

midnight

an advent journey



AN INTRODUCTION TO ADVENT

“What other time or season can or will the church ever have but that of Advent!” Karl Barth

The Seasons of the Church calendar are about participating in the story of God and keeping time with Jesus. They are a way to tangibly order our days around the person and work of Jesus by retelling and living within the gospel narrative.

The season of Advent is the first of these Gospel Seasons and therefore is the Christian New Year, and it strikes a very honest chord. The emotional atmosphere of Advent is that of longing. From the moment chaos & sin entered the world in the garden of Eden, the world was no longer as it was supposed to be. But God had promised to make all things new again through the promised Son of Eve, who would be the Messiah. But for many years, the people of God waited. Longing for the day when their distress would be relieved.

*“Long lay the world
in sin and error pining
‘Till He appeared
And the soul felt it’s worth.”*

Jesus, the Messiah, has come. This is what we remember at Advent – the first coming of the Messiah. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus marks the end of a world without a Messiah. But it is also true that the story is not over. The world is still not how it should be. And we are still longing. The Kingdom of God, which is what the Bible calls “the age that is to come” is marked by life, peace, and goodness. That age to come will be consummate when Jesus returns to finish what he started.

But the world in which we live now is marked by sin, death, and evil. The season of Advent invites us to live within the reality that the age that is and the age that is to come are overlapping now in Jesus. As we await the second advent of Jesus, we join in the long and rich history of God’s people longing, waiting, hoping for the day when in Christ, all things will be made new.

The story of the Bible is one that is honest about the pain in the human experience. And Advent is an invitation to experience hope, peace, joy, and love in the midst of the longing.

MIDNIGHT: AN ADVENT ILLUSTRATION

There is a pain that comes from our own sin, and then there is a pain that comes from the sin of others and the world. The season of Advent is a reckoning with our own wounds that need healing by the presence of Jesus, because of the sin of others and the world.

There is a picture that for us encapsulates the spirit of Advent. In a word, it is the idea of MIDNIGHT:



This idea of Midnight is the lived experience of complete darkness in the midst of the truth that the Sun is indeed still shining somewhere. It is the confident assurance that the light has not gone away for good, even though all I can see around me may be dark. This dual-reality creates longing. And this is the promise of Advent: The night will not last forever. It is real now, and it is painful. But it is not forever.

Advent teaches us how to practice and experience hope, peace, joy, and love during the night. The night is not simply about waiting for the morning. Rather, it is about the growth, healing, and transformation that Jesus works in our hearts throughout the night. Renewal happens in the night. The Scriptures testify to this experience. Consider Psalm 130, our guiding passage for this season:

1 Out of the depths I call to you, Lord!

*2 Lord, listen to my voice;
let your ears be attentive
to my cry for help.*

*3 Lord, if you kept an account of
iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?*

*4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that you may be revered.*

*5 I wait for the Lord; I wait
and put my hope in his word.*

*6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning—
more than watchmen for the morning.*

*7 Israel, put your hope in the Lord.
For there is faithful love with the Lord,
and with him is redemption in abundance.*

*8 And he will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.*

Herein lies the experience of Midnight: From the pain of waiting for the Lord in the night, to the experience of hope amidst the night. All in one prayer. This is Advent. And this is our journey for the next four weeks.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to be a daily prayer and scripture book, walking through each of the four themes of the season: Hope, Peace, Joy, & Love. In order for these virtues to be felt in the light of day, often they need to be formed in the darkness of night. So each week's theme will be examined and practiced from a different angle:

Sunday: Contemplate hope through the teaching of Scripture.

Monday: What do we need to acknowledge in the night to have hope formed in us?

Tuesday: What do we need to grieve in the night to have hope formed in us?

Wednesday: What do we need to wrestle with in the night to have hope formed in us?

Thursday: What do we need to surrender in the night to have hope formed in us?

Friday: What do we need to accept/receive in the night to have hope formed in us?

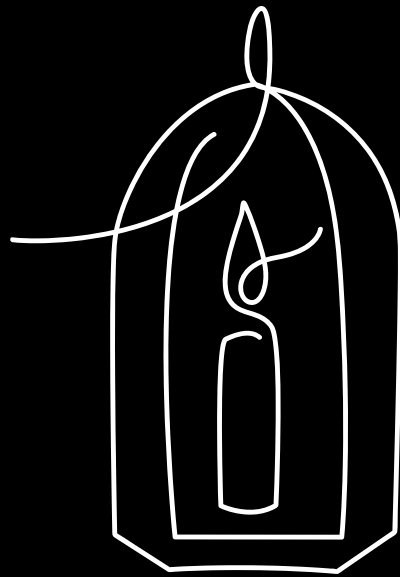
Saturday: Rest in order to have hope formed in us.

Contemplate, acknowledge, grieve, wrestle, surrender, accept/receive, and rest. These are the angles and daily practices by which we aim to form Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love in our hearts this Advent season.

At each Sunday worship gathering, we will explore a Psalm and how it teaches us about the way God forms Hope, Peace, Joy, or Love in our hearts at Midnight. And throughout the week, we will carry that theme and Psalm with us each day, focusing on one element at a time. This season is not about consuming content, but about slowing down to savor Christ. Because in the end, Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love have a name – and it's Jesus.

Week One

Hope



Written by Brenton Lehman

Psalm 130

*"Out of the depths I call to you, Lord!
2 Lord, listen to my voice;
let your ears be attentive
to my cry for help.
3 Lord, if you kept an account of iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
4 But with you there is forgiveness,
so that you may be revered.
5 I wait for the Lord; I wait
and put my hope in his word.
6 I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning—
more than watchmen for the morning.
7 Israel, put your hope in the Lord.
For there is faithful love with the Lord,
and with him is redemption in abundance.
8 And he will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities."*

week one

Monday

Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 130, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 130:1-2

Supplemental Passage: Matthew 1:20-23

What do I need to acknowledge in the night to have hope formed in me?

Nostalgia is memory without anxiety. And is there any other season that carries with it more nostalgia than Christmas? The collective ache for the memory of Christmas comes earlier and earlier each year, it seems, as retailers and neighborhoods begin to look a lot like Christmas long before Thanksgiving. This year, 2021, the day after Halloween most major stores in our city were ready for the Holidays.

Christmas nostalgia is that feeling of pretending, for just a little while, that everything is okay. It's as if we collectively long to push pause on the pain of the world and our own lives for just a moment and look back on fond memories while we make new ones. But the Biblical story of Jesus, and the season of Advent, have a far more grand vision for us. Instead of trying to find a moment of solace by pretending the problems of our life and the world didn't exist, what if we could actually experience hope in the midst of the pain? What if Jesus really was Immanuel, God With Us?

Nostalgia is good at bringing temporary bliss and feelings of happiness. But hope is durable. Nostalgia requires pretending and selective memory. It is a patchwork of highlight reels without the painful in-between. In that way, nostalgia is dishonest. But Hope isn't seasonal, and it doesn't require the absence of pain. **The practice of hope amidst the experience of pain is all about the presence of Jesus.** And the experience of hope requires acknowledging the pain of our circumstances. Jesus meets us in the middle of the night, and he stays with us. He is Immanuel: God with us.

So here is the question on which we are reflecting today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: **What do I need to acknowledge before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have hope formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Immanuel, today I'm bringing all of the difficulties in my life and the world to you. I'll acknowledge and name the pain, so that You can meet me in it. You said, "the truth will set you free", so I'll tell the truth, even when I'm in seasons that feel like Midnight. Teach me how to practice hope even when things are hard. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

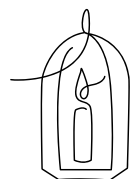
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Proverbs 13:12

Jesus, tonight I bring the ways in which I feel my hopes and dreams have been deferred. I acknowledge the ways in which I have either minimized difficulties or given them too much attention and influence in my life. The truth is, I need the presence of Jesus, not the absence of pain. Therein lies my hope. As I prepare to sleep, be near to my soul. In God alone I rest, in God alone I place my hope. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 130, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 130:3

Supplemental Passage: Isaiah 53:5, 7, 11

What do I need to grieve in the night to have hope formed in me?

Psalm 130:3 and Isaiah 53 are poetic renderings of the intersection of hope and grief. And at the intersection of hope and grief is how God deals with this word, “iniquity” and its effects on our hearts and the world. The Biblical word, “iniquity” is an interesting and incredibly vivid word. The Hebrew word behind the English word, “iniquity” is unique and very specific.

The Hebrew word is “Avōn”, which means crooked or bent out of shape, and it appears some 230 times in the Old Testament. Imagine someone with a severe back injury, which has them bent over in pain. If the spine is bent out of shape, it creates pain, limits function, and contorts the body. This is the image behind the Biblical word, iniquity. This is why the Psalmist says, “Lord, if you kept an account of iniquities, who could stand?” This is a play on words, in which the Psalmist imagines us all bent over in pain from our sin and the sin of others, carrying the weight of all of the consequences of sin until it crushes us. Who could stand? No one.

This is where grief comes in. Grief is the only healthy, human response to any kind of significant loss. When we don’t grieve our losses well – big and small – they compound with the sin’s effects and add to the weight we are already carrying. And it’s crushing. So we grieve, and even while we are grieving, God forms hope in our hearts.

Sin is the reason for every loss in our life. Be it death, injustice, unfulfilled dreams or desires, suffering, betrayal, poverty, or anxiety. Each of these is a departure from shalom, which is the peace in which God designed the world to exist.

Sin affects everything and everyone, and so we all have a reason to grieve, and we must grieve well, as does Isaiah and the Psalmist in 130:3. Because when we do, we are then able to be rescued by Psalm 130:4 – “but with you there is forgiveness, so that You may be revered.”

Grief done well is a gift. And the gift is a reverential awe of God, who enters our grief with healing and forgiveness, as he himself carries the weight for us and grieves with us. And in his presence with us in our grief, hope is formed in our hearts.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: **What do I need to grieve before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have hope formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Compassionate God, give me courage to face my losses and grieve them well. I don't want to be stuck in a phase of mourning, nor do I want to be stuck carrying the weight of my losses forever simply because I refused to feel the pain and grieve the loss. Neither extreme do I want. So I come to you, ready to grieve my losses. Be kind to me and present with me as I do. And form a resilient hope deep within me, as Jesus joins me in my own grief, and carries the weight I can no longer bear on my own. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Psalm 145:8–9, 14–16

Hold our hearts and be with us this night, Gracious God. Loving Lord, be with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.
(Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer)

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 130, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 130:4

Supplemental Passage: Genesis 32:24-31

What do I need to wrestle with in the night to have hope formed in me?

When I was in high school, there was a certain group of athletes who earned the reputation as the toughest and most intense competitors in the school. Wrestlers. Football players trained hard and hit hard. Basketball players could run up and down the court for days. Track and field, soccer, baseball – each team had their own set of skills and training, but wrestling had the reputation of being the most grueling training of all the teams.

Wrestling requires sustained efforts of both body and mind. It's one-on-one. And it's exhausting. There's almost never a moment when you and your opponent aren't active. For this reason, the training for wrestlers was known for being the most intense, most disciplined training of all.

When the Psalmist says to God in 130:2, "Listen to my voice, be attentive to my cry for help", he is using the language of sustained attention and effort. He is engaged in the discipline of deep attention, and he expects the same from God. This passionate plea resounds with the proclamation of Jacob after he had wrestled all night with God in Genesis 32:26, "I will not go until you bless me". Jacob did not know with whom he was wrestling in the night. But the Psalmist does. And so must we.

Jacob would discover he had wrestled with God, and he would walk with a limp for the rest of his life. But he was blessed. The Psalmist knows with whom he is wrestling. He knows he could come out of this night limping, but he won't settle for anything less than the attention of God, the blessing of God, even in the darkness, and no matter the cost. Hope requires the active discipline of wrestling with God, even in the night.

This is one of the ways God forms hope deep within us. Wrestling with God means sustained efforts of actively pursuing him, paying attention to him, crying out to him. Telling him the truth about our anger, sadness, and anxieties, with the resolve that we will not leave until he moves in our life. No matter how long it takes, and no matter the cost.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: **What do I need to wrestle with before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have hope formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Oh God, who contends with the hearts of humanity, come wrestle my heart, and win. Win my heart over to hope in the midst of the night. Form deeply within me a durable hope that does not come and go with the good and the bad. When I am too weary to wrestle with you in the night or when I am too distracted to realize I need to, come and get my attention. Come wrestle my heart, and win. I need you to do for me and in me what I cannot do for myself. Whether my circumstances are conducive to it or not, be the hope of my life. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Romans 5:3-5

Almighty God, Author and Finisher of my faith, sustain my attention to You and Your work in my life. I'm so easily distracted, and I give up too easily. But patient endurance through the night must finish its work in me. Because the fruit of patient endurance in the night of afflictions produces in me a hope that will not disappoint in a God who will not disappoint. Tonight, I endure by turning my last thoughts of the day before I sleep to You. Many other concerns and thoughts are bouncing around in my mind, but I choose now to pay attention to You. Finish what you started in me, Lord Jesus. It's in Your name I pray, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 130, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 130:5-6

Supplemental Passage: Daniel 3:1-30

What do I need to surrender in the night to have hope formed in me?

Today, we return to one of the themes at the core of Advent: **waiting**. And this is at the heart of our Advent Illustration: Midnight. In Psalm 130, imagine the Psalmist, in the dead of night – there is nothing but darkness all around. Even the clouds have covered the stars, and the moon is at its least reflective point. When things are this dark, our eyes widen and our senses heighten. Our pupils dilate, so as to take in as much light as possible.

The Psalmist gives this metaphor to us for when our circumstances match the illustration. When hope and God seem far away, and though we know the metaphorical Sun may be shining elsewhere, we do not know when this night will end for us. Yes, God's promises have been made, and yes He keeps his word. But how long until he does? How long must I wait? And what do I do while I am waiting?

We wait with eyes wide open, looking for evidence of the light of God's presence. Listening for any and every sign of God's movement in our lives. Paying attention. Waiting. Watching. More than watchmen for the morning. This is a picture of surrender. There comes a time when we must cease our wrestling with God, and simply wait for him. While wrestling is actively pursuing God, surrender is actively waiting on God. Surrender in the waiting requires relinquishing control, and giving up our attachments to certain outcomes.

If the night lasts forever, if the fires of suffering continue to burn, I will wait on the Lord. He will quench the flames. And even if he doesn't come through like we wanted or expected him to, we will wait on the Lord. We will surrender by putting our hope in the Lord, not in our circumstances or preferred outcomes.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: **What do I need to surrender before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have hope formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Jesus be glorified, even in my need. Whether you resolve it the way I want you to or not, I'm surrendering to you and your guidance now. The words of Jesus on the night he was betrayed are now my own: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done." I ask only one thing - be glorified in my need. Don't leave me alone, but meet me in my surrender. And teach my heart hope in the waiting. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Psalm 73:23-28

Ever present God, carry me through the night in a spirit of surrender. Indeed, who do I have in heaven or on earth but You? You are my portion. My hope is not in my circumstances or in my desired outcomes. So I release my attachments to them all, and ask for You to be my portion, my inheritance, the object of my desire. In your kindness, attend to my heart even as I sleep. Surrender is hard. But I know and believe that it is better to be surrendered to You than on my own, clinging for control. Your ways are better and higher than mine. Have my heart. Teach me to trust You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 130, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 130:7-8

Supplemental Passage: 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

What do I need to accept/receive from the Lord in order to have hope formed in me?

Advent is a paradox, as is life. There is so much goodness and beauty in the world and in Jesus. And yet, everything is harder than it has to be and there is so much pain and loss in the world. Sin ruins everything. And Jesus is so good. Both are true at the same time.

Advent is the season in which we remember the first coming of Jesus, and cling to hope because that is true. But it's also the season in which we take an honest look at the pain in the world and our lives, and turn our longing hearts toward the second Advent of Jesus, when all things are made new. Beauty and pain. Light and dark. Hope at midnight.

This is why the theologian Karl Barth said, **"What other time or season can or will the church ever have but that of Advent!"** This is the reality of the world. The Psalmist in 130:8-9 closes the loop in this poem about hope at midnight by teaching us how to receive the gift of God's presence and promise when we are in our most empty state. We feel empty, wanting, lacking. But with God, there is redemption in abundance. The darkness may be deep. And hope may seem scarce. But God's presence always leads us to a place of abundance. Hold on. Place your hope in God now, and be filled with hope in abundance.

Paul describes the same thing in 2 Corinthians 12:6-10. We see him move through the phases of wrestling with God, to grieving his loss, into receiving grace from God and somehow discovering a new, mysterious strength in his own weakness. It is not that God made Paul strong, rather that Paul's weakness became his strength, when his hope was in God and his abundant grace. The same is true for us. Our weakness are our strength, our pain is our hope when we receive the gift of God's grace and presence.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: **What do I need to accept/receive from the Lord in order to have hope formed in me during the night?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Gracious God, you are the giver of every good gift. So right now, I take a moment to reflect in gratitude on all the good that you have given me over the years. You have given me so much, and I deserved none of it. I revel in Your gifts, most of all that you would give me and all of us Yourself. In a thousand ways you give Yourself to us, to me. Not the least of which was when you gave yourself to us in the person of Jesus, as you took on flesh and endured the same pains we do daily. And most precious to us is the way you lovingly gave yourself over to death by crucifixion and raised to life again. You are always giving, and we are rarely receiving. But today is different. Today, I want to receive your grace, kindness, presence, forgiveness, provision, and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

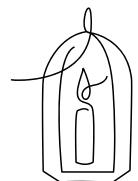
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: James 1:17

Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like the shadows of my circumstances, I come to you tonight because I need rest. I am always in need, even when I do not think I am. Tonight, it is rest and a thousand other things, and tomorrow it will be a thousand more. But tonight, my attention is not on my need, but on your provision. In Jesus, you provide what I need for the day. In Jesus, you supply all my needs. So I'm through with working and striving for the day. Now, as I enter rest, I entrust myself to Your care and receive Your provision. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



week one

Saturday

Let us rest in order to have hope formed in us

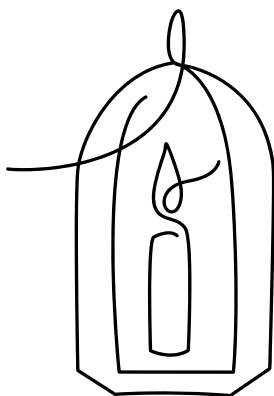
Read: Psalm 130.

Stop: For twenty-four hours, try to cease from all work, both paid and unpaid.

Rest: Pay attention to the pace of your heart, mind, and body throughout the day. Ask the Lord to bring rest to your soul in hHim.

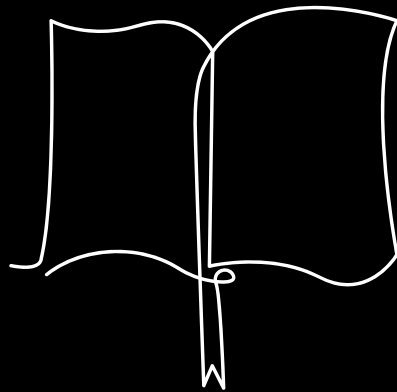
Delight: Delight in the Lord and those around you as much as possible throughout the day. Carry Psalm 37:4 in your heart: "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Contemplate: Find a moment to contemplate the goodness of God and the hope of Jesus through silence and solitude at some point today. If it's two minutes in the morning, midday, or evening, find the space to just be quiet and still before the Lord. Carry Psalm 145:5 with you as you contemplate: "On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wonderful works I will meditate."



Week Two

PEACE



Written by Emily Woody

Psalms 55

Give ear to my prayer, O God,
and hide not yourself from my plea for
mercy!

Attend to me, and answer me;
I am restless in my complaint and I moan,
because of the noise of the enemy,
because of the oppression of the wicked.

For they drop trouble upon me,
and in anger they bear a grudge against me.

My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.

And I say, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!

I would fly away and be at rest;

yes, I would wander far away;

I would lodge in the wilderness; Selah

I would hurry to find a shelter

from the raging wind and tempest."

Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues;
for I see violence and strife in the city.

Day and night they go around it
on its walls,

and iniquity and trouble are within it;
ruin is in its midst;

oppression and fraud

do not depart from its marketplace.

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—
then I could bear it;

it is not an adversary who deals
insolently with me—

then I could hide from him.

But it is you, a man, my equal,

my companion, my familiar friend.

We used to take sweet counsel together;

within God's house we walked
in the throng.

Let death steal over them;
let them go down to Sheol alive;
for evil is in their dwelling place
and in their heart.

But I call to God,

and the Lord will save me.

Evening and morning and at noon

I utter my complaint and moan,
and he hears my voice.

He redeems my soul in safety
from the battle that I wage,

for many are arrayed against me.

God will give ear and humble them,
he who is enthroned from of old, Selah
because they do not change

and do not fear God.

My companion stretched out his
hand against his friends;

he violated his covenant.

His speech was smooth as butter,
yet war was in his heart;

his words were softer than oil,
yet they were drawn swords.

Cast your burden on the Lord,
and he will sustain you;

he will never permit

the righteous to be moved.

But you, O God, will cast them down
into the pit of destruction;

men of blood and treachery
shall not live out half their days.

But I will trust in you.

Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 55, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 55:1-5

Supplemental Passage: 1 Peter 5:1-11

What do I need to acknowledge in the night to have peace formed in me?

During this second week of Advent, we will focus on pursuing peace (shalom) during the night. In his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga defines shalom as “the way things ought to be.” It is comforting to know we have a great Creator who fashioned everything as He saw fit and called it good. Yet, long seasons of darkness remind us that this is not what we are now experiencing, which causes great inner turmoil.

Nighttime seems to be a breeding ground for anxious thoughts. In the dead of night, when there is quiet and darkness, our mind tends to remind us of all that has gone wrong in our world. Tossing and turning, literally turning away from our racing thoughts, can make us long for either sleep or morning. When this has happened to me, at times I have simply tried to turn off my brain, to no avail.

Other times, I have tried to soothe or distract my mind with soft music or listening to Scripture, which can be helpful. But some of my most powerful, healing moments have been when I have intentionally faced the darkness, getting up while it is still night and kneeling before the Father. Rather than suppress or attempt to manage the anxious thoughts, I have named them and laid them at the altar. Even in the veil of darkness, acknowledgement brings hidden turmoil to the light. Whether it is a literal nighttime or a dark season, we take the first step toward peace when we pause long enough to come before the Father and cast our anxieties on Him.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when peace and God seem far away: **What do I need to acknowledge before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have peace formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, I pause before you to bring to light the turmoil that so often consumes my mind. Holy Spirit, help me put words to the chaos and inner struggle so that I can cast them before you. Jesus, thank you for caring enough that you obediently came to this earth to pave a way to the Father. I cast my anxieties on you, because you care!

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

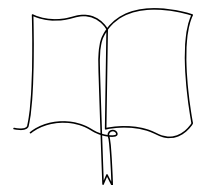
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5

God, we praise you for being our brilliant and loving Creator. When all was dark and void, you spoke light and order into existence. You brought peace to the darkness. Help us trust that you are as sovereign over this present darkness as you were in the beginning. Even if you allow the darkness to remain, you remain with us. Never once have you left us alone. Open our eyes to see you more clearly. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 55, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 55:5-10

Supplemental Passage: Isaiah 53

What do I need to grieve in the night to have peace formed in me?

Midnight calls us to grieve that which has been lost and also what was meant to be (shalom). Isn't it true that in grief, it is easier to seek comfort from someone who understands our pain? Someone who has "been there." Isaiah 53 is a beautiful reminder that Jesus has "been there." His empathy is immeasurably deep because he has not only experienced the pain of midnight, but he also understands how much it contrasts from the true light. In the beginning, Jesus stood with His Father at Creation as they spoke into existence all that is good--love, harmony, holiness, flourishing, etc. He understands how far we all have fallen from glory.

Perhaps part of the purpose of midnight is to move into deeper grief and therefore into deeper longing for God's holiness and glory on this earth. Death makes us grieve the loss of life but also long for eternity. Division makes us grieve the loss of relationship yet long for reconciliation. Silence makes us grieve communion and long for the voice of God. As we begin to experience deeper longings, we also must grieve our lesser loves, which God in His kindness and wisdom is gently stripping away. Midnight is hard, but it helps refine our longings toward that which is good. To Christ Himself--The Prince of Peace.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when peace and God seem far away: **What do I need to grieve before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have peace formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Jesus, thank you for willingly leaving your home in heaven to join us in the darkness. Thank you for willingly walking through the pain of this world in order that you may sympathize with us in our weaknesses. Thank you for being the Great Comforter who comforts us in our affliction. We love you Jesus and invite you into our grief. Help us invite you into every part of our heart. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

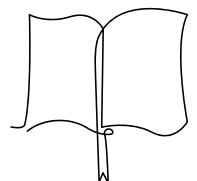
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: John 1:1-14

Jesus, we praise you for both being the Creator and willingly entering into your creation. You saw the darkness of this world and invaded this darkness with your presence. We praise you that darkness cannot overcome you. As we search for the light at midnight, remind us daily that you are the One we are searching for. You are the true light which brings peace. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 55, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 55:10-15

Supplemental Passage: Psalm 77

What do I need to wrestle in the night to have peace formed in me?

Have you ever experienced midnight so long that you begin to question whether there really is true light? We can name so many attributes of God, yet when our current experience seems void of these attributes, a war begins to wage within our soul and mind. “Did God really say...?” Let us not forget who first spoke those words (Genesis 3). “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood...but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Ephesians 6:12. Scripture becomes even more critical throughout midnight for it is a lamp to our feet (Psalm 119:105) and a sword against our enemy (Ephesians 6:17).

Throughout Psalms, we see how David wrestles with these questions. Psalm 55 shows a very natural response. He simply wanted to grow wings and fly away. Essentially to escape. Rather than flitting wings, today’s escape looks more like scrolling thumbs, mindlessly waiting for time to pass. But what if part of the wrestling is to stay present in order to combat the darkness with renewed faith and strength? Although escape was tempting, David chose to wait on the Lord. Psalm 77 shows one of his mental strategies. “Then I said, ‘I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High.’ I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.” David reminds us to remember, ponder, and meditate on the good things the Lord has done.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when hope and God seem far away: What do I need to wrestle against to remain present before the Lord? Also, are there any perspectives or truths that I need to wrestle with about God, or about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have peace formed in me more deeply? Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, sometimes these dark seasons make me question things that I do know are true about you. Remind me that exposed doubts are invitations to wrestle through these questions and grow even deeper in faith. Jesus, thank you for the ways you have already worked in my life. Anytime I doubt your goodness, help me ponder and meditate on the ways your goodness has been present in my life. Help my faith grow so much deeper as I experience your peace. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

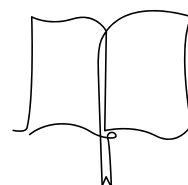
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Colossians 1:15-20

Jesus, thank you for both your supremacy and humility. You are the firstborn of creation. In everything, you are preeminent. Yet you also became the greatest sacrifice, pouring out your blood on the cross, so that we can experience reconciliation and peace. Jesus, help our hearts bow before you, who are worthy of all praise. And help us walk in this peace which is ours in You. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 55, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 55:15-20

Supplemental Passage: Philippians 4:4-8

What do I need to surrender in the night to have peace formed in me?

Philippians 4:6-7 gives us such a beautiful promise. Peace will be given to us when we pray with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is possible when we are able to come to a point of surrender within our prayers. This often takes place after wrestling on our knees. God truly wants to hear our heart's cry. We have the example of both Hannah and Jesus pouring their desires and requests before the Father. Hannah got a yes to her request for a son but Jesus did not get His cup removed. Therefore, presenting our requests to the Lord in an honest and raw way does not guarantee that we will get our way. Yet God still wants to hear all of it because he loves us and cares about what is on our heart. Then, we need to get to a point in our prayer when we transition to "but God" prayers. All of this is on my heart, but God I trust you.

In the night, it is important for us to declare and remember what we know to be true about God. As we lay our requests before the Lord, we look at them through the lens of "but God" statements. But God, I know that you see all and you know what is best. But God, I know that you are good. But God, I know that you are here and present. But God, I know that you work all things together for the good of those who love you. These declarations are a doorway into thanksgiving. Jesus, thank you for your goodness. Thank you for your love. Thank you for answering these requests according to your love and goodness. Thanksgiving is the doorway into His promised peace. Surrender does not mean that the night is over, but it does allow us to continue waiting for the dawn with renewed peace.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when peace and God seem far away: **What do I need to surrender before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have peace formed in me more deeply?** What can I thank Him for in the midst of this darkness? Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

As I lay my heart bare before you, Father, I choose to surrender to your will. I choose to thank you for your love, your mercy, and your peace. Even if I don't see it, I choose to believe and thank you! As I pray with thanksgiving, I anticipate your peace which will guard my heart and mind. Jesus, thank you for walking this journey with me! Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

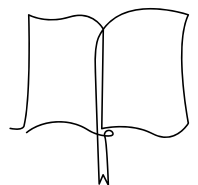
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: James 1:16-18

God, thank you for being unchanging. We experience changing seasons, yet you remain consistent and steadfast no matter our circumstances. Thank you for the picture of the sun which never dims even when our view has been blocked. Your character and your love never fade. Let my mind meditate on these beautiful truths as I surrender to sleep tonight. Be my last thought tonight and my first thought tomorrow. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 55, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: 55:20-23

Supplemental Passages: John 14:25-27, John 16:33, Romans 5:1-5, Isaiah 26:3

What do I need to accept/receive in the night to have peace formed in me?

As we look forward to celebrating the birth of Christ, we have the advantage of looking forward with eyes wide open. We know His full story and all that He ushered in. He has conquered death and we are redeemed and forgiven. In Christ, we have a Great High Priest, Co-Heir, Friend, Savior, Life Giver, and Prince of Peace. This week we have been walking through a process of having peace formed more deeply within us. In doing so, we are not cultivating peace, but cultivating our hearts like good soil to receive this peace which is already ours. Christ dwells in our hearts through faith and because of Christ, we have peace with God.

Spend some time rereading each of the supplemental passages above. Ask God to allow the truths of these verses to seep down into your heart, planting seeds that will reap peace abundantly more than we can imagine.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when peace and God seem far away: **What do I need to accept/receive from the Lord in order to have peace formed in me during the night?** Take some time to process and write any reflections in the space provided.

Jesus, thank you for being the Prince of Peace and for abiding with me and inviting me to abide with you. Help me to receive and walk in the abundance of peace that you continually wash over me. As others within our church also walk in your peace, may we walk in peace with one another as well. Amen,

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

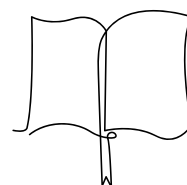
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Luke 2:14-20

Lord, I praise you for that night long ago which you interrupted with your glory. Shepherds and angels praised you together and Mary treasured and pondered these things in her heart. Jesus, thank you for the times you have made yourself known to us. May we respond with praise and honor, but also with pondering and treasuring. Let those moments become ingrained in our heart so that they more readily come to mind whenever we are experiencing midnight. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



week two

Saturday

Let us rest in order to have peace formed in us

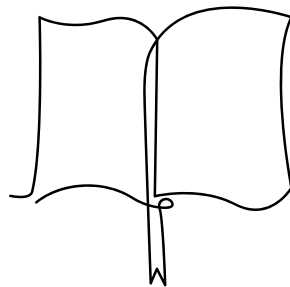
Read: Psalm 55

Stop: For twenty-four hours, try to cease from all work, both paid and unpaid.

Rest: Pay attention to the pace of your heart, mind, and body throughout the day. Ask the Lord to bring rest to your soul in hHim.

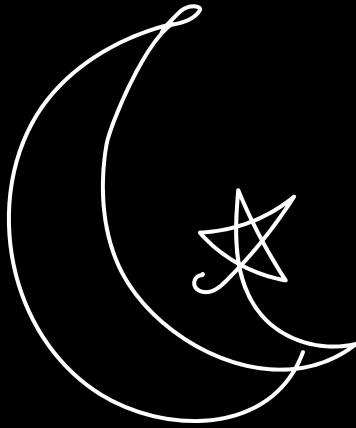
Delight: Delight in the Lord and those around you as much as possible throughout the day. Carry Psalm 37:4 in your heart: "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Contemplate: Find a moment to contemplate the goodness of God and the hope of Jesus through silence and solitude at some point today. If it's two minutes in the morning, midday, or evening, find the space to just be quiet and still before the Lord. Carry Psalm 145:5 with you as you contemplate: "On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wonderful works I will meditate."



Week Three

Joy



Written by Carley Marcouillier

Psalm 30

*I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up
and have not let my foes rejoice over me.*

*O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.*

*O Lord, you have brought up my soul from Sheol;
you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.*

*Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints,
and give thanks to his holy name.*

*For his anger is but for a moment,
and his favor is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may tarry for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.*

*As for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I shall never be moved."*

By your favor, O Lord,

*you made my mountain stand strong;
you hid your face; I was dismayed.*

To you, O Lord, I cry, and to the Lord I plead for mercy:

*"What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the pit?*

Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O Lord, and be merciful to me!

O Lord, be my helper!"

*You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
you have loosed my sackcloth*

and clothed me with gladness,

that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!

Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 30:1-3

Supplemental Passages: Job 1: 1-21

What do I need to acknowledge in the night to have joy formed in me?

Darkness takes many forms yet the heavy shadows of sorrow are some of the darkest of nights. Tragedy, grief, the death of dreams, pour water on the fire of our souls. Here, in the aftermath of unmet expectations, disorientation clouds our heavenly vision and tears blur our faith to believe. So, what are we to do in the silence of sorrow? And how do we begin to navigate the reality of waiting in such darkness?

There is no other character in scripture that can better relate to this internal turmoil than Job. His story is one of tragedy and unexplainable loss. After losing both his family and wealth suddenly, Job begins his journey into the night with a powerful acknowledgement, saying, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;...” (Job 1:21).

This is where we must all begin: Naming our losses before the Lord. Much like the grief process, spiritual formation takes root in the practice of acknowledging our reality; our pain, our needs, and our losses.

So here is the question to reflect today. In our own dark nights, when joy feels stolen from us: What losses or sorrows within my life do I need to acknowledge before the Lord in order for joy to be formed in me more deeply? Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, I have so many questions and my heart is breaking. Help me to acknowledge my reality, even in the darkness of what I don't yet understand. Be close to me, Jesus and allow me to honestly name the things that have darkened my world rather than deny they exist. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

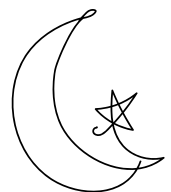
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Psalm 42

Lord, help me to acknowledge what I often seek to deny or avoid. I know you are present even when I cannot feel you or see what you are doing in the wake of pain. Awaken me to the treasures that can only be found in darkness. Give me a new song in the night. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 30:4-5

Supplemental Passages: 1 Samuel 1:10

What do I need to grieve in the night to have joy formed in me?

Why is it that we avoid expressing feelings of sadness? We apologize instinctively like we are doing something wrong. Throughout scripture the expression of anguish and despair in the face of loss is accounted for us again and again. The reality of our losses must be grieved. This process of expressing the impact of our acknowledged losses invites us into a posture of deep vulnerability with the Lord. What if our grief was a pathway to divine joy, a new awareness of God's grace to sustain us.

1 Samuel chapter 1 shares the story of a woman named Hannah. Her story is one that powerfully embodies this practice of expressing sorrow to the Lord. In the reality of her barrenness, Hannah cries out in prayer repeatedly. Her grief compels her petitions and prayers for God's grace and favor to sustain her family lineage. Like Hannah, the pain of life's barrenness is something we each carry in one form or another. Our losses impact us like nothing else can. Hannah knew this well and her example to fellow mourners was to grieve honestly before the Lord.

So, today as we reflect on Hannah's story, let's take time to ask ourselves this question: **What do I need to grieve with the Lord in order for a new awareness of God's sustaining grace to be formed in me?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, Please be near to me in my grieving. Give me strength to endure this sorrow that has darkened my sense of your sovereignty and sufficiency. Give me courage to express my anger, my pain, my disappointments, and my desires fully to you. Teach me through prayer, to come boldly to your throne of grace. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

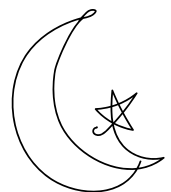
Scripture: Hebrews 5:7-8

"Jesus offered prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death.."

Lord, I acknowledge that I prefer to ignore or minimize my grief and loss. I struggle with seeing how resurrection life can come out of death. Give me a new awareness of what you are doing, and the strength to wait on you- even when everything in me wants to run away. Amen.

(Adapted from Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Day by Day guide)

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 30:6-7

Supplemental Passages: Job 23

What do I need to wrestle in the night to have joy formed in me?

Awareness of our losses brings questions of doubt, wonder, and worry. Pete Scazzero, author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, refers to this place of spiritual wrestling as the act of journeying through the wall. Much like how a physical wall stops us from moving forward, God works in the dark to stop us in our spiritual journey in order to radically transform our hearts. When faced with extreme grief in any form, we are forced to be still and sit in the silence of unanswered questions. Wrestling invites us to turn inward, refining our faith and beliefs about God's goodness towards us.

Much like Job, we can question our strength (Job 6:11-13) and become overwhelmed by the silence that sorrow brings to our souls. Yet, the process of wrestling is necessary for refining our image of God and uprooting our deepest longings. Job wrestles with God repeatedly through his suffering and in Chapter 23 he states, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him, he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold" (ESV). May we like Job wrestle well and come to the same resolve of surrender.

Today, let us reflect on our journey through the wall by asking : What questions or doubts do I need to wrestle with before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have joy formed in me more deeply? Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, I do not see the light of day and my questions in the night have challenged my faith more than ever. Please open my heart to see that you are working, even in sorrow. May I be able to wrestle well with the whys and worries, and come to a place of rest in your redeeming power. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

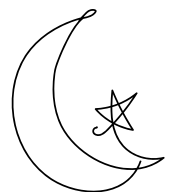
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Psalm 13

Lord, Help me to trust you at the wall. When I have more questions than answers and my soul is weary from the weight of my worries, remind me of your steadfast love. My I learn to rest in your goodness and trust that you are working to deepen my awareness of your presence in new ways. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 30:8-10

Supplemental Passages: Matthew 26:36-44

What do I need to surrender in the night to have joy formed in me?

What does it mean to surrender in times of sorrow? This term, often used in the context of war, is one that challenges the soul to relent from fighting for answers or control. It was once said that in order to surrender, there must first be a fight. In this context, a fight of the will. In the dark night of grief, we are faced with the invitation to trust God is working in the midst of tragedy. Even though we do not see, do we believe His will is for our good? This friction between trust and turmoil propels the soul to petition God in prayer.

One of the most profound prayers of Christ is found in the garden of Gethsemane. We read in Matthew 26 that Jesus, due to His overwhelming sorrow, went to pray, petitioning God saying, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Let us be comforted that Jesus too fell to His face asking for God to take away the cup of death and sheer sorrow of full surrender. For Jesus' surrender meant suffering. Yet, despite the darkness of His reality, this scene within the Gospel story powerfully displays His willing submission to God's most magnificent act of grace.

As we reflect on the sacrifice of our Savior, we too are invited to surrender ourselves similarly in our circumstances. Looking to Christ's obedience to the cross which led him to death yet we know from death came resurrection and in this promise, our joy will be made complete.

So, may we begin to view surrender differently— as a sweet song, a trust fall, our first choice, our safe place, and a steadfast stance against the darkness of sorrow.

Today, let us reflect on this question: What are the expectations and desires I need to surrender to the Lord in order for joy to be formed in me more deeply? Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Lord, May I not view surrender as dismissing my dreams but as entrusting you with them. May surrender be a practice of rest for my weary soul. Allow me to relinquish my attempts to control and no longer fear the shadows of death by trusting in your promise of everlasting joy. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

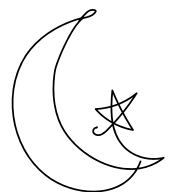
Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Isaiah 50:10

Jesus, help me to trust you when I cannot see. Allow me to surrender my need for sight and rely on your will to bring me to deeper dependence and overwhelming joy in the goodness of your grace. Thank you for being my security and sufficiency when all of the resources fail. In times of darkness, remind me that you are my light and my salvation. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 30:11-12

Supplemental Passages: Job 23

What do I need to receive in the night to have joy formed in me?

To mourn and rejoice, to grieve and give thanks— In Christ, these two realities coexist. As we wait for light to break through the clouds of disorientation, we are brought closer to the essence of joy, anchored in an awareness of God's grace. For what greater evidence do we have of God's grace than Jesus himself. This season, though darkened by the realities of brokenness in its many forms, is a time to receive the presence of God through Jesus our Savior.

This is the same invitation the angel gave the shepherds, on that night in Bethlehem, saying, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord..."

The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was and is the greatest news the world has even been given. For in receiving Him and accepting His lordship daily, we no longer have to fear the darkness alone and we are promised that one day our joy will be made complete when we are reunited with Him in eternity (John 16).

So, we wait. "knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence[and]so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

Not losing heart. "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen." 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 (ESV).

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today: **Have I received Christ as my Savior? and am I daily inviting the presence of God into my life, in order for joy formed more deeply?** Take some time to process and write down any reflections.

Father,

Thank you for the greatest gift of grace, your very own son. May I never forget the value of Jesus as my Savior, even when loss clouds my heavenly vision. This world will never satisfy my deepest longings. Be with me in the darkness, and let your presence illuminate my heart with unexplainable joy till I see you face to face. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: John 15:1-11

Lord, I want to be with you. Whether clear skies or storms, Help me to receive your presence and daily seek to abide in your love. I know I can do nothing apart from you. Help me to desire the joy you alone can bring my soul. Amen.

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Let us rest in order to have joy formed in us

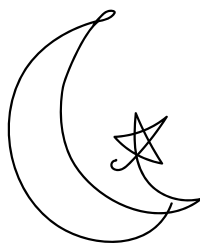
Read: Psalm 30

Stop: For twenty-four hours, try to cease from all work, both paid and unpaid.

Rest: Pay attention to the pace of your heart, mind, and body throughout the day. Ask the Lord to bring rest to your soul in hHim.

Delight: Delight in the Lord and those around you as much as possible throughout the day. Carry Psalm 37:4 in your heart: "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Contemplate: Find a moment to contemplate the goodness of God and the hope of Jesus through silence and solitude at some point today. If it's two minutes in the morning, midday, or evening, find the space to just be quiet and still before the Lord. Carry Psalm 145:5 with you as you contemplate: "On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wonderful works I will meditate."



Week Four

Love



Written by Emily Woody

Psalm 136

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His faithful love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of gods.

His faithful love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords.

His faithful love endures forever.

He alone does great wonders.

His faithful love endures forever.

He made the heavens skillfully.

His faithful love endures forever.

He spread the land on the waters.

His faithful love endures forever.

He made the great lights:

His faithful love endures forever.

the sun to rule by day,

His faithful love endures forever.

the moon and stars to rule by night.

His faithful love endures forever.

He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians

His faithful love endures forever.

and brought Israel out from among
them

His faithful love endures forever.

with a strong hand and outstretched
arm.

His faithful love endures forever.

He divided the Red Sea

His faithful love endures forever.

and led Israel through,

His faithful love endures forever.
but hurled Pharaoh and his army
into the Red Sea.

His faithful love endures forever.
He led his people in the wilderness.

His faithful love endures forever.

He struck down great kings

His faithful love endures forever.
and slaughtered famous kings—

His faithful love endures forever.

Sihon king of the Amorites

His faithful love endures forever.

and Og king of Bashan—

His faithful love endures forever.
and gave their land as an inheritance,

His faithful love endures forever.

an inheritance to Israel his servant.

His faithful love endures forever.

He remembered us in our humiliation

His faithful love endures forever.

and rescued us from our foes.

His faithful love endures forever.

He gives food to every creature.

His faithful love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of heaven!

His faithful love endures forever.

Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 136, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 136:1-3

Supplemental Passages: Psalm 27

What do I need to acknowledge in the night to have love formed in me?

As we enter into the last week of Advent, we focus on the deepest longing of our heart. To be known and loved speaks to the very core of who we are. God made us in His image, which means we are made for loving union with God and also with one another. We cannot begin to fathom the depth of love we are meant to experience daily. Our hearts were designed to receive and pour out love freely. Yet brokenness and hostility more accurately describe the world we live in today.

Today we have two conflicting realities. One, our human relationships, even the healthy ones, are vulnerable to division and strife. Relationships are pained by our sin and the sin of others. Two, we are more deeply loved than we can possibly comprehend by our heavenly Father. And Jesus demonstrated that love to us throughout His time on earth, and ultimately on the cross.

So in our darkest moments when it feels desolate or hostile, it is necessary to acknowledge the reality of our loneliness and pain. God does not expect us to be strong in the midst of heartache but to bring it to Him. We also must ask God to open our eyes to see the love that is present. Psalm 136 reminds us over and over and over again that no matter what, "His steadfast love endures forever."

So as I reflect on this past week, have there been moments that have made me question God's love for me? No matter the answer, I choose to ingrain His steadfast love on my heart and mind today. Take some time to write down multiple phrases that describe your experiences from this past week, both good and bad. Then after each one, write out the phrase, "his steadfast love endures forever." This practice allows us to both acknowledge our experiences and God's steadfast love.

Lord, I come and bow in your presence pouring out my heart to your listening ears. Jesus, there is brokenness all around me and within me which impacts my relationships. It also impacts my view of you. God, open my eyes to see more deeply your love and your redemption. Thank you that in you is the ministry of reconciliation. No matter how impossible things may seem, help me to place my trust in you. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18-25

Father, thank you for creating us in your image and for loving union. Whenever there is brokenness in my relationships or apparent distance with you, it is so comforting to remember that this is not part of your design or desire. You are for the marriages within this church. You are for reconciled friendships and healthy families. And you are for loving union with you. Help me rest in your love tonight as I lay my head down to sleep. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 136:6-9

Supplemental Passages: Proverbs 4:20-27

What do I need to grieve in the night to have love formed in me?

When the darkness is fueled by relational pain, there is a natural temptation to either harden the heart or numb it. Wounds birth a desire to fortify the heart, but often these fortresses are built out of resentment and bitterness. Or we may try to shut down the heart with apathy, convincing ourselves we don't care. This is not what God means when he tells us to guard our hearts. As the wellspring of life, we are not meant to wall it off but to guard it from sin and from hardening.

God invites us to grieve this pain. We are designed for deep intimacy with God and one another, so when intimacy is lacking or harmed, grief is a proper response. We need to mourn how our sin and the sin of others have damaged relationships with those we love. God is listening with empathy as we cry out to Him over what has been lost. He too grieves over these broken relationships. But also, we must grieve how our own brokenness so often keeps us from receiving God's love which He lavishes on us each day. It is comparative to starving at a banquet feast. Our hearts need help aligning to Him. Midnight reorients our hunger. We begin to crave the love of our Lord more desperately than we thought possible. We crave exactly what we are being offered, His loving mercy and kindness. He offers Himself.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when love seems distant and relationships are difficult: What do I need to grieve before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have love formed in me more deeply? Take some time to process and write any reflections in the space provided.

Lord, you call me to guard my heart. But rather than guarding it from pain, you want me to guard it from becoming hardened or numb, for it is the wellspring of life. Help me to grieve in a way that will allow me once again to receive and give love freely. This can only take place as I entrust my heart into your care. Thank you for being the Great Comforter. I love you, Lord Jesus!

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21

Lord, as I bow before you, I echo the prayer found in Ephesians 3. Jesus, let the riches of your glory grant me to be strengthened with your Spirit's power. Lord, help me with all of the saints to comprehend as much as possible your incomprehensible love. Jesus, I want to become so rooted in your love that all my doubts flee. Because in all honesty, there are times I doubt. I praise you that even when I am faithless, you remain faithful. Jesus, I need you to sustain me. Thank you for your love! Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 136:10-15

Supplemental Passages: Colossians 1:28-2:5

What do I need to wrestle in the night to have love formed in me?

Paul's epistles make it evidently clear that he had a deep love and affection for those to whom he ministered. As in all human relationships, sometimes these relationships were thriving and at times there were painful divisions. In Colossians, Paul describes his willingness to struggle and toil for the sake of unity and love. At the time of this writing, Paul was in prison. Talk about experiencing midnight. He was separated physically from those he loved and were burdened for. So, when he says he was toiling and struggling for them, this hard work took place on his knees. He was completely dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the deepest desires on His heart for those whom He loved.

Today, let us join Paul in toiling for those relationships where we desperately need God to work. Is your heart hurting over a child's rebellion? A loved one's salvation? A friend's betrayal? A recent rejection? Once again, we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. We have an enemy and it is not any person on this earth. Let us partner with God to fight against the actual enemy for the sake of love and unity within our church, friendships, and homes. And we are grateful this fight is even possible because of Jesus. Because of his obedience to come and then return to the Father, today we walk in the Spirit!

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when there is a relationship which feels impossible: How can I join Paul in struggling and toiling before the Lord about these relationships in order to have love and unity formed more deeply? Take some time to process and write any reflections in the space provided.

Lord Jesus, thank you for Paul's example of praying and toiling for those whom he loves. God, I bow before you and humbly yet boldly ask that you move miraculously among my friends and family. Let us love you with all of our hearts and love one another as ourselves. Break our hearts for any way we treat one another that goes against your holiness. Remind us often of your love for us and let that love be a reminder to love one another well. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Ephesians 5:1-2

God, thank you that I am your beloved child. These verses call me to be an imitator of you as a beloved child. Holy Spirit, I ask that you empower me to unconditionally and sacrificially love those around me. Jesus, thank you for being a beautiful example of loving well, even in your darkest hour. May I love others the way that you love me. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 136:16-22

Supplemental Passages: Philippians 1:1-11

What do I need to surrender in the night to have love formed in me?

Yesterday we looked at Paul as an example of wrestling and toiling well in the midst of the dark of the night. Paul had no idea how long his prison sentence would last. He didn't know if he would see those he loved again. Yet, his limitations within the earthly realm had given him greatness in the spiritual realm. All of his dependency was on the Holy Spirit. It was impossible for Paul to try to fix or control these relationships from afar. He relied on people to carry his letters to others and he relied on the Holy Spirit to work on the hearts of those he so often prayed for. He had such confidence that God would complete the work.

Before he met Jesus, Paul was a powerful religious man. People cowered before him. Then he met Jesus and discovered the glorious riches of His power. In advent, we celebrate the ushering in of a new kingdom. Jesus gives each of us access to the heavenly realm, which before was reserved for priests and only within the temple. We have such great promises and resources at our fingertips, yet so often we still rely on our own natural abilities to control desired outcomes, including our relationships. At times, God allows us to go through midnight so that we will come to the end of ourselves and finally yield to the loving will and power of our Father.

Many who have walked through a dark night talk about a depth in their intimacy with Christ, or depth of faith, or depth of peace that was not possible without suffering. There are great riches to discover at midnight if we will surrender and open our eyes to what God has in store for us.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when love and God seem far away: **What do I need to surrender before the Lord about the condition of my circumstances or of my heart in order to have love formed in me more deeply?** Take some time to process and write any reflections in the space provided.

Jesus, I am tired of trying to control everything and to work hard to create my desired outcomes. I bow before you and choose to let go. I choose to surrender to your will and plan. I also surrender to your process of cultivating love within and around me. Jesus, may our love abound more and more as we keep our eyes fixed on you. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-8

Jesus, when I read this definition of love. I know it is impossible for me to fulfill it daily to those around me. I bow before you humbly and ask that by your Spirit and grace, people experience patience and kindness and humility and selflessness from me, which is such evidence of Jesus abiding in me. To you be all glory and honor for any authentic love in my life. Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



Morning Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Look up Psalm 30, read it slowly, making a note of any word or phrase that stands out to you.

Read: Psalm 136:23-26

Supplemental Passages: James 1:16-18

What do I need to accept/receive in the night to have love formed in me?

As we look forward to Christmas morning, let us remember another night. During the time of Jesus's birth, there were wisemen from the East who watched the sky at night. The darkness allowed the stars to declare the story of the King of Kings being born in the land of Judah. When they received this good news, they traveled afar to bestow gifts on this royal baby. Jesus deserves all honor and all glory. He deserves every gift we could possibly give Him.

Yet He is the greatest gift giver. The coming of Jesus ushered in this new kingdom we are walking in. A kingdom where we have access to all of the riches of heaven while traversing on a hard and dark road. Jesus brought heaven to earth by entering this world, yet when he returned, He granted us access to the heavenly realm through Himself. Jesus today is sitting at the right hand of the Father interceding on our behalf. He has unlimited reserves in the heavenly realm. What are you in need of today? Love? Mercy? Grace? Forgiveness? Hope? Peace? Joy? Kindness? Courage? Strength? Self-Control? Gladness? Jesus loves you and loves to give good gifts to those who ask.

So here is the question on which we are to reflect today, and in our own dark nights, when love and God seem far away: **What do I need to accept/receive from the Lord in order to have love formed in me during the night?** Take some time to process and write any reflections in the space provided.

Father, we praise you for being the greatest Gift Giver!! Thank you for giving us your only beloved Son. Thank you that every good and perfect gift is from above, which comes down from the Father of lights! Jesus, thank you for being the greatest gift. We love you, Lord Jesus! Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Evening Reflection

Begin with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.

Scripture: Romans 8:37-39

Jesus, thank you that absolutely nothing can separate me from your love. Anytime there seems to be distance between us, remind me of this verse. Nothing, absolutely nothing will separate us. I ask that you continue to prune and heal my heart so that I can walk richly in this love every single day. I pray that this love continues to transform me and those around me. Jesus, we praise you for the glorious riches of your love! Amen

Conclude with two minutes of silence and solitude before the Lord.



week four

Saturday

Let us rest in order to have love formed in us

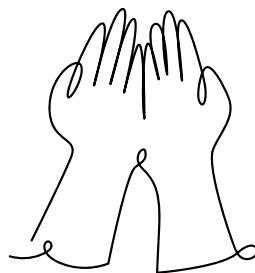
Read: Psalm 136

Stop: For twenty-four hours, try to cease from all work, both paid and unpaid.

Rest: Pay attention to the pace of your heart, mind, and body throughout the day. Ask the Lord to bring rest to your soul in hHim.

Delight: Delight in the Lord and those around you as much as possible throughout the day. Carry Psalm 37:4 in your heart: "Delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Contemplate: Find a moment to contemplate the goodness of God and the hope of Jesus through silence and solitude at some point today. If it's two minutes in the morning, midday, or evening, find the space to just be quiet and still before the Lord. Carry Psalm 145:5 with you as you contemplate: "On the glorious splendor of your majesty and on your wonderful works I will meditate."



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