



LIGHT HAS COME

*Big Ridge Baptist Church
Advent Devotional 2024*





INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our Advent devotional, a journey of reflection and anticipation as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ this 2024 Advent season. Advent in Christian theology is defined as “the coming.” Advent therefore is a celebration of the first coming of Jesus Christ of Nazareth with an anticipation of His second coming.

Because He came, we have access to peace, hope, joy and love. Many of us struggle to experience these wonderful gifts He gave. So the invitation of Advent is for us to lean into what Christ offers us in daily life. Christ desires to meet us in our struggles of life and grant us peace where there is no peace, hope where there is no hope, etc.

The devotional you hold in your hands is a tool to guide you through the four weeks of the Advent season. Each week, you will have a weekly overview and three devotions to utilize. Whether you snuggle up on the couch or gather around the dinner table, explore the Scriptures, engage in meaningful discussions and draw closer to God.

We invite you to embrace this season of waiting, to discover joy in the journey, and to remember the incredible gift of Jesus.

May you have a blessed Advent!

Dr. Raymond Grabert
Alicia Bowman



PEACE

Week 1 Intro

We start our Advent journey meditating on “peace.” Many of us strive to gain just a small amount of peace in our lives. Actually, peace seems to be so fragile. Such small things upset us. A spilled cup of coffee, a dropped piece of buttered toast (butter side hits the floor), or a flat tire can shatter our peace. We then struggle the rest of the day seeking to find it again. Sound familiar? What if I told you Scripture has a different view of peace?

This week we will discover that the peace Jesus secured for us on the cross is way more robust than what we experience. The best part of the peace that Jesus brings is that it is grounded in Him, given by Him, and guards us. We can have a peace in our lives that certainly “surpasses all understanding.” Even when we experience unpleasant circumstances, the peace of God will not leave us. Grab your Bible, find a quiet place, and let Jesus Christ of Nazareth give you His peace!

PEACE - DAY 1



Excerpt taken from Every Moment Holy, Vol 1 – A Liturgy To Mark the Start of the Christmas Season (Author Unknown)

*As we prepare our house for the coming
Christmas season, we would also prepare our
hearts for the returning Christ.*

***You came once for your people,
O Lord, and you will come for us again.***

*Though there was no room at the inn
to receive you upon your first arrival,*

***We would prepare you room
here in our hearts
and here in our home,
Lord Christ...***

*...Our glittering ornaments and Christmas trees,
Our festive carols, our sumptuous feasts -*

***By these small tokens we affirm
that something amazing has happened
in time and space -***

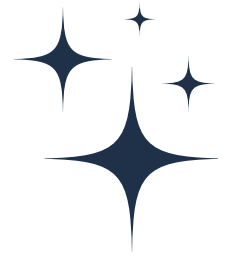
*that God, on a particular night, in a particular
place, so many years ago, was born to us, an
infant King, our Prince of Peace...*

*...Now we celebrate your first coming, Immanuel,
even as we long for your return.*

***O Prince of Peace, our elder brother, return
soon. We miss you so!***

Our Prince of Peace has guaranteed our inheritance as a result of his coming to earth. Praise the Lord! Now, in response to his coming, we must prepare him room in our hearts this Christmas season. Jesus doesn't force his peace on us. He simply offers it. We must reach out and take it, but in order for us to be able to rest on his peace, we must make room in our hearts. The world offers so much in the way of distraction and soul clutter, so this Christmas, let us enjoy the Prince of Peace by slowing down, recognizing the glory in the mundane, and clearing away unnecessary distractions. Let us make him room in our hearts and in our homes.

DAY 1 - REFLECT

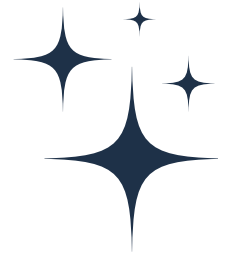


1. Read the liturgy above 3 times slowly. Savor the meaning in it.

2. What can you do to make room in your heart this Christmas? Perhaps eliminate an unnecessary distraction. Perhaps establish a daily routine for communing with the Lord (it can be so simple; ex: sit alone with the Lord over your cup of coffee each morning, turn the tv off and enjoy your Christmas tree lights in silence for a few minutes). Any small act that intentionally creates space for you to be with the Lord is preparing him room.

3. What can you do to make room in your home this Christmas? Perhaps establish a new family tradition that is meaningful/worshipful. Perhaps tidy up/decorate one room or one spot in your house where you can sit in peace. Perhaps invite someone over for dinner and good conversation. The Lord would be pleased to bless your attempts to make him room in your home this season.

PEACE - DAY 2



A Hymn on the Nativity of My Savior (Ben Jonson – 1572-1637)

*I sing the birth was born tonight,
The Author both of life and light;
The angels so did sound it,
And like the ravished shepherds said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid,
Yet searched, and true they found it.*

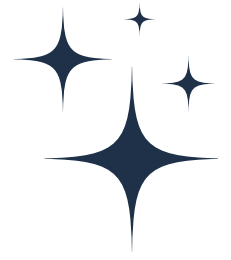
*The Son of God, the eternal King,
That did us all salvation bring,
And freed the soul from danger;
He whom the whole world could not take,
The Word, which heaven and earth did make,
Was now laid in a manger...*

***...The Father's wisdom willed it so,
The Son's obedience knew no "No,"
Both wills were in one stature;
And as that wisdom had decreed,
The Word was now made Flesh indeed,
And took on Him our nature.***

*What comfort by Him do we win?
Who made Himself the Prince of sin,
To make us heirs of glory?
To see this Babe, all innocence,
A Martyr born in our defense:
Can man forget this story?*

The third stanza of Ben Jonson's Christmas poem captures so perfectly the meaning of the peace that Jesus brought when he came to earth – the same peace he left his disciples when he ascended and leaves with his children to this day. Jesus said in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you..." Jesus' peace is not warm fuzzies and a complete absence of conflict. In fact, Jesus' peace did not spare him from any earthly suffering. No, the peace of Christ is something of an entirely different sort. It is a relational peace – peace with God the Father. Jesus' peace is the byproduct of being restored to God, redeemed, made one with him again. So this Christmas season, may we not focus solely on whatever earthly peace we may have (relational harmony, material blessing, etc.); this kind of peace is a blessing but is also fleeting and not guaranteed. Instead, let us revel in the true gift of Christmas – the peace of Christ, which is restored relationship with God. It is a peace that is beyond all understanding, and it is a peace that runs like an ever-flowing healing current underneath our present sufferings. Whatever you are facing this Christmas, know that Jesus has come to leave you HIS peace, and it is enough to sustain you, delight you and keep you forever.

DAY 2 - REFLECT



1. Read the poem above 3 times slowly. Pay attention to any word, phrase or line that jumps out at you.

2. Why do you think that part of the poem claimed your attention? What might the Lord want you to be reminded of as you prepare for Christmas?

3. Make a list of the things that are threatening your peace. Enjoy the gift of Christ's peace by talking to God about these concerns. He is eager for you to come to him.

PEACE - DAY 3



“I don’t always want freedom. I want security. I want comfort. I want nothing to go wrong, nobody I love to be hurt, to disappoint me. But that is not what Jesus offered. He offered life, and life more abundantly, and that means everything, the whole spectrum, laughter and tears, joy and disappointment, but above all life lived fully and openly and appreciatively. That is how Jesus lived, and how we are to live.”

Bright Evening Star (Madeleine L’Engle – 1918-2007)

If our expectation this Christmas is a Hallmark movie, picture-perfect Christmas without any suffering, we are destined to be disappointed. The reality is...life is hard. Evidence of our embracing Christ’s peace is our ability to embrace all of life – the joy and the suffering. Only a person of true, everlasting peace is capable of experiencing the abundant life that Jesus offers. Because Jesus’ model for abundant life is not one of zero hardship; it’s a grander vision than that. A Christ follower living abundantly in the face of great suffering is a shining beacon of light and hope in a dark world. Jesus came to bring us peace, but that peace is most brilliant when it’s shining in the darkness. This Christmas season, instead of bemoaning our suffering, let us grieve with courage. Let us feel the full weight of our pain. Let us cry out with great boldness to our Prince of Peace for rest and help. It is then and only then that the peace of Christ will rule in our hearts (Col 3:15) and transcend all understanding (Phil 4:6-7).

DAY 3 - REFLECT



1. Express gratitude to God for the joys in your life this season, both the profound and the simple. They are all gifts from God.

2. Pray through the list of concerns you made in the previous day's devotion. Make your petitions. Present your requests to God. Go to him with great boldness.

3. Pick at least one item from your list and write down how the Lord might be at work in that situation. How might he intend to use this suffering? How might he be glorified in it? How might he intend to use it for your good? (Repeat this for as many items on your list as you'd like).



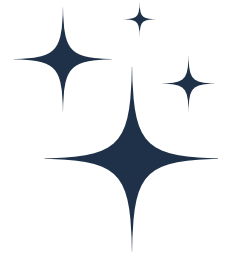
HOPE

Week 2 Intro

Advent week 2 approaches and with it, the subject of “hope.” Hope is essential to our survival for we cannot thrive without hope. But what exactly is this “hope” that Jesus Christ of Nazareth brings us?

We must define hope in order to understand the passages we will encounter this week. Defined from the Oxford dictionary, hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Therefore, hope is tenuous, uncertain, even wishy washy. The hope Jesus gives is not how we use hope in our modern language. Hope in the New Testament, according to Vine’s Dictionary, is confident expectation. New Testament hope is that spiritual intangible in which we confidently base our trust. We are guaranteed Jesus has paid the price for our sins, therefore we have hope for a future with him. All rests securely in Him.

HOPE - DAY 1



O Come, All You Unfaithful (Sovereign Grace Music)
Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-QHbpYjuIg>

O come, all you unfaithful
Come, weak and unstable
Come, know you are not alone

O come, barren and waiting ones
Weary of praying, come
See what your God has done

Christ is born, Christ is born
Christ is born for you

O come, bitter and broken
Come with fears unspoken
Come, taste of His perfect love

O come, guilty and hiding ones
There is no need to run
See what your God has done...

...Christ is born, Christ is born
Christ is born for you...

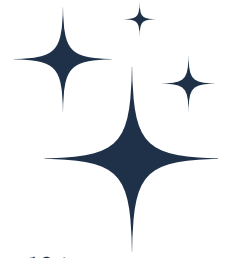
He's the Lamb who was given
Slain for our pardon
His promise is peace
For those who believe

So come, though you have nothing
Come, He is the offering
Come, see what your God has done

Christ is born, Christ is born
Christ is born for you
Christ is born, Christ is born
Christ is born for you

The beauty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is for the broken. In the same way Jesus came to a broken world to meet us in the mess we made, he comes to broken hearts to meet us exactly where we are. No one is too far gone to receive the gift of his coming. This is why our hope rests in Christ alone and not our ability to remake or transform ourselves or our circumstances. This is why Christ alone is the answer to every woe: There is nothing he can't heal...nothing he can't redeem...nothing he can't restore. What is challenging your hope this Christmas season? What are you struggling to hope in Jesus for? Enjoy the gift of Jesus' coming this Christmas by taking a good hard look at your hope. If it's strong, rejoice and encourage others. If it's weak, this is the holiday for you believer. Let Christ restore your hope this season. He desperately wants to.

DAY 1 - REFLECT



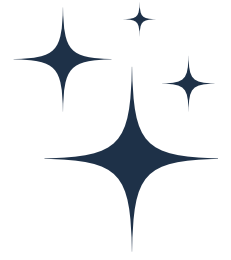
1. Read the song lyrics above (or listen to the song). Where do you see yourself in these lyrics? Do one of the bolded lines describe you right now? If not, write your own lyric below to describe your current reality:

“O Come, _____”

2. If the scale of hope ranges from (1) NO HOPE to (10) LIVING HOPE, where are you on that scale? What might it look like if your hope was more secure this season? What would be the fruit of hope in Jesus in your circumstances?

3. Spend a moment talking to the Lord about your hope. If it's high, praise him for it. If it's low, ask him for renewed hope. Either way...“O COME...”.

HOPE - DAY 2



Glory in the Darkest Place (Sovereign Grace Music)
Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jkDAB5Miv8>

Out of the depths of silent night
Immanuel, come hear our cry
Our grief is strong, our burdens great
The night is long and hope is faint

...Out of the depths of silent night
A Savior born, a mother's sigh
The darkness trembled at this Star
A beam of hope for troubled hearts

You came to set the captives free
A Morning Star of joy and peace
Why does this darkness feel so deep?
Why can't our weary spirits see...

You came to make Your blessings known
And bear our curse of death alone
You came to share our suffering
So in our sorrow we could sing...

...Glory, glory, glory in the darkest place
Glory, glory, glory let Your mercy reign...

...Glory, glory, glory in the darkest place
Glory, glory, glory let Your mercy reign
Glory, glory, glory in the darkest place
Glory, glory, glory let Your mercy reign!

“The darkness trembled at this Star”...what a beautiful line! This Star is Jesus Christ, babe in a manger, the spectacular display of glory lighting up the dark world he entered! Hallelujah! Oh Christian, had he not come, the darkness would have prevailed. Had he not come, there would be no hope for troubled hearts. Had he not come, there would be no glory at all. We are able to recognize the glory of Christ precisely because we have been in great darkness. We have tasted what it is to be without hope. Because Jesus came, we can sing through our sorrows, and the circumstances that cause us the most pain can be the very things that God uses to most bless us in the end. Let us hold fast to our hope this Christmas. Grasp onto it for dear life because it is strong enough to carry any burden. It is anchored in Jesus himself – the immovable, merciful, unchanging God who came for us! Glory! Glory! Glory!

DAY 2 - REFLECT

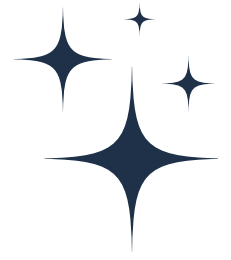


1. We have a real enemy who wishes to rob us of our hope. Identify one circumstance in which you struggle to hope. What lies might your enemy be whispering to you about that?

2. The most powerful medicine for a weary hope is a reminder of who God is. Write down descriptors of God and his character. Which of these descriptions do you find it hardest to believe? (This is likely where your enemy is hardest at work.)

3. Read the lyrics above or listen to the song. Soak in the truth that God's glory will always prevail. Be reminded today that no darkness will have the final say in your life and in your circumstances. Praise your Savior today – the light of the world has come.

HOPE - DAY 3



O Little Town of Bethlehem (Philips Brooks, 1868)

O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.

...How silently, how silently,
the wondrous gift is giv'n!
So God imparts to human hearts
the blessings of His heav'n.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
**the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.**

No ear may hear His coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive Him still,
the dear Christ enters in.

For Christ is born of Mary;
and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep
their watch of wond'ring love.

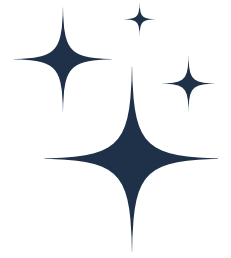
O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in;
be born in us today.

O morning stars, together
proclaim the holy birth,
and praises sing to God the King,
and peace to men on earth...

We hear the Christmas angels,
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

“The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Hope is an eternal enterprise. The living hope Christ offers us travels back into our past and gives meaning and purpose to the sufferings we have already travailed. It also holds us in our present time, keeping us at rest despite what rages in our periphery. And hope seems to reach out to the coming days, casting vision for the complete dissolution of all pain and suffering. What a mighty thing – this living hope! ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ captures beautifully the reality that the hope of Christ, while powerfully alive, is actually wondrously quiet. Much like the still, small voice of God, this living hope does not demand attention; rather, it quietly and peacefully comes to us and strengthens us in the secret places of our hearts. Perhaps this is why hope can feel so illusive, so hard to hold onto. It is springing up from deep within by the power of the Holy Spirit and in order to truly receive it, we must be still – like the sleeping Bethlehem that received the Savior of the world.

DAY 3 - REFLECT



1. Read the lyrics of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and underline every word or phrase that describes the quiet and stillness of Bethlehem that holy night. Evaluate your own inner quiet and stillness. Where are you on a scale from (1) COMPLETELY RESTLESS to (10) COMPLETE CONTENTEDNESS? What would it feel like to live closer to (10) on the scale?

2. Sit in silence/stillness for 5 minutes. Rest in living hope.

3. Ask God to increase your capacity for hope despite your circumstances. Ask him to quiet you with his love (Zeph 3:17).



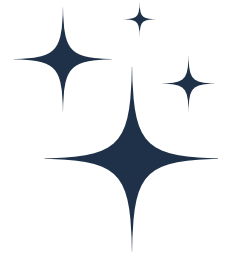
JOY

Week 3 Intro

Joy is the subject of Advent week three. Merriam-Webster defines joy as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune.” One synonym is the word “delight.” Advent joy is rich as we will discover as we meditate on this week’s verses. We must view joy as we view hope. Remember hope is not a wishy washy notion and neither is joy. Joy is not founded upon temporary experiences which ebb and flow. Our experience is not like receiving a gift as a child who experiences joy at opening the box and then sad when the toy breaks after ten minutes of play. Joy finds its fullness in Jesus; it may be said to be steadfast!

Joy may be defined as a human emotion but it is founded in God. Advent is the coming of the Messiah who will establish a way for humanity to experience a relationship with God. The result is that we receive joy. The presence of God in our lives leads us to experience a joy which is beyond human comprehension. Our relationship with God is what brings us a fullness of spirit to the point where despite the circumstances we may be facing, joy sustains us. Even when our toys break and must be placed in the garbage can, our lives experience an even keel because we have a relationship with the one who came that first Christmas. Grab your Bible, a good cup of coffee, and settle into this wonderful theme of Joy.

JOY - DAY 1



“Gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy.”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

– 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

If anyone had a right to be cumbered with “pangs of memory” it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who witnessed unthinkable atrocities at the hands of Nazi soldiers during WWII. Bonhoeffer’s appeal to gratitude is quite astounding and is evidence of his knowledge of the Bible as well as his deep and abiding love for his Savior. His gratitude is evidence of his love because gratitude is a sacrifice. It is far easier to be bitter and angry, to keep a record of wrongs and to ruminate on the painful circumstances of life than it is to let go of our pain and forgive. But the truth is the Bible invites us to be people who rejoice always – people who pray without ceasing – people who give thanks in ALL circumstances. This rejoicing – it is holy work, because a mere human, apart from the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, is not truly capable of it. The Bible is clear that our joy is inextricably linked to our gratitude. So believer, do you lack joy this Christmas? There is no shame if you do. If you find yourself trapped in ‘pangs of memory’ and lack a ‘tranquil joy’, try gratitude. There is so much to be grateful for. Christ has come. The Light has dawned. And you have been set free. It is a merry Christmas indeed.

DAY 1 - REFLECT

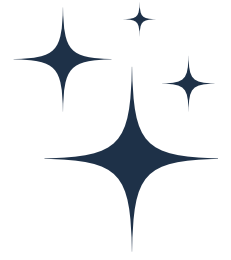


1. What are the “pangs of memory” that are preventing you from experiencing joy?
Be as specific as possible.

2. What do you think Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant by “tranquil joy”? Do you have that in your life? If you don’t, stop and ask God for it.

3. Take some time to express your gratitude to God.

JOY - DAY 2



“I cannot think that when God sent us into the world, he had irreversibly decreed that we should be perpetually miserable in it. If our taking up the Cross imply our bidding adieu to all joy and satisfaction, how is it reconcilable with what Solomon expressly affirms of religion, that 'her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace?'”

– John Wesley

“You make known to me the paths of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

– Psalm 16:11

Praise God it is not his purpose that we should be “perpetually miserable” in this life. Yes, we suffer as he suffered. But God delights in our joy and wishes for us to be people of joy in every circumstance. So where is this joy? How do we get it? True joy is found in one place: the presence of God. And where is His presence? In us. Because Jesus came, we can have the presence of God with us all the time. Immanuel...God with us. Lord Jesus, restore our joy this Christmas. Help us to find the fullness of joy in you. And since you are with us all the time, teach us how to see the world as you see it. Show us your pleasures forevermore. Fill us with your joy as we gather together this season. Fill us with your joy when we are alone. Give us your joy as we give gifts. Let us feel joy as we receive them. Let there be joy as we enjoy the good things you’ve given us – Christmas dinner, sparkling lights on the Christmas tree, our favorite carol on the radio. Joy in external things alone is flimsy and certainly not full. But joy that flows from deep within – from the presence of God – is the sturdiest joy and it does not scoff at small pleasures. So let us be with the God who came to be with us and let us have joy to the fullest this Christmas season!

DAY 2 - REFLECT

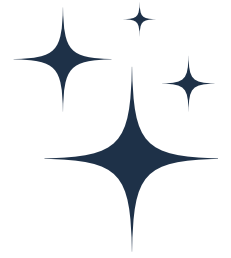


1. When did you last feel the “fullness of joy” David talked about in Psalm 16? Is there anything you can learn from that memory that might help you move towards joy now?

2. Being attuned to the presence of God is a skill that must be cultivated or a muscle to be exercised. Our culture works overtime to prevent us from enjoying God’s presence with things like busyness, holiday events, Christmas shopping, etc. Take a few minutes right now and enjoy his presence. Just be still and know that He is God and He is with you.

3. Identify things that threaten to rob you of your joy this Christmas. Write them down. Express your concern to God about these things. Ask Immanuel to be with you and to inspire your joy.

JOY - DAY 3



*“Through the way where hope is guiding,
Hark, what peaceful music rings;
Where the flock, in Thee confiding,
Drink of joy from deathless springs...*

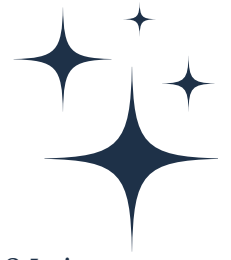
*...Theirs is beauty's fairest pleasure;
Theirs is wisdom's holiest treasure.
Thou dost ever lead Thine own
In the love of joys unknown.”*

Excerpt from ‘Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring’ (Johann Sebastian Bach’s Advent Cantata – 1723); Original lyrics written by Martin Janus (1661); Translation above by Robert Bridges

John 15:11 “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy maybe in you, and that your joy may be full.”

The lyrics above so beautifully capture the mysterious nature of the joy of Christ that he offers to his followers. He told his disciples that his very own joy – the same joy that would one day help him endure the cross – was theirs for the taking. In the same way he gave them (and us) HIS peace, he is giving us HIS joy as well. And it is an otherworldly joy, a joy so much more rich and full than mere human happiness. His joy is in ‘beauty’s fairest pleasure’. God delights in the beauty of his creation. And he delights in the beautiful creations of his children too. Joy and beauty walk hand in hand. How does joy seem to sneak in for one in the throes of suffering? It’s typically not in long-winded theological treatises. But it seeps into the heart of the one who gazes into a beautiful sunrise, one who watches their grandchildren giggle with delight, one who hears a beautiful symphony. God cares about beauty. He established the standard for it and he fills his children with deep, abiding joy in the face of it. Christ’s joy is also in ‘wisdom’s holiest treasure’ – God’s divine truth. God’s truth is meant to bring his disciples great joy. When that truth affirms us in our sacrifice, we rejoice. When that truth bumps up against our pride and wounds it, we rejoice by the grace of God! God’s truth is most certainly found in his Word, but our world is also replete with it if we’re willing to look for it. His truth might surprise you in a song on the radio, in a poem, in so many things that we, his children, have created. All truth belongs to God, no matter where it is found. Are you lacking joy, believer? Seek beauty. Seek wisdom.

DAY 3 - REFLECT



1. “Drink of joy from deathless springs”....How is your joy? Is it full? Is it fragile? Is it absent? Make an honest assessment and describe your joy below.

2. Have you experienced “beauty’s fairest pleasure” this Christmas? Write down the beautiful things you’ve seen and thank God for them. If you can’t think of anything, ask God to show you something beautiful this Christmas and to use beauty to restore your joy. Be on the lookout for it!

3. Have you experienced “wisdom’s holiest treasure” this Christmas? Write down truths that have comforted you, guided you, blessed you lately and thank God for them. If you can’t think of anything, ask God to open your eyes to a truth that you need and restore your joy with his truth. Be on the lookout for it!

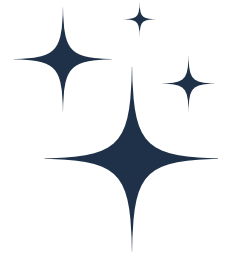


LOVE

Week 4 Intro

Remember Advent is about anticipating the coming of the Messiah. What better way to end Advent than by the theme of love? Advent week four's theme therefore is Love. Humans cannot live without love. We actually cease to thrive when we cannot love or be loved. Love is important because it actually undergirds the entirety of the advent season for God loved us so much that He did not wish to see us perish in our sin. He sent His Son to earth to reveal what we needed the most and that was an expression of the love of the father. What more needs to be said? Grab your Bible, a cup of coffee, snuggle in your favorite chair and journey this last week and embrace the Love of the Father.

LOVE - DAY 1



- ☐ ***“Love is patient and kind;***
- ☐ ***love does not envy or boast;***
- ☐ ***it is not arrogant or rude.***
- ☐ ***It does not insist on its own way;***
- ☐ ***it is not irritable or resentful;***
- ☐ ***it does not rejoice at wrongdoing,***
- ☐ ***but rejoices with the truth.***

***Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes
all things, endures all things.”***

– 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

***“So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and
whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” – 1 John 4:16***

Love comes from God, because “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Believers tend to read Paul’s description of love above with ourselves in mind. *Am I being patient? Am I being resentful?* If we’re honest, most of us would agree that the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is a difficult one for us to live up to, because we are not capable of perfect love. God is the only source of perfect love. But if we truly believe that God is love and that love (and our ability to show love) come from him, then it might be a helpful exercise to read 1 Corinthians 13 with God himself in mind. It is a description of him after all. Perhaps this will relieve the pressure valve on ourselves and help us to receive the perfect love of Christ, be transformed by it, and as a result, likely look more and more like that beautiful description of love above. God is not a cruel task master slapping our wrists every time we miss the mark. No, God is patient and kind with us. Not arrogant. Not rude. Not resentful. If you are in Christ today, you can expect to receive nothing but his kindness. His wrath was poured out on Jesus on the cross and not a single bit of it was reserved for you, believer. Hallelujah!!! The gift of Christmas is that Jesus came and granted us access to the One Perfect Love. Abide (remain) in his love this Christmas.

DAY 1 - REFLECT

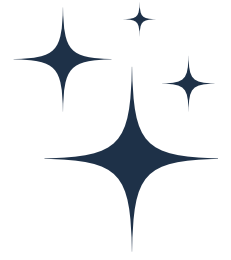


1. Put a check in the boxes next to the descriptions of love that you struggle to believe about God himself. (Is it difficult to see him as patient? Hard to believe that he is not resentful towards you because of your sin?) Pick one of the boxes you checked and write down how it might impact your walk with Christ for you to believe that description of God is true.

2. Which of the descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4 is hardest for you to embody yourself? Is it one of the ones you struggle to believe about God? Talk to the Lord about this. Express your desire to experience his perfect love more fully. Ask him to empower you to show that kind of love more naturally to those around you.

3. Spend a few minutes meditating on verse 7: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." What might the Lord be calling you to bear, believe, hope or endure this Christmas?

LOVE - DAY 2

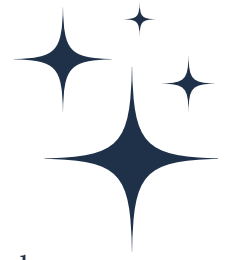


“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

– Romans 12:1

After exploring the perfect love of God available to us through Jesus Christ, the obvious next question is, “now what?” What are we to do with this great love that has been poured out on us? And the answer is quite fitting for Christmas time. The Bible tells us to present, or gift ourselves to God. God is not only interested in what we can do for him. He wants us to be with him. The best gift we could give our Lord this Christmas is our very selves. Paul uses “living sacrifice” language as a juxtaposition with the very different kind of sacrifice that was offered before Jesus came – it was a sacrifice of death. Once sacrificed, the doves, rams, lambs, etc. were of no further use, but when we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, it means that we continually prioritize him and his kingdom! We are a sacrifice that keeps on giving, over and over again, with great joy! We offer him our presence. We offer him our time. Our energy. Our resources. Our creativity. Our gifts and talents. And we intentionally lay down the things that clamor for our attention. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the ultimate gift of your sacrifice. We pray you are honored in the ways we give of ourselves this Christmas season in remembrance of your coming and in celebration of your coming again!

DAY 2 - REFLECT

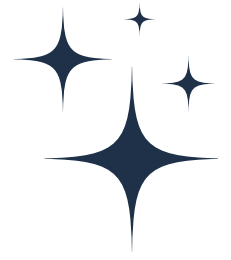


1. The best gift you can give to the Lord this Christmas is your presence. Spend time talking with him now and express your love for him. If your love for God feels weak or disillusioned, don't be afraid to be honest with God. He is trustworthy.

2. Is there anything unholy or unacceptable in you that you need to repent from? Your merciful Lord waits not with the unfeeling cruelty of a disappointed ruler, but instead with the lovingkindness of a gracious Father. Let us offer him our repentance.

3. Is there anything you once offered the Lord that you might need to offer him again? Any rhythms you need to pick back up this next year? Any habits you need to reclaim? What part of your living sacrifice needs new life in the new year? Talk to the Lord about these things.

LOVE - DAY 3



“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”

– John 13:34

We have explored the love of God which motivates us to offer ourselves to him, but it also motivates us not only to love God, but to love others as well. Jesus gave this commandment to his disciples, urging them to love each other in the same way that he loved them. The meaning in this commandment is so much richer than even they realized at that time, for Jesus would soon give his life for them – the ultimate expression of his love. Jesus invites us to love one another in this way – to give of ourselves and to consider the needs of others above our own. While this commandment is certainly not limited only to our closest family and friends, it is these people whom we likely have the hardest time offering this kind of sacrificial love – the people closest to us. The invitation for us this Christmas is to be so filled by the love of God in the celebration of Jesus’ coming that his love fills our cup to overflowing and spills over onto those who are nearest to us. The invitation is to love those people sacrificially and to put their needs ahead of our own. Lord Jesus, will you help us to follow your example this Christmas as we love our family and friends? Give us hearts full of mercy and forgiveness. Give us eyes willing to see their needs. Give us ears willing to listen. And give us hands willing to serve. May your glory shine so brightly in the darkness through our love for one another!

DAY 3 - REFLECT



1. Is there anyone in your life right now who is difficult to love? Anyone who seems to bring out the worst in you? Pray for that person right now. Beg God to soften your heart and empower you to love them well this Christmas.

2. Ask the Lord if there is anyone in your life who he wants you to bless/honor this Christmas? Pause and wait. Write down whoever comes to mind. Brainstorm ways to tangibly show them love.

3. Is there anyone in your life who is doing a great job of loving you sacrificially? Thank God for them and make a note to thank them too. If you can't think of anyone, know that the Love of God is sufficient. Make the choice to keep offering yourself whether or not you receive it in return. This is Christ-like love and he is so honored by your selfless love. He will not forget you.



FINAL THOUGHTS

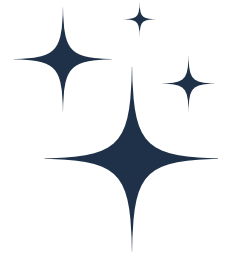
It was a pleasure co-writing this devotional. Our prayers while writing our different parts was that you would have an encounter with Jesus Christ of Nazareth - that you would experience a fresh holiday season this year and remember the love of God.

*We wish to share a story that has always touched our hearts over the years. You will find it familiar for you have heard it from time to time from the pulpit. May it warm your hearts for it truly encapsulates the meaning of Christmas. It is entitled, *The Man and the Birds*, by Paul Harvey. God bless you richly.*

All For Christ,

*Dr. Raymond Grabert
Alicia Bowman*

THE MAN AND THE BIRDS



The man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge. He was a kind, decent, mostly good man. Generous to his family, upright in his dealings with other men. But he just didn't believe all that incarnation stuff which the churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn't make sense and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story about God coming to Earth as a man.

"I'm truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite. That he'd much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. And so he stayed and they went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper. Minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound...then another, and then another. Sort of a thump or a thud...At first he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter, if he could direct the birds to it.

Quickly he put on a coat, galoshes, and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light, but the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in. So he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow, making a trail to the yellow-lighted wide open doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them...He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms...Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn.

And then, he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me...That I am not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Because any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared him.

"If only I could be a bird," he thought to himself, "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to safe, warm...to the safe warm barn. But I would have to be one of them so they could see, hear and understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. And he stood there listening to the bells – Adeste Fidelis – listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

And he sank to his knees in the snow.

-By Paul Harvey