery of the world around us when he describes the sadness of Narnia as, “always winter, but never Christmas.”

It is easy to become burdened by the “winter” of this weary world and forget that Christmas has come, and is coming. We have a heavenly Father who delights in seeing the gift of His Son received and celebrated with eagerness and joy.

The truth of Christianity is that it is always Christmas morning. “Joy to the world” is ringing out from heaven. “Peace on earth” echoes in our hearts. The grace of God is bursting out from the tree of the cross.

Isaac Watts captures the hope of Christianity beautifully in the third verse of *Joy to the World*:

No more let sin and sorrow grow
Nor thorns infest the ground:
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as the curse is found.

**“We have a heavenly
Father who delights
in seeing the gift of
His Son received
and celebrated with
eagerness and joy.”**

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son...” It has been rightly said that you can replace “the world” with your own name and not change the meaning at all.

If, during this Advent season, you find yourself weary from the winter of the world, this is a great day to remember the joy of the Christmas that has come, and is coming. Your heavenly Father is eager for you to delight in the joy of His Son all over again. And He wants you to long for His “blessings to flow far as the curse is found.”

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What circumstance, or relationship, or part of life do you feel the “winter of this weary world” the most?
2. What can you do today to bring the joy of “the Christmas that has come, and is coming” into that part of your world?
3. How does the truth, “For God so loved (fill in your name...and say it out loud), that he gave His only Son,” impact your life and thinking today?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. Tell a story about the best present you have ever opened?
2. Who gave you that present and what made it so great?
3. We celebrate Christmas to remember that Jesus was God’s gift to us on that first Christmas morning. And as fun and exciting as Christmas is to celebrate now, what do you think it will be like to celebrate and remember Christmas in heaven?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

The Voices that Bring Lasting Joy

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”

Isaiah 40:1–11 (ESV)

When is it most difficult to have joy? Think of a time when you were not joyful. Most often it is when circumstances are not moving in our favor or when we experience need or failure. Everyone will experience some form of failure each day, some small and some large. Perhaps the “failure” is simple, like forgetting to get milk at the store and having to drive all the way back. Other failures are more difficult and impact our relationships, such as losing our temper and being impatient with our children or spouse. Failures at work can impact our livelihood financially.

One of the greatest and most impactful failures we experience is with sin. Sins can bring devastating consequences that impact every area of our lives. No matter the failures we experience, they can make it difficult to capture joy.

In Isaiah 40:1-11 the remnant of Israel is still living in exile in Babylon. They are far away from their homeland and perhaps many family members and friends. Their situation is marked by failure and sin, and joy is lost. Through this passage they hear four voices that come as encouragement in hopes of restoring their joy.

Warren W. Wiersbe explains the four voices that are seen in this passage:

Voice #1—Voice of Pardon (vv. 1-2): Israel has sinned greatly against God through idolatry, injustice, and immorality. But the voice of God reminds them that they are still His people, and that He loves them. Though God would discipline them, He would never leave or forsake them. The voice reminds them that God is a God that can pardon any sin if they will turn to Him in repentance.

Voice #2—Voice of Guidance (vv. 3-5): Although they were in exile, the remnant of Israel would soon return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and temple. God knew during that time fear and anxiety would creep in to rob their joy. But the voice of God once again reminds them that they were not going alone. As they returned, the Lord would go before them and open the way.

Voice #3—Voice of Promise (vv. 6-8): The nations that stood against Israel were slowly fading. Assyria was gone and Babylon was soon to follow like grass that withers and fades away. Many things can fade in life – health, wealth, relationships, security. The voice of God reminds them that the Word of God would always remain. As they begin their journey home, Israel could rest completely in God’s promises.

Voice #4—Voice of Peace (vv. 9-11): It had been years since the children of Israel had experienced peace. They had been conquered, taken from their homeland, and were living among their enemies. Now they would finally be released from their bondage. As they came out of the valley and climbed to the mountaintop once again, they would be able to experience God’s victory over their enemy and peace in the land God had given them.

As believers we also live in a hostile land. The Bible tells us that this world is not our home and that we will experience many different trials and failures. Whether we are struggling against broken relationships, financial failures, or even exhausting battles with sin we can find great encouragement from these voices.

Perhaps the voice you need to hear is that God can and will pardon that sin that seems to have taken hold in your life. Perhaps it is the voice of guidance because there are many decisions you are facing. Perhaps it is the voice of promise because of the things you are trusting in are all falling apart. Perhaps it is the voice of peace because this is lacking in many areas of your life.

Whatever your need or circumstances, listen to the voice of God, who sent His Son because He loves you and wants to give you lasting joy.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What battles are you facing right now that are robbing you of joy?
2. Which of the voices do you desperately need to hear from today?
3. Who in your life could you be a voice of encouragement to?

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What are some struggles that we face as a family?
2. Why do these struggles rob us of joy?
3. Which of these voices would help us fight for joy?
4. How could we be a voice of encouragement as a family?

Listen to | “*Comfort ye*”

by George Frideric Handel (1741)

The song, *Comfort ye*, from Handel’s Messiah, is Isaiah 40:1-11 set to music. As a family, listen to the song and discuss its tone: Is it light and joyful, calm and peaceful, sad or somber?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Who are you? Why are you?

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” Having said these things, he spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud and said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.”

John 9:1-7 (ESV)

Who are you? Not your name. Not what you do. Maybe a better question to ask is: *Why are you?*

We are all made for a purpose consistent with who we are. A can opener opens cans. A can opener does not toast bread; that is what a toaster does. Pastor Matt Lantz, on the Journey Woman podcast defines identity in this way: “Identity is a declaration that defines being that indicates design and direction.” A can opener is made in a specific way, with specific materials, and is defined by its creator for a specific purpose. Lantz goes on to say “Being a follower of Jesus isn’t just about going to heaven and doing what the Bible says. It’s also understanding that God

didn't run me through a machine, crank me out and mass produce us. We are His handcrafted, unique creations, each of us. As a result, if we are handcrafted and unique, then we have a function. Do you know what your function is?"

In 1687, believers came together in Westminster and created what some would call the most accurate and succinct summary of the Christian faith ever produced. They created a summary of Christian doctrine consisting of 107 questions and answers. Question number one of this quintessential document should be imprinted on our hearts and never forgotten:

Q1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.

Each year, the Jews have an eight-day celebration called the Feast of Tabernacles. The celebration's purpose is twofold: remembrance of God's provision for the nation of Israel during their time of wandering in the wilderness (Num. 9:15-23) and looking forward to the millennial kingdom and return of the Messiah. During Jesus' time, a major feature of the Feast of Tabernacles was the lighting of lamps in the women's court in the temple. These great lamps would light the temple area as people came together to sing praises and dance in remembrance of God's provision. It was while these large lamps were burning in the temple that Jesus makes this audacious statement: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

In John 9:1, as a demonstration of this claim, Jesus proceeded to heal a man that had been blind since birth. This man probably woke up, like any other morning, expecting to live out his "why"—to stand at the temple gate and beg for alms. Little did he know that that by the time the sun would set, he would see the world around him for the first time in his life! This man represents the bleak reality that every person is born spiritually blind, until we choose to follow Jesus as our light and salvation.

**"... our lives are fully
encompassed within God's
eternal purpose."**

Jesus then explains the reason for this man's blindness and why he was to be healed: "It was not that this man had sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v. 3). In these words we face a terrifying and beautiful truth: our lives are fully encompassed within God's eternal purpose. Job understood this when he stated: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

Scripture overflows with stories of people who thought they could blaze their own trail, and every single time God takes their sin and uses it for His eternal purposes. Jesus then charges all believers to participate in God's divine plan: "We must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day, night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the World" (vv. 4-5).

Every one of us has a purpose. This purpose is not found in your work, or where you live, or even who you marry. Your chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever. Sometimes, God's glory is revealed in happy circumstances, like a blind man being given his sight. And, sometimes, His glory might be found in the bleakest of times, like Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor. 12). But one thing is certain: joy is found when we accept and trust Jesus to step into our darkness and allow Him to become our Light of our World.

In 1862, When Robert Louis Stevenson was twelve years old, he was looking out into the darkness of night from his upstairs window, watching a man light the street lanterns. When his governess saw him and asked what it was that he was doing, he responded by saying, 'I am watching a man cut holes in the darkness.' Simply put, is that not what Christmas is all about? 'Long lay the world, in sin and error pining', but then Jesus, the Light of the World, was born in a manger, cutting a massive hole in the darkness of the world.

This Advent season, find joy in glorifying God and pointing others to the Light of the World in how you act, speak, and love.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How can you, as a believer, be someone that 'cuts holes in the darkness' of the sinful world we live in?
2. If identity is a 'declaration that defines being that indicates design and direction,' what would be declared about you?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

Paul in 2 Corinthians has this to say about his 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Cor. 12:7), "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

1. What did Paul mean when he said that when he is weak, then he is strong? What does this look like in your life?
2. Man's tendency is to sinfully turn away from Christ and give glory to the things of this world. In what ways have you seen this happen in your own life? How can you practically give glory to God alone?

Read | “*The Lamplighter*”

by Robert Louis Stevenson

My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky;
It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by;
For every night at teatime and before you take your seat,
With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street.

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,
And my papa's a banker and as rich as he can be;
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,
Oh Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you!

For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,
And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;
And O! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,
O Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Searching for Joy

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make his paths straight.
 Every valley shall be filled,
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
 and the crooked shall become straight,
 and the rough places shall become level ways,
 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Luke 3:1-6 (ESV)

Joy doesn't always jump out at us. Sometimes, we have to search a little to find it. That's true in Scripture and true in our lives as well. Today's passage is one of those "treasure hunts," where digging into the people, places, and times will help us experience the delight the Lord desires for us.

First, let's look at the list of royalty and rulers in verses 1-2: the emperor of Rome, Judea's governor, three sons of a king serving as regional tetrarchs, and the high priest of the Jews. These men—Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas, and Caiaphas—made the ancient world go round. And thanks to the record of history and Scripture, their names are probably familiar to you.

We know them because of their deeds. These secular and spiritual leaders were at best selfish, manipulative, and deceitful; at worst, many were murderers (Matt. 14:1-12, 26:34; Luke 23:1). Their most wicked works were yet to be carried out, but still reveal the hearts of these leaders and the bleak state of the world at the time of Jesus' birth.

We also know them because of the way God would use many of them to accomplish His perfect plan of redemption through His only Son's death on the cross.

It was into this dark time that "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (v. 2). After more than 400 years, God was breaking His silence. And His first words to mankind through this Spirit-led prophet? *Forgiveness is freely given to all who turn to the Lord.*

**"After more than
400 years, God was
breaking His silence."**

John the Baptist, as he became known, was the first prophet to minister to Israel since Malachi. And like his predecessor (and every one before him!), John was calling the world to repent. But his message was specific—he preached repentance made public by water baptism. The purpose of this was to prepare the people's hearts for the coming Messiah who would one day forever wash their sin away.

Isaiah's prophecy predicted the joy that flowed from this hope:

*"It will be said on that day,
'Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'" (Isa. 25:9)*

John wasn't a world leader or ruling monarch, but he was doing what no one else in his day had yet done: he was preparing the way of the Lord (v. 3). And the people responded en masse. We see elsewhere in Scripture that the Jordan River

overflowed with sinners aware of their brokenness and desperate for a life released from the burden of the law (Matt. 3:5-6).

It is here among the archives of history and Old Testament prophecy that we find the spark of joy, lit by a backcountry preacher serving in obscurity on the banks of a river. The world was ruled by darkness, but this joy was rooted in the heart of a Father who knew mankind's greatest need and never once forgot His promise to His people.

Those who stepped into the waters by faith were choosing joy, trusting that there was something—and *Someone*—greater to come, and that this was only the beginning.

Joy is sometimes an act of faith for us as well. We, too, live in a dark time, and our leaders aren't often known for their benevolence or integrity. Our personal circumstances can weigh us down in grief or despair. We easily forget the Light when surrounded by all these shadows.

But unlike Israel 2,000 years ago, we know the whole story. Jesus, the Son of God, came as a baby—a herald of joy for all people. His perfect life ended on a cross, where He took on every sin and drank every drop from the cup of God's wrath. And our real life began with His resurrection. We now receive grace, righteousness, hope, and joy in abundance because of His sacrifice.

That is the daily reality for all who believe. Among many other things, we are reconciled (Rom. 5:10), at peace (Rom. 5:1) redeemed (Col. 1:14), made new (2 Cor. 5:17), chosen and blessed (Eph. 1:3-4) and perfectly loved (Eph. 2:4). Because of Christ, we have much reason to rejoice every day of our lives, no matter our circumstances.

Where will you find joy today?

Prayer

Father, thank you that joy can be my experience every day because of the gift of Your Son, Jesus. I confess it's hard to see past my circumstances or feelings, but I want to live out the joy of my salvation in all things, at all times. Help me also to be a joy giver! I want to spread Your joy to all the world, and what greater source of joy is there than being Your child, now and forever. Give me courage and opportunities to share that good news with everyone You put in my path, especially this season. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. David uses the phrase, “restore to me the joy of my salvation” in his psalm of confession and repentance (Ps. 51). In what ways has sin stolen your joy? How has the Lord been faithful to restore your joy?
2. Why is repentance of sin important for a follower of Jesus? Have you made the discipline of repentance part of your daily life? How does this affect your relationship with your heavenly Father?
3. What specific decisions can you make this time of year to help make more room for joy in your life?
4. How can you be a joy giver this Christmas season?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What is the difference between joy and happiness?
2. What kind of things give you joy? Why?
3. Have you ever felt joy in the middle of a difficult situation? How were you able to experience joy during this time?
4. Have you ever asked God to give you more joy in Him? If not, ask Him to help you find and experience joy every day of your life!

Listen to | “*Joy to the World*”

by Isaac Watts (1719)

Joy to The world! the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let ev’ry heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing

Joy to the world! the Savior reigns
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks,
hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found,
Far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love
And wonders of His love
And wonder wonders of His love.

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____





LOVE

ADVENT | Week 4

Ask any 5th grader you can find and have them finish this sentence, “God is ____.” Nine out of 10 will say, “love.”

You can find the origin of this sentence in the first letter that the Gospel writer John wrote. It says this,

“God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:8-10, ESV).

Notice that John writes, “in this is love...” twice. He wants us to look into what he is describing so that we can rightly see what “love” really means.

The first part of love’s meaning is seen in God sending His only Son into the world. That is what we celebrate on Christmas. The Son of God stepped out of eternity into history. Jesus entered the world as one of us. He became one of us. God became man. He gave Himself to us. You can’t truly know what love means unless you know and believe the Christmas story.

The second part of John’s teaching on love comes in verse 10, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Not only did God give Himself to us in giving us His Son, but He also gave Himself for us in sending His Son to be the *sacrifice for our sin*.

Christmas and the cross come together to show us what it means that, “God is love.” As we peer into the wooden manger this season, may we be reminded of the wooden cross as well.

Because, “in this is love...”

love | lɒv | noun
:: a feeling of deep
attachment to another,
arising out of kinship;
an assurance of
affection;



Celebrating the Love of God

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.”

Isaiah 11:1-10 (ESV)

At first glance, this well-known passage does not seem to be particularly about love. But as we examine it more closely, we can see it truly is. Because the perfect love of God is a perfect balance of amazing justice and amazing love.

One image that comes to mind from the image Isaiah uses is that of a big dead stump. This represents Christ's humanity, with all the sordid stories from Jesse's ancestors—from the betrayal of Joseph by big brother Judah to the adultery and murder committed by David, the man after God's own heart.

But wait! Look and see this tiny, tender shoot emerging from the seemingly dead stump of humanity, borne out of the love of God. Now true life can finally spring forth. The branch from Jesse's roots, imbued with the Spirit of God, invites us to peer through the misty shrouds of time into a recovered and redeemed garden. It is a place where there is no injustice, no suffering, and no strife anymore. And as our blurry vision comes into focus, we see Jesus—the outcome of perfect judgment and righteousness. And with that perfect judgment, armed with righteousness, wickedness is utterly destroyed. As we ponder these amazing things, we must agree that it would not be right for any sin to be left unpunished.

The results thrill our hearts. The picture painted for us is of the little tyke who plays with snakes, leading carnivorous creatures in a peaceful parade. This is how the curse is reversed. Paradise lost has been regained. And on that day, there will no longer be any danger or suffering or disease anymore.

“Because of the love of God, the only champion who can bring this about must be born.”

Because of the love of God, the only champion who can bring this about must be born. Jesus came from the stump of Jesse and because of Him, we will forever celebrate the love of God.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What words and phrases are used to describe the Holy Spirit in this passage?
2. Isaiah 11:2 points us forward to the coming Messiah and to a familiar scene in the New Testament. Read Matthew 3:13-17. How do we see Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled over 700 years later?
3. What does this passage teach us about the Lord's judgment? How is His judgment different from the way we tend to judge others around us (see vv. 3-4)?
4. How do verses 9 and 10 describe the world and the people in it during that time? How is this unlike our world today, and how does contrast encourage you as you prepare for the return of our “Root of Jesse”?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. In today's passage, Isaiah promises the coming of a Savior—One will judge the world with perfect righteousness, justice, and faithfulness. He is referred to here as “a shoot...from the stump of Jesse”, a “Branch”, and “the Root of Jesse.” Read Romans 15:7-13 aloud. Who is this promised One?
2. Verse 3 also tells us His judgment will be completely different from the way *we* judge others. How does it feel when someone judges you based on something they saw or heard about you? We hate it when we are judged based on our appearance, our behavior, or gossip, but how quick are you to turn around and judge others using these same standards?
3. As a result of Christ's *righteous* judgment, perfect peace and harmony will exist among all of God's creations (vv. 6-9), even between those who were once considered “enemies.” What usually happens when we judge others *unrighteously*? Do we experience this same kind of peace and unity with those whom we judge, or do we create divisions and conflicts? Do our judgments of others bring you closer together, or drive you further apart? How can you follow Jesus' example and be a peacemaker even as you make judgments about the people and the world around you?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

In the Midst of Love

“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
 shout, O Israel!
 Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
 O daughter of Jerusalem!
 The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
 he has cleared away your enemies.
 The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
 you shall never again fear evil.
 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
 “Fear not, O Zion;
 let not your hands grow weak.
 The Lord your God is in your midst,
 a mighty one who will save;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness;
 he will quiet you by his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing.”

Zephaniah 3:14-17 (ESV)

Have you ever been in the room when a new parent holds their baby for the first time? Or have you ever seen a groom’s face when the bridal march begins to

play and he sees his bride for the first time? If you've experienced either of these events, you've been in the presence of true love.

There's no way to explain or prepare someone for how love feels. An expectant mother might try to imagine what it will be like to hold her baby in her arms. But until you've experienced that moment, there's really no way to understand the immediate and unconditional love between mother and child. A young couple might ask how they will know if they're truly in love, but we all know the only answer that makes any sense is just that, "when you know, you know."

Just like a sudden flash of light heightens our awareness of darkness, walking through a period of pain or suffering intensifies our recognition of love. When the world around us is oppressive and difficult, we can more clearly see and feel the love of God wrapped around us like a blanket. While it may not change our circumstances, we find peace and comfort knowing we are in the presence of our loving Father.

Zephaniah 3 is a window into what it will look and feel like to be fully restored to our Lord God. This passage helps us understand how God's great love provides a path to salvation from our deserved fate, and restores us to the perfect love we can find only in the presence of our Holy Father.

For more than three chapters, Zephaniah reads like the script for an epic battle scene where the enemy will be literally wiped from the face of the earth. Zephaniah prophesied of the Lord's coming judgement of sin. He specifically calls out the nations of Judah and Israel and gives them a warning to turn from their idolatrous ways before the Lord's wrath falls upon them. He urges them to seek the Lord and to seek righteousness and humility (Zeph. 2:3).

But in the middle of chapter 3, the narrative shifts to a theme of restoration and salvation for the people of Israel and all whose hope and trust is in the Lord. After the storm of judgement, Zephaniah's tone turns to one of rejoicing and even exuberance. "Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel!" (Zeph. 3:1, NIV). The Lord has literally turned their mourning into dancing (Ps. 30:11) and wiped away all their wrongs. He cleans the slate, grants a full pardon, and best of all, He now resides in their midst. They no longer have any reason to fear or mourn because the Lord Himself is their Champion, the Warrior who stands among them as King, Protector, and Savior.

"... He is more than the King who protects them; He is also the Father who dearly loves them."

But He is more than the King who protects them; He is also the Father who dearly loves them. While He is the mighty warrior who will save them, in verse 17 he goes on to describe a scene that puts all the greatest love stories to shame: "He will rejoice

over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing.”

The original Hebrew name for Emmanuel literally translates, “God with us.” This was the name prophesied in the Old Testament for the coming Messiah. The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem literally put God right in our midst. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost keeps God in the midst of all believers for all time (Acts 2:1-4).

Rejoice, oh brothers and sisters in Christ! The Lord your God is in your midst, and He has rescued you; He sings over you; and takes great delight in you. We are in the presence of the greatest love that has ever been or ever will be, and it is perfect, redemptive, and directed right at us. *O come, O come Emmanuel.*

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How has the Lord’s presence “in the midst” of your life been evident?
2. What should be your response to God’s great love for you?
3. Have you ever been quieted by the Lord’s love? In contrast, have you ever felt the exuberance or loudness of His love over you (see v. 17)?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. How do you most often experience the love of the Lord?
2. As a family, how can you carve out time to reflect and discuss specific evidences of the Lord’s presence in your lives?
3. Would your daily life look different if you truly believed the Lord was in your midst?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

A Father's Selfless Love

“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

Seeming betrayal and seeds of doubt. Youth and inexperience. Alone and afraid. Mary and Joseph found themselves in a difficult situation more than 2,000 years ago. Their starting place was shaky ground. Few couples would successfully navigate much less survive such a situation today without immediate support and supernatural intervention.

Mary and Joseph were formally engaged to be married—meaning they were legally bound to each other under Jewish law (v. 18). This was very different from modern day engagements, especially when pregnancy was involved. Mary faced serious consequences for the unborn child she was carrying. Joseph knew this child was not his. He could legally and rightfully turn his future humiliation into vengeance for Mary’s “betrayal” and demand she be stoned. Self-preservation was definitely an option for Joseph.

But Joseph, being a just and righteous man, was not thinking of himself. His focus was on Mary and his love for her. Though the life they expected was not going to be a reality, Joseph could not bring himself to publicly humiliate his bride, much less aid in her death. His selfless love for Mary moved him to seek a quiet divorce (v. 19), the most reasonable of them all.

Joseph’s heart was heavy as he weighed his limited choices (v. 20). But God, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1), lovingly sent an angel of the Lord to show Joseph the best option of all.

He comforted and assured Joseph that there was nothing to fear by marrying Mary. She was still the same Mary—faithful, trustworthy and God-fearing. The angel confirmed the baby was indeed placed in her womb by the Holy Spirit and there was no reason to doubt her integrity. He even threw in a gender reveal! Spoiler alert...it’s a boy! Better yet, the son Joseph would raise as his own would be called Jesus, and he would “save his people from their sins” (v. 21).

Imagine the love that ignited inside Joseph as soon as he heard the news of Jesus. The boy he would parent and protect would also be his Savior. The Jewish people, including Joseph and Mary, had anticipated the long-awaited Messiah for many generations. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 to confirm this prophecy was fulfilled by the events in verses 20-21, confirming Jesus was indeed the Messiah (v. 23).

Joseph quickly obeyed God and married his bride (v. 24). He loved and honored her well until the arrival of God’s son (v. 25). Thankfully Jesus was God’s son, not Joseph’s. Jesus was fully man and fully God, making him the ultimate sacrifice to one day atone for sin.

All of us face the eternal consequences of sin. As Joseph responded to Mary in selfless love, God also responds in love—in fact, He is love (1 John 4:7-21). The greatest exhibit of His love for us was through the giving of His son, Jesus (John 3:16). God’s rescue plan to save us from sin and eternal separation from Him exhibited the greatest act of love creation has ever known.

“As Joseph responded to Mary in selfless love, God also responds in love—in fact, He is love.”

Jesus Christ's birth as a helpless baby on earth, His death as an innocent man on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead as our conquering King was His love in action. May we celebrate and reflect God's selfless love to one another this season.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What character qualities does God display in today's passage?
2. What motivated Joseph's responses/actions throughout the passage?
3. What motivates your thoughts, words and deeds throughout the day?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. How would you describe Joseph?
2. How did God show His love for you in today's passage?
3. How can you respond in love to others and point them to Christ?

Song of Meditation | “*Love is the Theme*”

by Albert C. Fisher

Of the themes that men have known,
One supremely stands alone;
Through the ages it has shown,
‘Tis His wonderful, wonderful love.

Love is the theme, love is supreme;
Sweeter it grows, glory bestows;
Bright as the sun ever it glows!
Love is the theme, eternal theme!

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Glory in the Highest

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!” When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Luke 2:8-20 (ESV)

This is one of the most familiar texts in the New Testament. Perhaps the words conjure up an image of Linus on a stage, clutching his blanket, and asking, “Lights, please?” before he speaks these words to explain the true meaning of Christmas to Charlie Brown. Hopefully the words have not become too familiar to still prick our hearts.

Earlier in chapter 2, Mary and Joseph had gone to Bethlehem in Judea to register for the census. While they were there, the baby came, and He was laid in a manger because there was no room or proper bed for Him elsewhere. Then the scene shifts—not to the new parents or family members, but to an unlikely group: shepherds. Just like the baby, they too were somewhere unusual and uncomfortable and lowly. They were in the fields while others were asleep in bed.

When the angel came, the glory of the Lord did not just appear before their eyes, but “shone around them” (v. 9). They were enveloped in His full glory, like a loving embrace that brings joy instead of fear. Indeed, the angel’s message was one of joy: the long-awaited Messiah, your Savior, the Lord, has been born. He has not come in military power with armor and chariots and a sword. He has come as a fragile, lowly newborn, swaddled and laid in a feeding trough.

**“For all ages, angels
had watched this
gospel story unfold
before men, and now
the Lord had done it.”**

These shepherds were not the only ones to hear the message on this night. When the angels of heaven heard this joyful announcement, they all showed up to celebrate! For all ages, angels had watched this gospel story unfold before men, and now the Lord had done it. In love, the Father had sent His Son in flesh and blood to redeem and reconcile mankind to Himself. And the angels couldn’t contain their worship; they filled the skies over Judea to join in the chorus giving praise to the Lord. What a glorious sound it must have been!

Likewise, the shepherds also worshipped and glorified the Lord after they found the baby in the manger. Their status did not keep them from spreading the word to everyone they saw. And then they rejoiced their way back to their fields and flocks, forever changed by the glory that they had encountered that night.

Mary also worshipped. For nine months, she had meditated on Gabriel’s announcement that she would give birth to the Son of the Most High. (Luke 1:30-33) Now this truth had been verified by strangers smelling of sheep, who had been washed in the glory of the Lord in the middle of the night. This information was too lofty for her to grasp but too weighty for her to brush off. She realized the gravity of this moment and personally worshipped her Savior.

When we grasp the tremendous depth of love that it took for God to provide salvation and hope to us through the flesh of His very own Son, our immediate

response must be worship. Whether we worship the Lord powerfully like the angels, enthusiastically like the shepherds, or meditatively like Mary, He is worthy of all of our praise. It was not simply to fulfill a duty or complete a plan. God encapsulated all of His eternal, powerful, overwhelming love for us in one tiny infant.

Glory to God in the highest! May we receive His loving Gift with enthusiasm and worship! And may His people be changed into His likeness as we glorify Him in all things.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What does this scene reveal about the character of God?
2. Have you ever been overwhelmed with worship of the Lord the way that the angels were?
3. As you “ponder these things in your heart,” what else does the Holy Spirit tell you about Jesus?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. How do you think Mary felt when the shepherds told her about their encounter in the fields?
2. What names or titles did the angel give for Jesus?
3. Take some time to thank the Lord for all of the ways He has loved you.

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Enduring, Unfailing Love

“Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, “so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

Matthew 4:12-16 (ESV)

Darkness. We are first introduced to the concept in the beginning, when Genesis 1:2 states, “The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep.” This was before life as we know it ‘was.’ Historically, darkness evokes feelings of fear and foreboding; it’s also a mark of physical and spiritual blindness. Unreflecting, it only absorbs what surrounds it.

It was darkness that engulfed the Israelites as they languished in Egyptian slavery. Hearing their cries of oppression and despair, God called them out to be a people for Himself—a people meant to experience and reflect His glory, hope, and faithful love to a dark world.

Israel was a nation of people who failed, choosing not to return God’s affections or share His love with others. They were a rebellious people. A defeated people. A people who loved darkness and moved further and further from their God as history marched on.

And yet, God had not moved. And His covenant people would not be left in darkness.

As Isaiah so prophesied: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

In Galilee, in Bethlehem (in what would have been Zebulun in the long ago Northern Kingdom of Israel), Light entered the world’s darkness. Just as God spoke physical light into the darkness of Genesis 1, the true Light, predicted by Isaiah, was realized in the person of Jesus Christ. A reflecting Light—the exact image of the Father and His unfailing, covenant-keeping love!

O, what love is this, that God would send His Son, a Light among his wayward people, and not for them only! A light among Jews and Gentiles. A light that was a promise fulfilled. A light becoming brighter during His time on earth, through His ministry, death, and resurrection. A light made brighter as His love persevered through men’s dark deeds of jealousy, fear, rejection, persecution, and death. A love superior to any other possible expression of love.

**“O, what love is this,
that God would
send His Son, a
Light among his
wayward people...”**

This was a love of sacrifice—the sacrifice, not only of the cross, but sacrifice that would lay aside glory, empty itself, condescend to manhood—even a helpless infant—for the sake of the ones loved.

Yes, “this is love. Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Jesus Christ is the only Light strong enough to pierce the darkness of our hearts and make us new, giving eternal life and providing an enduring, life-changing love.

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. How does the love of Christ reflect from you into a dark world?
2. What steps could you take to show Christ’s love to your family in a new, more complete way? Your co-workers? Your friends? People on the fringes of your life? Strangers? Those who you consider an enemy? Ask God for the desire, wisdom, and guidance to accomplish His purposes for loving others through you in a way that is reflective of Jesus.

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What words and phrases does Matthew use to describe Jesus in this passage? What was Jesus called to do in Galilee? Read the passage below. How does Matthew later say we are to follow His example?

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Matthew 5:14-16

2. In the Bible, “darkness” is often contrasted with “light” to represent the difference between sin and righteousness. Where do you sense areas of “darkness” in your own life, your school, your community, and in the world today? How does the light of Christ reflect from you into dark places? What could you do to let your light shine even more brightly so that those living in darkness will come to glorify God?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

When Tomorrow Creeps Into Today

“The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw
concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the Lord
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;

and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Isaiah 2:1-5 (ESV)

As children, many of us looked forward to Christmas morning more than any other day of the year. This excitement, however, was almost always fueled by a desire to receive presents rather than some super-spiritual reason. For children, the thrill of Christmas morning can be so encompassing it occupies all their thoughts and makes sleep nearly impossible, even during the days leading up to Christmas.

Have you ever looked forward to something so much that, even though it was happening in the future, you couldn't keep it from creeping into your today?

The prophet Isaiah wrote about that kind of day more than 2,600 years ago after the nation of Israel split and the northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians. It was a time of great spiritual and political upheaval for Judah as they narrowly escaped defeat and found themselves politically, economically, and militarily weakened.

The previous chapter of Isaiah outlines God's complaint against His chosen nation—they had become so rebellious and sinful that He had grown tired of their sacrifices, stopped listening to their prayers, and allowed their enemies to overrun them.

Isaiah points Judah to a coming day when Jerusalem will be the most powerful and influential city in the world, not because of their great might, but because that is where the Son of God will live. Both the law and the Word of the Lord (v. 3) will go out from Jerusalem because Jesus will be speaking it!

In that day, it will not just be Jews who come to Jerusalem to worship but “all the nations.” The nations will go there because God is doing two things—He's teaching them His ways (v. 3) and judging between the nations, perfectly and rightly settling all their disputes.

Isaiah identifies two things that will happen because of God's actions. The first is that the people will “walk in His paths” (v. 3), which means they will obey Him. The second is that because God is judging between nations, they don't have to resort to military power to protect themselves, which is why they convert their weapons of war into tools for farming (v. 4). Not only do they not need weapons for waging war, they even stop training to fight! No need for armies. No more young men and women dying to settle conflict. All nations go to the perfect judge.

Isaiah then concludes this section in verse 5 with an exhortation for the people of Israel (the house of Jacob) to “walk in the light of the Lord.” He points to a day when the rest of the world will know the truth that they have been taught, and encourages them to live in light of that truth today. Instead of rebelling and looking to others for strength in times of national distress, turn to their God who one day will set everything right.

Sometimes, when things are going well in our lives, it's easy to grow complacent, especially spiritually. Isaiah 2:1-5 reminds us that even when things seem to be going well, it's nothing compared to how great it will be one day when Jesus returns. Reading the prophetic passages of Scripture help us put today in the right perspective and keeps us from loving this world too much.

The same is true if we're going through rough times, like Isaiah's original audience. Whether it's national distress—mass shootings, political struggle, economic crisis—or a personal challenge—the loss of a loved one, cancer, or broken relationships—looking forward to a day when Jesus will make all things right increases our love and gratitude for Him.

**“... looking forward
to a day when
Jesus will make
all things right
increases our love
and gratitude for
Him.”**

Let a little of this tomorrow creep into today.

Prayer

Lord help me not be so consumed with today—both the trials of today or the pleasures of this world, even the good things that just aren't as good as you—that I lose sight of you—your perfect goodness, your great grace and love towards me. Please help to live today with my eyes on you!

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. In verse 3, what is it that Isaiah says will attract the nations to Zion (Jerusalem)? Do you likewise find yourself “streaming” toward the teaching God's Word, or away from it? How highly do you prioritize the knowledge of “His ways” and “His paths” in your own life (v. 3)?
2. What words and phrases does Isaiah use to describe the temple of God in verses 2-4? What kinds of things will occur in and from this “new Jerusalem”?
3. In today's passage, Isaiah helps us peer into the window of eternity. He describes a time when weapons of war are transformed into instruments of service, peace will abound, and God's law is obeyed. If this hopeful reality only exists in the future, why do you think Isaiah exhorts Israel (and us) to “walk in the light of the Lord” today?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What do you think it means to “walk in the light of the Lord” (v. 5)?
2. How have you seen your family members, your friends, your teachers, or your

leaders applying and living out the truths of God’s Word? How have their godly examples been a source of light in your life?

- 3. What are some benefits have you experienced as a result of obeying God’s Word? What consequences have you experienced as a result of disobedience?
- 4. How does the promise of a restored future, where sin or suffering are a thing of the past, give you hope as you seek to walk in the light of the Lord today?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____

Lady in Waiting

“And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Luke 2:36–38 (ESV)

A favorite Christmas traditions in many families is the Christmas calendar. It is some version of a calendar made of cloth or wood or other material with a tiny pocket or opening for each day of December leading up to Christmas Day. Every day, anticipation grows and excitement builds as you move one day closer to Christmas.

In America, most families put up the tree in the living room and lights on the house. Each day, the number of wrapped and bagged packages under the tree grows. Christmas music plays and favorite movies of the season are watched. Special books are read. We totally immerse ourselves in the coming of Christmas. We “long for” its arrival if you will. It is like we begin to see everything around us with “Christmas eyes.”

The birth of Jesus was the long-awaited fulfillment of the promises that God had made throughout the history of His people. He created for them a longing and expectation that was meant to inspire in them a hope for the future, an urgency for

the present and a perspective of the past.

That's why Luke gives us the gift of Anna. She is the most obscure character in all the narrative surrounding Jesus' birth. In the long chapters of Luke's Gospel, she occupies the real estate of three verses in the middle of chapter two. It is likely you have read over those verses and missed her altogether. But Luke wants us to catch a glimpse of the birth of Jesus through her "Christmas eyes."

She is an old woman. She is probably 105 years old and has been a widow for 85 years. We are told she is a prophetess, a role that had faded in her recent years. When God does not grant revelation for 400 years, the message of the prophets can tend to feel stale to the people around. "Yeah, yeah... we've heard all of this before!"

She is not famous. She is not significant. She is not wealthy. She is not even profound. Luke does not record a single word she ever uttered.

But, she is remembered. Luke was a historian. He interviewed eyewitnesses. He spent time with Mary and the disciples. He studied everything there was about Jesus. And somewhere in all that the name Anna kept coming up.

Maybe it was Mary that recounted, "I remember the year Jesus was born. We took him to the Temple as the law instructed. There was this widowed woman, old and thin. She was there serving the temple. I'll never forget when her eyes met Jesus. Such joy and compassion filled her soul. She knew him. He was only a month old, but she had been looking for him all her life."

The emperor was looking for more taxes. The religious leaders were looking for more favor. Young men were looking for wives. Young women were hoping for children. Worshipers were looking for mercy from God. But Anna was looking for Jesus. And she had found him.

"God was not silent any longer. His voice was loud and clear in the cooing of this child..."

For more than 80 years, she came daily to the temple, praying and worshipping. She skipped lunch and dinner, sometimes for days or weeks. She longed and waited and hoped. And then one day, an unsuspecting couple shows up at the temple for the routine purification...and her eyes meet this child.

Could it be? God was not silent any longer. His voice was loud and clear in the cooing of this child held tightly to his mother's chest. God was with them. God was here. She beheld him. At long last, He had returned!

Luke wants us to know Anna. He wants us to see her. She has a joy and amazement that was greater than those around her because what she longed for

was greater! She never settled for the lesser things. She had “Christmas eyes,” and her excitement overflowed to all around her.

As believers, this is a good reminder. We want to cultivate a longing for greater joy. It may be that you find yourself caught up in the spirit of Christmas but uncommitted in your heart the person whose birth we celebrate. And we not only celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we also want to expectantly long for His return.

Jesus’ return will eclipse the joy and excitement of any Christmas morning we’ve ever experienced a million times a million. And Christians today long for a Christmas to come that will last forever!

Further Reflection | Individual Study Questions

1. What is something you are waiting on or longing for in your life today?
2. How does that waiting and longing you have help you in your perspective regarding waiting and longing for the coming of Jesus?
3. What steps can you take to help cultivate more deeply a longing for Jesus’ return?

Further Reflection | Family Study Questions

1. What is your favorite Christmas tradition or event?
2. Describe something in the future that you are excited about.
3. What would it look like and feel like in our family to have an excitement about the day that Jesus will return?

Notes:

Year: _____

Year: _____

Year: _____



FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP

"We will not hide them from their children,
but tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.
He established a testimony in Jacob
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers
to teach to their children,
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments..."

Psalm 78:4–7 (ESV)

If your family is like most, Christmas is one of your favorite times of the year. There is so much to get excited about during the Christmas season! The lights, the presents, the food, the Christmas trees, and the time with loved ones. With all this activity, though, isn't it too easy to forget the biggest reason of all to be excited? Sometimes it feels like all the things we are doing drown out the Savior we are celebrating. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In Psalm 78, God implores an adult generation to teach the next generation about Him. We see in Old Testament that He gave His people tools to accomplish this task. Have you ever wondered why, from the very beginning, God gave His people feasts, celebrations, traditions, and rituals? Traditions are teaching opportunities. They are opportunities to re-tell the story to ourselves and our children. Our celebrations sear truths into our memories. That was exactly God's intention with every feast, celebration, and ritual He established.

The Christian Church has always realized the importance of traditions. That's why, for thousands of years, the Church has celebrated the Advent season. Advent is an intentional time to re-tell the story of how our long-promised Savior came into the world and will return again to make everything new.

What if we used all the things we love about this season to accomplish what God has called us to in Psalm 78? The following pages are filled with ideas to help you do just that. The Advent wreath is a simple and significant way to focus your family through the month of December. Kids love to turn out the lights and light the candles. And with each candle you light, you are re-telling the story of Jesus.

Whatever you choose to do, the important thing is that you gather as a family to remember and celebrate the coming of Jesus. Psalm 78 says there is a purpose in telling the story of Jesus to our children. They learn to set their hope on God. Imagine your children, many years from now, as adults looking back on their Christmas memories. What if, in addition to their love for lights, Christmas trees, and presents, they also had a deep affection for Jesus because of what your family did together every December?

May God reveal Himself to you and your children this Advent season.



Ideas for Family Discipleship

Attend “The Nativity Live”

Join Bethel Downtown and the Foundry for their annual production of The Nativity Live. This free event will bring God’s Word to life for people of all ages in the heart of downtown Tyler. You’ll start on the third floor of the church and travel through different scenes narrating the story of Christ’s birth. There will even be live animals!

Make an Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is part of the liturgical countdown to Christmas and a beautiful symbol of the season. A basic Advent wreath consists of a circle with four candleholders with one candle in the center. It may be garnished with holly or pine branches. The Advent wreath can serve as a teaching moment too. Point out the colors to your children, and talk about what they mean.

Here’s how you can make one of your own:

- With green crafting wire, fasten live or plastic evergreen branches to a wire wreath circle.
- After you attach the first branch, lay the second branch over the end of the first so it covers the stem.
- Continue in this way until you reach where you began.
- Tuck the ends of your final branches under the foliage of the beginning branches.
- The circle of evergreen branches reminds us of God, who has no beginning and no end, and of His faithfulness, which endures forever.
- Set four candles in candleholders inside the wreath. Traditionally, the wreath holds three purple candles and one rose-colored candle. A white candle can be added in the center of the wreath.

*The first purple candle represents **hope**. We remember the long years that the world waited in anticipation and hope for the coming of the Messiah.*

*The second purple candle represents **preparation**—Israel’s preparation for the Messiah and our preparation for the second coming (advent) of Jesus.*

*The third rose-colored candle represents **joy**. Christ brought joy to all who believed in Him, and we are filled with joy today as His second coming draws nearer.*

*The final purple candle represents **peace**. God gives peace to all who wait for Him.*

*The optional white candle represents **Christ**—the perfect, spotless, righteous Lamb of God.*

Light the Advent candles every day at dinnertime in this manner:

First Sunday of Advent—light the first purple candle.

Second Sunday of Advent—light the first and second purple candles.

Third Sunday of Advent—light the first and second purple candles and the rose candle.

Fourth Sunday of Advent—light all the purple and rose candles.

On Christmas Day, celebrate Jesus' birth by lighting the white candle in the center of the wreath, if you included it.

Make an Ornament Garland

Cut out 24 green and red construction paper strips. On each strip, write the name of a family member, friend, or ministry. Staple the strips as links into one long garland. Hang the garland in your home as a decoration. Every day in December, have a family member remove one of the paper strips. As a family, pray for the person or ministry whose name is on that strip of paper.

Use Christmas Cards as Prayer Reminders

As Christmas cards arrive during December, place them in a basket in a noticeable area. Once a day, pull out one card and pray for that person or family together. Keep the Christmas card basket out all year and pray regularly for other families. You may want to write the person a note signed by your family that says, "We prayed for you today."

Read Together

Choose a nativity story (Matthew 1:18-2:12 or Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-38) and read it aloud together. Or, choose a biblically centered Christmas classic and read a chapter or two each night after dinner as a family.

Suggested Family Reading

Little Pilgrim's Progress by Helen Taylor

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson

Behold the Lamb of God: An Advent Narrative by Russ Ramsey

Create an Advent Jesse Tree

This ancient tradition, based on Isaiah 11:1, helps children learn the Christmas story and related Scripture. Start with either a small live or artificial tree. If you prefer, use removable Washi tape to outline a tree shape on a door or wall.

Use the 24 Bible stories below, or select your own, and create small ornaments that correspond with each story. Use construction paper, scissors, markers, and other art supplies. Beginning December 1, read the corresponding Scripture passage, discuss how it points to Jesus, and then hang or tape the ornament on the tree.

| Days and Themes | Scriptures | Ornament Designs |
|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Day 1: Alpha and Omega | Rev. 22:13 | Alpha/Omega symbols |
| Day 2: The Trinity | Col. 1:15-16 | 3 interlocking rings |
| Day 3: Creation | Acts 17:24 | Earth/tree/sun/moon |
| Day 4: Love | 1 John 4:16 | Heart |
| Day 5: Believe | John 3:16 | Cross |
| Day 6: Bethlehem | Mic. 5:2 | Silhouette of cityscape |
| Day 7: Promises | Isa. 7:14 | Rainbow |
| Day 8: Mary is Chosen | Luke 1:26-28 | Photo of family |
| Day 9: Trusting God | Luke 1:29-37 | Pregnant woman, Mary |
| Day 10: Immanuel | Matt. 1:20-23 | “Immanuel,” handprint |
| Day 11: A Good Attitude | Luke 2:1-5 | Donkey |
| Day 12: No Room at the Inn | Luke 2:6-7 | “No Vacancy” sign |
| Day 13: Born in a Manger | Luke 2:6-7 | Baby in a manger |
| Day 14: The Shepherds | Luke 2:8-12 | Angel |
| Day 15: Go and Tell | Luke 2:16-18 | Shepherds with sheep |
| Day 16: The Wise Men | Matt. 2:1-2 | Wise men |
| Day 17: The Greatest Gift | Matt. 2:9-11 | Presents |
| Day 18: The Word | John 1:1-3 | Bible |
| Day 19: The Good Shepherd | John 10:14 | Shepherd with staff |
| Day 20: The Vine | John 15:5 | Vine with fruit |
| Day 21: Light of the World | John 8:12 | Lighthouse |
| Day 22: Bread of Life | John 6:48 | Loaf of bread |
| Day 23: Way, Truth, and Life | John 14:6 | “One-Way” sign |
| Day 24: Lamb of God | John 1:29 | White lamb |

Have a Birthday Party for Jesus

Children learn the significance of birthday parties at a very young age, so having a birthday party for Jesus is a practical way to help kids to understand the significance of Christmas. Just like we celebrate another year of life with a birthday party, Christmas is an annual celebration of Jesus' birth and the fulfillment of God's promise to send us a Savior.

Before you begin, read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:1-16. If you have a nativity set, point out each character as they are mentioned in the story. Ask your children what kinds of gifts they would give to Jesus for His birthday, then read Matthew 2:1-11 together. Explain the significance of the three gifts presented to Him by the magi (gold, frankincense, and myrrh).

*These were gifts worthy of a king. The early church Fathers understood the **gold** to be symbolic of Christ's deity, the **frankincense** of His purity, and the **myrrh** of His death (since it was a spice used for embalming).*

After reading both stories, invite your children to help you prepare, bake, and decorate cupcakes or a birthday cake for Jesus. Sing "Happy Birthday" together, let your children blow out the candle(s), and ask them to make a wish. Ask your children what they think Jesus would have wished for, then read 1 Timothy 2:3-4 out loud and discuss.

The Bible says that God's wish is for all of mankind to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Jesus is our Truth (John 14:6); He doesn't want anyone to perish. Instead, He wants everyone to enter into a personal relationship with Him (even though some will choose not to).

Help Another Family

Find an individual or family within your community through your church, school, neighborhood, work, or a reputable nonprofit that needs help during this season. Helping others without accepting anything in return is a great way to show your family to love like Jesus. Ways to help include:

- Pay a bill or "catch them up" on a bill
- Put gas in their car (be sure you pump it and serve them!)
- Babysit for free
- Clean up their yard
- Purchase groceries
- Invite them over for a meal and send them home with prepared frozen meals
- Purchase gifts for their children for Christmas/birthday

Free Hot Drinks and Prayer

Setup a free hot chocolate and/or coffee table in your neighborhood, busy parking lot (ask permission first) or anywhere there is lots of foot traffic during

Advent. Hand out the warm beverages and offer to pray for the visitors that stop. You can pray right there for them or they can complete a slip and put it into a “prayer request box” (wrapping paper and a box) so you can pray for them later on or throughout the season.

Listen to Music

Be mindful and purposeful with the music your family plays during the Advent season. Whether it’s background music throughout the day, in the car or as everyone is settling into bed, music can keep your family focused on the true meaning of this season. Some favorite hymns include “O Come, O Come Immanuel”, “Come Thou Fount”, “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”, and “Joy to the World.”

Act it Out

Acting out the different scenes from Jesus’ birth story is a great way to make it come to life, especially for children. Use simple items such as a nativity set, popsicle sticks, clothes pins or old socks to make puppets for each person. While the adults or older children read the passages from the Bible, the children listen and act out the story with the figures or puppets. Families can also get robes, towels, and fabric to create “costumes” and act out the story while someone reads.

Love Your Neighbor

Giving a simple gift to your neighbor such as a homemade ornament, baked good, or singing carols/hymns throughout your neighborhood is a great way to spread hope, peace, joy, and love. If you don’t live in a neighborhood, you can love your neighbors at the closest a retirement community, nursing home, or long-term care facility.

Instructions for making Advent ornaments:

- Buy pre-fabricated ornaments at Hobby Lobby or other craft stores. Blank wooden ornaments in all shapes are available. Colored or clear ball ornaments will work too.
- Paint, stamp, use stickers, etc. to add one of the Advent themes (hope, peace, joy, love).
- Decorate the ornament and add ribbon or a special hook so it can be hung on a tree or wreath.
- Write a personal message from you or your family such as “Praying this season will bring you hope—Love, The Millers”. You can even add a scripture or reference to the message.

Resources adapted from “6 Ideas for Celebrating Advent as a Family” by Lifeway Publications, “Knowing Him by Name 2018 Advent Calendar” by Focus on the Family, and “A Meaningful Christmas: A 24-Day Family Devotional” by Carrie Rogers and Brittney Poe.

