

CHRISTMAS AT CANYON HILLS

Welcome to the Christmas season. At this time of year, we see so many changes that set apart this month in our culture: changes in food and drinks, in decorations, and in music. In many ways it is so good to set apart this time, but we need to do it for the right reasons. As Christians, this is a time of year that we often reflect more deeply on the love of God as seen in the birth of Christ. As we prepare for Christmas, we sing songs, hear messages, and do activities as a church family that point our eyes to the glory of the incarnation, and this advent devotional is one way we hope to do that this year.

Each Sunday this month will be focused on advent, a word that means "arrival," and how love, joy, and peace arrived in a unique way with the birth of Christ. We want you, as a part of our church, to join the rest of this family as we focus on the love, joy, and peace of Christ in this devotional. These were written by leaders in this church with the hope that we will all join together on the same page each day to focus on Christ.

We hope that you and your family are blessed by taking the time to read through these passages of Scripture, reflect on how they can be understood in light of Christmas, and consider some questions to help deepen your understanding and application of the message of Christ. May God bless you in Christ this Christmas.

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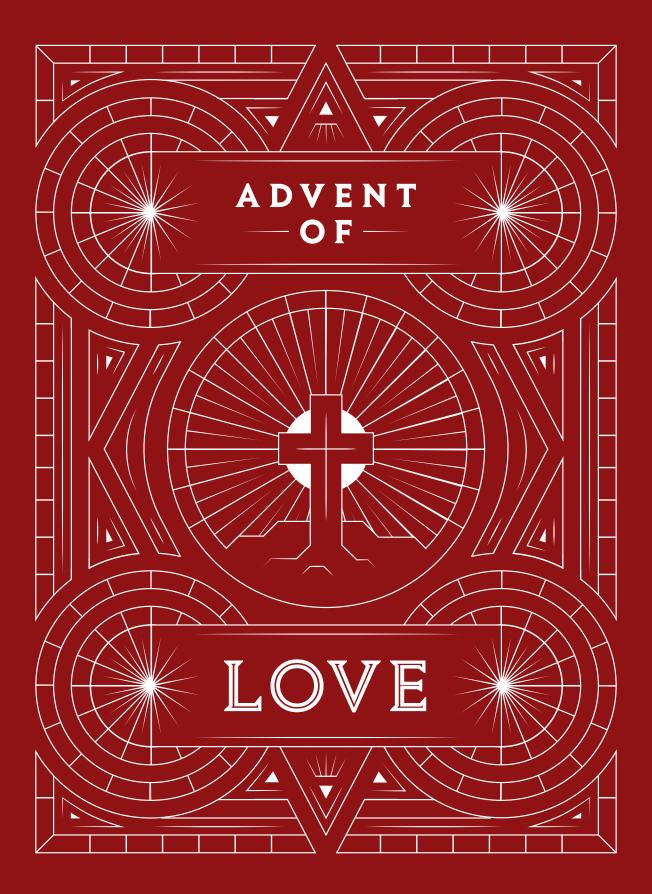
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DECEMBER 2 JOHN 3:16

¹⁶ For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This is by far the most famous verse in the Bible, and for good reason. There are plenty of people in the world who don't read the Bible or know much about Jesus but have heard this verse before. And often, this is one of the first verses that a Christian memorizes. But because it is so commonly known, it can be easy to gloss over, to repeat with rote memorization without really reflecting on the reality of what it teaches.

All of this starts with God, with his love for the world. Jesus tells us that God's motivation in sending him was God's great love for the world. That includes you and me! God's infinite love, which is defined by him and is rooted in his very nature, is what prompted him to send Jesus. And that love is for the world, his creation, the men and women who bear his image in their own created nature.

Jesus shows us what this perfect love looks like. Jesus was sent by the Father to live the perfect life we couldn't live and then die the death that we deserved, so that we could be saved from sin and death, and saved for everlasting life in Christ. That good news is the ultimate expression of God's love for us.

This love is available to anyone who would believe in Jesus. But this idea of believing in Jesus is not as simple as saying some words. I can say I believe that a chair will hold me, but if I refuse to sit in that chair, is it really belief? It is only true belief if you put your money where your mouth is and actually live out what you say you believe. In the same way, Jesus doesn't want our lip service, but he wants our repentance and surrender, our whole-life submission to him.

When we offer up that true belief, when we give our life over to Jesus, we not only avoid the consequences of our sin ("should not perish") but we get to experience the complete, full, eternal life that God designed us for – a life that is rooted in an actual relationship with him! And all of this is only made possible because of the love of God, a love that is aimed right at you.

Have you given your life over to God, committing to follow Jesus as your Lord and Savior? If so, when and how did that happen? If not, why not?

DECEMBER 3 EPHESIANS 2:4-7

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

As we get closer to Christmas, we can be reminded of the profound love God has for us. This passage speaks of our transformation from death to life, made possible only through the Father's love.

God's love is not a passing emotion, but rather a fundamental part of who he is. His love is a mighty force that redeems and restores. Throughout Ephesians 1, Paul proclaims that God chose us before the foundation of the world, and predestined us for adoption through his son, Jesus Christ. This wasn't an accident or an afterthought. The Father's love is intentional, unfailing, and everlasting, and he has had that love for us since before we were born. And because God's love is rooted in his character, not in what we do, there is nothing that will make him love us less or separate us from his love. God has so lavishly poured his love and grace on us, assuring that we are not only forgiven of our sins, but also adopted as members of his family.

So, as we reflect on the birth of Christ, we see the expression of his unconditional love: God loves us so much that he sent Jesus into the world, into our brokenness, into our sin, and not only brought life where there is death, but hope where there is despair. God's love is the driving force behind the Christmas story.

This Advent season, let's pause and consider the magnitude of God's love for us. How does knowing that you are deeply loved and chosen by God before the world began change the way you approach Christmas and the gift of salvation?

DECEMBER 4 ROMANS 8:35-39

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long;

we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

During Christmas, we celebrate the advent or arrival of the love of God in the flesh. Throughout history, God has shown the love he has for his people in a variety of ways. He showed his love to Adam and Eve by promising to one day bring redemption. He showed his love through his covenant with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. He showed his love through the giving of the law to Moses and the people of Israel. He showed his love through his faithfulness to Joseph. He showed his love by rescuing his people out of the hands of Egypt.

But with the coming of Jesus, we see something unique, something different than these other expressions of God's love. With the arrival of Jesus, we see more than actions, we see the fully incarnate God, not just an action, but a person. If you want to see the love of God, look to Jesus. Now that we have this embodiment of love, is there anything that can take it away from us? What about difficulties here on earth? No! They cannot separate us from God's love! What about death itself? No! It cannot separate us from the love of God. What about all the powers in the universe? What if every angel or every single force in all the universe was against us? What then? The Apostle Paul answers with a resounding no! Not even all the power of creation can separate us from the love of God which is found in Christ Jesus. When you think of Jesus coming as a baby this year, let his coming remind you that nothing... not even hell and Satan himself can separate anyone who is in Christ from the love of God!

According to this verse, what is the only way a person can be separated from God's love?

DECEMBER 5 LAMENTATIONS 3:22-24

²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;
²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
²⁴ "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

How many of us remember our mom saying to us after a hard day, "It will all look better in the morning!" The idea of this was that after "a good night's sleep" we could understand things more clearly! Sometimes life can seem so overwhelming with all we go through that it couldn't possibly get better overnight! But with God and his kindness, he gives us new days and new mercy every morning! What does God's mercy mean? The Hebrew word for mercy is used 250 times in the Old Testament which encompasses all of God's LOVE! God's love is so far beyond comprehension that it is described in many of his attributes! His grace, goodness, forgiveness, compassion, faithfulness and even his judgment.

How often do we reflect at Christmas on the profound reality that God became flesh for mankind? This is the greatest love of all! And because Jesus is the incarnate God, he is more than empathetic with our suffering, he has perfect compassion, and this causes him to act! That is the compassion that drove him to the cross so you and I would have perfect fellowship with him, so his grace and mercy would be displayed to all those who have received him.

So, mom was right! Because God's mercy for us is new every morning, we get to experience the faithfulness of God every day of our lives. That means we can repent of sin; we can change our ways to be more like Jesus. We can ask God for more strength and courage to face that very difficult situation knowing this reality about God, "his mercies are new every morning, great is your faithfulness."

Read these verses about God's great mercy and compassion: Psalms 145:8-9, Mark 6:34, Ephesians 2:4-5, Hebrews 4:14-16

According to these verses, how has God shown you great mercy and compassion? How will you respond with mercy and compassion to others because of God's great example to you?

DECEMBER 6 1 JOHN 4:7-12

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Do you have any bedtime routines? For our kids, we have a routine we go through every night. It includes things like brushing teeth and putting on pajamas, but it also includes some stories, some Bible, and some prayer. And then, before we walk out the door, we say the same thing we've said every night since our first son was born: "We love you because God made you, because God loves you, because God gave you to us to be our son and daughter, and because God gave us lots of love to give to you. And those things will never change because God will never change, so neither will our love for you or, most importantly, God's love for you."

We do this for lots of reasons, but the main reason is so that we instill in our kids the reality that our love for them is not dependent on anything that they do; it's dependent on the character of God. God's love is so foundational to who he is ("God is love"); it is in his nature and seen in his actions. And because his love is rooted in himself, and not in us, there is nothing that we can do to make God love us more or make God love us less.

The same needs to be true of our love. Our love for others is rooted in God ("for love is from God"). We don't love others because they are loveable; we love others because the God of all love has given us his love to overflow toward others. And since the love of God will never run dry, so too should our love for others always persist.

Try to name one person in your life who needs the unconditional love of Jesus. How can you tangibly show that person God's love through your actions today?

DECEMBER 7 PSALM 136:1-26

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever...

Have you ever had someone tell you the same story more than once? Most of the time, they have completely forgotten they already told you. But what if they were persistent and insisted on sharing it again... and again? In fact, what if they told you the same thing 26 times in a row? Well, apart from maybe questioning their sanity, we would presume that what they are telling us must be really important... so important that it is worth saying repeatedly. Maybe that's why the writer of Psalm 136 repeated the same phrase 26 times in one chapter (seriously, take a look!). What's the phrase? It's very simple: "For his steadfast love endures forever." This is the message he didn't want his readers to miss. As we approach Christmas 2024, this is the same message we don't want you to miss: God's love for you endures forever. It never ends.

One of the verses that describes God's love best is probably the most wellknown verse in the whole Bible:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

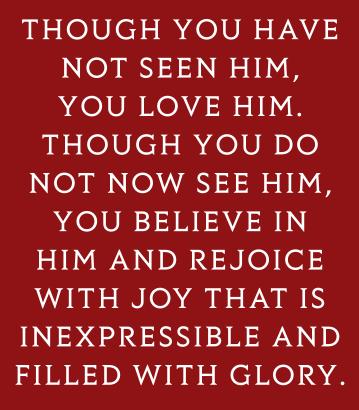
Think about it... according to this verse...

- 1. God's love is for everyone ("God so loved the world")
- 2. God's love is sacrificial ("That he gave his only Son")
- 3. God's love is available to everyone who believes in him ("that whoever believes in him")
- 4. God's love saves us from hell and secures a place in heaven for us ("that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.")

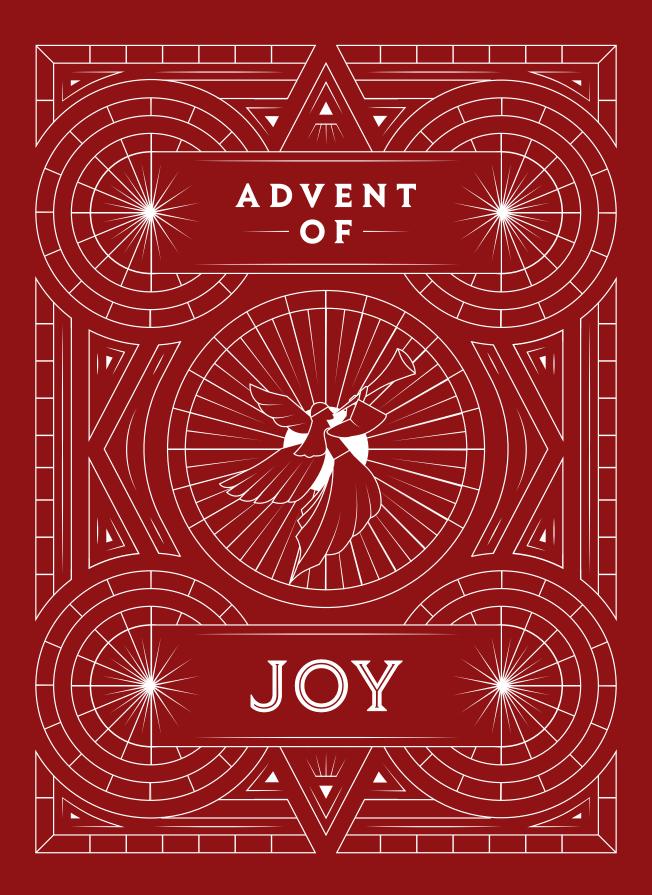
There is nothing like it. It truly does endure forever. So what should your response be to his love? Here are three ways the Bible calls us to respond:

- 1. Love him in return "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind." Luke 10:27
- 2. Love others "Beloved if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." I John 4:11
- 3. Obey his commands "If you love me you will keep my commandments." John 14:15

Which of these expressions of love do you need to grow in the most? Take a minute and go to God in prayer, thank him for his love, and ask him for strength to grow in your love for him and others.



1 PETER 1:8



DECEMBER 9 ISAIAH 12:3-6

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say in that day:

"Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted.
⁵ "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth.
⁶ Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Think back to one of the greatest Christmas gifts you ever received, the one you had been hoping against hope for... the one you had been day dreaming about for weeks! Remember how the butterflies built up, how the sound of the wrapping paper being torn filled your ears, and how the smiles of those around you blossomed as they saw you realize what you had been given.

God desires for us to feel the same way when we intentionally take time to remember the greatest gift ever given, salvation brought to us by his son Jesus. Isaiah is calling us to "draw from the well of salvation", which means to think back to our salvation, consider what it means for us and what it cost Jesus, and then take daily actions that are in line with that salvation.

Isaiah compares this feeling to drinking refreshing water in a desolate place. He calls us to take our spiritual thirst to God, to dip our bucket into the refreshingly cool water of remembering our salvation, and then to drink deeply and live out of the rejuvenation that comes from having drawn from living water!

But the note that is so wonderful here from Isaiah is that as we draw from that well of remembering what our Jesus has done for us, we are not filled with guilt or shame... but JOY! Drawing from that well should be like opening that greatest Christmas gift all over again, and it's not just limited to one day a year! We can draw from this well every day and in every moment! This well will never run dry, the JOY will overflow, and God our Father will Himself be joyful as he watches us drink from the well of his great faithfulness in Jesus.

Take time today, alone or with family, to write out six instances of how God has provided for you and/or how following Jesus has changed your life in a particular way. Then take time in prayer to thank God for His goodness, for the salvation He has given you, and for the refreshment of his JOY!

DECEMBER 10 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-18

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

"Joy to the World, the Lord has Come." This very familiar hymn resonates with us during this time of year. But have you ever considered what it means to rejoice always? To pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances? This seems like an impossible command from God's Word. How can we do this when life seems so painful? When the one you love is not at the Christmas service, or the beautifully set dinner table. When the diagnosis you receive is overwhelming and seems impossible to comprehend. Or, maybe, the Christmas season makes you feel lonely.

The only way for this command to be accomplished is through God's perfect power! He is the only one that can give us the help we need to do this.

How do we do this? We must first define what joy means. Joy is not happiness. Happiness comes from the word 'happening' which is a feeling based on the temporary or current happenings. Joy is something that is so much more than feelings. Joy is based on what we know to be true about God!

Try praying this out loud to God:

God, you are sovereign, you are in total control!

God, you are holy! You are the only one who can forgive sin through your Son, Jesus Christ! God, you are peace! You not only give peace, you are peace! God, you love me! God, there is nothing about my situation that you are not fully aware of!

When we focus on the character of God, we can be joyful always, not just at Christmas time but every day of the year!

This Christmas, as you sit with others or even alone, take a moment to say an attribute of God out loud. This will accomplish the command to be joyful always! Because of our confidence in the character of God, it will help us make this command possible, and our hearts will follow.

Take the time to praise God, that HE came into the world as an infant child, lived a sinless life, and paid the penalty for our sin so that we can know true joy that only comes from the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ! "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!"

DECEMBER 11 JOHN 15:10-11

¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

When you think about joy, what comes to mind? What brings you joy? It's easy to confuse happiness and joy into one. But here's the thing – happiness is temporary, joy is eternal. Joy comes when we abide in Christ and rest in his love for us.

In this passage, Jesus calls us to obey his commandments and abide in him. But he didn't leave us to figure that out ourselves. He came and lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and set the example of obedience to the Father by abiding fully in him. You might be wondering how we abide. Abide means "to remain" or "to stay". Jesus clung to the Father by continually spending time with him. He didn't disconnect from the Father – he was always attached to him. We can do this by daily spending time in his Word, continually praying and coming before the Lord with gratitude, bringing our needs, as well as listening to the guiding of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Jesus knows that when we abide in him – when we tether ourselves to him, we will experience the true fullness of joy.

The reality is that true and lasting joy only comes from the Lord. It only comes when we abide in him and in his great love. Joy was never meant to be found in the created world but rather in the Creator himself. In this season of advent when life can be about so much of the created, may we turn our hearts to God who loves us with an everlasting love and find fullness of joy in him, a joy that can't be stolen or altered.

What will it look like for you to abide in the Lord today?

DECEMBER 12 NEHEMIAH 8:9-10

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

This day was the culmination of a long saga for the Jewish nation that had started with God's judgment for their disobedience. God had used the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to conquer God's people, taking them into captivity. This led to generations feeling forsaken by God, never hearing the Word of God or knowing how to be reconciled to him.

But at the appointed time, God, in his mercy, raised up men and stirred in the hearts of kings to allow portions of the Jewish people to return to their homeland. This led to Nehemiah rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem solidifying their return and signifying that God's favor was upon them again. As the walls were completed the people came together to hear the Word of God read aloud and explained to them. As the people heard and understood God's Word, it led to expressions of mourning over their sin as well as great joy and celebration among them. This was declared a sacred day, and the people found strength in the joy the Lord imparted to them by renewing their relationship with him.

In a similar way, four hundred years later, the Jewish people were living under the oppression of the Roman government, wondering if God had forsaken them. They were desperately looking for the coming of the long-anticipated Messiah who would rescue them and reconcile them to God. An angel appeared to some shepherds testifying of a news that would bring them great joy, that the Messiah—yes, Emmanuel (God with us) was born in Bethlehem.

What joy they must have felt to hear that they had not been forsaken by God. He was providing the Messiah who would rescue them from their bondage and reconcile them to God! This is the same joy that is available to all who believe in the Messiah who reconciles us to God.

How can knowing you are reconciled to God through Jesus bring joy and strength to your life?

DECEMBER 13 PSALM 16:11

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

Do you remember the feeling of "Christmas Spirit" when you were a kid? I do. I remember feeling the anticipation of a trip to see family, waiting to see what might be under the tree, watching the movie Elf, with my family late at night. That Christmas spirit feeling brought so much warmth in the days leading up to Christmas, both physically in our Christmas sweaters or peppermint mochas, and in the intangible feeling of a Christmas movie with a happy ending. But the thing about that feeling, just like all other earthly happiness... it faded. After Christmas, the decorations were put away, the tree was thrown out, the songs that days before had been all I wanted to listen to suddenly felt overplayed. When we place our hope in the things of this world, that hope, like everything else, eventually fades.

But Psalm 16:11 reminds us of a deeper, lasting joy. The Christmas season is the reminder of a joy that is unshakable and eternal because it is found in the character and very nature of God. This is the infinite gift from our Father in the person of Jesus – not earned or deserved by anything we do or don't do, but freely given by God. It is the joy of knowing that God is with us — Emmanuel. Jesus came to show us the way of life and brings us joy that transcends circumstance.

This Christmas season, let's not allow ourselves to be distracted by temporary joys and pleasures. Let's set our eyes and hearts on Jesus. Joy incarnate—the way of life.

What are some ways that you can use the warm "Christmas spirit" feelings to remind you of the true source of joy, Jesus Christ?

DECEMBER 14 HABAKKUK 3:17-18

¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

We all have hopes and expectations in the Christmas season. Whether those have to do with a gift you hope you receive, a person you hope you get to see, or a sense of rest you hope to enjoy at the end of the year. Whatever it may be, we often look forward to something every Christmas season. And sometimes our expectations are met! We get to enjoy what we were hoping for! But sometimes our circumstances don't match up to our desires. Can you remember having a disappointing Christmas? Either you didn't get that toy, you couldn't see that person, or you went back to "normal life" in January with less rest than when December started? How do we have joy, even when life is hard?

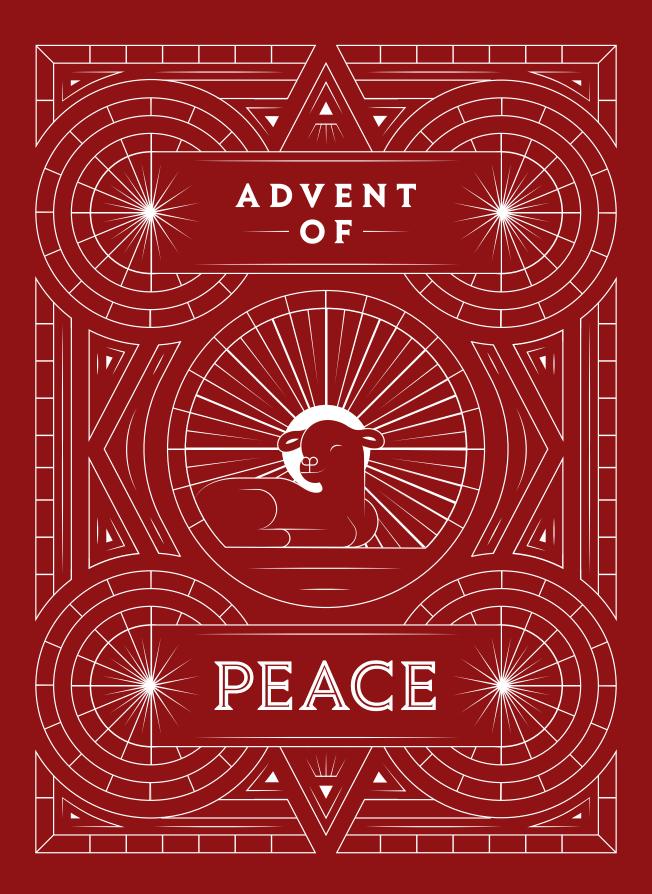
Habakkuk shares about a "worst-case scenario" in verse 17, a year with utter devastation. But even if that should happen, he still has joy? How does that happen? How can we transform our "what if" worries into "even if" statements of faith? The only solution that Habakkuk offers is placing our joy in God, rather than in our circumstances. We need to learn how to trust in the unchanging nature of God, rather than in the fickle nature of our immediate situation in life.

We can learn from Habakkuk that we can take joy in something that is unchangeable, something that won't let us down. God is faithful, eternal, and perfect. He will never disappoint us. We can take joy in God because we never have to fear having our hopes in him unmet. He already met all of our needs by saving us in Jesus Christ. We can "take joy in the God of our salvation."

Joy in any circumstance. Joy if things are going well in your personal life. Joy even if you have to suffer. This is the message of Habakkuk. God is the source of our joy, more than any earthly condition. Our salvation in Jesus Christ is the steady ground that we can stand firmly on, content with our position in Christ now, and looking forward with hope to being face-to-face with our Lord.

What are some hopes or expectations that you have for this Christmas season? Practice committing to joy in God even if those things don't come to fruition.

THEREFORE, SINCE WE HAVE BEEN JUSTIFIED BY FAITH, WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. ROMANS 5:1



DECEMBER 16 JOHN 14:27

²⁷ I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.

If I were to ask you... "What is one thing that you want for Christmas?" What would your answer be? All kinds of things might come to your mind, things like a new car, health, a new computer or maybe the Seahawks winning the Superbowl.

But if you were to ask God what he wants to give you for Christmas, what do you think he would say? One of the biggest "presents" that God gives us through Christmas, and the coming of Jesus is... PEACE through his presence.

There is a lot of darkness and conflict in our world, our country, and even our homes at times. But the good news is that hope for real peace is rooted in Christmas – and the work of Jesus.

And the peace God gives doesn't come through the absence of conflict, or having everything we think we want. God's peace comes through his presence in our lives and our relationship with him. His presence changes everything. Just knowing that he is walking with us through all the ups and downs of life, and knowing that he is always listening to our prayers, should give us the peace we need.

The world can't give us peace. It promises peace, but it can't deliver. Only God can give us real peace. All our real, lasting peace flows from one gift, the gift of Jesus.

The King of Heaven became the child in the cradle to become our savior on the cross. Jesus is our greatest gift ever!

If you could get one special gift for Christmas, what would you want? If you could give Jesus a gift for Christmas, what do you think he would want?

DECEMBER 17 MATTHEW 5:9

⁹ God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

These days peace is oftentimes distant or fleeting. There is political and social unrest around the world, as well as deep division in local communities and in homes. Even in the church, peace is frequently, and to our detriment, a secondary consideration. This begs the question: "Is working for peace really that important?" Isn't giving generously or serving our neighbors or (fill in the blank here) more important than pursuing peace?

The answer is "No." Scripture commands us to live in peace, and Jesus commends those who work for it. What Jesus wants is for the world to know him, the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6) and for us to reflect our Creator, "the God of peace" (Hebrews 13:20).

If we are honest, we struggle to work for peace because we are selfish by nature. We "do what we do because we want what we want," and we want to satisfy ourselves, even when self-satisfaction comes at the cost of considering others. Working for peace is hard. We live in a world that breeds dissatisfaction and conflict with every click on our screens.

The word "peacemaker" means to bind together something that is divided. This isn't an easy task and it's definitely not the path of least resistance. We must see that our efforts for peace have a reward much greater than self-preservation and comfort this side of heaven. Jesus invites us into the blessings that come from being a child of the Most High, "for they will be called the children of God".

Working for peace not only provides personal blessings. More importantly, it blesses others by pointing them towards the Savior, Jesus Christ. Because peace is so rarely worked for, when we "work for peace," we are beacons in a dark world, lighting the way for others to find and see the One who made peace between us and God, though we are guilty sinners deserving death, and God is perfectly holy and perfectly just.

The Lord Jesus gave you and me the ministry of reconciliation; therefore, "working for peace" is not a suggestion, but a command with the promise to be blessed and to be called "children of God." And all this is so that others, like ourselves, might come to know the God of Peace, who desires to make them his children through the peacemaking work of his Son on the cross.

Who do you need to go and make peace with, so that they might see that you have received the great gift of reconciliation and perfect peace with a Holy God?

DECEMBER 18 ISAIAH 26:3-4

³ You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.
⁴ Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.

If you could use one word to describe the general state of your heart, would it be peace? Sadly, this wouldn't be the case for me. What is the issue? As we look at Isaiah 26:3, we can find a clue.

Have you ever seen a horse with blinders on their eyes? Because of the location of their eyes, horses can see almost all the way around themselves. But when a horse is working, this incredible ability can become a distraction and create anxiety for the horse. Horse owners put blinders on to keep the horses focused on the right things, specifically the work they have to do that is right in front of them. In Isaiah 26:3 we see that the heart that is kept in perfect peace is the heart that is stayed on, or focused on God. We, like horses, get distracted by many things. Our eyes wander and we start thinking about all the things around us, all the things that we can't control. God will keep us at peace, but our job is to fix our gaze on him! Keep looking to him. Don't look to the left or to the right. Fix your gaze on the one who is worthy of your trust. Take one step at a time knowing that you can trust the one who is leading you.

Christmas is the perfect time to readjust our focus to pay attention to the things that truly matter. To turn our attention away from the things that will not only distract us, but will bring our hearts unnecessary anxiety. Even some good things, like gifts, and decorations and family, can become distractions pulling us away from focusing on Christ. But as long as Jesus is in view, and your trust is in him alone, your heart will be at rest.

Is there a Bible story that gives a real life example of someone keeping their eyes on Jesus? If you need a hint, think of Peter.

What are some things that you have been focusing on, that you need to stop looking at in order to remain focused on Jesus?

DECEMBER 19 EPHESIANS 2:13-17

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

"Peace" means a few different things in the Bible. It can be a sense of calm even in the middle of chaos, or fulfillment in a complete life in Christ, or it can also be the opposite of war. When two people or groups of people are against each other, they are at odds, they are divided. But when they are able to reconcile, there is peace. In Ephesians 2, Paul is talking about how the Jews and Gentiles had always been separated; they had always acted like enemies. The Jews considered themselves insiders, the chosen ones who received the love of God. And they considered Gentiles to be the unclean outsiders. But now, we can have peace with people we haven't traditionally gotten along with because of Jesus. "For he himself is our peace..."

God is in the business of restoring broken things: healing broken bodies, fixing broken relationships, and bringing broken people back to him. The ultimate expression of this ministry of restoration happened in Jesus Christ. When Jesus died on the cross and the curtain in the temple ripped, separation was no longer necessary. We are no longer separated from God! And if we can be reconciled with God, then surely we can be reconciled with each other! Because when Jesus reconciled us to God on the cross, he "killed the hostility." So we can now live in peace with one another.

This is hard enough to do when we are totally on the same page with someone else. But it can be difficult with people who are very different than us, who see the world differently than we do. As you enter into these last few days before Christmas, consider how Jesus coming into the world leveled the playing field and allowed for anyone to have access to salvation in Jesus Christ. And thank God that he preached peace to you who were far off, and brought you into peace with him and with others.

Is there anyone in your life that you have a hard time getting along with? How can you promote peace with that person in light of the peace that you have in Christ?

DECEMBER 20 ISAIAH 9:6-7

⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

It's hard to believe that we are just a few days away from Christmas! When you hear that, what goes through your mind? Is it excitement for the celebration of the birth of our Savior? Is it anticipation to gather with friends and family? Are you looking forward to exchanging gifts with those you love? Or do you find yourself stressed and worried? Do you feel caught on the treadmill of the hustle and bustle of the season (even when you promised yourself last year you would never do that again!)? Are the pressures of gifts to buy, finances, busy schedules, and unmet expectations overwhelming you?

If so, I have good news. In the midst of what may feel like Christmas chaos, God offers us peace. In fact, in the verses above, you can see Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. And as the Prince of Peace, he has actually blessed you and me with his peace. What an amazing gift! We couldn't ask for anything better. So, here's the question: if we have been given peace, why do we still worry? Why do we still allow ourselves to be stressed and overwhelmed?

I believe the answer is found in Colossians 3:15 where it says, "LET the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." A light bulb went on in my mind when I first noticed the word "let." While we have been given God's peace, we have to "let" it rule our hearts. If we don't, we forfeit peace. So, what does that look like? How do we "let" the peace of Christ rule our hearts?

DECEMBER 20 CONTINUED

Again, God's Word gives us the answer. Philippians 4:6 says, "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God (here's the amazing promise) and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." When we go to God in prayer with the things that worry us, when we take them off our plates and put them on his, we begin to experience his peace.

So here's my question for you. What is keeping you from God's peace this Christmas? Whatever it is, let me encourage you to give it to him in prayer. Let go of the need to be in control and let him carry the weight of your anxieties. Only then will you begin to experience his peace. And I guarantee it will be the best Christmas present you will get this year!

DECEMBER 21 PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

One of my favorite moments from the Christmas season growing up, was when my family and I were gathered together at church on Christmas Eve, surrounded by the warm glow of candles held high, as the entire congregation sang one of the most peaceful Christmas carols together.

"Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright, Round yon Virgin Mother and Child, Holy infant so tender and mild, Sleep in heavenly peace, Sleep in heavenly peace."

There is something profoundly peaceful about that moment—and as a child I am not sure if the peaceful feeling was from the vibey lighting, the beautiful voices filling the room, or the comforting message of the song itself. Yet, each year, after leaving the Christmas Eve service, that sense of peace would quickly fade. And that peace would be overshadowed by my anxiety over family dynamics, unmet expectations, or simply the overwhelming busyness of Christmas Day.

I realize now that there was a disconnect for me between singing the words of that song and fully grasping the significance of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, entering the world on that "silent and holy night." Paul's words in Philippians 4:5 reminds me what I was forgetting: "The Lord is near." This nearness isn't just a comforting thought - it's a divine promise. It assures us that even in the midst of life's chaos and uncertainty, we can experience a peace that surpasses all understanding.

DECEMBER 21

Because the Lord is near, we can bring our struggles and anxieties to God. Because Jesus is present with us, we are equipped to face our circumstances with thanksgiving and joy. And because the Prince of Peace is still on the throne, we can focus our minds on what is true: that perfect peace, regardless of our circumstances, is a gift freely offered to us.

What situations in life make you feel anxious or unsettled? How does thinking about what is true about Jesus and his Word bring you peace?

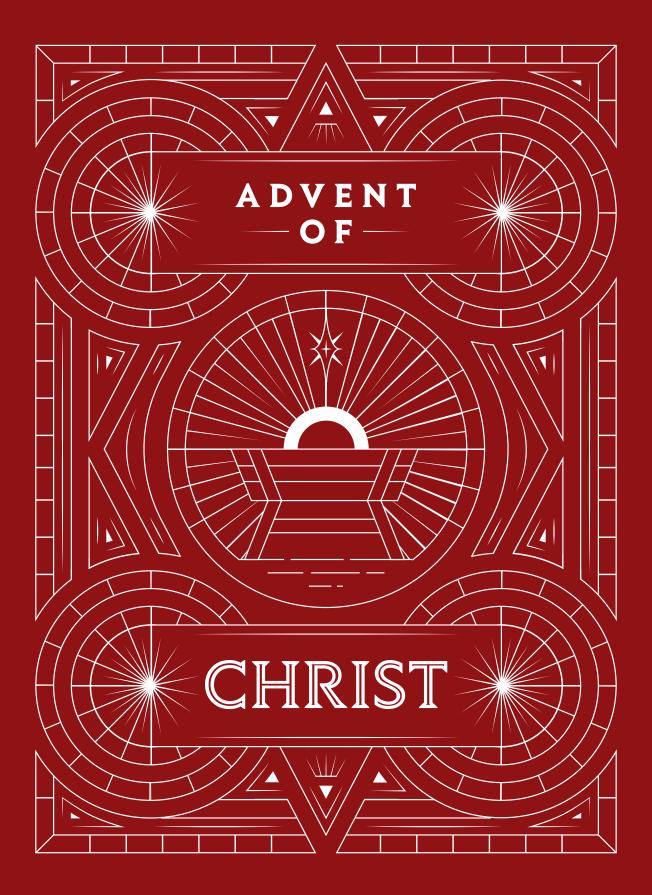
JOIN US FOR A CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE NO DEVOS - MAKE UP DAYS

> **SUNDAY, DEC. 22** 9:30AM | 11:00AM | 12:30PM

MONDAY, DEC. 23 5:30PM | 7:00PM

TUESDAY, DEC. 24 1:30PM | 3:00PM | 4:30PM

> KIDS PROGRAMS BIRTH-K AT ALL SERVICES



DECEMBER 25 MATTHEW 1:18-23

Merry Christmas! Before you read any further. Read Matthew 1:18-23.

Christmas is not about tradition. Christmas is not about lights. Christmas is not about friends, or family, or good food or great gifts. At least not primarily.

All of these things are good things! All of these things are blessings! All of these things are intentional...but they are not meant to be an end in and of themselves. They are meant to be signposts that point to a celebration surrounding the greatest, most gracious, most merciful gift any person could ever receive.

I love Matthew's account of the Christmas Story. It is short, and it is to the point. It all culminates in verse 21, "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." I think sometimes it's easy to get distracted at Christmas (stating the obvious) and forget why Jesus came in the first place. He didn't come to pose for a nostalgic nativity card. He didn't come to give Costco an excuse to start selling plastic trees in September. No. *He came to save his people from their sins.* Jesus' arrival points to a reality that we naturally don't like to dwell on. We, in our sin, were lost. We were hopeless. We were in desperate need of rescue. And the worst part was we didn't even know we needed saving! But our God, being rich in mercy... Jesus, in his over-the-top humility... chose to come to the earth to live the life we could never live, die the death that we deserved, rise from the dead three days later <u>so that we could be saved from our sin.</u> Without Jesus. We have no hope. In Jesus, we have been given and gifted an eternal hope.

Today, as you look towards whatever your day will be filled with, celebrate! Don't hold back! Make the day a party from top to bottom. But make sure you are celebrating the right thing. May your traditions point you back to Jesus born in a manger. May the lights remind you that this is truly a day unlike any other. May your gatherings of friends and families make room to share your gratitude for God's kindness to you in Jesus. May your gifts to each other be given in a spirit of generosity that reflects your Heavenly Father's generosity to you. And may you receive your gifts with gratitude, only overshadowed by your gratitude to God for the ultimate gift of his Son. The one who came to save YOU from your sins.

There are no questions for you at the end of this devotion. I would just encourage you to pray. Pray with gratitude for Jesus. And pray that God would keep your hearts and mind focused on the right reason to celebrate today.

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