

*New Bethesda Baptist
Church*



Advent Devotion Guide 2021

Interim Pastor Dr. Tom Gaskins

What began as a dream in my heart years ago came to pass in 2008 with the publication of our first Advent Devotional. My hope was to compile devotional thoughts for our North Run Baptist Church family, by our NRBC family with a few special people added in. Hopefully this booklet would help enhance your Christmas experience.

It is my hope now to share the devotions I penned through nine years of Advent devotionals (with a few specials added in) to encourage you on your journey to Christmas. I've made editorial changes & corrections as well as updates for this devotional. As you will see, many of the devotions are straight from my heart and reveal both the excitement and struggles I've encountered in life.

Reading only one devotion each day will give you food for thought throughout the Advent season. There is temptation to read ahead in the booklet, but I encourage you to read only one day at a time!!

The Advent season begins four Sundays before Christmas and continues through Christmas Day. The word "*Advent*" comes from the Latin and means "*to come to*" or "*arrival.*" This is the time to prepare our hearts and homes for the coming of Christ into His world. It is my prayer as your (interim) pastor for this Advent Devotional to help you prepare your heart

and soul for the coming of Christmas. May you find refreshment and inspiration with each day's devotional thought.

This booklet follows the candles of the Advent Wreath:

- 1st Sunday -- Hope
- 2nd Sunday - Peace
- 3rd Sunday - Joy
- 4th Sunday - Love
- Christmas Eve/Day - Light

The Advent wreath is exactly what the word implies, a wreath of evergreens bound in a circle. Fastened to the wreath are four candles, for the four Sundays in Advent, with a white candle in the center.

Although the origin of the wreath is obscure, the use of candles for religious celebrations can be traced to the ancient Hebrews. Placement in a circle represents God's eternity and perfection. Evergreens and candles are used to remind us of God's gift of life through Jesus Christ. The wreath is an ancient symbol of victory and glory and symbolizes the reign of the coming King.

The colors of the candles are also symbolic. Three of the candles are purple, the traditional color for Advent. Purple stands for penitence and preparation, and thus is the color for both Advent and Lent. Purple is also the traditional color of royalty and reminds us to prepare for the coming of our King.

One candle is pink to represent the joyfulness of Christ's coming. The fifth, or Christ candle, is white and is placed in the center of the wreath reminding us that Christ is the center of Christmas!!

Merry Christmas and God's richest blessings to each of you.

Pastor Tom

“...and there were
in the same country **shepherds**
abiding in the field,
keeping watch over their flock by night.
And, lo, the *angel*
of the **LORD** came upon them,
and the **glory** of the **LORD**
shone round about them:
and they were sore afraid.
And the *angel* said unto them,
FEAR NOT: for, behold,
I bring you **good tidings** of
great joy, which shall be to all people.
For unto you is born this day
in the city of David a **SAVIOUR**,
which is *Christ* the **LORD.**”

Luke 2:8



Hope

Sunday, November 28	Pastor Tom
Monday, November 29	Pastor Tom
Tuesday, November 30	Pastor Tom
Wednesday, December 1	Pastor Tom
Thursday, December 2	Pastor Tom
Friday, December 3	Pastor Tom
Saturday, December 4	Pastor Tom

Peace

Sunday, December 5	Dr. Steve Allsbrook
Monday, December 6	Pastor Tom
Tuesday, December 7	Pastor Tom
Wednesday, December 8	Missionary Julie
Thursday, December 9	Pastor Tom
Friday, December 10	Susan Gaskins
Saturday, December 11	

Joy

Sunday, December 12	Pastor Tom
Monday, December 13	Pastor Tom
Tuesday, December 14	Pastor Tom
Wednesday, December 15	Pastor Tom
Thursday, December 16	Pastor Jeffrey Fololo
Friday, December 17	Missionary Julie
Saturday, December 18	Missionary Martha Moore

Love

Sunday, December 19	Pastor Tom
Monday, December 20	Pastor Tom
Tuesday, December 21	Dr. Waylon B. Moore
Wednesday, December 22	Pastor Tom
Thursday, December 23	Pastor Tom
Friday, December 24	Pastor Tom

Light

Saturday, December 25	Dr. John Upton
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Sunday

November 28

Beginning the Journey to Christmas

*“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 . . .”*

Isaiah 2:3

Today we begin our journey toward Christmas. It is time for joy and for contemplation. This is our time to reflect on Christmas past, present and future.

How well I remember my father’s stern words to - *“wash your hands.”* As a kid that seemed kind silly since I had played around *germy* things all day long. Germs were meaningless to me back then. But, as a child with great wisdom (translate as *fear*) I washed my hands - to keep peace - and to have hope for eating at the table with my family! How different it is today when we are washing our hands often in the midst of this worldwide pandemic!!

Isaiah wrote: *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of our doings before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. ‘Come now, let us reason together says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient,*

you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel . . .” (Isaiah 1:16-20).

As we set out on this first Sunday in Advent, let us begin with the hope and expectation that something wonderful is going to happen! Let's be like Isaiah and tell others that a great event is coming! Our first candle in our Advent Wreath is the candle of Hope. With the help of God's cleansing power, hope comes upon our world through His Son, Jesus Christ. As Christians we find our hope, not in the things of the world, but in the marvelous blessings of our Lord and Savior. When we are washed in Him, we are cleansed for all eternity!

As we celebrate this Christmas let us seek to remove evil from our hearts and let us seek to do things that we ought to do that would be pleasing to Him and to those around us. As a church family let us *“reason together”* so that we might be a bright and shining light of hope and help in our sin, darkened world.

Will you join me in Bethlehem, in that obscure stable, amidst the sights, sounds and smells of the animals, in the darkness of the day, to experience the greatest hope this world will ever know. Will you take the time to marvel as did the shepherds and rejoicing with the angels, giving thanks for the Christ of Christmas and singing praises to the babe of Bethlehem?

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *“Father, help me to be open to you as I confess my sinfulness before you. This has been a most difficult year filled with so much confusion and fear . . . help, us in our weakness as we journey to Christmas. Forgive my selfishness and help me to enter this Christmas season seeking You and the Hope you bring. Amen”*

Monday

November 29

Keep Your Purpose in Sight

“Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

In his best-selling book, *Quiet Strength*, Coach Tony Dungy spoke of his years in professional football as player and coach. Following his Super Bowl victory he was widely recognized for his coaching ability, but in his book he spoke of *“building a legacy - not necessarily on the field but in those places that most people will never see.”*

“My purpose in life is simply to glorify God. We have to be careful that we don’t let the pursuit of our life’s goals, no matter how important they seem, cause us to lose sight of our purpose.

I coach football. But the good I can do to glorify God along the way is my real purpose. I want to help people see the path to eternal life through Christ, to enjoy an abundant life now, and to fulfill their God-given purposes here.”

Think for just a moment what could have happened if Jesus had allowed His humanity to overcome His divinity. He could easily have forsaken God’s purpose for the sake of His own lofty goals in this world.

Was there anything wrong with His public teaching? No. Anything wrong with feeding 5000 hungry people? No. Anything

wrong with healing the sick, causing the lame to walk or giving sight to the blind? No. How about casting out demons or bringing the dead back to life? Again, no. What about calming storms and restoring dignity to folks caught in blatant sinfulness? No! No! No! These are all good things. All lofty goals. Great characteristics. But Jesus came for a higher purpose!

Jesus ultimately came to bring salvation to a sinful world. He came to put on public display God's grace and mercy. From the cradle to the cross, God's purpose for Jesus was to give hope to the hopeless, joy to the downtrodden and eternal love to all. As you experience all this Christmas season offers, remember to take a moment for your ultimate purpose: to worship God and bring glory and honor to Him in all things.

With each carol you sing, with each gift you exchange, with every sight and sound you enjoy, remember to give thanks to God and share His love with those you encounter.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Father of hope, you came to bring salvation to mankind. Nothing short of your eternal plan would have been acceptable through your Son. Thank you for Your faithfulness and gift to us at Christmas . . . and all year long. Amen."

Tuesday

November 30

Hope Does Not Disappoint

*“ . . . and character builds hope,
and hope does not disappoint us,
because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through
the Holy Spirit
which has been given us.” (Romans 5:4-5).*

Christmas was coming that year and it was a strange time for me. I was alone, living in North Carolina, headed toward early separation from the Air Force, recently enrolled at Campbell College, serving as a part-time associate pastor for South Rosemary Baptist Church and moving toward being on my own for the first time in my life! My family was in Florida, a long, long way away. I was insecure, afraid, lonely, homesick, hurting and confused. Understand, I was thankful to be headed to college, but my discharge had come in a whirlwind . . . I found out the first week in December I was “getting out” about the same time I learned I had been accepted to Campbell and had a room in which to stay. All good things, but a bit scary as well!

That first semester was a time of transition. I had already attended several colleges and universities and had not done well academically - too busy playing baseball to study. I had tried to settle in and study hard (now that was a learning process), and I had even made a few friends on campus. But things changed suddenly

when my landlord had a stroke and died. I was permitted to stay in the rented room through the semester, but then what?

I was too old and set in my ways to make it in the dorms. I was too broke to rent an apartment (even if one had been available). My hope was fading fast! In stepped two of God's angels who restored my hope and blessed my life. God used Charlie and Selma King to remind me that Christmas is not just a day, it's a spirit to celebrate every day! These retired, hard-working mill workers. wrote me a check so that I could purchase a used, mobile home to live in for my final 18 months of college.

Because of their generosity my hope was rekindled, and they helped shape my character for future ministry. Several months later I was able to pass along their generous nature to a fellow student who had no funds for his semester's books. Amazing how God gives us gifts all year long!

This Christmas I'm going to think a little more about how Charlie and Selma blessed my life and how I can be a blessing to others. Is there someone who could use an encouraging word or deed from you that might restore hope and build character in them? As we move toward Christmas, in these perilous pandemic days, put your faith in the "hope that does not disappoint."

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Father of hope, you came to bring salvation to mankind. Salvation for our souls is for eternity. But sometimes we need a good dose of "hope" for daily living. Thanks for the kindness of folks who are used of God to help shape our character and give us renewed hope. Amen."

Wednesday

December 1

Fly Like an Eagle!

*“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and
not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.”*

Isaiah 40:31

Pastor Bill Hybels wrote: *“The manger is a symbol of what can happen when Jesus Christ resides inside us. The ordinary suddenly becomes extraordinary.”* Norman Vincent Peale wrote: *“The magic message of Christmas is that God gave us so much more than we can possibly give back!”* The old message: ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord’ is still the heart of Christmas.”***

He is truly our only hope!!

At this time in 2012 my wife and I were on the front end of a journey we never dreamed we'd have to make! Susan's shocking diagnosis of breast cancer rocked our world! I didn't feel like flying with the eagles; in fact, it felt like our wings had been suddenly clipped! For weeks one negative report followed another. From the reading of the mammogram to the surgeon's report that said: “we got it all,” (when she hadn't and a second surgery was required); we were numbed with despair and disbelief . . . and much fear. We had faith in God, but we were overwhelmed with what was happening .

. . we never doubted God's presence, but we surely wondered what He was doing!!

We eventually came to the place where we realized our only hope was in the Great Physician and in the hands of trained medical personnel - the doctors and nurses who saw her (us) through two surgeries, six chemotherapy sessions and 33 radiation treatments - who helped restore health to Susan! Thank God for gifted people who became the hands of our Lord. Thank God for our family and friends who lifted us up in prayer and helped in so many wonderful ways. Thank God for His grace on us . . . He truly is our hope!!

Christmas 2012 was a somber season in many ways for us. We still tried to celebrate with family and friends, and I still tried to bring encouraging sermons, but our world was shaken. Susan's faith and her strength were amazing to me! She had every reason to be afraid, to complain, to get angry, but what she chose to do was trust God and allow Him to do what needed to be done. She was such a trooper through the entire ordeal . . . she was a positive example to so many people!

This year we place our hope into the hands of the same God who guided us, sustained us, lifted and carried us, in 2012. We rejoice that He is our hope both in this world and in the world to come!!

The coming of Christ into this sin-darkened world is the only hope we have. Thank God He is still the heart of Christmas!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Heavenly Father, thank you for the reminder each Christmas that you are the Hope of the world. Thank you for your strength in our times of weariness. Thank you for those who have gathered under our weary "wings" and encouraged us and brought us to this place in life. Please encourage others as you have encouraged us. In your Name I pray. Amen."

Thursday

December 2

Christmas Shoes

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Philippians 4:4

For two years in junior high school, I was part of the school football team . . . not good enough to play in the games but too stubborn to quit! While my teammates wore cleats, I only had tennis shoes. For two years I slipped on the Florida grass. I'm sure those shoes kept me from being a football super star . . .that and the no talent thing!

Fast forward to my sophomore year in high school. I was smart enough not to try out for the football team, but I did run on the school track team . . . but I still only had tennis shoes and not track shoes! I remember a present that year that changed my life. My older brother, Rick, out of school and employed, bought me my first pair of track shoes! I can still remember the wonderful smell of those shoes when I opened the lid and took them out of the box. I remember how perfectly they fit and how good they made me feel. I was so confident and so ready to run that race that lay before me!

Those shoes, black and white, ran many miles that year and the next. My times improved and I became a winner on the track. I hadn't thought of those shoes in years, and I wonder if I ever told my brother how much they meant to me. I can only hope I thanked him for his gift (well, I have now!). Funny how we remember such things as Christmas draws near.

Christmas is the glorious day on which we celebrate that pivotal event in human history, the birth of Christ. The event that forever changed the history of the world. No amount of commercialism or fanfare should obscure the fact that Christmas is the annual birthday celebration for the Christian faith, a time for believers everywhere to rejoice, to pray, and to give thanks for God's greatest treasure: His Son. Perhaps it is also important for us to remember those who have touched our hearts and our lives and the joy that comes from sharing with others.

As I remember my Christmas shoes, I remember that special feeling from a Christmas long ago. As I remember Christ this Christmas I remember an even earlier day when He came to live in my heart and life and I started my journey toward my heavenly home.

Billy Graham observed, "Christmas is the celebration of the event that set Heaven to singing, an event that gave the stars of the night sky a new brilliance." As we endure the busy days that lead up to Christmas, it is appropriate that we remain mindful of the real reason for the season by offering our prayers and our praise to the One whose birth we celebrate.

More than fifty years have passed since I wore my Christmas track shoes. Thanks, brother, for that special gift. More than fifty years have passed since I received Christ as my Savior. Thanks, Lord, for that eternal gift. I close with words from Dale Evans: "Christmas, my child, is love in action. Every time we love, every time we give, it's Christmas." And that is the hope and joy I have this year.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Father, thanks for the gift of life. Thanks for reminders of gifts given and gifts received. Thanks for the greatest gift of all . . . the joy of knowing and serving You. The hope for all eternity. Amen."

Friday

December 3

Lead Me On a Level Path

*“Teach me thy way, O Lord;
and lead me on a level path . . .”*

Psalm 27:11

Today we continue our journey toward Bethlehem, the birthplace of our Lord Jesus Christ. With each new Christmas season comes opportunities to remember and relearn what the meaning of Christmas is all about. This is a time for joy and contemplation. This is our time to reflect upon Christmas past, present and future.

Someone once said, *“If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.”* It might also be said that if you don’t know where you’re going, how will you know when you arrive??? Getting to Christmas takes some thought and planning. Too many folks will miss the blessings of Christmas because they take the *“wrong road”* or they get so caught up in the secular hustle and bustle of the *“holiday”* that they miss out on the holy day.

As we travel toward Bethlehem this year let’s take time to reflect on what that first Christmas meant to a watching and needy world. Let’s spend time rekindling the true Christmas spirit!

As a young child I remember the eagerness with which we approached Christmas. Buying and trimming our tree. Shopping for family and friends. Wrapping and placing gifts beneath the tree.

Stockings hung by the chimney (actually, for us, it was by the living room bookshelves) with care . . . all precious memories of long ago times. I love the sights, sounds and smell of Christmas! As I grew from childhood into a more mature person, I learned to appreciate the true meaning of Christmas in my heart!

I remember traveling to grandparents' homes, and later to visit with friends. Mostly I remember the excitement that Christmas brought! That is something I want to recapture (especially in these perilous times) as pastor, father, husband, grandfather and believer - the excitement of Christ, on the road we travel as a church family, to the place where Jesus was born!!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Father, Creator of life, divine gift and blessed redeemer, help us to travel the road to Christmas with childlike faith and anticipation for all that is Christ! Open our eyes, Lord, we would see Jesus. Amen."

Saturday

December 4

From You Shall Come Forth . . . Hope!

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephratah . . .

*from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in
Israel”*

(Micah 5:2).

Most of us learn early in life that the anticipation of an event - a trip, party, graduation, or wedding - is fun, but waiting can be so difficult!

I remember those days of anticipation as the school year was drawing to an end. Excitement, coupled with anxiety, for required projects and final exams. But summer was coming! The days seemed to drag on. All I could dream about was no school, sleeping late, playing hard and really enjoying the warm Florida sun. And, of course, with summer came . . . baseball!

For this Florida boy baseball was more than a game - it was a way of life (Little League, high school and college you could find me on a ball field somewhere). Whether it be on an organized team with freshly laundered uniform, well-oiled glove, shined cleats, or on a sandlot with a gathered gang of neighborhood boys - baseball was what really counted and what I truly loved!

Sometimes the anticipation for the baseball game was clouded with distractions. Afternoon showers seemed to have a way of coming at just the wrong time for a ball game.

Sometimes there was grass to be cut, or chores to be done, that interrupted what I really wanted to do . . . play ball! Later it was my paper route that interfered with getting on that field!

Anticipation in exhilarating and distractions were . . . well, they were frustrating and sometimes painful. So, it was in Israel some two thousand years ago. The Jews anticipated Messiah and the prophets foretold of His birth that was to occur in . . . Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was such a small and insignificant town. Somehow that village chosen by God was overrun with visitors coming to pay their taxes. So it was when Mary and Joseph arrived - they found many distractions including no place for them to spend the night! Thankfully, a place was offered and Mary delivered her first-born son . . . in a stable . . . in Bethlehem! It was there the One who was to be the ruler of the universe came with little fanfare on that first Christmas morn. The long awaited and anticipated birth of the King had come to pass . . . and very few knew or cared. Their hope had come, and most were so distracted they missed it. Sadly, many still do!

I challenge you not to allow distractions to cause you to miss the hope of Christmas. That long anticipated Hope is still our hope today. In your heart, home and worship anticipate the joy of Christ.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Father of hope, you came to bring salvation to mankind. You chose the obscure village of Bethlehem as the birthplace of your Son . . . nothing short of your eternal plan would have been acceptable through your Son. Thank you for Your faithfulness and gift to us at Christmas . . . and all year long. Amen."



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Sunday

December 5

Emmanuel

Someone said, *“The most important sound in any language is the sound of one’s own name.”* My elementary school teachers taught me the importance of correct spelling, and I think that applies to one’s name as much as correct pronunciation.

In the biography of Jesus called Matthew, Mary was pregnant. A messenger of God told Joseph they should name the child Jesus and Jesus would *“save his people from their sins.”*

Matthew writes, *“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him, Immanuel’ – which means, ‘God with us’”* (Matthew 1:22-23 NIV). Matthew referred to the prophet Isaiah (see Isaiah 7:14). In describing the coming of Jesus as fulfilling prophecy, Matthew means that God personally acted.

Immanuel, spelled with an i, comes from the Hebrew in Isaiah 7:14. I have also seen the name Immanuel spelled Emmanuel (e.g., Matthew 1:23 in KJV and NRSV). In the Greek New Testament, the first letter ε becomes e in English. If only hearing the name, I find it hard to distinguish between Immanuel and Emmanuel.

The two spellings remind me of two other words, immigrate and emigrate. Somewhat hard to distinguish, they mean two similar, yet different, things. I have learned that some of my ancestors immigrated from England. They came to settle, permanently, in a new land. They wanted to find a new home. One who emigrates, like an emissary, comes from. Immigrate emphasizes coming to. Emigrate emphasizes coming from.

Jesus reveals the Presence of God with us. Jesus has come from God and has come to us. Since that name means ***“God with us,”*** I prefer to spell the name Emmanuel. It focuses my attention on God’s choice. I think of God emigrating from Heaven in Jesus.

It also reminds me that God did not immigrate to take up permanent earthly residence. In the end, God wants us together, together in God’s Presence in Heaven. The Bible says all have sinned, so we could not get to God on our own. God loves us so much that God has come to us – to be with us, to live among us in a self-revealing way, and to take our sin upon Himself that we might one day be with God.

What Good News! We celebrate the birth of the Promised One come to us – Emmanuel, God with us.

Dr. Steve Allsbrook,

Retired, Executive Director

Dover Baptist Association

Prayer: *“Bring us into this Christmas season with our hearts and minds focused on you, most gracious God. It is in you that we are created, in you that we are healed, in you that we are transformed to become that which you call us to be. We wait expectantly for the Christmas gift you promise; Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.”*

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Monday
December 6

Peace Among Men

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth
peace among men with whom he is pleased!”*

(Luke 2:14).

No greater light had ever shone upon the face of the earth than did that light which shined down on a few unsuspecting shepherds tending their flock on a hot Judean night. Most of us have heard the Christmas story many times and we tend to take the account for granted. But not those shepherds! When the angel of the Lord appeared to them it was not an everyday occurrence! Those guys had every right to be afraid. Nothing like that had ever happened to them before! Even the glory of the Lord shining round them wasn't much of a consolation for such a phenomenon!! For a few brief moments there was no peace, there was just plain old fear!

But then the angel started to speak, and the good news was presented to them and that good news started to become real to them. Perhaps the angel's voice was soothing? Perhaps the overwhelming news was what they longed to hear? Perhaps the promise of a sign to them was such a great promise that they gained their composure and regain their shepherdly

courage? But then a whole multitude of angels appeared and the night was alive with praise and glory! Wow! I think that would have startled me just a bit.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth . . . peace!!” Certainly the world needed peace. Surely those frightened shepherds longed for peace. And in the midst of our crazy, too-often-upside-down world we long for peace as well!

Peace. Glorious peace. Quiet peace. No more hustle and bustle. No more rushing here and there. No more worrying and stressing out. Just peace. Blessed peace. That’s what the angels promised and that’s what the world needs. Peace.

“Peace among men” would be a welcome relief from the mumbling and grumbling, the lying and cheating, the *“I’ll get you before you get me”* world we live in. I think we all long for a more carefree, stress-free world where we are not afraid, where we feel safe and comfortable. It would be heavenly if brothers and sisters could, and would, dwell in peace and unity.

But there was a disclaimer on the peace the angels announced: there would be peace among those with whom HE is pleased. Peace comes when Christ reigns and rules. Jesus Christ was born to bring peace and hope to the hearts of those who acknowledge Him as Savior and Lord. Peace comes to the hearts of those who follow His will and His way. For Christ peace came with a price. The peace He brought came at the expense of His life on Calvary - ***“my peace I give you,”*** He said, ***“not as the world gives do I give to you.”***

With the sounds of angels praising God ringing in their ears those shepherds went off in search of the peace they promised. May we find His peace within our hearts and homes at this Christmas time. Peace.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "May the God of hope and peace dwell within you and may you know His grace and mercy as you've never fully known it before. Thank you, Father, for angels and shepherds, but most of all thank you for your Son who makes peace a thing to be grasped. Amen."

Tuesday
December 7

Peace as only God can Give

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you;
not as the world gives do I give to you.*

*Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be
afraid.”*

John 14:27

Twenty-one years ago Americans united in grief with the tragic events of 9-11. Because of evil and hatred our peace was shattered in a way that was all too real for us to understand.

On December 7, 1941, Americans were stunned when Pearl Harbor was bombed and we were pulled into World War II. Our peace was shattered in a way that is difficult for most to understand.

Throughout history evilness has shattered peace in the hearts and minds of men and women everywhere.

Grasping real peace is a challenge at best.

God wants us to know the peace that comes when He meets the need for our daily resources. When we are reconciled to Him, we become His children, and He wants us

to experience the abundance that He has to offer. We don't have to look to the supply channels around us and be anxious about the things of this world.

We have all we need in God's riches! When we are good stewards of what He entrusts to us He promises to meet our daily needs. We may not receive everything we want, or think we deserve, but God promises to give us our daily bread.

I remember reading some time ago about a tragic story from New York. N.Y. authorities entered a third story apartment house in Brooklyn and found the withered body of a 77-year-old man covered with an old-fashioned nightgown. He was dead.

In another dusty bedroom, piled high with yellowed newspapers, laid a sister of this man unable to get up and pleading for food. While the detectives looked around, they found another sister out on the streets going through the neighborhood asking for food.

A tragic story of a man and his two sisters starving to death in their Brooklyn apartment. Starving to death in the most industrialized city and country in the world! But here is the twist to this story. The police found in that apartment, hidden among the rubbish in various storage places - \$67,000 in cash and more than \$100,000 worth of securities! There they lived amid all of that wealth, and they were still starving to death.

God is ready to supply us with His blessings but sometimes folks just are not willing to receive them! God

wants us to know of His abundance and grace, but we're too blind or selfish to see.

Heavenly angels announced to the world "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased*" - The Prince of Peace had come. Jesus offered His peace to all who would accept Him as Savior. Christmas is our reminder that peace is God's gift to us offered through His Son, Jesus Christ. May the gift of peace and the joy of Christ be yours this Christmas.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *"Father, Prince of Peace, Hope of the world, grant us peace of mind and joy in heart as we celebrate Your coming to this world to bring salvation and Light to our dark and needy world. We praise you and thank you." Amen.*

Wednesday

December 8

Peace

“I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace.

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

John 16:33

“In this world you will have trouble.” Not *“you might have trouble,”* but *“you will have trouble.”* There’s no escaping it. So why do we act surprised when it happens? Why do we think trials and troubles are the exception? This world is full of trouble. A mother gets breast cancer. Children fight in wars. Young women get sold into slavery. People die in car accidents, plane crashes, train crashes. Criminals don’t pay for their crimes. The innocent get jailed. Our leaders are sometimes corrupt or immoral. Earthquakes wipe out thousands of people.

I recently heard about some orphans who aged out of the system and were taken as virtual slaves to work in a store and home where the owner held all their documents and paid a low wage. I heard about the young schoolgirl who was

strangled after being lured by pedophiles. I heard about the corrupt practices of businesses where people have to pay a bribe to get a job. I heard about pastors being put in jail for their faith in Jesus. I heard about the children whose parents were killed in an auto accident.

How do we have peace amid these situations? That's why I love Christmas. It reminds me that because of Jesus coming to this earth, I can have peace amid the trouble of the world. Jesus came to this earth, a gift from God, to bridge man to God. He died for our sins and rose again so we could have a relationship with Him. He is with us, in us, giving us strength and hope. He is our hope. He is our peace. Even when things don't seem to be all that peaceful.

You will hear lots of people say, *"Let there be peace on earth,"* this time of year. I think for many of them it means no fighting or hatred. Which is a good thing, but I want to challenge you to think and mean more than that. Ask for His peace in the midst of the trouble of this world. Ask that all in this world will know that peace. After all, He says in **John 14:27**, ***"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."***

Prayer: *"Father, let there be peace on earth. Your peace. You promised us Your peace. May we feel Your presence and hope amid the trouble of the world. May we always remember that in You is peace."* Missionary Julie

Thursday
December 9

Longing for Peace

*“Bethlehem Ephrathah,
you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah.
But the LORD will choose one of your people to rule the
nation -
someone whose family goes back to ancient times.”*
Micah 5:2

Peace? In 1809 all the world seemed to be in turmoil as Napoleon marched across the helpless hamlets of Europe in his quest for world domination. His name brought fear to all in his pathway.

During that time of invasions and battles, babies were being born in Britain and America. But who was interested in babies when a lunatic was making ruthless history in the world. What could be more important than world domination? Who cared about English-speaking infants that year that Europe was in the limelight?

Perhaps someone should have. A host of thinkers and world leaders arrived that fateful year of 1809.

- William Gladstone was born in Liverpool.
- Alfred Tennyson began life in Lincolnshire.
- Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Edgar Allan Poe began his tragic life in Boston.
- Charles Robert Darwin took his first breath that year.
- A rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky was the birthplace of a newborn named Abraham Lincoln.

All that (and more) happened in 1809 . . . but who cared? All eyes were on the battlefields of Europe where the destiny of the world was being shaped . . . or was it? Few remember the battles of 1809, but who can measure the impact of those other lives?

Insignificant? Certainly not!

Go back eighteen centuries before that. Who cared about the birth of a baby born in the little village of Bethlehem? The world was reeling from the impact of heavy taxation and Roman domination. Could anything be more important than Caesar's decisions and rule from Rome? Who cared about a Jewish baby born in Bethlehem?

God did! Without realizing it, mighty Augustus was only an errand boy for the fulfillment of Micah's predictions . . . a pawn in the hand of Jehovah. While Rome was busy making history, God arrived!! He pitched His fleshly tent in

silence on straw in a manger . . . among the animals . . . under a star. The world didn't notice. They worried over Alexander the Great . . . Herod the Great . . . Augustus the Great . . . while the world overlooked Mary's Little Lamb . . . Sadly, it still does.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *“The world longs for peace, Lord. We cry out for self-satisfaction. Some continue to look to world leaders for salvation. Some to wealth and might. But, Lord, what we truly need is God in the flesh . . . the babe of Bethlehem. Grant us peace in our hearts that comes from knowing you are still the Lamb of God. Amen.”*

Friday

December 10

Attitude

“I will sing of your love and justice;

To you, O Lord, I will sing praise”

Psalm 101:1 (NIV)

I wrote the following devotion for our first Advent devotional (at North Run Baptist) in 2008 . . . I continue to believe that attitude plays an important part in how we observe Christmas. There is real peace that can be found when we know Christ as both Savior and Lord . . . and it came to be with the coming of Bethlehem’s babe so long ago . . .

One of my favorite authors and teachers is Dr. Charles “Chuck” Swindoll. I’ve long admired his writings and enjoyed hearing his sermon messages whenever I get the opportunity - Susan and I had the privilege of meeting him in 2017 on an Alaskan cruise (a retirement gift from NRBC) - a dream come true!! I continue to listen, read, and appreciate this great man.

What I admire about Dr. Swindoll is his willingness to expose his human side. His wit and humor add a great deal to the depth of his teaching. When I read or hear a message from Dr. Swindoll I feel like he is real . . . like me - and I like

someone who can identify with someone like me who is out there in the daily trenches of life. One quote from Dr. Swindoll causes me to reflect on my attitude at this time of year.

This is what Dr. Swindoll said, "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, the education, the money, than the circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think, of say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past . . . we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it. And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our Attitudes."

During this Christmas season we need to take time to examine our own attitude about life and our spiritual service for Christ. Christmas is an excellent reminder that God knows how difficult it is to live in our world - He came to give us direction and purpose in daily living. Look inside, friend, and discover what you need to confess, how you need to repent, and what is necessary for you to live in the fullness of Christ's will for your life.

Know this: There are too many who claim to be Christian with attitudes that are more in line with Ebenezer Scrooge who proclaimed - "Christmas - baa humbug!" This year ask God to grant you the greatest presence ever - that of a positive attitude in life! May you find wonderful joy in the real meaning of Christmas.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *"Father, I simply ask today that you help me to look deep inside myself so that I can adjust my attitude to your divine will for my life. Amen."*

Saturday

December 11

Peace

*“And the peace of God, which passeth all
understanding,*

shall keep your hearts and minds . . .”

Philippians 4:7

2012. Cancer. Surgery. Chemotherapy. (You’ll lose your hair.) Radiation. (Seven weeks of it.)

These are not words that bring a sense of peace to anyone! And while I will confess to feeling overwhelmed, confused, and a myriad of different emotions at first, my God was right there with me at every test, surgery, chemo, radiation treatment and doctor appointment. He saw me through each and every one. And there was peace. “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) I experienced that peace!

Leaving a radiation treatment one day this summer, I heard Max Lucado on the Christian radio station I listen to. And this is what stuck with me... God may not take away the trials that we face, but He takes away the fear. "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace" (John 16:33). And that was certainly true for me! When the fear was gone, in its place was . . . PEACE! I was able to pray and feel peace. I had praise songs running through my head during some pretty uncomfortable tests and they gave me comfort and calmed my nerves. I knew I had prayer warriors praying for me, standing in the gap for me and that REALLY lifted my spirits!

One of the devotions I read this fall gave the biblical definition of peace, saying there is peace with God and there is having the peace of God. The peace of God reminds us to be anxious about nothing in this world. God knew everything that was ahead of me and He was already working out the details long before I was ever clued in! God sent peace to our world and to each of us through his Son Jesus. And at this Christmas season as we celebrate the birth of our Savior, the Prince of Peace, I pray that you will experience this peace that comes from knowing Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.

***“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given:
and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his
name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty
God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”*** (Isaiah
9:6 KJV).

Susan Gaskins

Prayer: *“Heavenly Father, I love You and thank You for this
Christmas season when we celebrate the birth of Your Son.
Thank You for giving me a peace that has passed all my
understanding. I lift up those who have not stepped out to claim
Jesus as their Lord and Savior so that they too can have the
kind of peace that only You can give. Amen.”*



J
O
Y

Sunday
December 12

Real Joy

*“The birth of Jesus took place like this:
His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph.
Before they came to the marriage bed,
Joseph discovered she was pregnant.
(It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn’t know that.)
Joseph, chagrined but noble,
determined to take care of things quietly
so Mary would not be disgraced.
While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream.
God’s angel spoke in the dream:
“Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married.
Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived.
God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant.
She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you,
Joseph, will name him Jesus - ‘God saves’ -
because he will save his people from their sins.”*

Matthew 1:18-21 (The Message)

Nearly 2,000 years ago, thirty years after His birth, Jesus stood on a mountainside near the Sea of Galilee. Thousands came to listen to Him. And He delivered some of the most challenging, yet unusual, statements we'll ever hear. They're recorded in Matthew 5, and we call them the Beatitudes. We might call them the steps to joy. They all begin with the word **"Blessed,"** which means *"happy"* or *"fortunate"* or *"in tune with God."* And they're an introduction to the rest of His message that follows. His first message to the world was how to experience real joy!

Dr. Swindoll says that "joy is a positive attitude we choose to express. It is a matter of attitude that stems from your confidence in God. The belief that He is at work, that He is in full control, that He is in the midst of whatever has happened, is happening or will happen."

Someone has said there are four things that can rob us of joy:

Circumstances

People who hurt us

Concern about the future

Concern about the past

As I reflect upon the birth narrative of Jesus, I wouldn't blame Mary and Joseph if they were unhappy - after all there was a host of circumstances working against them: An unplanned pregnancy, unjust taxation, a chaotic world, extended travel near her due date, no place to rest for the night, gossip about her condition and justified worry about the past and future. Where's the joy for them?

Their joy came not from the things of the world, but from the promise of God. Mary's pregnancy was not man-made, but Heaven sent. Conceived by the Holy Spirit her Son would save the world from sinfulness. Later, when the wise men found the Christ-child, they ***“rejoiced exceeding with great joy”*** and ***“they fell down and worshiped him.”***

In just a few days we celebrate the miraculous birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Let us fall down before him in worship and praise rejoicing with overflowing joy for his promise and gift to us - eternal salvation and life everlasting!! Now that's real joy!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *“Father, grant unto each of real joy this Christmas season . . . and all year long as we grow in grace and hope through Christ our Lord. Amen.”*

Monday

December 13

Christmas Joy

“I have been crucified with Christ.

My ego is no longer central.

It is no longer important that I appear righteous

before you or have your good opinion,

and I am no longer driven to impress God.

Christ lives in me.

The life you see me living is not ‘mine,’

but it is lived by faith in the Son of God,

who loved me and gave himself for me.

I am not going to go back on that.”

Galatians 2:20 (The Message)

One young child wrote the following letter: *“Dear Santa, there are three little boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey; he is 2. There is David; he is 4. And there is Norman; he is 7. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. But Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman.”*

If you could use one word to describe Christmas, what word would it be? Some folks would use words like headache, busyness, expensive, or even bothersome. I have heard even Christians use

these words to describe the day we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. How sad that an event that brought so much joy in Heaven should bring so little joy here on earth.

I would like to suggest to you that Christmas can be a time of joy, no matter how broke you are or how busy you are. Joy is like love- it is not merely an emotion, but a decision, and I believe you can be as joyful as you want to be. It's all in where you choose to put your focus. If you really want to have joy this Christmas season, let me suggest that you focus on Jesus!

In one of my favorite Christmas TV specials, Charlie Brown asks if anyone knows what Christmas is about, and Linus recites the story of Christ's birth from Luke 2. Have we forgotten that Christmas is not primarily about us - our family, friends, church, presents - but about Him?

One year a Christmas afternoon visitor asked five-year-old Ruth, "*Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas?*" After a moment's hesitation, she answered, "*No, but then it's not my birthday!*" It is His birthday and we should spend more time celebrating His birth and less time worrying about the "*trappings*" of the holiday.

The life you see me living is not 'mine,' but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Not only was Jesus born in Bethlehem, but by faith and by His Spirit He lives in me. That should fill us with great joy!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "*Heavenly Father, enable us to live by faith and to enjoy the real joy of Christmas: Christ our Lord who loved us enough to give us the gift of Himself. Amen.*"

Tuesday

December 14

Rejoice in the Lord Always

*“Therefore, my brothers and sisters,
you whom I love and long for,
my joy and crown,
stand firm in the Lord in this way . . .*

Rejoice in the Lord always.

I will say it again:

Rejoice!”

Philippians 4:1 & 4

It’s safe to say that joy is one of the most elusive fruits of the spirit. There are many things that rob us of joy; more that steal our happiness. Circumstances can shake our faith, people discourage us, and things distract us from God’s blessings. To experience His abundant, overflowing joy involves a choice. God doesn’t force us into His will, nor does He push us to be joyful and happy . . . but He certainly makes provisions for us to live a life that has real joy as its bedrock.

We tend to equate “*happiness*” with joy, but they are two totally different ideas because they each spring from a different source. One comes from the world around me. The other originates

directly from the Spirit of the Living God. Happiness is conditioned by and often dependent upon what is happening to me. If people treat me well, if things are going well in my life, then I'm happy. If my circumstances aren't favorable, then I'm unhappy.

Joy, on the other hand is found throughout the Bible as a profound, compelling quality of life that transcends the events and disasters which haunt others. Joy is a divine dimension of living that is not encumbered by circumstances. The Hebrew word means, "to leap or spin around with pleasure." In the New Testament the word refers to "*gladness, bliss and celebration.*"

Three days from now we celebrate the most joyful day is the year . . . Christmas!

Christmas still brings out the inner child in me. I want "to leap or spin around with pleasure" I know that my God came into the world to bring us hope and forgiveness. Born as the Christ, He lived a sinless life, and He died in our place as the sacrificial lamb. Christmas joy is not based upon circumstances or earthly surroundings but upon the Truth that Jesus is both Savior and Lord. Is it any wonder that I want to leap and spin around with pleasure!!

I must confess, as I write this devotion, that there are many circumstances in my life that are pressing down on my heart right now. I am overwhelmed with some of them. Walking through life when times are tough is not easy and there are times I'd like to just . . . quit! But, as long as God continues to love, continues to guide, and continues to reign, I am going to "*rejoice in the Lord.*"

I want the kind of joy that we find in Christ, it is comforting and makes me want to leap and spin with pleasure! This Christmas I invite you to “*Rejoice*” in Jesus and give thanks for all His blessings in your life.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: “*Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus and for the joy that we have because of His life that was given for us.*” *Amen.*

Wednesday

December 15

Joy to the World

*“There things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be full.”*

John 15:11

Can you think of a time when your heart was so full of joy that it bubbled over? A time when a smile graced your face and the twinkle in your eye wasn't dimmed by cares of life? Those are precious moments. I remember the joy that came when my children were born and when salvation became real to them.

Joy can come from the sound of a loved one's voice or when the very thing you thought to be impossible becomes real. All you had to do was reach out and seize it, to enjoy the promise of your heart.

Consider the joy of God's deliverance for his beloved people. He bundled up His greatest gift, love and delivered it to our world and eventually to our hearts. Jesus Christ, the breath of Heaven, the King of kings, our very own salvation. What joy!

“Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. . . . Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together before the LORD; for he cometh to judge the earth: with

righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity” (Psalm 98:4-9).

Interestingly, the carol, *“Joy to the World”* omits references to shepherds, angelic choruses, and wise men. It emphasizes the ecstatic joy that Christ’s birth brought to humanity. Our Bible tells us that for centuries hearts had yearned for God to reveal Himself personally. At last it happened as ***“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”***

Does your heart rejoice when you think of Jesus? That kind of love brings pure joy - righteous joy. Rejoice!

Pastor Tom

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, 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, repeat, the sounding joy.*

*No more let sin 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 wonders, wonders, of His love.*

Prayer: *“Father, Let that first Christmas joy be ours today!
Amen.”*

Thursday
December 16

Overjoyed

*“ . . . the star . . . went ahead of them until it stopped over the
place where the child was.*

When they saw . . . they were overjoyed”

(Matt. 2:9b-10 NIV).

*“I have much to write to you, but . . . I hope to visit you and
talk with you face to face,*

so that our joy may be complete”

(II John 1:12 NIV).

We have heard of each other for two years. Dover Baptists have prayed for me and helped support my work at Thembalihle (Good Hope) Baptist Church in South Africa.

I was exceedingly glad when I heard that I would get to come to Virginia. I had dreamed of coming and hoped we could meet one day. I thought, “I have much to write to you, but...I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete” (II John 1:12). My dream was coming true.

In October I made my first trip beyond my home country. I met many Dover Baptist brothers and sisters. My experience fulfilled my expectations, and my joy was complete.

As it says in II John, “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us” (II John 1:4 NIV). I had the joy of fulfilling a dream. I had the joy of meeting many I longed to meet. Now back home in South Africa, I have the joy of knowing Dover Baptists who walk in God’s truth. That memory adds to my joy and helps me serve God here.

The Gospel of Matthew says that wise men left their homeland to see “the one who has been born king.” They traveled far and not nearly as fast as we travel today. How long had they hoped for the moment that finally came? When they saw that the star they had followed stood still, they were overjoyed. What they had expected had happened.

“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh” (Matthew 2:11 NIV).

Like them, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Even with half a world between us, we share the joy of the Good Hope we have in Jesus Christ. Though we are apart now, one day we will be together in heaven. In Christ, our joy is already complete.

Pastor Jeffrey Fololo
Good Hope Baptist, South Africa

Prayer: *“Thank you, Father, for the Good Hope we have in Christ. Help me to remember what is already true in heaven and to know that our joy is already complete in Jesus. Amen.”*

P.S. Dover Baptist Association enjoyed a wonderful partnership with Pastor Fololo and he wrote this devotion for our devotional booklet in 2010.

Friday

December 17

Great JOY

“I proclaim to you good news of great joy

that will be for all the people:

Today a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,

was born for you in the city of David.”

Luke 2:10-11

What is joy? A beautiful flower. A rain storm. Being in His Presence. Doing something you enjoy. Snow falling softly. Being with family. Talking with a friend. A Sunday afternoon nap. Enjoying a good meal. Going to a wedding. The birth of a child.

I don't remember the day I was born, do you? But my family sure does! In fact, my parents were so full of joy that they announced my birth to all their friends. My father drew a picture of a train with each car labelled with our names. On the caboose, he wrote my name! They sent out these notices and also rejoiced with friends and family over my birth. So it is with God when His Son was born on earth.

Imagine that night in the Judean countryside. Sheep huddled together. Expansive night sky full of stars. Shepherds huddled together talking quietly or maybe warming up by a fire. A hush is over the world. Then suddenly, a bright light. A heavenly messenger with a joyful message. Then the skies full of angels

singing - loudly singing. Proclaiming the birth of God's son. Then the shepherds went to find the child and rejoice over His birth.

Luke says that ***“when they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”*** (Luke 2:17-18)

Don't you want to be like those shepherds? Having light in the darkness, hope in the night and then letting that joy overspill to others. May the joy of our Savior's birth spur us on to tell others of His love for all people!

Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

Let earth receive her King.

Let every heart prepare Him room.

And heaven and nature sing.

Julie
IMB Missionary

Prayer: *“Lord, our hearts are full of joy this Christmas! Thank you for your indescribable gift. Help me to share this joy with others who need to hear the good news. Amen.”*

P.S. Julie was secretary when I arrived at North Run Baptist in 1998. We served together for just over a year before she received her appointment as an IMB missionary to one of those places we dare not name. She is an MK having grown up in Indonesia before coming home to the US for studies in college and seminary. Truly she serves because of love for God's people and the joy of helping them come to know the One who gives joy in salvation!!

Saturday
December 18

Joy - Established in Love

*“So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.
And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,
may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people,
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of
Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -
that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of
God.”*

Ephesians 3:17-19

We have all heard statements such as these:

“The holidays get so busy.

*“The family expectations, work parties, and kids’ programs leave me
feeling a bit frazzled.”*

“Have you finished your Christmas shopping yet?”

“I wish I could celebrate Jesus’ birth in a simpler way . . .”

I wonder how much of these holidays were spent relishing the joy of Jesus coming to Earth. Of experiencing a freshness His great love for you! Or how much this Advent may have been influenced by a flurry of performing, trying to fulfill other people's expectations. This might have been seen in how we decorated the house, the events we said "yes" to, the photos we posted on social media, or the gifts we purchased.

In August (2008) I moved to a new ministry field, Amsterdam, Holland. I've already struggled here with "performance." I must learn the language, now, I need to ramp up a new ministry quickly. Does God think more of me (only) when the new Connexion campus ministry becomes a growing group? Do I have more "value" when the Dutch like me? (Of course not, but I'm just being real with the whispers inside my head). I've been trying to find the balance of two key concepts: 1) you work hard to learn culture and reach out in the start-up phase. On the other hand, 2) you rest in God's unconditional love for you. No push. No performance.

Isaiah wrote about this struggle, to find rest and to trust. ***"This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: 'In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it'"*** (Isaiah 30:15).

Paul prays for the Ephesian church in Ephesians 3, to have power to "***grasp***" something that really "***surpasses knowledge.***" Love, God's love, is not an easy idea. I believe that when we understand God's love, we will rest. We will let go of the controls.

I look forward to our Christmas Eve service! In the meantime, may I encourage you to relax today? Let the roots of God's love go down deep in your life and thoughts. Ask the Lord to show you if there are any roadblocks that prevent you from . . . understanding His unconditional care for you. Journal about ways you've experienced God's love during Advent - - and the joy His wide, long, high and deep love bring at Christmas.

Missionary Martha Moore

Prayer: "Father, I want to be deeply rooted in Your love. I desire to understand fully your love. It's so wide and so deep. May I rest in you. Also, let me pass on this unconditional love to those around me today. In Jesus' name. Amen"

**P.S. Martha is the daughter of Pastor Tom's childhood pastor. She wrote this devotion for one of first devotionals shortly after she moved to her new work in Holland.



LOVE

Sunday
December 19

His Love Reaching

*“And the Word (Christ) became flesh (human, incarnate)
and tabernacled (fixed His tent of flesh, lived awhile) among
us;
and we [actually] saw His glory (His honor, His majesty),
such glory as an only begotten son receives from his father,
full of grace (favor, loving-kindness) and truth.”*

John 1:14 (Amplified)

Early in 2010 we said farewell to my precious Mom who entered her eternal reward after faithfully serving God throughout her life. Her church family in Tampa embraced our family in a very special and loving way . . . for that we were most grateful.

On New Year's Day of 2011 I was honored to officiate for my niece's (Jennifer) wedding ceremony in North Carolina. It was a joyous and wonderful experience and I saw love in action through the bride and groom and their church family. Little did we know that the joy would be shattered just a few months later.

On March 29th my brother's wife, Sherry, died unexpectedly. Through the valley of death once again we walked. My brother asked me to take the lead in her memorial service and I was honored to do so. Sherry and I had been high school classmates

and she and my brother had been married for 41 years. Again, we experienced an outpouring of God's love from several churches in Roanoke Rapids . . . for that we are most grateful.

As we celebrated Christmas then it was different. We missed our loved ones, but we also know they are celebrating Christmas in Heaven with our Savior . . . for that we are extremely grateful!!

Christmas is the reminder of how much God loves us. He loved us so much that He left the splendor of Heaven to come into our midst to bring eternal love to us.

I love this thought from Gloria Gaither:

“Right from the beginning God’s love has reached, and from the beginning man has refused to understand. But love went on reaching, offering itself. And still today, after two thousand years, patiently, lovingly, Christ is reaching out to us today. He is reaching, longing to share with us, the very being of God. His love still is longing, His love still is reaching, right past the shackles of my mind. And the Word of the Father became Mary’s little Son. And His love reached all the way to where I was.”

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *“Thank you God for your love. Thank you for surrounding us with your powerful arms as we experience Christmas love this year. Enable us to share that love with others and to experience your joy as we live daily for you. Lord, please be with those who are walking in loneliness or sadness at this time of year. Wrap your loving arms around them and may know your love, joy and peace. Amen.”*

Monday

December 20

Take Time to Love

“Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and know God . . .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”

I John 4:7 & 9

In a well-worn tune of yesteryear William Longstaff shares the words:

Take time to be holy,

Speak oft with thy Lord;

Take time to be holy,

The world rushes on . . .

This time of year should be a reminder to all of us that the world is rushing ever onward. This year things are strange and strained . . . the hustle and bustle of shopping has been curtailed because of a global pandemic. I suspect many are shopping online still seeking to find the most appropriate gift for loved ones. I also suspect many baking, cooking, preparing and partying in a different fashion - still makes me tired just thinking about all we do. The secular side of Christmas begins earlier and earlier as retailers take

advantage of the best sales season of the year - this year "*black Friday*" started in October! And, let's face it, we often get so caught up in the rush of activity that we are too stressed to enjoy the love of Christmas.

Perhaps this will be the year we slow down and enjoy the blessings of Christmas. It is such a shame to miss the blessings because we are too busy.

This year it is my desire to spend more time enjoying and less time worrying! I have many reasons to slow down. Our gatherings may be a bit subdued, and our partying will be done with "*social distancing*", but we will still celebrate Christmas, for Christmas is more than what the world thrusts upon us!

I remember back many years to the time when I first held my son and then my daughters and now our five grandchildren. Such love. I wish I had taken time as a father to spend more moments with my kids - I pray I am wiser now and will have more time to show my grandchildren how much granddaddy loves them. Thank God for little lives to make us realize what love truly is!!

And to think, my love is nothing compared to the love that God has for us. God loves us so much that He sent His Son into this world to bring us hope . . . and love, joy . . . and peace. "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God . . . God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." I believe our Heavenly Father longs to hold us tightly in His arms to comfort us and assure us that He is still in control. His love transcends even global pandemics!

It's Christmas so I encourage you "to take time to be holy."
Please don't let the significance of Christmas love pass by without
expressing your love to others . . . and to your Heavenly Father.

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Lord, help me to spend more time with you. Help me to allow your holiness to overwhelm my sinful nature and give me peace. Remind me that Christmas is love. God's love. Our love. Lord, I know you won't slow the world down, so slow me down so I can take more time to grow in your holiness" Amen."

Tuesday

December 21

What Is the Greatest Verse On Love?

“For God so loved that world that He gave us his son . . .”

In our world the most familiar verse on love is John 3:16. We celebrate the birth of the Baby in just two days, and Galatians 4:4-6 reminds us that *“ . . . in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son . . .”* We celebrate His birthday with presents for Him first, then ourselves. Our mission offering is His birthday gift from us, and so is loving others all year.

Two other verses in John’s gospel may be more important in telling us of God’s love to and through us! During the summer growing up in Texas, it was too hot inside our church. So we had the services at night outside in a parking lot, with fold up chairs, and strings of lights around. We cooled ourselves with cardboard fans the local mortician had given to churches.

Bugs flew everywhere. To our delight we saw one of the lady soloists, with a large mouth, trap a flying bug inside, holding a long note!

We fell out of our chairs laughing, and many others joined in as the pianist waited for her to spit and continue. Our pastor then asked the congregation to quote their favorite verse. When some older person quoted John 3:16 there was a gasp through the audience, “There went my verse”! Few other verses were quoted.

In John 17:23, Jesus' long prayer reveals how much God loves me (and you). He loves you as much as He loves Jesus! Can it be? “. . . that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me” (NLV). Think on this verse now and feel our Father's hug on you.

Do you find it hard to give love to some people? Out of love? God has given you His love to spread to others. “That the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17: 26). God's love for Jesus is yours now, to deposit in your family, people at work, others you “can't” love.

Dr. Waylon B. Moore, Founder,
Missions Unlimited

Prayer: “Lord, I claim your love by faith! Let me surprise others with it today, at CHRISTmas, then all New Year! Amen”

P.S. Dr. Moore was Pastor Tom's pastor at Spencer Memorial Baptist in Tampa, Florida where pastor Tom made his profession of faith and began his ministry in 1968. Dr. Moore is father to Missionary, Martha Moore.

Wednesday

December 22

A Mother's Love

“We love because he first loved us” (I John 4:19).

Mom taught us love. In her own personal and quiet way Mom was able to make each of her children feel “special” and each of us felt like we were her favorite (I know she just patronized my brother and sister because I was her favorite!). O, yes, Mom taught us to love, and also to laugh!

When life was hard and times were bad, Mom loved her family. She had a way of making the most out of nothing while helping us feel special. She endured the heartaches of life with grace and dignity and she loved us unconditionally. And she modeled God’s love. There’s something about a mother’s love that reaches deep into your heart!

When I received a call on January 25th from my sister in Tampa, that Mom was gravely ill and was in the hospital, I knew I had to see her one last time. I also remembered my promise to Mom to “watch out for my sister” when Mom was gone. Thankfully I arrived by Mom’s bedside a few hours before her glorious home-going and she modeled love once more. Through her pain and discomfort, she greeted me, thanked me for coming, and her final words to me were “I love you.” Throughout that long night as Mom suffered, I sat with my sister and we said our goodbyes and released her into her eternal reward. Mom taught us love!

In the darkness of the night, as my sister slept for a short while, Mom reached heavenward as if opening her arms to embrace Jesus, then placing her hands across her chest she folded them in prayer and triumphantly marched off into God's heavenly kingdom, surely singing songs of praise and glory. Mom taught me love! Her memorial service was simple with my brother, my son, her pastor and I each sharing about the courage, strength and love of a special lady. We shared some wonderful words about a special lady, and we rejoiced that God shared her with us for a long while because Mom taught us love!

Mom learned about love from her parents and from her Lord. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, she loved Him as only a mom can do. She loved Him unconditionally . . . as He does us. She met His earthly needs and she cared for His well-being. When He suffered, she suffered. When He rejoiced she rejoiced. That's what moms do. She knew He was special, and she treated Him special - just like my mom did! I learned to love because God taught Mom how to love.

Today would have been Mom's 103rd birthday. She lived her life to the fullest, making us feel special, modeling Christ before us, encouraging us in so many ways and teaching us all about love. Now that's a gift that will last forever. Happy birthday Mom . . . see you soon in God's eternal Kingdom.

Love and miss you . . . your favorite!!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "May the God of love and joy richly bless you today. May you feel special because you are God's favorite! Let the love of Christ flow through you and may you help others to feel special because you care. Amen."

Thursday

December 23

Christmas Is Love

I John 4:8-10

*“My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other
since love comes from God.*

*Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a
relationship with God. The person who refuses to love
doesn't know the first thing about God,
because God is love - so you can't know him if you don't
love.*

*This is how God showed his love for us:
God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through
him.*

*This is the kind of love we are talking about -
not that we once upon a time loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear
away our sins and
the damage they've done to our relationship with God.”*

(The Message)

I remember the “*magic*” of Christmas. Growing up in Florida we didn’t think much about a White Christmas . . . just wasn’t going to happen! But like children everywhere in the north, we warm-blooded Floridians in the south anticipated the coming of Christmas and the joy of presents and surprises. We didn’t hang our stockings by the mantle - didn’t have one; instead they were hung by the built-in bookshelf in the living room. The tree on one side of the room, fully decorated with bubbling lights, ornaments, and wrapped presents below. On the front porch those huge old bulbs twinkled for all to see. Oh, it was all magic to a child like me!!

I still remember the decorations around our neighborhood, and I can smell the aromas from Mom’s baking and the turkey cooking in our kitchen. I remember how hard it was to get to sleep on Christmas Eve. And I remember how exciting it was to wake on Christmas morn. Long ago memories that are still magic in my heart. I loved Christmas then . . . and I still do today.

We kids grew up. And then my kids grew up. Now we enjoy our grandkids growing, and I still see the magic in Christmas, and the joy of giving, and the love of family and friends.

Through the years I’ve learned more about the message of the heavenly hosts, and the journey of Mary and Joseph. I’ve preached about the birth of my Savior in Bethlehem’s stable. I’ve sung about the holy birth, the silent night and the joy to the world. I’ve heard the bells on Christmas Day, and I’ve tasted the bread from God’s heavenly kitchen. But most of all I’m learning more and more about the love of God that sent his only Son to bring hope to a hopeless world. I’ve accepted His love and found my salvation through the sacrifice He made for me. I can’t say I understand how it all happened, but I can say thank God it did!

To me Christmas is love. His love created this world. His love saves this world. His love sustains this world. That babe of Bethlehem, that Savior on the cross, and that resurrected Christ are all the love that I will ever need . . . I hope this Christmas you can proclaim the same!!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: *“Let the reality of Your love be in our hearts and celebration this Christmas . . . and every day. Amen”*

Friday

December 24

Christmas Light

*“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you . . .
being confident that He who has begun a good work in you
will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

Philippians 1:6

How do you want to be remembered? When physical life has passed you by and all that remains is the “dash between your date of birth and your date of death” - what would you like people to remember?

Life on earth is short and eternity is long. God designed it that way. There is little we can do to change that. Oh, we can live a full life, love generously, share kindness with others, practice hospitality and serve our Lord through His church, but that won't necessarily add years, or even days to our lifestyle in this earthly realm.

Jesus came into our world to bring each of the gifts of Advent to His creation: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love and Light.

Jesus came to be Light for the world.

Jesus calls for His followers to be Light in this world.

I find it revealing that the Wisemen followed a great light to find the Messiah. The brightest star in all the world cast its light upon the darkest sinfulness and directed us to the Light of the world!

We remember Christ as the babe of Bethlehem, the Master Teacher of Israel, the Miracle worker, the Healer of broken hearts and lives and the Giver of Light into the darkest corners of sinful people.

We remember Jesus as the Hope of all eternity, the One who offers Peace in the midst of all conflict . . . peace far greater than we can imagine. We find in Him Joy in spite of suffering and Love beyond compare.

The Apostle Paul wrote to his young apprentice Timothy: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry” (I Timothy 1:12). Timothy, like Paul, ministered in the Name of Jesus Christ. Like many others they became a reflection of the Light of Jesus. They left behind a glimmer of light in an otherwise dark world. Hopefully we are doing the same.

As a child (and even now as an adult) I loved to watch the lights on our Christmas tree. Many years ago we had a set of bubbly lights that really fascinated me. Often our family would drive around Tampa to see the “Christmas lights.” There is something about light that attracts us.

On that first Christmas so long ago, the light of Heaven directed mankind to the LIGHT of Heaven and the world has never been the same! Thank God for that Light!!

I wonder if you might want to be remembered as one who reflected the Light of Jesus to a sin-darkened world . . . I want to be remembered as a Light bearer, how about you? Shine on Christ Jesus, shine on through me!!

Pastor Tom

Prayer: "Loving Father, help us remember the birth of Jesus that we may share in the song of the angels, the gladness of the shepherds, and the wisdom of the wise men. Close the door of hate and open the door of love all over the world. May this Christmas morning make us happy to be your Light-bearers. Amen."

Matthew 5:14

You are the

LIGHT

of the world



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Saturday December 25

Christmas Day

The Healing Light

Luke 1: 67-79

Do you miss the light this time of year? I miss the light. Getting up in the dark and coming home in the dark makes me feel like a possum. The wedge of light we get now gets a little more pinched every day. The day closes in on us by mid-afternoon and it starts feeling like two great doors on both sides closing in. And it is not just the seeing of things we miss this time of year. We miss the feel of the sun on our face. We humans were made hungry for light, not just the sight of it but also for the touch of it.

Our world feels as if it is really stalled in the dark, stalled somewhere around 3 A.M. We believe a new light is coming but at 3 A.M. there is precious little sign of it. We have been waiting for the bright rising of the day to come.

So, today we celebrate because Christmas Day comes like the rising sun and touches us with the light that makes us well. Christmas is a celebration of the morning already arrived and it feels like a healing has begun. Zacharias said, **“Sunrise from on high, dawning shall break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness...”**

So, Jesus shines like a touching, like a healing. If we are wise we will submit all our sickness to His light. On this day we can be washed in the light, bathed in it, held by it, healed by it. The light will hold the broken heart, bathe a broken relationship, wash a broken dream, and we can be made whole.

A few weeks ago I was sitting in a park just having fun when I saw a grandmother and a girl who I guessed to be 4 or 5 years of age walking together. I looked at them just at the moment that the little girl showed-off a perfect cartwheel. Then I saw the grandmother give her keys to the granddaughter. I wondered why but soon found out as the grandmother turned a cartwheel of her own! And it was pretty fine.

On Christmas Day acres of grandmothers turn cartwheels. It is a day when all God's children who have been closed in too long by the dark can go leaping at last in the light of God's love. And a little child shall lead them!

Dr. John Upton, Executive Director,
Virginia Baptist Mission Board

Prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus, come like a child, as you did. Come as a physician, as you are. Come like a sunrise, as you will on the day that God is making even now!"