



# Christmas Presence

exploring the relational nearness of God



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## Christmas Presence

Most of us know our basic needs and desires: in joy we long to celebrate with others; in darkness we yearn for safe guidance; in our accomplishments we want a familiar face to appreciate us; in failure we need a loved one's hopeful reassurance.

What might be more challenging for us is to admit those needs that are much deeper and more essential: forgiveness, cleansing, belonging, security, redemption, significance, transformation. It is these deeper needs and desires of our souls that find their fulfillment in God's presence.

As the Bible unfolds, we see how humanity fractured intimacy with God in Eden, and how God responded with grace, enacting His covenant promises and moving history toward the goal of bringing His people back into His presence through...His presence. The Bible summarizes God's plan:

*"I will be their God, they will be my people, and I will dwell in their midst"* (see Lev. 26:12; Jer. 32:38-40; Rev. 21:1-4).

While God is omnipresent - that is, present everywhere at all times - God's presence, His "relational nearness", is only accomplished by the arrival of the Son of God, Jesus.

Throughout our Advent series, we will explore God's acts of moving near to His people, acts which offer as a free gift to His people - and to us today - the very thing that meets our deepest needs: Himself.

For more info, visit [\*\*www.LSchurches.com/Christmas\*\*](http://www.LSchurches.com/Christmas)

## Year End Gift: Walk for Water

3.5 miles. That's 15 laps around a football field. Or five times the number of steps to climb the Empire State Building. It's also the average distance women and children walk every day in developing countries to access water. And half of that daily journey is walked with 44 pounds of water.

This walk for water is not only physically strenuous, it is incredibly dangerous. Imagine trekking over steep, rocky hills in low light, straining to notice if any wildlife is in your path as you balance five gallons of water in your jerrycan.

Or imagine that you're one of the many who walk that 3.5 miles before the sun rises or after it sets, the time of day that provides shadowy cover for anyone who intends to bring you harm simply because you're both in the same place.

This is the reality for women and children across the globe who make the daily walk for water. For these millions of people, the treacherous, exhausting, and often-dangerous walk for water is the only option if they want to survive each day. Unless the Lord provides a clean water source that is accessible, easy to use, and durable.

This is where the partnership between you and Living Water International offers so much to so many who must make this daily walk for water. Through your generous gift, Living Water International is able to provide economic growth, safety, time, health, education, and more to communities across the globe.

At our Christmas gatherings, we will collect our 12th annual Year End Gift. 50% of your generous gift will go to Living Water International, and 50% will go to the mission of your local Living Stones Church.

To give a gift now, or to get more information, head to our Year End Gift webpage at **[www.LSchurches.com/yearendgift](http://www.LSchurches.com/yearendgift)**



## A Theology of God's Presence

The Bible tells us that God is both *transcendent* (He is exalted, majestic, and greater than and independent from creation) and *immanent* (He is near to and involved in His creation). Here is an example of these two truths about God being praised together from Psalm 113:

Verse 4: The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! (Transcendence)

Verse 7: He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap (Immanence)

The Bible also tells us that God is *omnipresent* - i.e., God is present everywhere at all times, yet He acts differently in different places.<sup>1</sup>

Here's how these truths come together: since God doesn't need creation (for His own happiness, success, or anything else), and since He is able to be everywhere always, God can be immanently present whenever and however He wants. In other words, *if God wants to be relationally near to His people, He can do so. He has done so. And He will do so.*


In the words of J. Ryan Lister, "God's presence is both [...] our future hope [...] and our means of salvation."<sup>2</sup>

Here's what Lister means: the hope for Christians isn't some vague, spiritual place called "heaven"; the hope for Christians is being with God - intimately, permanently, and without interruption. And the way God secured that hope was by being present - first through various means like the tabernacle, temple,

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 1250.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ryan Lister, *The Presence of God*, pg. 57.



and other forms (like showing up to Moses in a burning bush in Exodus 3), then by coming into creation as a man in Jesus, and now by the Holy Spirit who indwells all Christians. Jesus, through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, secured a place in God's presence for all who trust in Him alone for salvation.

The presence of God, then, is "the manifestation of God in time and space - mediated in some sense - working to bring forth redemption and redemption's objectives and, simultaneously, the unmediated, fully relational, and eschatological manifestation of God first experienced in Eden and awaiting the elect in the new creation."<sup>3</sup>

Translation: *God's presence is His relational nearness.* And there is no greater gift that God could ever give us than His own presence, because there is nothing greater, more satisfying, more fulfilling, or more enjoyable than Him:

*"You make known to me the path of life, in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."*  
(Psalm 16:11)

This is precisely why we evangelize, and why Christmas can be one of, if not the most, missional times of the year for you.

It's out of love that we offer Jesus alone as the only way to salvation, because apart from Him, there's nothing but increasing sorrow and disaster:

*"The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply."*  
(Psalm 16:4)

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<sup>3</sup> Lister, pg. 51.



## Genesis 3:8-9

### PURSuing PRESENCE

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/missing-mark>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/they-hid-themselves>

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

Like many other passages in Scripture, there are several applications we could take from these verses, but there is only one meaning: Sin has entered into the world through Adam's rebellion, and the response of our ancient parents is hiding. But the response of God is to pursue, to draw His people - in the midst of their rebellion - back to Himself through the question, "Where are you?"

The stage is then set for what Scripture unfolds: the story of God the pursuing Redeemer, who responds to sin with both judgment and salvation.

#### GROUP INTRO

This Advent, we're exploring the Bible's teaching about God's presence. When you hear the phrase "God's presence", what image comes to mind? What emotions would you expect to find in someone who is experiencing "God's presence"?

## TEXT

1. What does the language in these verses communicate to us about the kind of relationship Adam and Eve had with God?

*Leader help: the fact that God is “walking” in the garden and they could experience this with Him shows profound closeness and intimacy between God and Adam and Eve. See also Genesis 5:24, Genesis 6:9, and Micah 6:8 to see how “walking” with God means intimacy with Him.*


2. Who is the LORD God? Why is this name/title used 3 times in these verses?

*Leader help: LORD is used as part of translation history. Scribes did not want to write down God’s personal name from Exodus 3:15 - Yahweh - so they replaced His personal name with the Hebrew word for Lord. The phrase “LORD God” is actually “Yahweh God”. This is the personal, triune God of the Bible, the One who is both Redeemer and Judge. By using both His personal name and His title, the author (Moses) is showing that God had a personal relationship with Adam and Eve, even though He is the exalted Creator.*

3. Why do the man and his wife hide themselves from God? Why is this significant?

*Leader help: Adam and Eve have sinned against God, and before they even know that God knows about their specific sin, the power of sin has already brought ruin upon them. Adam himself says that he was afraid because he was aware of his own nakedness. This is Scripture’s way of communicating how sin brought both fear and shame into the human experience. It also shows that sin isn’t just rebellion, it is a power that corrupts our minds, wills, emotions, souls, and bodies.*



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4. What does God's pursuit of and question to the man reveal about God's character?

*Leader help: as Christians, we believe that the Bible is a unified story, and so we know based on other biblical passages that God knows everything that can possibly be known all at once (Ps. 147:5; John 21:17; Heb. 4:12-13). So when God asks the man a question, He isn't seeking information, He is pursuing relationship with sinners. This reveals God's willingness to pursue with love those who rebel against Him, which shows His gracious and merciful character.*

5. Looking at the rest of the story of the Bible and history up to this point, how does God continue to pursue sinners?

*Leader help: God clothes Adam and Eve, which foreshadows the later sacrificial system, and ultimately the sacrifice of Jesus. God also pursues Cain and Able, Noah, and then Abraham, graciously choosing to use Abraham to bring about the 12 tribes, through whom Jesus eventually comes. After Jesus ascends, the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit, who saves sinners and uses us to proclaim the gospel and make disciples. See Eph. 1:3-10.*

## APPLICATION

1. What are some ways you have found yourself attempting to hide from God? What was your motivation for attempting to hide from God?
2. When someone is choosing to rebel against God, do you find yourself wanting to "write them off" or pursue them? How can we know when it's wise to let someone go and when it's wise to pursue?
3. How has God's pursuit of you transformed your response to both your sin and the sin of others?

4. How would you help someone recognize when God is pursuing them/seeking them out?

## PRAYER

Thank God for being a gracious pursuer

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Ephesians 1:3-10***

Confess to God your fear of Him, your shame over your sin, and how you have rebelled against or hidden from Him

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: 1 John 1:9-10***

Ask God to have mercy on and save those in your life who have rejected Him, rebelled against Him, or run from Him out of fear and shame

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Luke 19:10 & Deuteronomy 7:6***



## Exodus 2:23-25

### HIDDEN PRESENCE

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.christianity.com/theology/covenants/what-is-the-abrahamic-covenant.html>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/afghan-christian-suffering/>

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

The story of Scripture progresses from Eden to the patriarchs to the Israelites who find themselves in Egypt after Joseph, the favored son of Israel, dies. A new king, who stands as a representative enemy of God, comes into power and orders heinous violence against God's people and enslaves them. The covenant promise to Abraham and the patriarchs seems to be in jeopardy, but God shows that He has been with His people all along, and He acts to deliver them.

God sovereignly - and often in hidden ways - is at work to ensure His covenant promises stand. He hears our cries, He knows our pain, and eventually sends Jesus - the true Prophet, Deliverer, and Son of God (see Ex. 4:22) - to bear ultimate suffering on our behalf in order to guarantee His spiritual presence with us now and His physical presence at the Second Advent.

#### GROUP INTRO

Every year, Living Stones Churches partner with Living Water International to provide not just clean water, but a life-transforming gift to those around the world who don't have convenient access to clean water. Read Proverbs 14:31 and then take turns praying that God would make you into a generous, God-honoring group of givers.

## TEXT

1. Who are the people of Israel and why are they significant in the story of the Bible?

*Leader help: the people of Israel are God's chosen people. He didn't choose them because they're special, but simply because He desired to choose them. God chose them as a step in fulfilling His covenant promise to Abraham to make him a blessing to others and to give him many descendants, and a place for those descendants to settle. God made a covenant with Israel (see Exodus 20), and gave them the Law, sacrificial system, tabernacle, and eventually temple. It was through Israel's lineage that Jesus came, and He is the fulfillment of all that God promised to Abraham.*

2. What do the people of Israel do in response to their suffering?  
How would you describe the emotion of their response?

*Leader help: they groaned and cried out. Some (or perhaps all) of this groaning and crying was directed to God, because we're told that the cry for rescue came up to God. In other words, they passionately prayed to God. They poured out their heart to Him. They didn't try to hide their suffering, but instead truly and painfully cried out in the midst of it to the only One who could help.*

3. How does God respond to His people and why does God respond? What does this show us about God's nature?

*Leader help: God eventually enacts judgment upon Egypt while also rescuing His people out of slavery so that He could continue the fulfillment of His covenant to Abraham, which was to make him and his offspring a blessing to the whole world. This is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus (see Galatians 3:10-29). Here, God shows that though He is hidden, He's present because He heard,*

*saw, and knew the suffering of His people, showing that God is with us even when we can't perceive His presence.*

4. Describe what it means for God to remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

*Leader help: in the Bible, the word translated as "remember" doesn't mean God recalls something that was forgotten, but that He is about to act for the benefit of someone else. For God to remember the covenant to bless all the nations through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob means that God was going to act and show His people that He really is faithful, even when it feels like all hope is lost.*

## **APPLICATION**

1. When in your life have you been most tempted to be distant from God - in times of suffering or in times of comfort? Why?
2. What has God provided to us to show and prove that even though He may feel distant or seem hidden, He is actually present, at work, and faithful?

*Leader help: your group might be tempted to look at their own lives and circumstances only, but it would be helpful to point to:*

*The presence and work of the Holy Spirit*

*The Bible*

*The sacraments of baptism and communion*


*The community of the church*

*The leadership of the church (pastors and deacons)*

*The world around us (He is sustaining creation according to His promise in Genesis 9)*

3. How can we help one another remember that God is present and caring in the midst of suffering? How does the gospel guarantee God's care even when we don't feel it?



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4. Are you able to passionately and honestly pray to God? Why or why not?

## PRAYER

Pray on behalf of those who are suffering, passionately crying out to God for rescue, redemption, or reassurance.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Exodus 2:23-24; Psalm 63***

## Exodus 40:34-38

### GUIDING PRESENCE

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/dwelling-place-god>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-does-the-tabernacle-symbolize/>

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

God was with His people in their suffering in Egypt, and now He wants to dwell among them for their instruction, guidance, and protection. He resolves the problem of His holiness and their sinfulness by delivering detailed instructions for a mobile tent called the tabernacle and then instituting the sacrificial system. The appointed leaders - the priests - can then offer sacrifices for the sins of the people (we know from the whole story of Scripture, however, that these sacrifices never took away sins - they simply represented faith in the Lord, who would eventually send Jesus to be the permanent sacrifice for the sins of all who trust in Him [see Hebrews 10]).

The Lord loves to guide His people and protect them. Look at God's own reason for having the tabernacle built:

"Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex. 25:8).

We who live after Jesus have the guidance and protection of God in the form of the indwelling Spirit, the canon of Scripture, and the community of the redeemed called the Church. As we travel through the harsh wilderness of a world plagued by sin, suffering, and death, we need God's guidance and protection just as much as Israel did while traveling.

## GROUP INTRO

Every year, Living Stones Churches partner with Living Water International to provide not just clean water, but a life-transforming gift to those around the world who don't have convenient access to clean water.

Take some time as a group to pray that God would guide His people into a mindset and heart of generosity prior to the collection of our Year End Gift at our Christmas services.

You can get more info about the Year End Gift at [www.lschurches.com/yearendgift](http://www.lschurches.com/yearendgift)

## TEXT

1. What are some words in this passage that are intriguing, unusual, or confusing to you? Why?

*Leader help: it's a good practice to come to the Bible with curiosity and a willingness to simply observe. This gives time for us to set aside assumptions or ideas that we might bring to the Bible that the Bible isn't actually communicating.*

2. How would you define the meaning and purpose of the following words that are found in this passage:

"Cloud of the LORD" & "Fire"

"Tent of meeting"/"Tabernacle"

"Glory of the LORD"

"Israel"

*Leader help:*

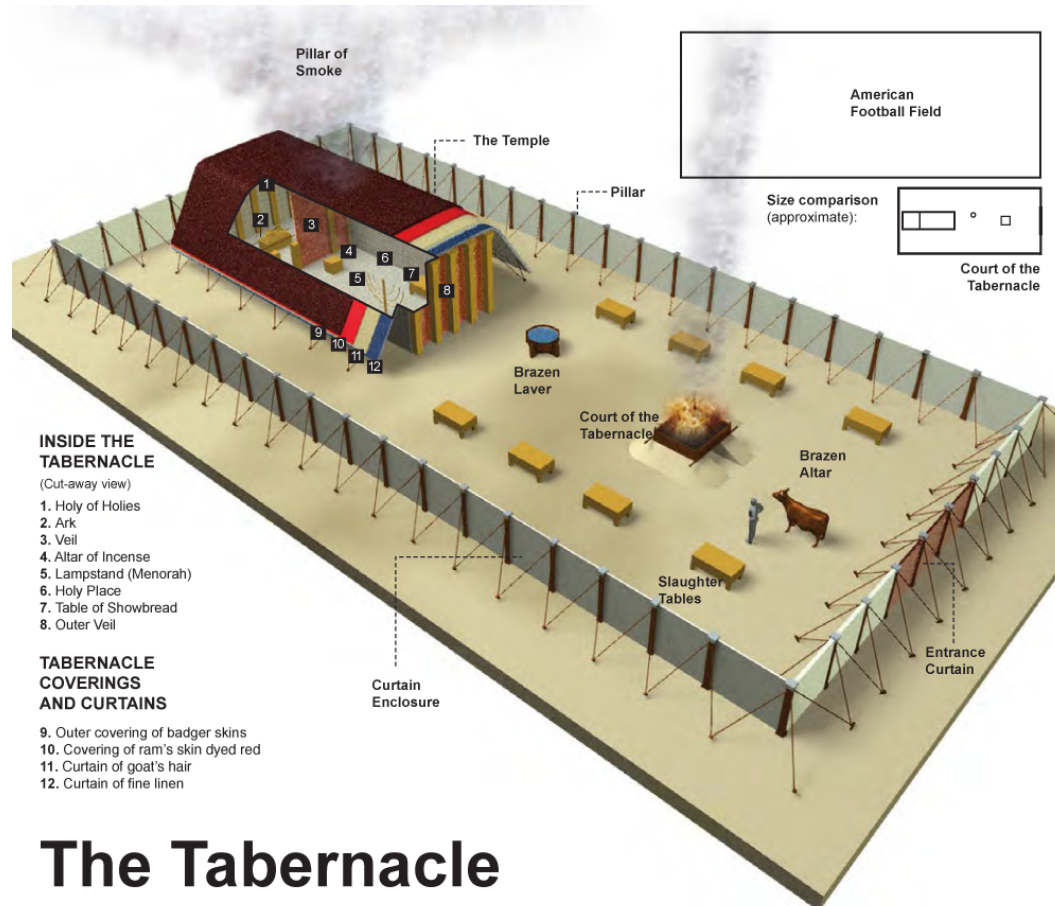
**"Cloud"& "fire"** = The theological term for these physical manifestations of God's presence is "theophany". This was a physical symbol of God's presence to Israel - both the cloud and the fire served to guide God's people on their journey (see Exodus 13:21 and Numbers 14:14). Later in Scripture, Jesus is taken up in a cloud after His resurrection, symbolizing God's presence (see Acts 1:9).



**"Tent of meeting"** = the mobile tent filled with beautiful symbols and imagery (representing the future new creation) where God would meet with the high priest in a section called the "Most Holy Place". The purpose was to give God a place to dwell among His people, and where His people could worship Him. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the tabernacle. The Apostle John even says that Jesus dwelt or "tabernacled" among us (John 1:14).

Click the picture on the next page for a larger diagram.





## The Tabernacle

This portable temple was built in the wilderness by the Israelites circa 1450 BC after they were freed from Egyptian slavery. The tabernacle was the first temple dedicated to God and the first resting place of the ark of the covenant. It served as a place of worship and sacrifices during the Israelites' 40 years in the desert while conquering the land of Canaan.

**"Glory of the LORD"** = in Hebrew, the word we translate as "glory" also means "weight". Glory simply means the bright, overwhelming visible appearance of God's presence, the "weight" of all that God is in His holy perfection. The purpose of God's glory filling the tabernacle is to show that this is His place - He wants to live among His people so He can guide them and show the rest of the world what He's like.

**"Israel"** = the people God graciously and freely chose. There's nothing special about Israel except that God chose them. It's significant that in one portion of Scripture, God calls Israel His son (Exodus 4:22). Jesus is the true and ultimate Son of God, who obeys where Israel failed (see Mark 1:11).



3. Where does God eventually guide Israel? Why is this significant?

*Leader help: God will guide His people into the land of Canaan - the land He promised to give to Abraham, and the place from which Jesus the Messiah will come. This is significant because it shows that God is completely faithful, sovereign, powerful, and gracious. He didn't have to pick Israel or even use them, but He entrusted His Word to them and made a covenant with them, and in His power, He overcame all obstacles to fulfill His promise.*


4. What kind of impact does the guiding presence of God have on the people of Israel?

*Leader help: They're made aware of their sinfulness and God's holiness and His grace. They're comforted by the cloud and fire - one provides shade from the blazing sun, and one provides warmth in the cold nights. They're shown where to go and when to go so that they don't get lost or destroyed in the dangerous deserts.*

## APPLICATION

1. The people of Israel had God guiding them through the tabernacle as well as the cloud and fire. What sources of guidance do Christians have?

*Leader help: Jesus Himself said it was better for Him to leave so that the Spirit could come. We are guided by the Holy Spirit, the Bible, God's direction of our lives (this is called "God's providence") and the community of saints called the church. These are the main ways God guides us through life.*

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2. What is the impact of neglecting the guiding presence of God today? What kind of dangers exist for those who do not take advantage of God's gifts of guidance?
  3. If you were to help someone try to follow and obey God, how would you do so? What counsel would you give?
  4. In your own life, when have you doubted that God was guiding you or when have you struggled to treasure the guidance God has provided? How does the gospel impact your doubts and struggles?

## PRAYER

Praise God for His faithful guidance through the presence of the Spirit, the Bible, God's providence, and the church.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: John 16:13***

Pray for God's help to not stray from His guiding presence, and confess the ways that you have strayed or struggle to stray from His presence.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Hebrews 10:24-25***

Pray for those who have rejected God's guidance.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Hebrews 3:6-14***



## Isaiah 55:1, 6-9

### FREE PRESENCE

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-great-invitation-come-drink-eat-live>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/isaiah-five-movements/>

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways, and this is ultimately displayed in the gracious gift of His Son for our salvation.

Isaiah 49-55 is focused on the future hope and restoration of Israel and the nations (God's saving grace). This saving grace arrives through the forthcoming Servant of the LORD. Throughout these chapters of Isaiah are songs referred to as "Servant Songs", which are poetic prophecies describing the Servant and what He will accomplish. The heart of this Servant Song is the prophecy that the Servant "will suffer and die as a substitute for those who have sinned."<sup>4</sup>

Since this Servant dies for His people's sins, the invitation of Isaiah 55:1 is given. Jesus Himself mirrors this invitation in John 7 when He exclaims, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink." God invites us to enter His presence to enjoy Him, His gifts, and His compassion and abundant pardon. At no cost to us.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets*, pg. 131.

## GROUP INTRO

Take some time to pray about the Year End Gift, specifically that God would use the money given to (1) make Himself known to the millions of people around the world who have suffered injury, illness, kidnapping, and violence and (2) provide clean water to suffering children.

## TEXT

1. Using a study Bible or one of the linked articles under "Resources", describe some of the main points of Isaiah.


*Leader help: Isaiah is basically about (1) the Holy One of Israel (God) and His rebellious people, (2) the Holy One of Israel and the rest of the rebellious nations, and (3) the Holy One of Israel and His kingdom.*

2. Read Isaiah 25:6-8, then read Isaiah 55:1. Why does God use the metaphors of drink and food to talk about salvation?

*Leader help: God is interested in making Himself and His salvation known, so He uses very familiar, down-to-earth examples to communicate. These metaphors also communicate the need for salvation. We need salvation like we need food and water - God's salvation isn't just a nice addition to life, it is the only way to truly come alive and be truly human.*

3. Who is invited to the banquet God is offering? After someone responds to God's invitation to salvation in 55:1, what kind of calls to action does God give in 55:6-7? Why does the order of these two things (God inviting and then God calling to action) matter?

*Leader help: Everyone who thirsts and those who have no money are invited. This means those who know their need, and know they have nothing to offer God. After someone receives God's free gift of salvation (55:1), they're called to prayer (55:6),*



repentance (55:7), and returning to God continually (55:7). This matters because someone will only truly respond to God's calls to action after experiencing His free grace. And after someone truly receives salvation, they will repent of sinful thinking, desires, and actions.

4. According to verses 6-9, how are God's thoughts and ways different than ours as humans? Why is the invitation into God's presence shocking?

*Leader help: God is holy, and we are sinful. We would expect not an invitation, but a rejection from God. Yet God is abundantly compassionate, pardoning, and forgiving, and He offers Himself freely to anyone who comes to Him, anyone who recognizes their own thirst and hunger (i.e. need). We would not expect God to offer Himself and His salvation freely to sinners; instead, we expect that God will crush us for our sins and weaknesses. In fact, in many places in the Old Testament, God shows that His holy presence is deadly to human beings. So His invitation of grace is totally unexpected here.*

5. How does Jesus fulfill this passage?

*Leader help: Prior to Isaiah 55, there are several poems called the Servant Songs. These poems are about God's suffering servant, who dies and resurrects on behalf of God's people.*

*Read John 7:37-39, where Jesus gives the very same invitation God gives here in Isaiah. By doing so, Jesus is (1) claiming to be God in the flesh, (2) claiming to be the source of God's salvation, (3) claiming to be the goal of salvation, and (4) reiterating that salvation is by faith alone. Jesus is both the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 49-55 and the salvation offered because of the Servant's death and resurrection.*





## APPLICATION

1. What events and experiences from your own life have shown you your own need for God's free salvation?
2. What is satisfying, fulfilling, and enjoyable about God?
3. How would you help someone who hasn't experienced God as satisfying, fulfilling, or enjoyable? What Bible passages or historical Christian disciplines might be helpful for someone in that position?
4. We know from this passage that God's salvation is free. In what ways do you try to earn God's salvation? Why do you do this?

## PRAYER

Thank the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the free gift of salvation.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Philippians 3:3-10***

Confess the wounds, weaknesses, and sins that get in the way of your enjoyment of God.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Hebrews 12:1-3***

Ask God to give His free salvation to those in your life who don't want anything to do with Him.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Micah 7:7***

## John 1:18 - Christmas

### REVEALING PRESENCE

This week's Discipleship Guide serves as a devotional for your adoration of Jesus as you celebrate Christmas.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14)

### RESOURCES

*Jesus Christ is God the LORD*

<https://livingstoneschurches.com/christmas>

### PASSAGE SUMMARY

At first glance, the ESV translation of this verse could be confusing:


"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."

Other translations are helpful for clarity:

NIV: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."

NET: "No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known."

God told Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).



This begs the question: how can human beings, who cannot even see God, truly *know* God and be in His *presence*? Jesus is the answer. God's reply to our sinfulness and misery wasn't to invite us back into Eden, but to pursue us and bring us into His presence - both in the here and now, and in the new creation to come. In this baby, sinners can finally see the face of God and live.

The basic message of God to humanity is found in the God-man, Jesus.

Even though He was under no obligation to reveal Himself to us, God has pursued us to make Himself known through the presence of Jesus!

This isn't some abstract, conceptual, philosophical knowing. Instead, Jesus is God showing up as a human being to be intimately involved and personally known. We don't have to wonder what God is like, we don't have to guess about His character, because Jesus is "the word of life" - He is the life "made manifest" in history. In fact, the entire reason John wrote his Gospel is summed up in Chapter 20:

*"So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."*

Other religions might offer us prosperity, a sense of security, internal peace, vague happiness, a measure of power, but they can't offer God, they can't truly give the presence of God because other religions don't offer us the true Jesus.

## Two key Greek terms appear in John 1:18

**Monogenēs** (translated as “only God” in ESV and “the one and only Son” in NIV).

This word means “only begotten”, “unique”, “special”. This word communicates Jesus’ special status as the Father’s only beloved Son. Jesus is the *only* one who has fully revealed God. You will not see God if you avoid Jesus.

**Exēgeomai** (translated as “he has made him known” in ESV).

This is where we get our word “exegesis”. Jesus “narrates”, “makes known”, “reveals” God. Jesus is the only exegesis of God. Jesus is the content of all that God has chosen to say. Jesus is God’s message to humanity in all of the fullness of that message. It’s as if God got onto a stage in front of all of humanity, took the mic from the mic stand, and said to everyone, “Jesus.”

Jesus is every detail God wanted to make known about Himself. When He graciously heals lepers, you’re seeing God’s heart. When He enjoys hanging out with sinners, you’re seeing God’s heart. When He dies for the sins of His people, you’re seeing God’s heart. When He defeats death for His people, you’re seeing God’s heart.

*“The Word who was face-to-face with God in the glory of eternity came to be face-to-face with us in this world, marked by temporality, changeability, and the shame of sin. Infinite and finite, eternal and temporal, Word made flesh.”*

- Sinclair Ferguson

# 1 Corinthians 15:17-26

## RETURNING PRESENCE

### RESOURCES

<https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/our-god-reigns/>

### *How the Resurrection Shapes our Hope*

### PASSAGE SUMMARY

Advent is simultaneously a celebration of the first arrival of Jesus and an act of anticipating the return of Jesus at the end of history where we'll be invited into the very presence of God.

Paul wrote to the spiritually-confused and conflicted Corinthians to settle various disputes, questions, and concerns they had. In the midst of this ordinary, conflict-ridden church, Paul sees a desperate need for a massive reminder: Jesus is going to physically return and defeat all of His enemies, including death itself. After this occurs, God will be "all in all", meaning God will be present and lovingly exercising authority over all reality unquestioned, unchallenged, and without end. Nothing, not even death, will separate us from God's presence. Nothing will upend His presence with us.

Jesus has accomplished all that is necessary for reconciliation with God, yet we still exist as sojourners in a severely broken world. Here, our experience of God's presence is often laced with doubt, fear, confusion, and suffering, all of which culminates in our death. This tension is captured by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians when he writes, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."

In other words, to try to live your best life now - to expect this life to be ultimately fulfilling - is to live in fantasy rather than reality.



## GROUP INTRO

This passage highlights the fact that our only true hope is that Jesus has physically resurrected from the dead and will one day physically return and resurrect us into a renewed creation.

What are some of the cultural hopes that you tend to hold to?

## TEXT

1. Why is Christianity futile and worthless if Jesus did not physically resurrect from the dead?

*Leader help: if Jesus didn't physically resurrect from the dead then He has been defeated, death still reigns, and we are still dead in our sins - not able to be made into new creations by faith in Jesus. We'd be dead in our sins because the resurrection proves that Jesus' sacrifice was effective for our salvation. If His death didn't pay for our sins, then we have no hope.*

2. What does it mean to have hope in this life only (see verse 19)? How does this contrast with hoping in the returning presence of Jesus?

*Leader help: To hope only in this life is to try to live your best life now by seeking wealth, the praise of people, or leaving a great legacy for future generations. This is worthless because God truly exists and His judgment against those who didn't trust Jesus for salvation is eternal. Not only this, but this life is still filled with sin, satanic attack, misery, suffering, and death. To bank everything on our broken world or the successes and achievements of broken human beings is to have misplaced hope. There is no comparison with what Jesus freely offers to all who trust in Him: eternal life, unending pleasure, and beauty beyond all imagination.*

3. What will be the impact of Jesus physically returning?

*Leader help: Jesus will physically resurrect His people, give them new bodies, destroy everything and everyone who opposes Him, and completely remove sin, the devil, and death itself. He will then bring the new creation.*

4. Dictionary.com defines hope as “the feeling that what is wanted can be had or that events will turn out for the best.”

How is the hope that Paul talks about in this passage different from this cultural definition of hope?

*Leader help: Biblical hope is a certainty and assurance that what God has promised will actually happen, and it is based on His **character** (He is always truthful and faithful), His **actions** (He has guaranteed and demonstrated our resurrection by resurrecting Jesus), and His **covenant** (He promised before He created anything that He would be God to His people, they would belong to Him, and He would dwell with them forever).*

## APPLICATION

1. What differences between this world as it exists right now and the new creation most intrigue or excite you? Why?
2. How are you most often tempted to “hope in this life only”? How do the Spirit and God’s Word help bring you back to true, biblical hope?
3. Why is it crucial for you to set your hope fully on the returning presence of Jesus instead of something else? How does reorienting your hope toward Jesus empower you to survive and even thrive during suffering?
4. What does God’s defeat of death, sin, and the devil mean for your everyday, ordinary life? How does this victory change your approach to your daily routines, troubles, and wins?

## PRAYER

Pray the following version of the J.O.Y. ("Jesus", "Others", "Yourself") prayer:

Jesus:

Praise Jesus for His willingness to die in your place for your sins and for His victory over your sin, death, and the devil. Confess ways you've hoped in this life only.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Titus 2:11-14***

Others:

Ask the Spirit to remove idols, sin, and satanic delusions from those in your life who are trapped in their worldly hopes.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: Colossians 4:3;  
2 Thessalonians 3:1***

Yourself:

Ask God to truly release you from any idolatry or false hopes you have within yourself, and ask Him to help you have rock-solid hope and joy in Him and His future return.

***Biblical passage to guide this prayer: 2 Timothy 3:14-17;  
2 Peter 3:11-13***

## Ephesians 2:18-22

### INDWELLING PRESENCE

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/conversion-makes-you-family>

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/love-the-church-over-its-health>

#### PASSAGE SUMMARY

Because Jesus has accomplished salvation, the Spirit now indwells God's people all over the world, making the gathering of the saints - the church - the dwelling place of God. As Christians gather to worship God, He is not only among us, but *within us*, working for our good through the proclamation of His Word, the celebration of the sacraments (baptism and communion), and the spiritual gifts of our brothers and sisters.

The Holy Spirit is the gift of God's presence to the community of God's people. Through the Spirit, we're given new life and the actual power to live a life that reflects the character and love of God. We're comforted and strengthened in times of weakness, we're empowered toward holiness in the face of temptations, and we're given hope that fuels obedience to Jesus in experiences of suffering. As we collectively minister the gospel to one another and look forward to the return of Jesus, we can rest from fear and works-righteousness because of the presence of God within us.

## GROUP INTRO

Author J. Ryan Lister makes the point that our experience of God's presence should always be anchored to the Bible, because that's where God has authoritatively made Himself known to us. What might be some consequences of not seeking the Bible to make sense of our experiences?

## TEXT

1. Context is key for understanding the Bible. What is happening before and after 2:18-22? What is the letter to the Ephesians about?

*Leader help: Before these verses, we see Paul describing what exactly the triune God has done through the ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as he praises God in 1:3-2:10. After these verses, Paul again describes the gospel and its impact, and then exhorts the Ephesians to live in holiness, love, and unity with one another.*


*Ephesians has two main themes - Jesus has reconciled creation to Himself and Jesus has united many people from all nations and ethnicities and brought them together in His body, the church.*

2. How do these verses describe Christians? What role do Christians play in God's purposes in the world?

*Leader help: Christians are those who (1) have access in the Holy Spirit to the Father through Jesus, (2) are fellow citizens of God's kingdom with other saints, (3) are members of God's family, (4) are together being built into God's temple/dwelling place.*

*Our role in the God's purposes is to pursue Him and be built up by Him for His mission of saving His people through the proclamation of the gospel.*





3. According to these verses, what is God like? What are the characteristics or attributes of God?

*Leader help: First, God is triune - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Second, God is welcoming, gracious, intentional in His acts, personal, loving, merciful, and attentive.*

4. How does this passage refute the idea that Christians can simply worship God on their own rather than gathering together in community?


*Leader help: God's purposes for His people are collective and communal, rather than individualistic. A Christian isn't actually stepping into God's good purposes for their life if they neglect corporate worship, community, and the shared mission of the church.*

5. Why is it significant that Christians are being built together into a dwelling place for God?

*Leader help: The entire story of Scripture shows that, because of human sinfulness, relational nearness with God hasn't been possible without continual sacrifices. God is holy, and we are not, so without the blood of Jesus, we would die in God's presence. But God has done all that is necessary to reconcile us to Himself through His Son - so the fact that we are being built into God's dwelling place shows the significance, effectiveness, and permanence of what Jesus has accomplished for us. We can be totally secure that we truly are loved and completely forgiven.*

## APPLICATION

1. What causes you to want to avoid community? How does this passage - and the gospel in general - address this?
2. This week, how can those of us who have trusted Jesus help one another rejoice and rest in the fact that God has chosen to dwell within us?

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3. How do these verses speak to the desires, needs, and dreams of the culture around us? How can we use the truths of this passage to communicate the gospel?

## PRAYER

Take some time to praise the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for making you a member of God's family.

Ask God to make these truths an experiential reality for you - truths that you enjoy, embrace, and act upon on a daily basis.