

TEAM CHURCH PRESENTS



— 2021 —

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# What is Advent?

Hello Team Church family! If you are new to the season of Advent, here is a brief introduction to the history and heart behind our corporate participation and observation of this season. The church year, also known as the liturgical calendar, contains six sacred seasons to be observed throughout the calendar year. Practiced by several Christian denominations, these seasons provide the Church with a time to reflect on both the grand narrative of the Gospel story and the stories of God's work through our lives today.

Advent is the first of these gospel-seasons and is defined as a period of waiting. It is here that we take time to remember the coming of Christ's birth as we wait in longing for Christ's second coming here on earth. With this space between, let us pause, seek the Lord, and pay close attention to the reality of our weary hearts and the present and future hope of Christ's redemption.

# Introduction

The Christmas season is here and with it feelings of excitement, anticipation, and expectation. Our excitement for the holidays is in many ways bound by the list of expectations and expenses that overwhelm this time of year. Perhaps we even add pressure to the way we should be experiencing our spirituality in this season. We want to experience more hope, more joy, more peace. Yet, for many of us, the reality of this longing simply makes us mask our pain and pretend that things are fine or burn ourselves out trying to meet our own unrealistic expectations. In all our Christmas planning and preparation, how often do we pause long enough to acknowledge the reality of our heart's deepest needs? What if this Christmas, we instead took a step back from all the expectations in order to invite Jesus into our lives in a whole new way? What would it look like to sit with the reality of what we wished this year would have brought us and lean into the present and future promises found in Jesus? Jesus did not come to earth to demand peace, hope, joy, and love from us. He came to bring them as a gift for us, and that gift is Himself. In Christ, we can experience each of these attributes when we walk with Him. When we bring Jesus our hopelessness, His hope shines even brighter on the canvas of our unfiltered lives. When we bring Jesus our anxieties and chaos, His peace shines brightly, displaying His glory. When we offer Jesus our brokenness, He renews us with a song of joy and when we come to Him freely, He welcomes us into His love. Come, let's experience the closeness of our King in this season by recognizing our reality and reflecting on our Redeemer Jesus! Each week, we will read devotionals written by fellow members within our community, including a special Christmas Day devotional you can read aloud with your family by our pastor Dr. Kenny Hibbard. We will focus on themes of hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus fulfills through Himself. God desires for us to experience these things; however, we do not cultivate them apart from being with Him. He wants us to make space so that He can be these things to us in the ways He knows we need them most.

HOPE



# THE REALITY OF HOPELESSNESS

DAY ONE | TIMOTHY RIORDAN

**Meditate On:** Lamentations 3:17-20

*"I have been deprived of peace;  
I have forgotten what prosperity is.  
So I say, "My splendor is gone  
and all that I had hoped from the Lord."  
I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me."  
-Lamentations 3:17-20*

Good morning.... afternoon, or evening, friend! You may be sitting all cozied up on this nice Wednesday morning with your cup of coffee or tea, some soft music playing in the background and a warm stream of light coming through the windowpane as the morning breaks upon the earth on this beautiful first day of December.

Or.

It is Friday afternoon, you are already two days late beginning this devotional plan. You have had a stressful week filled with errands and will probably get home later than hoped with dinner plans not yet constructed to start the "restful weekend" off with a bang. You may feel swamped with the crushing realities of busyness, distraction, or sorrow, and some days you are doing good just to collapse in bed. "Hopeless" paints it well. Whatever the day, and whatever atmosphere you currently find yourself in, I think we all share a very real and familiar connection to the feeling of hopelessness that the prophet Jeremiah speaks of here in Leviticus. My role in today's devotional is not to fully combat that feeling, or even to uncover the theme of Hope fully. This theme will be uncovered as you continue throughout this week. But, I do want to tell you that you have a Father.

A Father who wants you to come with these burdens, questions and doubts that you wrestle with in the darkness of night and the busyness of day.

As you continue on in the theme of hope found within these pages over the next week, you will uncover WHO our Hope is and how we live in Him. However, for today, I want you to take the next few minutes to sit quietly before the Lord. Be honest with yourself. What is troubling you? What has been screaming for your attention and clouding your perspective this week, month and year? Take the next few minutes to ask God to lead you this week to fully know and be guided by the Hope of Christ amidst the seemingly hopelessness of the earth. So go ahead, put the book down and dwell with your Father.

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Now that you have spent time with God in prayer, open your Bible to the above passage, but continue on past verse 20 to see what you find. I am praying for you now! It is not easy.

God help us to see! Lead us to Hope, and help us to dwell and rest there in You, AMEN!

*If this earth is your heaven, hopelessness is the only path ahead. If Christ is your heaven, Hope will lead you through this troubled land until dawn comes.*

# THE EXPECTATION OF FAITH

DAY TWO | TODD BOYD

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Hebrews 11:1-3

*"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible"*

*-Hebrews 11:1-3*

Faith is defined as "having complete trust or confidence in someone or something." For example... we typically have faith that the rollercoaster ride we are about to get on has been properly maintained so that we can enjoy the excitement of the ride all while remaining safe. We can be confident that the engineers and mechanics have been properly trained and have built numerous safety checks into place so that the ride operates the way it was designed and constructed. We trust that the ride operator has been properly trained so that everyone properly buckles their seatbelts and clamps down the steel bar so that nobody goes flying out of the car. Furthermore, we have the expectation that the rollercoaster ride has been properly maintained during the off-season with bolts being tightened and bearings being greased so that on the opening day of the new season, park enthusiasts can rely on the fact that they will have the time of their lives without being injured.

For the majority of us, the essentials of the proper construction, maintenance, and operation of a rollercoaster ride are mostly unseen by the general public. We get on the frightening rides because we have the marvelous faith that everyone has correctly performed their job so that we can ride the ride in safety. If you were to learn that even one of the necessary jobs involved in the construction or operations of a rollercoaster were not performed correctly, no one in their right mind would even think about getting on the ride. Riding a rollercoaster takes faith that the people who built the ride, knew exactly what they were doing otherwise we wouldn't trust them with our lives.



Why is that when it comes to our faith in God, so many people struggle in this area? Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Our faith really boils down to two things... 1. Do we really believe in God's existence? And 2. Do we really believe God's Word? In other words, do we actually believe in God and that He is who He says He is? Do we really believe that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent or not? If we truly believe that God is all powerful, and He knows everything about everything, and we truly believe what God's Word teaches about Him, then our faith can continue to grow.

To say it another way... our faith in God is directly related to our knowledge of God. In order to grow our faith, then we must first get to know Him, and the way you get to know God is by reading God's word, praying to Him, and spending time with Him. As you get to know Him, then you will be able to see God work in your life. You will be able to witness Him answer your prayers. You will be able to gain a sense of peace and wisdom that can only come from Him. As you grow closer to God, and you begin to see Him move in your life, then you will be able to see your faith grow stronger. Hebrews 11:6 says "and without faith it is impossible to please God..."

Many of the Old Testament heroes such as Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Enoch, and Noah were all considered righteous because of their amazing faith in God. Their faith grew out of having an intimate relationship with God, knowing that He is who He says He is, and that God had great plans for their lives. God has incredible plans for all those who have great faith in Him. Our faith in God is directly related to how deep and intimate our relationship is with Him.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, thank you for being true to Your word. Thank you for loving me the way You do. Please draw me into a deeper relationship with You so that You can continue to grow my faith. My desire is to have a faith that pleases You because I love You. In Your Son's name I pray, Amen.

# RENEWING OUR VISION

## DAY THREE | DUANE OYER

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Isaiah 43:3 & Isaiah 43:18-19

*"For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for  
you"  
-Isaiah 43:3*

*"Remember not the former things,  
nor consider the things of old.  
Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert."  
-Isaiah 43:18-19*

The Hebrew nation had faced nearly 400 years of slavery, but the one true God of the universe was about to stretch forth His powerful hand and bring all of that to an end. The great nation of Egypt would soon face utter destruction, pummeled by plagues, its first born slaughtered, the entire army drowned in the Red Sea; a high price to pay for the freedom of God's chosen people, the nation of Israel. But no cost was too great when it came to ransoming God's children.

Yahweh had established His covenant with Abraham and his descendants by an oath on His own name. He was their God and they were His people. Nothing could stop His faithful promises from coming to fruition. Yet through all His mighty acts against Egypt, God was not finished working on behalf of the Israelites.

In this passage of Isaiah, the Lord urges His people to focus, not merely on the past, on what had been done to win their salvation from slavery, but even more so on the "new thing" He was doing, both this day and in the days to come, to guide them to the promised land. He had not provided for their freedom just to let them wander helplessly through the desert. He would miraculously create for them a pathway where there was no way. He would supply them with life giving water in a dry and thirsty land, as well as manna from Heaven to satisfy their hunger. God would not abandon His people when they needed Him most. They needed only to keep their eyes on Him and live.

Centuries later on a cruel cross on a hill outside of Jerusalem, the very Son of God would pay the ultimate price to ransom God's chosen ones. He would establish a New Covenant through His precious blood (Luke 22:20), securing the salvation of both Jew and Gentile alike. Through this sacrificial act of love, God proved once more that no cost was too great to set the captives free.

His love, however, did not stop there. Philippians tells us that after starting this good work in us, He will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6). He has brought us up out of a miry clay and set our feet upon the Rock, Jesus (Psalm 40:2). God will surely keep us from falling (Jude 1:24) And is definitely able to do exceedingly more than we could ever ask or think (Eph. 3:20-21).

Our Father directs His children, those who have been given spiritual eyes to see, to look and perceive that He is, even to this day, still doing a "new thing". He still provides a way through our 21st Century wilderness, blessing us with "living water" and spiritual food for our hungry souls.

Consider these words from a 1979 Imperial's hit:

"Never use the word 'Defeat',  
Claim His promises, every one of them  
And every spoken word He'll hear ,  
Because we're everything to Him. "

" He didn't bring us this far to leave us.  
He didn't teach us to swim to let us drown.  
He didn't build His home in us to move away.  
He didn't lift us up to let us down."

### **Reflect and Remember**

- God is your Savior and your Sustainer
- He loved you enough to pay your ransom, and nothing can separate you from that love.

### **Prayer**

"Heavenly Father, give me a renewed heart that glorifies You, and eyes to see Your mighty hand at work in my life. Help me to trust You as You finish the awesome work that you began in me. Amen!"

# REMEMBRANCE OF OUR REDEEMER

## DAY FOUR | DONN HEADLEY

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Isaiah 7:14 & Isaiah 9:6

*"Therefore the Lord himself will give  
you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall  
conceive and bear a son, and shall  
call his name Immanuel."*

*-Isaiah 7:14*

*"For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

*-Isaiah 9:6*

"O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" So Paul writes in Romans 7:24. The farther you and I travel in this life, the more we will encounter our degraded position. Yes, indeed, there will be days of some degree of victory, but we also know, in the depths of our soul, that there is no true peace or lasting prosperity--no hope!--in our current condition or effort. We have no place in this world, no home of our own. We realize that our view of reality is a sham and a deception, as we see "through a glass darkly." That is why those of us who honestly confront our fallibility and fallenness restlessly and fervently seek the true Reality: the Risen Savior, who lifts us from our lowly place and redeems us. Like Job, we can declare, "But I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the end he will stand on the dust. Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh. I will see him myself; my eyes will look at him, and not as a stranger. My heart longs within me." Here is Reality, and here is hope. How do we know? Where is our confidence? Because the Faithful One always keeps his promises; he always has, and he will today. As with Isaiah (7:14), we are promised this day Immanuel, "God with us": "For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be upon his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." (9:6) The wonder of Christ's counsel contrasts with our failed plans.

His presence in our lives promises transformational hope to us. His providential love protects and guides. His provision of peace, shalom, promises the triumph of his righteousness and justice, the ultimate and eternal defeat of sin, conflict, war, and death itself.

Believing, then, just as much in things unseen as those seen, we stand on our hope as we yearn to obey and adore. That is what we were created to do. We are grateful for his mercy, as we have not received what we do deserve, eternal banishment. We are humbled by his grace, as we have received what we do not deserve, communion with him. These faithful promises and steadfast hope carry us through our days, whatever we may encounter. As we walk with him, we know we are no longer a stranger to Christ, but a friend (John 15:15). We walk as a friend by being a creature acquainted with God's Word, in devotion and in prayer.

Your days to come will be light and dark and both intermingled. As we traverse this blessed Advent Season, may we turn and return in our journey--with the greatest Hope!--to our Redeemer, the Immanuel, the Logos, to his Word, his promises, his faithfulness, his Shalom. As we do, we are then able, like Paul, after we have admitted our wretchedness, to declare at every moment, with all humility and gratitude, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

# RESTORING OUR SECURITY

DAY FIVE | KATHY MCDERMOTT

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Peter 1:3-5

*"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."*

*-1 Peter 1:3-5*

The word HOPE can hold an enormous amount of power, but it can also represent an overwhelming feeling of impossibility. "Just have a little hope", someone says to you at a challenging time and you immediately think to yourself, "that's easy for you to say".

But if you are a believer in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, you are thrust into a truly living HOPE. It becomes a mission and duty to our Lord and Savior to spread this message of HOPE to our family members, friends and even strangers we meet in our everyday lives.

The toughest hardships, grief, divorce, job loss, Covid, loneliness, and so many other stages of our lives is an opening for someone to pour in that HOPE. Let that person be YOU!

# REST IN HIS RETURN

## DAY SIX | BETTY RANGLES

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Thessalonians 4:13-20

*"Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words."*

*-1 Thessalonians 4:13-20*

I am reminded of a song by Jeremy Camp called "There will be a Day"

I try to hold on to this world  
With everything I have  
But I feel the weight of what it brings,  
And the hurt that tries to grab  
The many trials that seem to never end,  
His word declares this truth,  
That we will enter in this rest  
With wonders anew  
But I hold on to this hope and the promise that He brings  
That there will be a place with no more suffering  
[Chorus:]  
There will be a day with no more tears,  
No more pain, and no more fears  
There will be a day when the burdens of this place  
Will be no more, we'll see Jesus face to face  
But until that day,  
We'll hold on to you always...

Jesus is in our future; Jesus' victory took place at the cross! When He ascended from the Mount of Olives to heaven, he sat down in His rightful place as the ruler of all creation. Yes, there is still evil in the world, but that doesn't mean that Jesus isn't reigning. The Apostle Paul taught the exact same thing when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:25, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (NIV) No matter what happens in our crazy world, we must never lose sight of the fact that Jesus is Lord, and He reigns overall. He always watches over His people. So, place your trust in Him, not in politicians, governments, the news, or the media.

Jesus sent a message of hope through his Apostle John, in the Book of Revelation. It has always been a book of hope for everyone who puts their trust in what Jesus did for them on the cross. (John 3:16, 17) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Revelation 21:3-5 "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.' Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' And He said to me, 'Write, for these words are true and faithful.' "

After the Tribulation, Jesus will return to earth and will reign for a thousand years. He will cast Satan and everyone who has rejected Him into the lake of fire, where they will stay forever. Then a new heaven and a new earth will be established. God will make all things new, and the curse of sin will be forever reversed.

Where does my HOPE come from? The Maker of Heaven and Earth. May your Holiday season bring Glory to God, and every hour be filled with Joy, Hope, Peace and Love.



A black and white photograph of a pine tree branch, likely a spruce or fir, with dense, needle-covered branches. The word "PEACE" is overlaid in a large, white, serif font, centered horizontally and slightly above the middle of the image. The background is dark and textured with the needles of the tree.

PEACE

# THE REALITY OF CHAOS

## DAY SEVEN | RUBY BOYD

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Peter 5:6 & Philippians 4:6-7

*"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time." -1 Peter 5:6*

*"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." -Philippians 4:6-7*

"I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; Many will see and fear and will trust in the LORD" Psalm 40:1-3.

If I could pick one recurring phrase that I've consistently heard throughout my life as a Christ follower, it is the phrase, "Wait and Trust me"— I've heard them not as two separate words, but as two words working as a conceptual unit...as in you can't do one without the other. But how do we attain that degree of trust in the Lord, especially during times of chaos?

Faith.

As believers, we can certainly overcomplicate our faith. As Christ followers we are all called to love the Lord with our whole heart, with all of our mind and with all our strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves; simply said, Love God and Love people. It's in loving our Lord that our faith inevitably grows. It propels us forward in life's most challenging seasons. It is that unshakable faith that keeps our feet on sturdy ground and our hearts resting in the midst of life's storms."Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD.

For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit" (Jer. 17:7-8).

In Deuteronomy 30:19-20 Moses speaks of two ways of living– life, and death. Moses goes on to explain that if we choose life, we are to Love the Lord our God, we are to obey His voice and we are to hold fast to Him. The first of his instructions being "Love the Lord our God," is unmistakably essential. We can't love God if we don't know Him, we certainly won't obey Him if we don't love Him, and we in turn, won't "hold fast to Him," especially when chaos comes.

The same is true in knowing the Lord loves us too. In order to have that kind of love for our Lord and consequently that kind of faith, we need to know that He loves us. This Biblical truth, in itself, is everything. If we truly know the Lord loves us, we can love Him, and if we love Him we can trust Him, and if we trust Him we can and will wait and obey Him, "holding fast" to Him during times of chaos. It all works together.

So the reality of chaos is that in this world we will have trouble, it's assured. But if we trust in the Lord we don't need to fear because the Lord has overcome. He loves us, is for us, and is with us! Nothing can separate us from His love. We are victorious through Him who saved us for eternity (John 16:33, Romans 8:31,35,37,39).

Therefore in mass chaos and confusion we can wait and trust in the Lord because He promises a spiritual peace that this world cannot give. A peace that surpasses all understanding (John 14:27, Phil. 4:7).

The Lord's plans will prevail. His plans cannot be thwarted. HE is BIGGER than it all. In Him we find our rest. So we can forever hold on to that spiritual peace that He promises.

# THE REALITY OF PEACE

## DAY EIGHT | JACKSON PRICE

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** John 16:33

*"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*

I am burdened with my own troubles, the troubles of my community, and thanks to connectivity and media, the troubles of the entire world. I'm sure many of us may feel the same way. Why does it sometimes seem like no one is at the helm, nobody to steer us clear from the chaos and destruction that enters our lives?

Jesus tells us quite plainly that we will have tribulation. Not that we may have it, or only the "really bad people" will encounter it... no. He lays it right out there for us with no uncertainty. We are destined for tribulation in this world that is dominated by a system of evil. Jesus, the one who exemplified perfect kindness, gentleness and love, was despised by the world! So, of course, we who are called to live like Jesus, keep his commandments, and spread the gospel will also be hated by the world.

"In me you may have peace" these are words of hope and realism from Jesus. He promises peace that flows from him and not from the world which is the source of our tribulation. We must cling to Jesus because none of our own righteousness (and certainly not any of the short-term pleasures of sin!) can bring us peace. For this is the reality of peace: there is ONE who is sovereign over our lives. One who has total and absolute control over every circumstance because he has overcome the world. If that were not enough, he loves us more than we love ourselves, we are in his care, and he has a promise for the future for each and every one of us and it is glorious! The angels proclaimed "glory to God and peace on earth" the very night Jesus came into the world. My hope for all of us is that we may have peace through Jesus and take comfort in the victory over sin and death he alone achieved. Let that comfort fill you and sustain you through your tribulation. Share it with others so they may experience the peace of Christ as well!

# THROUGH CHRIST PEACE WITH GOD

DAY NINE | CURTIS ALFORD

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Romans 5:1-2 & Psalm 32:1-5

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God."*

*-Romans 5:1-2*

*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." And you forgave the guilt of my sin."*

*- Psalm 32: 1-5*

Peace seems to be the opposite of all that troubles us. For so many of us, there is a lack of peace either inside ourselves or closing in on us from the outside, maybe some of both. We desire peace at home, at work, at school, with our marriages, our children, our finances, our in-laws, in our minds, and more. Perhaps, we find peace an unlikely achievement in one or many of these areas. But what if peace isn't the absence of that which troubles us?

As Jesus' disciples battled a literal storm with Jesus sleeping in the boat, they feared for their lives and lacked what? Peace? No, not really. I mean yes, there was a storm - by definition, not peaceful. But what does Jesus ask that they lack? ... It's faith (Mark 4:35-41). They wanted peace (ie. to be out of the storm so they wouldn't die), but they needed faith. Now, what typically robs us of peace are not literal storms, and having faith in a "storm" of life doesn't mean it will be stilled.

However, faith in Jesus will give us the means to endure (Phil 4:6-7; 11-13). Also, Jesus is not an unaffected bystander of the "storms" of life, sleeping until we get His attention. He shares in our humanity and suffering. See his reactions to the death of Lazarus (John 11), his great compassion on needy and hungry crowds of people (Matthew 9; Luke 9), and his anguish in Gethsemane (Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22) to point out a few. He is not undisturbed by the problems of this world. However, when we find Jesus seemingly not at peace, did he lack faith? Absolutely not! His emotion is rooted in zeal for His Father and in His great love for us.

It's peace we want, and faith we need. As Paul concludes, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace with God. Not peace with the world or in the world, but peace with God. That's true peace. Knowing that no matter what we may have to endure, our hope will not fail us (Romans 5:3-5).

Do you feel at peace? If yes, then why do you feel at peace? Is it because you embrace Jesus in faith, or is it simply a season in life that appears to be calm – Jesus wants infinitely more for you than temporary, or may I say, fraudulent peace. If you don't feel at peace, why is it? Perhaps there is sin to confess – if you do feel that weight (as David details so well in Psalm 32), that is another strong evidence of His love for you, His pursuit of you, and he is faithful to forgive. Maybe you don't feel peace because of external circumstances in your life that are out of your control– give them to Him continually in prayer, knowing He is the one who can turn grief, sorrow, pain, doubt, and fear into peace, joy and victory.

Reflect on the promise of peace with God we have through faith in Christ. We do not embrace a feeling or an idea, we embrace a person, our Lord and Savior Jesus whose birth we will soon celebrate again this year. Worship Him, and be at peace.

# CONTINUED PEACE THROUGH TRUST

DAY TEN | MEREDITH RUSSELL

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Isaiah 26:3

*"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast,  
because they trust in you."  
-Isaiah 26:3*

The world in which we live is crumbling. It's broken, scary, frustrating, and always failing us. I find myself weary of this world – I look for peace in empty things. I look for peace in circumstances, in people, in avoiding conflict; I look for peace in the things of this world. Time and time again I search for peace in fleshly things that often leave me filled with anxiety. Funny, isn't it? That this vicious cycle of anxiety is often awakened in my search for "peace." Jesus tells us that the world will never give us peace the way He gives peace. (John 14:27) God is holy and therefore He is trustworthy – when we trust God there is no fear, and when there is no fear, there is peace—a peace that only comes from Jesus. Fill your mind with scripture, prayer, and the active pursuit of an intimate relationship with God. When our minds are filled with the things above, then God's peace flows through us. In Philippians 4:7 it talks about His peace that surpasses our understanding, that it is a peace that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. No matter the circumstances that the world brings, Jesus will bring a peace that comforts and protects us. Where do you look for peace? What are you filling your minds with? How can fully trusting Jesus lead to a life of peace?

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE PEACE

DAY ELEVEN | SARA GORDON

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Isaiah 11:1-6

*"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them."*

*-Isaiah 11:1-6*

In chapter 10, Isaiah describes how God will destroy the kingdoms who have come against His people, Judah, and exposes this barren landscape. Chapter 11 begins with "THEN". I have that word underlined and highlighted in my Bible. It's like a breath of fresh air and encouragement that "There is peace to come."

This prophecy was written around 600 years before Jesus would fulfill it. I wonder how it felt to Isaiah to write this. I wonder how he pictured this Judge that would slay the wicked "with the breath of his lips." Who would care for the poor, exact justice for the oppressed, operate with righteousness and faithfulness. This ruler would have the Spirit of the Lord on Him, with wisdom, understanding, counsel and strength. And it must have felt odd to describe this mighty ruler as a little child. (v6)

Though Isaiah wasn't able to see it fulfilled, in the Gospels, we can see and hear the heart of Christ for His people, particularly the poor and needy.



His life's work was to bring truth and clarity; to help them see how they've gone astray; to expose the wickedness and deceit in their structures and leadership.

He made many enemies as he stirred up the rules and regulations of the Jewish order, and He founded the entire Christian church through just twelve of his closest friends.

Such peace and hope resides in these verses, especially since we know how it was fulfilled. When the things of our lives are torn down, the light of the Gospel exposes a clear path that points us back to Jesus and reminds us how great our God is. Jesus has been woven within every fabric of humanity, and His work continues.

I can remember a few specific times in my life when I experienced a perfect peace that can't be explained. In a moment, my world was chopped down. The structures of my future were altered and seemed barren. THEN this peace that passes understanding rested on my heart and I could see Jesus woven in it just as He always has been, and it gave me the courage and strength to do hard things.

Have you ever experienced a peace that you couldn't understand?

Are you feeling discouraged or run down by your circumstances or even our cultural climate right now?

I pray that in moments you feel down, you can lean into the Peace He brings. He is not done yet.

# ABIDING PEACE

DAY TWELVE | AMY BRASWELL

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Psalm 23

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right path for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me, all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." -*

*Psalm 23*

Think back to a time during the holiday season when you were in a crowded and busy shopping mall as either a child with your parent(s)/guardian or if you are a parent now, when you were with your children. As a child, did you ever wander off and get separated from the protection of your parents? Do you remember how it felt to be separated from the one that cares for you, guides you, protects you, and comforts you? If you ever experienced this situation as a parent, you immediately left the others in your group to look for and bring back your beloved child. Recall the peace and comfort you experienced when the child was found and placed back safely within your care. As followers of Christ, we can have that same peace and comfort when we allow God to be our loving shepherd and our dependable guide.

Psalm 23 is a beautiful poem written by David, a prior shepherd boy, which compares a shepherd caring for his sheep to God caring for his children (i.e. followers). Sheep are totally dependent on their shepherd for food, water, guidance, and protection. Sheep also have a natural tendency to wander off and find trouble, so the shepherd must keep a close watch on his flock and will search for and retrieve any wanderers. Sheep also know the voice of their shepherd and will follow him.

Just like sheep with their shepherd, we need to be totally dependent on God for guidance, wisdom, and protection. God knows exactly what we need and will meet our necessities. We must learn to hear His voice by daily prayer and Bible reading. When we hear His voice, we must let Him guide us and we must follow. When I am following God as my Good Shepherd, He refreshes my soul and I experience peace and comfort, even during dark and troublesome times. If and when I wander from God's plan, I have comfort knowing that He is always pursuing me and will welcome me back with loving arms. As a faithful follower of Christ, we not only have peace and comfort during this life, but also guaranteed peace and eternity with God. Thank God today for the peace and comfort that He provides to his sheep (i.e. followers) not only in this life, but for eternity with Him.

JOY



# GOOD NEWS

DAY THIRTEEN | A.J. HOLT

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Luke 1:46-55

*"And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.'" - Luke 1:46-55*

Think about the last time you got good news. Was it hard for you to think of something specific? In our age of information and constant connection, it is hard to not feel like good news is drowned out by the constant stream of negative news bites filling our screens every day. We aren't alone in this feeling, however, as Mary must have felt similarly at the news from the angel Gabriel.

Remember that Mary was living in Roman-occupied Israel. For over 400 years Israel had been handed over from conqueror to conqueror, empire to empire, waiting on a prophetic word from God. But none would come until a young Jewish girl betrothed to a man from the tribe of Judah would be visited by Gabriel with his good news. Place yourself in Mary's position at the encounter. At hearing the ridiculous proclamation of her pregnancy without ever having been with a man. After 400 years of either bad news or no news, could you easily accept Gabriel's words without a degree of skepticism? Or worse...negativity? Do you ever find yourself responding to good news the same way?

The truth is we approach God's blessings and even the Gospel (literally good news) looking for a catch; waiting on the other shoe to drop. We assume that things are too good to be true and we guard our hearts and minds against getting too excited.

But Luke 1:37 reminds us that "nothing is impossible with God." That we don't serve a God who misleads, swindles, or over promises. What He says is what will happen. His promises never fail. His blessings come to pass and we can rejoice in them because of that fact. Christians especially can celebrate the blessings in our life because they are on top of our ultimate gift from God in the Gospel, the good news of Jesus.

And Mary models the proper posture in light of God's good news: humility and faith. This Christmas season, are you looking for good news? Let the Gospel that was told to Mary thousands of years ago shape your perspective this year. We have so much to already be thankful for in Jesus; let's come before God as servants this Christmas with an eye out for all of the good news He is still bringing to us today.

# HEALING IN PAIN

DAY FOURTEEN | WILL SCOTT

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Peter 1:6-7

*"You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials so that the proven character of your faith – more vulnerable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire – may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." -1 Peter 1:6-7*

Inevitable are the trials of life. Jesus did not promise us health and prosperity, but persecution. Paul was beaten and imprisoned for proclaiming the Gospel. Peter was told by Jesus that he will one day "stretch out his hands", which in those times often referred to crucifixion. We may not become a martyr for our faith as many did in the new church. But we are not exempt from the storms that await. It was the enduring faith of these men and many others that served as the catalyst for the early church.

Necessary are the storms we navigate. They erase distractions. They exploit the weakness of our flesh. They expose false idols and empty hope. They confront the areas of our faith we have not yet relinquished to God. "But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind," James 1:6. How can we know the depth of a faith that goes untested? How can we experience the grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father without tribulation? We can't.

Temporary is the heartache. As the Psalmist said, "my days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass," Psalm 102:11. We are all guilty at times of being consumed by our circumstances that we forget where our promise lies. We allow losing battles to be deceptive and distract us from living with an eternal perspective. Hope is not found in the transient victories of this world. Our assurance rests in the eternity that Christ has already secured.

Fruitful is the journey we take in Christ. Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, impurities are cast away as we become more like Jesus. We trust God deeper. We grow in a peace that transcends all understanding. And on that day when Jesus is revealed to the world, we too will receive praise, glory, and honor.



# REJOICING IN PAIN

DAY FIFTEEN | JILLIAN RIORDAN

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** James 1:2-5

*"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." - James 1: 2-5*

I have always loved the analogy of the "Refiners Fire story" in relation to suffering and becoming more like Jesus. Imagine Jesus as the silversmith of our life.

"As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse that says: 'He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.' (Malachi 3:3) She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, 'How do you know when the silver is fully refined?' He smiled at her and answered, 'Oh, that's easy – when I see my image in it.' (author unknown)

We can rejoice in the pain because we know that there is a PLAN and a PURPOSE behind our suffering and we can either become embittered toward God or allow Him to teach us through the trial. I love what John Piper says about pain, "I have never heard anyone say, 'The deepest and rarest and most satisfying joys of my life have come in times of extended ease and earthly comfort.'" Nobody says that. It isn't true." There is something deeper that we gain from life when pain comes our way IF we can hold fast and preserve.



We can rejoice in pain because we know that Christ is acquainted with our grief. He knows our pain - every kind of pain you have felt in this life - Christ has felt too and He has overcome. "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not" - Isaiah 53:3

We can rejoice in pain because we know that the GLORY of what is to come will FAR outweigh our present sufferings. Romans 8:18 states "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

So, if today you are in pain - don't numb yourself to Christ. If today you are in pain don't run from Him. Open yourself up to Him. Dig deep in to who Christ is - because He CARES for you and wants to see you through it. He is with you and for you.

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." - 2 Corinthians 4:8-10

# INEXPRESSIBLE JOY

DAY SIXTEEN | JEREMY CUMMINGS

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Peter 1:8-9

*"Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls." - 1 Peter 1:8-9*

Praise the Lord for Migraines!

Thank you, Jesus, for root canals!

Hallelujah, I've thrown out my back again!

These phrases are not commonly heard from believers because expressions of praise are not normally connected with things that bring us pain and sorrow. However; if we could travel back in time to the first century, or visit our persecuted brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, I think we would hear phrases like these coming from their lips!

The Apostle Peter, in the epistles bearing his name, is writing to Christians spread throughout Asia Minor who were suffering for their faith. Peter encourages believers to praise God in the midst of their suffering by focusing on what God has already done for them in the past and what He is going to do for them in the future when He returns. By focusing on the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus, which covered their sins, past, present, and future, they would be able to rejoice with an inexpressible joy, regardless of their present circumstances. Because of their love for and faith in Jesus, these suffering saints would "obtain" or receive the object of their love and faith, Jesus himself, which would result in the salvation of their souls.

These same words of wisdom from Peter still apply to us today. Our love and faith in the crucified and risen Savior gives us the ability to be filled with a joy that does not depend on our present circumstances. An "inexpressible joy" filled with glory, for it is a joy that does not fade or diminish, but will be ours forever and ever as we reign with Jesus in His eternal kingdom.

# NO MORE TEARS

## DAY SEVENTEEN | BRE MEADOWS

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Revelation 21:3-6

*"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.'"*

*- Revelation 21:3-6*

There are life experiences that we have all endured that have brought us tears; tears of joy and tears of sorrow. One event that will bring out grave emotions in anyone is death. At the end of 2019, I ran into this unwelcomed life circumstance to a degree like never before. My grandmother and my uncle both passed away within 24 hours of each other. My grandmother was sick and her health was declining quickly and her death was anticipated, but even still, not as suddenly as it came. The death of my uncle was as unexpected as anything ever could be. To my knowledge, neither of them were Christians, which forced me to search deeply for the hope we are promised amidst grief described in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. I am typically a positive and joy filled person, but I felt lost in deep sorrow. How could I have joy when I had to watch my dad bury his mother and brother on the same weekend? I realized I was grieving without hope, without peace, and without joy. In the midst of the deepest sorrow I have ever felt, I clung to Jesus. I knew I would find comfort in His arms, even if I didn't understand why he took my loved ones so soon. He showed me that my joy isn't dependent on any circumstances or the emotions I feel in the midst of them. My joy isn't even dependent on the salvation of others.

My joy was restored when I was brought back to the foundation of my salvation, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. I had to reconcile the tried and true words of God and believe that He is who He says He is regardless of my opinion on the way these circumstances "should have gone." His goodness and mercy did not change just because I wanted a different eternal outcome. When we meet Jesus face to face and enter the dwelling place with God, we will be so enthralled with God's presence that all things will fall away. We will be worshiping our Creator, doing the only thing that He designed us to do and we will be fully satisfied, ALL the time, forever! How could anything be more joyous than that? Jesus paid the highest price, and in doing so, gave us an opportunity to dwell with him for eternity and reconcile us to God. If you believe and confess that Jesus is your Lord and savior, these promises are true, unfailing, and never ending. This is where our JOY comes from as Christians: God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, faithful and true. He is trustworthy! I pray you will reflect on who Jesus is and that the joy of your salvation will be restored this advent season. Holidays are a tough time for a lot of people, but joy is not predicated upon circumstances or emotions. Joy is exuding from Christ's love for you, and He is ready for you to see and receive it!

# THE ESSENCE OF JOY

DAY EIGHTEEN | NELSON & JESSICA GARNER

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Psalm 16:5-11

*"Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful[a] one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." -Psalm 16:5-11*

There are a few scenes that bring to mind the essence of joy...a baby smiling at his mother, a faithful dog's excitement when their owner comes home, the feeling when you are a kid and you first come down the stairs on Christmas morning. While this joy is earthly, it will fade. We constantly chase the things of this world pursuing that feeling of earthly joy. The Christmas season has become a time when many chase joy. People search for nostalgic feelings that will renew their sense of joy. There is a frenzy of decorating, baking, buying and giving. But none of these things brings true joy.

Psalm 73:25-26 says, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." It's not easy sometimes as Christians to watch the wicked prosper in their pursuit of wealth and other earthly temptations while also watching the difficulties of the righteous. However, as we see in Psalms, true joy comes from knowing that the Lord is our everything and that He will protect us. Unlike the fleeting joy found in earthly pursuits, this joy will not fade as we keep our eyes on Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit to instruct us, keeping us close to God. We cannot be shaken and our joy stolen by the things of this world.

God has promised not to abandon us but rather to bring us with Him to heaven. What greater joy is there than this?! This is the true essence of joy.

We feel true joy all over - our hearts are glad, our tongues rejoice, and our bodies rest secure in the Lord when we abide in Him. True joy is not only a physical feeling here on earth, but God promises to fill us with joy in His presence as we one day will experience eternal pleasures at His right hand. True joy is also a sense of deep contentment as we know that God is the ruler of the world and that He directs our steps.

As we contemplate the Christmas season and what brings us joy, let us consider that while hot chocolate, gifts, and a beautifully decorated Christmas trees are nice, they don't compare to the true joy of knowing that God loves us, protects us, and if we trust in Him as our savior, He will bring us with Him to heaven one day.

LOVE



# THE ABSENCE OF LOVE

## DAY NINETEEN | BRAD MEADOWS

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away." -1 Corinthians 13:4-8*

### Why Love?

I am a pessimistic person. I am an impatient person. I am usually a pretty stubborn person, especially when I feel that I am right about something. I wouldn't say that I'm rude or arrogant, but my wife would tell you the opposite if you ever caught us in traffic. "It's just the way God made me!" has become a popular excuse in today's self-help, self-love, self-idol worshipping culture. While there are times when I feel like I'm really walking with Jesus and being a humble and loving follower, there are still times when my actions and thoughts surprise me with their grotesque negativity, sinfulness, and lack of love.

In college, my mentor once punched me in the throat with a quip about struggling with thoughts and actions. "Your horizontal relationships reflect your vertical relationship." When I find myself not loving those around me very well, I am usually not receiving love from Jesus in my relationship with Him. When I feel like I'm being a great husband, friend, youth pastor, and follower of Jesus, my "vertical relationship" is consistent and honest. We live in an absence of love when we are not consciously receiving God's love. Living in love is not a one-and-done, "boom I'm saved" moment. If anyone has ever looked like love embodied, it's Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we can know all of these things in our head but struggle to grasp them in our heart. If that's you, don't fret. Christians have always had to fight to live in this love.



No church in the New Testament struggled to live in love as much as the Corinthian church, who Paul gave a proper and loving spanking to in each of his letters to them. Paul constantly reminded them that they were (and still are!) all in the same family. The most clear cut archetypal passage on love is found in 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4-7.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

These verses come after a chapter discussing spiritual gifts and differences in us as the body of Christ. When we don't all grasp that we're in the family of God, we quarrel, we fight, and we live in the sinful qualities mentioned above. An absence of love will always lead us away from others. Jesus's love calls us to Himself and sends us to others. Where do you find yourself in your relationships with those around you; your horizontal relationships? How's your vertical relationship? Jesus is patient, kind, and loving. See Him today and live in His love!

# EVIDENCE OF HIS AFFECTION

DAY TWENTY | TIMOTHY RIORDAN

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Hosea 11:1-11

*"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities. They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves. I will settle them in their homes," declares the Lord." Hosea 11:1-11*

The eleventh chapter of Hosea is one of the most profound portraits of the affection of the Father in the entire Bible. Let me just read a few of the headings that are found within chapters 1-10 that lead up to this powerful moment.

"Israel's unfaithfulness punished".

"The Lord accuses Israel".

"Punishment coming for Israel and Judah".

"Israel and Judah are unrepentant".

"Israel will reap the whirlwind".

Hosea chapters 1-10 display the wickedness of a nation and the fury of a Father. A holy fury that only rests in reconciliation. You may think love cannot dwell with fury, but if this is your belief, you do not understand love and you do not understand holy fury. For love calls to fury like a friend in need in the dark of night.

Fury is only love in motion. Love without fury is no love at all, but is detached indifference. Cold apathy. Love requires fury. Praise God for His holy fury! For it was from the fires of love that fury was forged. But in chapter 11, within the winds of fury, God stills the storm to reveal to us the nature of His love; a love that doesn't relent or diminish in the midst of our sin. A love that doesn't blink in hesitation, because this love does not have a symbiotic relationship to sin. Sin only wishes it could make love suffer; to diminish love's strength as a parasite slowly pulling the life from an animal. But sin only finds its death in love. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us". This love is an infinite flow from the nature of God and has no bounds or measures. Sin finds death in love, but man finds eternal life there forever and ever. Praise God that the streams of Grace flow from the heart of Love!

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life". However, we must understand this mystery. God hates the cancer of sin. He hates sin, because, although sin cannot diminish Love, sin is pulling the life from us. Yes, we have been saved from the penalty of sin in eternity, but we must still wage the war on earth and experience the consequences that come when we bow to sin. The Father looks down upon his daughters and His sons and cries "let me fill you! Every moment let me free you. I am the only answer. Love is the only cure. Run from the sin, son. Flee from the darkness, my daughter. The darkness will never fulfill you because it is infinitely empty. But even when you dwell in darkness, my love for you is infinitely vast; calling you home. Come home."

May the love of God protect you from the grip of sin, and may the fury of God equip you in the midst of battle.

"The Gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." -Tim Keller

Amen!

# LOVE'S INVITATION

DAY TWENTY-ONE | AARON HORNER

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Romans 5:6-8

*"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." - Romans 5:6-8*

"Christ died for the ungodly."

Truly let that sink in.

"Christ died for the ungodly."

He died, not for the best of us, but the worst.

He died for Pharaoh.

He died for Goliath.

He died for Jezebel.

He died for the Pharisees.

He died for Judas.

He died for Saul.

He died for you. Not for the parts you want him to see. But the parts you don't.

Every time you've ever felt far from God, he's there with you. Loving you. Laying down his life for you. And nothing can separate you from this love. No running, no doubts, no anger, no sin you've ever committed has made him love you less. "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more."

His love never runs out. Never lessens. Never fails. Because, unlike what we often see in ourselves, his love is not strained by its use, but increased.

This love seems to be irrational, illogical, non-sensical. It doesn't seek to preserve the self but to give it away freely and joyfully. In this giving away there is true happiness, joy, and freedom.

So who better to die for than for those who cannot repay him? When better to die then while we still sin against him? How better to die than at the hands of those he's saving?

He is not just the God who loves. He is the God who is love. This is who our God is. This is who we worship.

How amazing it is to serve the God of love.

We stand in awe of your glory. Yahweh, Adonai, Jesus, Father, Love personified.

# BELOVED CHILDREN

## DAY TWENTY-TWO | CLINT NEWTON

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 John 3:1

*"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." - 1 John 3:1*

When I read a verse like 1st John 3:1, my heart goes back to a time when I first found out that my dad wasn't my dad. I found out via my stepsister that dad was her dad, but not mine. I was devastated. I wanted to know why my 'real' dad didn't want to be in my life. It really caused a small crisis for my young mind and heart. I remember my parents sitting me down and explaining, but it still stung. Dad was dad to my stepsister and to my two brothers, who I guess were "steps" also. I was now a stepson and felt like the outsider. As time passed, my parents did a great job of not making distinctions, and the whole 'step' family stuff faded into the background. My dad who wasn't my flesh and blood, is my dad. He raised me, he led me, he attended my games and treated me as his own. Most importantly, he introduced me to Jesus. So, 1st John 3:1 hits home when I think of "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" My earthly father gifted me with his love and called me one of his own. I was no different than my sister or brothers. "And that is what I am." My last name Newton is reflective of my dad. I'm a Newton. I am his earthly child, adopted and gifted with his love.

As I apply that verse to my Heavenly Father. WOW! The word "lavished" here can be translated as "bestow a gift." How appropriate during this season where we celebrate by the giving of gifts to one another. Christmas is a time where we who call ourselves Christians can celebrate the gift that was given to us: Jesus-the child that would grow up and take my sins upon His back. It is through His perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection that my faith is perfected in Him. My status of "outsider" to the Kingdom is changed to "Child of God". Because of His great love, I am now His child.

# WITH ALL OF ME

DAY TWENTY-THREE | SCOTT & STACY ECHERD

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** Deuteronomy 6:5 & Philippians 3:12

*"Love the Lord your God with all  
your heart and with all your soul  
and with all your strength." -  
Deuteronomy 6:5*

*"Not that I have already obtained all  
this, or have already arrived at my  
goal, but I press on to take hold of  
that for which Christ Jesus took hold  
of me." - Philippians 3:12*

Tis the season. Those words we know so well. The hustle and the bustle that drives every action and thought towards our goal of Christmas. We make trips in and out of the attic to pull out all the stockings, decorations, and manger scenes from our 6 large red storage containers. We make sure that the tree is perfect with every ornament turned just the right way. Sitting around studying the sale ads on Thanksgiving to find the best deals for presents. Without caring who's around us we sing non-stop to the sounds of the season as they play through our homes, car speakers, and stores we visit. Willing to make the extra effort in trips up and down the ladder outside to get the lights just right in putting out a decoration display that would make Clark Griswold jealous. In our house, we love Christmas, love sharing it with family and friends, and love what the true meaning of the season is. So do we find ourselves giving as much effort, energy, and time desiring to know God? Does our love for him drive every action? Does it make us want to press in and study his word? Are we willing to sing non-stop in worship to him? Are we willing to make the extra effort and intentionally make him known? Are we loving God with the same determination as we do for all things during the Christmas season?

We are commanded to pursue God, not in a season, but throughout our life. It's sometimes hard for us to grasp that God loved us with everything – all the way to death knowing he would endure what we deserved. We are called to live for him and to love him "with all of me" – our heart, soul, and strength. We are not perfect and nor will we ever be.

Through God's saving grace, he holds our lives in his hands and we should strive with everything to press into him while giving everything we have to loving, serving, and sharing the good news of Jesus.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Deuteronomy 6:5

Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:12



# BY THIS YOU WILL KNOW

DAY TWENTY-FOUR | STEVE DRYE

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** John 13:35 & Ephesians 5:1-2

*"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." - John 13:35*

*"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." - Ephesians 5:1-2*

As a professional educator for the last 25 years I have had the opportunity to be a teacher as well as the opportunity to observe, coach, and evaluate hundreds of teachers. During this time I've had the privilege to work alongside and admire many truly gifted educators. I've also had the opportunity to see fortunately far fewer who simply aren't cut out for the job. Among the very best teachers, there are a number of key characteristics that mark them.

Here are some of the characteristics that I've noticed among the very best teachers:

- The best teachers are passionate about teaching and love their students;
- The best teachers feel that teaching is something they have been called to do and they are willing to work for more than they are compensated for to achieve their mission;
- The best teachers are willing to do whatever it takes to make their students successful;
- The best teachers celebrate the one difficult student who finally gets it far more than a whole classroom of students who easily grasp the lesson immediately;

- The best teachers make the abstract concrete through modeling, examples, and directions;
- The best teachers scaffold the lesson so that their students can learn the material as they are ready for it;
- The best teachers are patient and are willing to teach the same lessons over and over again if that's what their students need;
- The best teachers are willing to make any sacrifice so that their students can learn and be successful; and
- The best teachers aren't respected anywhere close to the amount they deserve to be even by the people they devote their lives to serving, yet they still serve.

While poor human teachers seek to puff themselves up, proclaim their credentials, point out how much they know, or blame their students for not learning, the best teachers are always willing to try something else to get through to their students. They are devoted to them.

When people wouldn't listen to the prophets, God the Father sent His Son. Jesus is the Perfect Teacher and, even more so than the best human teachers we've had, Jesus doesn't just tell us what to do and leave it for us to figure out. He gives us examples; He models His lessons; He shows us through His life; and He patiently teaches us the same lessons over and over if we are slow to learn, stubborn, or not ready. He is the Perfect Teacher because He truly knows all the answers now and forever. He knows just how to reach each of us and rejoices when He finally does.

# THE ESSENCE OF LOVE

CHRISTMAS DAY | DR. KENNY HIBBARD

**Make Room:** Begin with 2-3 minutes of silence inviting the Lord into this time of reflection.

**Meditate On:** 1 John 4:16 & 1 John 4:9-10

*"And so we know and rely on the love  
God has for us.  
God is love. Whoever lives in love  
lives in God, and God in them."  
- 1 John 4:16*

*"This is how God showed his love among us:  
He sent his one and only Son into the world  
that we might live through him. This is love:  
not that we loved God, but that he loved us  
and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for  
our sins." -1 John 4:9-10*

**Merry Christmas!** As a child, teenager, and even now as an adult, there are many Christmas mornings that I must fake like "I love" the gift I just unwrapped. Don't judge me. I am sure you have also ripped into a gift and then once gazing upon it, force out a smile, make eye contact with the gift's giver, and gurgle out halfheartedly; "Thanks! I Love it." To be sure, it is not that we are ungrateful, but there are many well-meaning gifts that really don't elicit a "truly ecstatic love" emotion. As a kid, new underwear and socks were needed at Christmas, not loved. However, my new Huffy bike with special shocks designed for jumping hills that I received when I was nine years old... now that was something I truly loved! Most Christmas mornings, there are only one or two gifts that we truly love!

This is the beauty of Christ at Christmas. The Gift of Jesus Christ that we celebrate each December 25th is the perfect gift! Once we receive it, we feel instantly..."I love it!" Moreover, that is exactly what God is and has for us. He is love. When we receive God's amazing love, and we understand that He loves us unconditionally, then our only reaction to this kind of transformational love is to declare, because He loves me, I LOVE God! No faking it and no conjuring up false emotions. When we know and experience God's Love for us, we love it and hopefully we want to pass it on! It is the gift that keeps on giving!

Today, Christmas Day, before you go to bed, take time to think about the different gifts you received and that you gave. Then ponder a moment on the Gift of Jesus our Savior. Take time to reflect and then whisper to God, "I love it!" Last thing, commit to God that you will take time in the new year, to re-gift it to others.



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