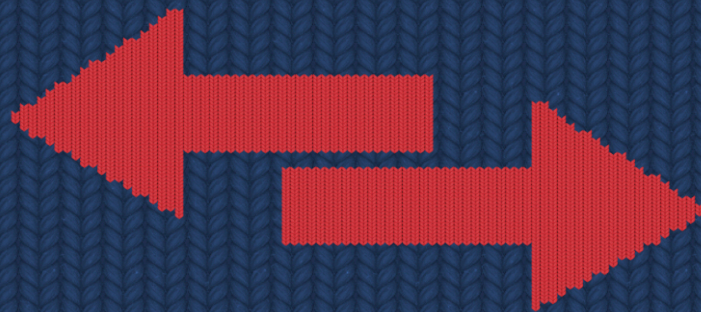




LOOKING

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD



Introduction:

There are four powerful truths—four beautiful realities that the season of Advent prompts in our hearts. They are: Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy. For those not familiar with the liturgical calendar used by many Christians throughout the centuries, Advent has historically been a period of four weeks, leading up to Christmas, that the church has set aside to help focus our hearts on the coming of our Messiah—specifically through the lens of these four themes. Then we reach the pinnacle of the season as we arrive at Christmas Eve and rest our eyes on Jesus Himself.

Our English word Advent comes from the Latin word “adventus” meaning “coming.” The celebration of Advent contains the two key ideas of *remembrance* and *anticipation*. There is the wonderful aspect of remembering what Christ did for us in His first coming, the first Advent—as well as the anticipation of what He will do when He returns. So, let’s examine each of these four blessed truths—Hope, Peace, Love, and Joy—and explore their roles in the life of the believer.

The format for this series will be a bit different from our normal sermon study guides. We want this to be more of a devotional experience as we think about and meditate on the meaning of the coming of Messiah—both His first and second comings. So, rather than the normal set of weekly study questions, for this series we will provide personal devotional questions for you to pray/meditate through and hopefully spend time discussing together as a family. Our hope is that you would be able to set aside time to gather together once a week as a family or small group to talk through, pray about, and focus your hearts together on Christ.

As you know, the challenge we all face during this busy season comes from the distractions the world provides—trying to wrest our focus off of the true meaning of Christmas. So take this as an opportunity to pause and think and pray through the theme for that week. Perhaps use this study guide as a journal and jot down some reflections and pray that God would fill your heart with thoughts of Him each day.

This series will also be different in that we will include in the introductions much more extensive background thoughts and reflections about the significance of each of these powerful ideas—thoughts that might enable you to see these familiar concepts in a new way. And then, as mentioned, we’ll provide some questions for you and your family to discuss. Then for those who are using this in a small group setting, you can discuss together what God impressed upon your heart from that week’s meditations, and we will also provide a couple of additional “going deeper” study questions for your group time as well.

We pray that this will be a time for God to really do some work on our hearts. But for that to happen, we need to be open, willing, and eager for that change. What things might God inspire in your heart and your life through this season of Advent? What will you be praying for God to help you change?

HOPE

Isaiah 9:1-7 & Titus 2:11-14

November 28th, 2021

Oftentimes in the process of developing our understanding of God and how He works in the world, we need to take a step back and look at things from a big-picture perspective. We need to ask big-picture kinds of questions—searching out and evaluating what appears to be going on behind the scenes. What is God up to in this event or that—especially as it relates to the unfolding of His plan? What is the meta-narrative that helps us make sense of what is happening around us? Engaging in this kind of exercise helps bring into focus and provides the context for the happenings in our everyday lives.

Over these next four weeks, we invite you to join us as we take that step back and look at the plan and purposes of God in a big-picture kind of way—and examine some important ways God works in the world and in our lives through the lens of these four themes of Advent. Let's begin with a deep dive into the idea of Hope.

(These are some thoughts on hope we have explored in previous studies. But it is good to revisit important issues like this from time to time. As we will see, hope is such a central theme and message of scripture, these ideas bear repeating.)

When looking at prominent themes presented in scripture, we are, by definition, looking at the forest, rather than the trees. We are compiling what we know from scripture and sorting all of this into categories of important truths. We are striving to develop a big-picture perspective. The big-picture question we begin with is: what is the central force driving forward the story of redemption in the Bible? What is the through-line that connects God's entire redemptive narrative together? Is it love? Many would say so. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..." (John 3:16). "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). There seems to be both scriptural and theological support for this. Love is definitely the central theme in the Bible and one which seems to have inspired the divine rescue plan that God previewed for us all the way back in the garden.

But peeking behind that veil a bit, can we identify the energizing force that drives the story of mankind, this story of love, ever forward? What internal drive has God crafted within us to keep us going when everything around us is screaming for us to stop—to throw in the towel and quit? What is the one principle, belief, or power in the universe that God has designed into life and into our psyches that enables us to persevere, to persist, to endure, and to even take a next step when there seems to be no reasonable evidence that we ought to? I would argue that it is hope. Hope is what keeps us looking to the future. Hope is what we cling to when everything else has fallen by the wayside. Hope is literally the engine that drives mankind forward amidst oftentimes horrific injustices and suffering—to take a next

breath—to take that next step and wait expectantly and sometimes desperately for good to finally come. I would argue that hope is the most basic instinct of the human heart, without which we would not nor could not exist or press on.

Hope gives meaning to seemingly meaningless events. Hope enables us to look beyond our present circumstances to a brighter destiny that God promises. Without hope, all that's left is despair. We must recognize that hope truly is the energizing principle that allows us to get out of bed every morning—hope that we will get that raise at work—hope that we have not screwed up our kids too badly—hope that things will get better in our marriages—hope against hope that the cancer will go into remission.

Hope is: the promise that God is working, the promise that God has a plan that will one day bring an end to sorrow, and the promise that all things will be made right. It is our hope in God—the confidence that is inspired by a God who is sovereign that serves as the content of this promise. Since God is in control, we can have hope.

In fact, we can define a Christian as “one who hopes”—one who is dissatisfied with the state of the world and who works to make things better. A Christian is one who has wagered his or her eternity on the hope, the confidence, and the assurance that God is, that God is working, and that God is wise, loving, and purposeful in how He is guiding the unfolding of history. A Christian is one who has seen the hand of God working in their own life, throughout history, and throughout the Bible, and is one who trusts (and this really is the essence of hope)—that God is unfolding and revealing to us throughout this history how things will be ultimately made right. History itself prompts us to hope.

If we look back to the very beginning, we see that the world was perfect and mankind was in perfect union with God (Genesis 1–2). If we look to the end, we see that the world will again be free from the ravages of sin and the influence of evil (Revelation 21–22). The journey in between these two points is God's grand redemptive narrative, which centers upon the hope that God will fulfill His promise to send the world a savior. It is precisely hope that pervades the entire story of the Old Testament as God's people wait for the Messiah to come. Without that hope, none of the suffering they endured would have been bearable or have made sense.

If we take a journey through that history, we see that the very first promise God made to His creation was that He would send a redeemer, a savior (Gen 3:15). This promise was the foundation of the hope that drove mankind from that moment on to live, love, work, serve, and persevere through a thorn-filled life. Creation was broken because of sin, and the hope God gave mankind was that He had a solution. So we pressed on.

Hope is what drove Adam and Eve to persevere, even after the Fall and after their family was destroyed by murder. It was the promise of the “seed of the woman” that gave them hope. Then, all throughout succeeding history God continually reaffirmed that initial promise. What did this look like?

God chose Abraham to be the fountainhead of a people through whom the Messiah would come. It was hope and trust that God keeps His promises and could raise the dead

(Heb 11:19) that enabled Abraham to offer up his only son. It was hope that Israel clung to through 400 years of slavery—that God would indeed send a deliverer. It was hope that sustained the Israelites in the desert for 40 years, when the promises of God seemed to be in question. It was hope that God would send a righteous king that heartened generation after generation in Israel who watched godless kings lead them into idolatry. It was hope that inspired God’s people to trust for 70 years in Babylon, after the most disheartening events in their nation’s history. The temple and city were destroyed and their God had ostensibly been defeated by the gods of Nebuchadnezzar. The encouragement of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the godly witness of Daniel drove the exiles on to hope. Hope in the promise of the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15); in the ultimate Passover lamb (Ex 12:2-13); in the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15); in the child of the virgin who would be called Immanuel (Is 7:14); and the righteous branch in Jeremiah (Jer 23)—all of these nudges and reminders from God fueled this hope.

And then it happened. Messiah finally came. That hope was not wasted. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to offer us life by dying on the cross for our sins. Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise and the object of that hope. He is the promised savior. He is the culmination of all the hopes and dreams that carried God’s people on through the worst of times. After centuries and centuries of desperately clinging to hope, in a climax of anticipation and overwhelming joy, the Messiah finally came—and that all-consuming hope was actually fulfilled. (Selah)

So now what? If hope is so integral to the most basic functioning of the human spirit, how does humanity continue? Hope was fulfilled. Messiah has come. Will hope no longer matter? What do we do without that energizing force that drives us ever forward? This is the moment where we kneel in reverent silence as we witness the breathtaking creative genius of God at work.

In one of the most brilliant, most awe-inspiring, epic plot twists ever imagined, God actually uses mankind’s rejection of Himself as the means to keep us seeking after Him. We refused the object of hope we were so desperate for. We rejected the only thing we ever truly needed. God promised. We hoped. God delivered. But the story was not yet complete.

Somehow, miraculously, even though the hope of mankind was actually fulfilled in the coming of the promised savior, God designed a way to continue to utilize this most basic drive within us by orchestrating the unfolding of His plan to require a second coming of Messiah. After the hope of fallen humanity was fully, powerfully, and finally consummated in the coming of Messiah, God’s grand redemptive narrative, and really, all of human life, somehow now continues to center upon hope—hope that Jesus will return to make all things right. Our selfish rejection of Messiah turned out to be the very mechanism that would initiate this new era of hope.

So, mankind continues to hope! We continue to trust that God will provide. We continue to believe that He will return and establish that kingdom He has so wonderfully

described in His Word. Hope continues to be the currency of the soul. God had to do it this way—because a life without hope is no life at all.

Hope truly is that through-line that connects all of history together. It is the driving force in the heart of mankind that keeps us moving forward. Without hope, we become despondent—in essence, not really living any longer. *With* hope, we press on with optimism and even joy. Hope is the energizing principle that gives us life. Knowing that this is the way the heart of man operates (in fact, designing us in this way), God placed at the climax of history the fulfillment of that great initial hope.

This is the heart of the meaning of Advent. This is the heart of hope itself. This is the coming of Messiah—the fulfillment of the hope that fueled and sustained and buoyed and encouraged and emboldened and inspired weary hearts ever since Adam's Fall.

So now that Christ has come—now that Advent is fulfilled, in what specifically do we continue to hope? We have already mentioned the return of Christ as the pinnacle of our future hope. But just to complete the picture a bit...

We live precisely in the hope of the resurrection of the dead. That this brief life ends in inevitable and inescapable death is the dread of all mankind. But resurrection hope cancels out this dread. We looked earlier at Abraham's confidence in God's power over death. Joseph, Moses, and David all held to a resurrection hope (Heb 11, 2 Sam 12). Job articulates this hope most eloquently: *"And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh, I shall see God"* (Job 19:25-26).

Ezekiel and Daniel are rich with resurrection pictures. Needless to say, this is one of the most prevalent themes throughout scripture. The New Testament is brimming with such resurrection hope references. For example: *"And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of His Spirit who lives in you"* (Rom 8:11). If we possess the Spirit, then just as surely as Christ was raised incorruptible, so will we be also. We need not fear death. Is that not the essence of hope? Is that not the power of resurrection truth—that we no longer need to fear the great unknown; "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns," as Shakespeare opined? The confidence that death is actually a promotion, a gateway that finally brings us home—this is the connection between hope and resurrection.

"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 Pet 1:3-5)

In addition to the hope of resurrection, we live in the hope of Heaven. Our reward, our inheritance, our dwelling with God is all wrapped up in the single word, Heaven. We live with an expectancy of receiving what He has promised us in glory.

Why do we hope? Because things are not as they should be. We hope because we suffer. In fact, hope is inextricably tied to suffering. Sharing in Christ's suffering is the guarantee of sharing in His glory. Suffering is the process by which faith is produced and refined. Faith and hope work hand in hand. Hope is a forward gaze, anticipating that something better is coming. And faith is the rested assurance that God is willing and able to make it so.

Where does hope come from? According to Romans 5:3-5, hope comes in an unbreakable chain, through character and perseverance, as brought on by tribulation. It is through the enduring of tribulation that the seeds are planted from which hope eventually grows.

Hope is not just a vague "wishing for" or desiring of something better. In other words, hope is hope *in* something. It is a belief, a trust, a confidence in the promise-keeping nature of God. This hope—that links the "sharing in suffering" with the "sharing in glory" is the hope that God will do what He has promised. He will make all wrongs right. He will raise up those who have been down-trodden for His name's sake. He will bring to glory those who have shared in the sufferings of His Son.

As we have seen, even post-Advent, hope is what drives us on still throughout this pain-filled life. It is the hope; really, the confidence that death, in the end, has no power and is not *actually* the end. It is the hope that God will again keep His promises and Jesus will return to dwell with us forever—when hope will be no more. In a sense, if you think about it, Heaven will be the absence or end of hope—not in the sense of hopelessness, but in the sense of completion and fulfillment. There will no longer be a need for hope. Hope is what drives us to look to Heaven as our actual home. When we arrive home, we will be complete. We will have peace. We will be with God—which is the ache of every human heart. But until then, God has given us this incredible gift called hope.

Devotional questions:

The idea of hope in the Christian life brings up a lot of questions in our hearts. After reading the introductory notes, set aside a time this week with your family or group to think about and talk through each of these questions about hope:

1. When thinking about hope, what Bible stories come to mind (e.g. Hannah—1 Sam 1; Esther, Daniel, etc.)? Which stories really put the idea of hope on display? Why? What biblical stories of hope resonate with you the most?
2. What is it in life that drives us to hope? What situations in life reveal that hope is the only answer? How is hope the antidote for worry and anxiety? What is it about hope that can redirect our thinking? Spend some time with God thanking Him for giving us hope and for being the trustworthy object of that hope.
3. What kind of hopes do you have on a typical day? What unfulfilled hopes do you have in this life? What hopes do you have for Heaven? What are some specific worries,

temptations, and frustrations in your life that might be avoided if you were to focus your heart each morning on the hope Christ provides for you?

4. Since God is in control, we can have hope. Where have you seen this idea at work in your own life? When do you really believe this is true? When do you (by your actions) reveal that you might not fully or consistently believe it? Talk to God about why you sometimes doubt.
5. What events can you look back on in your life to see God's faithfulness? What can you praise Him for right now? As we remember and rehearse the amazing work of God in our lives, it brings the power of those experiences back into our present awareness and stokes the fires of hope. Take a few minutes to praise God for the hope He has given you.

Additional Discussion questions:

1. What role does longing play in our hearts? What does the idea of longing itself reveal? What are you longing for? Spend some time with the Lord and ask Him what He would like you to long for.
2. What is the relationship between hope and dependence? Helplessness and dependence is such a hard state for most of us to dwell in. Why do you think this is so? How does God use this state to grow our faith? Why is this an essential element of a life that is characterized by prayer? When we don't pray, what are we communicating to God? What does this say about our own self-sufficiency? Pray that God would help nudge you into a pattern of life that enables you to regularly connect with Him in conversational prayer.

PEACE

Selected Texts

December 5th, 2021

We are journeying through the season of Advent and looking at the amazing themes that arise when remembering Christ's first coming, as well as the feelings that arise as we anticipate His return. Last time we explored the idea of hope and how foundational hope is to our very being. We cannot exist without hope, and so God, in His infinite wisdom, designed life and all of history around, first, the promise that Messiah was coming. This was the hope mankind clung to. This was the hope that sustained us through the seemingly endless trials of life. Next, when that hope was finally fulfilled, when Messiah came, God then promised that Christ would return. This renewed and reimagined hope has carried us on ever since. Christ will return to make all things right. Hope truly is the currency of the soul. And hope is the first of the amazing themes that the Advent of Christ lays before us.

The next picture that Advent paints for us is the picture of peace. Jesus Christ, God's own Son, came to give us peace. This is a very simple statement, yet one which rings with profound implications. When we think of the idea of peace, what images come to mind? Perhaps tranquility, absence of hostility, health, soundness of mind and body, freedom from strife? When you boil it down, peace is a reaction to something. It is a state, mindset, or condition that is the contrast of something else. That "something else" can be war, or anxiety, or travail, or a myriad of other various maladies. Peace is a state of welfare that stands confidently and defiantly against its enemies.

The Bible describes several different kinds of peace. There is spiritual peace which is the gift of God through the victory of Jesus Christ on the cross. There is internal and external peace we can experience in our own hearts and in our relationships with others. There is also an everlasting peace that Christ will bring with Him when He establishes His kingdom. But whatever kind of peace we discuss, we can describe it as a state of blessedness that exists in the midst of (and even though assaulted by) trials, tribulations, and all other manner of conflict.

This context of trials and suffering gives meaning to what peace is all about. It is only in examining the opposite of peace, or the obstacles to peace, that we can truly understand what peace entails. It is no accident that the spiritual life of the believer is most often pictured in terms of warfare and battle. In a very real sense, peace is an outcome and result of war. The conflict we now experience is the prelude to peace. How is it that we have peace with God? Because Jesus fought our battle and won the victory over death. This motif of war, battle, conflict, and suffering is absolutely central to the Christian life.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "The steps by which we ascend to the place of joy are usually moist with tears." It is an inescapable truth that the path to glory, and in this life, the

path to peace, leads inexorably through suffering. Such is our lot in life and such is the story of not only scripture but of the entire history of fallen mankind as well. That we would be unable to appreciate the good without first experiencing the bad is simply how humans operate. Nobel Prize winner George Wald said, "When you have no experience of pain, it is rather hard to experience joy."

Scripture is replete with images and examples confirming this to be true. *"If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him..."* (2 Tim 2:12 KJV). *"But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed"* (1 Pet 4:13). *"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"* (2 Cor 4:17). *"...we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God..."* (Acts 14:22b). *"...if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory"* (Rom 8:17). *"...we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort"* (2 Cor 1:7b). The list of verses that discusses this theme is seemingly endless. The road that leads to hope and peace will invariably pass through suffering. It is the way of the world. It is the way of the Christian life.

Couldn't there be an easier way? Why is suffering a necessary prerequisite to the blessedness of peace? Ultimately, God is using the suffering we experience to mold us into the image of His Son. Suffering is the mechanism by which God burns away the dross from the lives of those He loves. Through suffering He purifies and prepares His people for what is to come.

So, why is suffering a path to peace? Suffering seems to be the only tool that is truly effective in capturing our attention. C.S. Lewis always says it well, "...pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Suffering has the ability to force us to re-focus our priorities on the important things in life. When everything we have is taken away; when the things of this world are no longer present to cloud our vision, the only option left is to look to God for the answers.

Suffering is the instrument through which God turns our eyes toward Him. It alone is immediate and powerful enough to compel us to loosen the grip we have on the things of this world. And valuing the things of God above all else is the goal. Suffering makes us long for home, our true home. Suffering helps make it clear that this world is not our home.

The well-known nineteenth century Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne once said, "There is a great want about all Christians who have not suffered. Some flowers must be broken or bruised before they emit any fragrance." Those who are older and wiser in the faith all seem to agree that suffering in the Christian life is not something to be dreaded and avoided at all costs. If possible, it is something to be welcomed. James goes so far as to say, *"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"* (James 1:2-4). Peace is not

the absence of trials. It is a learned confidence in God and rested assurance in God's sovereignty through the midst of and because of trials.

Far from devastating our lives, suffering actually works to make us perfect and complete. After all, we are in the Master's hand; we have nothing to fear. If there are rough edges that need to be chipped away and smoothed, it will probably hurt, but we can rest assured the quality of the finished product will be worth the pain. And even more importantly, when the Lord is finished, the result will be what He wants it to be.

Stress, anxiety, worry, and frustrations all seem to be a normal part of every Christian's life. But the question is, does it need to be this way? I think we all imagine that true peace is only possible when Christ returns and makes all things right. But the presence of trials and suffering in this world actually militates against this idea. Jesus said, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"* (John 14:27). He also said a couple of chapters later, *"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). Jesus very clearly wants us to live a life of peace now—in the midst of trials, not merely in the absence of them. He has given us His peace. He has overcome the world. He has fought the battle and won so that we can have peace right here and right now.

Scripture tells us that we should not be surprised at the fiery ordeals that overtake us. We should understand that suffering is the path God has prescribed if we are to rid ourselves of the sin that blocks a life of peace. And it is clear that Christ desires us to live in peace. But practically, where does the peace of Christ come from? How do we access it?

The Apostle Paul had that kind of peace, and he describes it for us in the book of Philippians. Paul is writing this letter from prison and is instructing the Philippians how to have peace through trials. He is sitting there in chains and telling them to do all things without grumbling, and to rejoice in the Lord always. In Philippians 4:6 the injunction Paul gives us is: be anxious for nothing. What is Paul really saying here? What is the Holy Spirit expecting us to do? When life hits you in the face, when tragedy strikes, when life just doesn't make any sense, what is God's answer? BE ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING? How? How in the world can we not be anxious when our world seems to be crumbling around us?

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Phil 4:6). As simple as it sounds, the antidote to being anxious, he says, is that we are to pray. That's it? It seems too easy (or maybe simplistic). That's the answer the Holy Spirit (through Paul) is giving us. The way to achieve a stress-free life of peace is to pray.

Why is it that prayer brings peace? Prayer is acknowledging that God is God, that He is in control, and that He cares about what happens to us. It is the recognition of the sovereignty of God. If we're anxious, that means that we either don't believe in or don't understand the ramifications of a God who is sovereign. Prayer essentially means leaving the matter in the hands of God—and if He is sovereign, truly in control, then there's no possible

reason to be anxious. So, the first thing we need to know, the first step toward a life of peace, is that we need to pray.

How are we to pray? Paul states in verse six that we are to pray with thanksgiving. Why is thanksgiving so much a necessary element of prayer? First of all, we are commanded to do so in 1 Thess. 5:18: "... *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*" Even more, when we rehearse the wondrous deeds that God has done in our lives—when we remember how often He has resolved seemingly impossible situations—it gives us comfort that He is able to do the same in this impossible one. Repeatedly in the Psalms, the way David got himself out of depressions and got his focus back—how he got himself out of worry and anxiousness was by rehearsing and reciting the amazing works and attributes of God. Over and over again, this is the pattern shown us in scripture.

What the Biblical writers understood, and what we need to understand, is that our God is always faithful. We have a God who has a perfect track record—not only in the Scriptures, but also in our own lives. And we need to recognize that, both for our own peace of mind, and *before Him* in praise and thanksgiving. A prayer life filled with thanksgiving will keep God's faithfulness fresh in your mind. So, we are to pray. We are to pray with thanksgiving. And next, verse six also states that we are to pray about everything.

Why everything? Is God the God of only the big stuff? Does He not care about the falling of a sparrow? He cares for everything about you. We are told in Proverbs 3:5-6, "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.*" We tend to look at that verse from the positive side, but it seems that the reverse holds true as well: if we don't acknowledge Him in all our ways, then He won't direct our paths. Is it possible that the extent to which you acknowledge Him determines the amount of direction you get? The prerequisite to total peace and total understanding of God's will and direction for your life is to submit everything to Him in prayer. So, we need to pray. We need to pray with thanksgiving. And we need to pray about everything.

What is the promised result when we turn everything over to God in prayer? It is the peace of God. Philippians 4:7 says, "*...and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" What a glorious promise. What exactly is this peace? It is the knowledge that God is in control. It is an understanding of the promises of God and a confidence in the one who made those promises. Now here is the takeaway:

True peace is a rested assurance in the sovereignty of God that comes from submitting everything to Him in prayer. If you are ever to have peace in your life, true peace, then you must learn to give everything over to God in prayer. Whatever the situation, whatever the answer from God, the point is that if it's left in His hands and truly given over to His sovereignty, you can rest assured.

A life of peace is possible—a stress-free way of living is not only offered in scripture, it is commanded—and it's how God designed life to be. Because our faith is not yet sight,

because we all have to live life to one extent or another by faith, we might as well live it in peace—God's peace—that rested assurance in the sovereignty of God that comes from submitting everything to Him in prayer.

The price tag for peace is prayer—prayer with thanksgiving—and prayer about everything. A familiar hymn puts it like this, “Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear / all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

Devotional questions:

The idea of peace these days seems so foreign to us. When you look around, there is no peace to be found. If we find someone who is not dealing with anxiety, we are shocked. After reading the introductory notes, take some time this week to meditate on the idea of the peace God offers us. Talk and pray with your family or small group through these questions on peace:

1. Why do you think so few people today truly experience the peace of God on a regular basis? What are some of the barriers to peace that we face in life? Which of those barriers affect you the most? Why do you think that is?
2. If you had to define peace in just a few words, how would you describe it? What is the connection between peace and our understanding of who God is? Understanding and focusing on the attributes of God can add to our peace. Which attributes of God do you think would be most effective? What has been your experience of peace (or lack thereof) in your life? How has this changed as you have grown in your faith?
3. What are the different kinds of peace we can experience in our lives? What areas in your own heart seem to be lacking peace? Take some time to pray through these thoughts and talk to God about why this might be.
4. What role has suffering played in how God is refining and shaping who you are as His child? Looking back on these experiences, how have they affected the peace you feel when confronting new challenges or trials? Pray through this idea of suffering and talk with God about how you feel about it. What do you think God is saying to you about how you view suffering?
5. What do you see as the connection between prayer and peace? What has been your experience with the effect that regular prayer has on your peace or lack thereof? How does thankfulness affect our peace? Try an experiment this week. Begin each day with prayers of thankfulness. Then keep track of how this affects your peace or anxiety as you go throughout your day.

Additional Discussion questions:

1. We mentioned that peace (in all its forms) is a reaction to something—a mindset that is a contrast of something else. What are some of these opposites and enemies of peace? In other words, what are some things that peace is a reaction to? Where do each of these things come from? How can we break down each opponent to peace to

its most basic elements—in order to apply God’s Word and God’s truth to that situation?

2. One of the ways we defined peace was, “A state of blessedness that exists in the midst of (and even though assaulted by) trials, tribulations, and all other manners of conflict.” How can we work toward having that peace? What are some practical steps? How does suffering help us learn to take our eyes off ourselves and our temporary situations and put them on God and eternity? How can having an eternal perspective add to our peace?

LOVE

Luke 1:26-37 & John 3:16

December 12th, 2021

In many ways the Bible is a love story. It is love that drives God's grand redemptive narrative forward. Love is the central theme of history and the defining characteristic of what it means to be a Christian (John 13:35). Love is the thread that ties together creation and redemption, and everything in between. Love is the story of God creating and then rescuing His children—of sacrificing His own Son to be in relationship with us. Love is the subtext underlying every passage in the Bible.

When we think of love being discussed in the Bible, we recall the familiar passage where Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 13 the priority of love—and, in context, what love does to hold the body together. He says of faith, hope, and love, that the greatest is love. In this “love chapter,” he describes a lot about love—what love does and does not do—but a clear definition is not really offered. So if we are to really understand the enormity of the sacrificial love of God and the ramifications of the injunction laid upon us to reflect that kind of love, we should attempt to define love a little more clearly. When we are able to say that we “love” our God for the sacrifice He made by sending His Son to die on the cross, and also say that we “love” a certain flavor of potato chips, we know some clarification of the term is needed.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis takes us on a journey that he himself had taken with regard to how to define the idea of love. Lewis began his journey toward a definition of love by envisioning love in just two respects. The first is what he called “gift-love.” This is represented by a man working to provide for his family. The second, he called “need-love.” This is the love that sends a child to his mother's arms. He later added a third category which he called “appreciative love.” This can be likened to gratitude and thanksgiving. Then, eventually, based on four Greek words used in scripture for different aspects of love, he refined and honed his categories into four distinct types.

The first type is represented by the Greek term “*storge*”—what Lewis calls “affection.” Sometimes used to refer to familial love (parent/child or other family members), Lewis broadens this to include all those we have affection for. It differs from friendship in that you can feel affection for those whom you would not choose as your friend (the clerk at the store who regularly goes out of their way to help you, or the neighbor who always has a nice thing to say). It is the love of enjoying someone or something and can also include the feelings we have for our pets.

The next kind of love is “*phileo* (or *philia*)”—what Lewis refers to as “friendship.” We see this reflected in the familiar name “Philadelphia,” the city of brotherly love. *Phileo* is a love of common interest—a love of those who care about the same things. Lewis notes: “Friendship is born at that moment when one man says to another: “What! You too? I thought that no one

but myself....” Although Lewis refers to this love as the least needed, it can also be the most enjoyed and longest-lasting of the earthly loves.

A third kind of love is called “eros” in Greek and is another way of speaking of romantic love. Lewis equates this with what we call “being in love.” Eros goes beyond merely a sexual relationship and seeks emotional connection with another person. This kind of love is focused on the object and little attention is paid to the self.

The last kind of love is “agape”—what Lewis refers to as “charity.” This kind is different from the others because it is modeled for us by God Himself. It is sometimes referred to as a divine kind of love and the source of all the others. It is our love of God and the love from God. This is indeed the most unselfish kind of love, where the needs of the other is all that matters and nothing is asked for in return. It loves the unlovable and undeserving, and is unconditional.

Lewis argues that to love is to be vulnerable—to risk that this love will be spurned or abused. The obvious vulnerability we offer in romantic love is also present in open, honest, transparent friendships. This vulnerability just takes a different form. The most vulnerable of all is agape, where nothing is asked for or required in return. Therein lies the risk.

The world will try to make us believe that we are slaves to love. Countless movies and romantic novels would have us believe that love is an overwhelming force that we, in essence, must bow down to. But scripture paints a different picture. Regardless of the type of love, we must understand that love is a choice. We cheapen love when we intimate that we have no power over it. Even the picture presented in the phrase “falling in love” furthers one of the biggest lies about love the world would have us believe—namely, that love is out of our control—that love is just a feeling we must simply submit to.

This misconception drives the depressingly high divorce rate that exists in our world. When people see love as merely a feeling (which can naturally sometimes wane), and when those feelings diminish they sometimes believe that love is gone—and then are tempted to abandon those relationships. No, love is a choice. It is a decision of the will. It is a commitment to someone or something that transcends mere feelings. Yes, there are attendant feelings that accompany the phenomenon of love, but to reduce love to just a feeling is to not give love its due.

We need to understand that love is a verb. It is something we do. It is something we choose. To highlight the fact that love is a choice, we need to remember that love is commanded of us. Jesus called this the greatest commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”* (Matt 22:37-40). And lest we miss the significance of this statement, Jesus is basically saying, “If I could sum up the entire Old Testament Law into one idea, it be the command to love.” We are obligated to love whether we like it or not. If it were a mere feeling, how could we be accountable to obey that command?

One way to define something is to describe what it is not. In theology this is called “apophatic theology.” This is where we try to describe who God is by detailing what He is not. Sometimes something is so vast and difficult to get your mind around that the only way to really approach it is to begin by ruling out what it isn’t. The same idea applies to love. Love is such a grand, magnificent, glorious concept with so many brilliant facets, that to do justice to the topic you sometimes have to simply start by describing what love is not. There are a lot of opposites of love. It can be said that the opposite of love is hate. Some have also described the opposite of love as fear. But another opposite of love is selfishness. C.S. Lewis highlights this for us:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable. (Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

Here Lewis equates love with the willingness to be open, transparent, and vulnerable. But he also highlights that to ensure your heart is safe from hurt or pain or the sting of rejection, you must wrap it in the “coffin of your selfishness.” What a perfect picture of the opposite of love. It is selfishness. It is a kind of death whereby you cut yourself off from, yes, the pain of rejection, but you also do not truly live—in that you isolate and insulate yourself from connecting with anyone or anything. It is the height of selfishness to never open yourself up to another—to never sacrificially give for another’s benefit. With love comes connection and intimacy, but also vulnerability and risk. And that is the glory of love. When it is required—when the object of our love is worthy of sacrifice and self-giving—that makes it all worthwhile.

So far we’ve seen that love is vulnerable, love is a choice, love is commanded of us, and love is selfless. We also need to see that love involves sacrifice. John 3:16 is a verse that is quoted so often it can very easily lose its power. But the love that is described in that verse gets to the heart of another facet of the meaning of love. To give up what is most precious to us for the sake of another is the greatest kind of love imaginable. God so loved the world that He gave us His Son—to be abused, rejected, and killed—so that we might have life.

When you become a parent, your view of life changes. Your view of God changes, and your view of love changes. You have a new perspective on what it means for God to call you His child. The love you have for your children radically transforms your view of love—and your view of how God must feel about you. I can imagine situations where I would give up my life for someone else. But I honestly have a hard time imagining a scenario where I would give up the life of one of my children. But this is the sacrifice God made for us.

Jesus said in John 15:13, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” This sacrificial love was the motivation for the greatest sacrifice of all time—not just that God the Father gave us His Son, but that God the Son gave us Himself. We often

focus on the death of Christ as the center of that sacrifice, but there is another facet we need to wrap our minds around: Christ displayed untold sacrifice not only in the crucifixion, but also in the incarnation—in Christ becoming man. We sometimes forget that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, took on flesh—took on an additional nature to become forever the God-man. He did not cloak Himself in human flesh for a mere thirty-three years. No, what is most mindboggling is that at this very moment, there is a man standing at the right hand of the Father. Jesus chose to locate Himself, in all the fullness of deity, forever within the confines of a human body. I don't know if we will ever truly understand the sacrifice this entailed. Sacrifice is an absolutely undeniable element in our definition of love.

One final aspect of love is that it must be shared. There is no possible way to conceive of a love that is kept to oneself. The love of God was the impetus for creating mankind in the first place. The overflowing love of God absolutely had to be poured out upon others. Not that there was any kind of need within God, but love of that quality and magnitude exists to be expressed. Lewis says: "In God there is no hunger that needs to be filled, only plenteousness that desires to give" (Lewis, *The Four Loves*).

The question remains: what does this kind of love motivate us to do? In fact, what is God's definition of love? In a word...obedience. This is not just external conformity to the Law, but the internal desire for righteousness—a longing to be like Christ. This is the core of how God wants us to look at love.

The Bible has quite a few things to say on this matter (and they all sound very similar):

"If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15).

"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching...Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching" (John 14:23-24).

"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:10).

"...this is love for God: to keep his commands" (1 John 5:3).

"And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands..." (2 John 1:6).

There are many more passages that re-emphasize this point. Obedience of God is the heart of love. We cannot know God until we know His commandments—His desires for how we should live. And we cannot truly love God until we obey His Word. The more you know God, the more you will desire to obey Him. And the more you obey Him, the more you will love Him. These actions grow in a crescendo, building upon one another. Again, love is a verb. It is something we must choose to do.

Love, then, flows in two directions: vertically (our relationship with God) and horizontally (our relationship with others). Much of what we have discussed pertains to the horizontal. But we must be sure to first lay the groundwork in the vertical. Our relationship with God is the foundation of and wellspring for love. We must attend to that relationship first

so that we can truly know love—so that it can flow from us to all those around us. Lewis goes so far as to say that we cannot love a fellow creature until we love God.

Devotional questions:

There is so much written and said about love in the world today. Some of it is good, but much of it is both wrong and harmful. Where should we go for a proper understanding of what love is and what love is not? After reading the notes above, spend some time thinking and talking through the questions below with your family or small group.

1. One of the things we learn from C.S. Lewis on this topic is that to love is to be vulnerable. What does this mean? How are we vulnerable when we choose to love? What are we risking? Even with this risk, is love worth it? How so? What are some examples of this? Pray and ask God to bring to mind situations in your life where opening up to love was difficult or even costly. What did you learn about yourself through this?
2. How is love a sacrifice? Where have you seen this in your life? What have you had to sacrifice in connection with love? Where have you seen others sacrifice? Again, even with this sacrifice, is it worth it? How so? How is love a sacrifice for God (beyond the greatest sacrifice of His Son)? Spend some time talking with God about this.
3. In what ways is love a choice? In what ways is love a feeling? What is the danger in thinking of love as merely a feeling? How can we understand God's view of love better by seeing it as a verb—something that He commands that we do? How have you seen this idea played out in your life? In other words, when have you lived out the reality that love is a choice?
4. Why must love be shared? What is it about love that makes it so? Where have you seen this in your life? How is this true of God?
5. In our relationship with God, what is the connection between love and obedience? Re-read the passages above about love and obedience. What stands out to you? How have you seen this demonstrated in those around you, or in your life? What might God be saying to you about obedience? Spend some time in prayer and confession in response to what you hear God saying.

Additional Discussion questions:

1. What are some of the stories of love in scripture that stand out to you (more than just romantic love)? What is it about these stories that are impactful to you?
2. Where do you think you excel when it comes to God's call in your life to love? Where do you think you fall short? Which of the items mentioned in 1 Corinthians 13 really characterizes your life? What are some examples? What is God speaking to your heart about love, and what areas He would like to work on with you?

JOY

Luke 2:8-20 & Psalm 51:10-13

December 19th, 2021

We are journeying through the Advent of Christ and looking at the amazing themes that arise when discussing Christ's first coming—as well as the anticipation of His return. The first week we took some time to explore the idea of Hope. We then looked at Peace and Love. The final picture that Advent paints for us is that of Joy. What is joy and how can we experience it?

A dictionary definition of joy is: "...the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying." But what the world thinks of as joy, as reflected in this dictionary definition, is actually more the idea of happiness. The source of happiness is happenings or happenstance. It is transitory. It is temporary. The book of Job says, "...the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment" (Job 20:5). In contrast to joy, happiness is momentary and fleeting because it is focused on our circumstances and the world around us. It comes and goes depending on the situation. As circumstances change, so often does our sense of happiness. This happiness is a cheap imitation and dim reflection of true joy. The Bible defines joy in a much different way.

In scripture we see that joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness can be described as an outward expression of elation, whereas joy is more an inner sense of peace, contentment, and trust. The source of joy is God. It is founded upon His goodness, His promises, His faithfulness, and His love. Joy is not temporary because it is grounded in who God is. Joy is a bold declaration that regardless of circumstances, our hearts can rejoice. It is the heart's jubilant cry that we are blessed and that God is good.

Joy is a topic that radiates forth from the writers of scripture. "Joy," "joyful," and "rejoice" seem to ring from just about every page. But a key component of God's perspective on joy is highlighted for us in John. "*If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*" (John 15:10-11). Joy is intimately tied to our relationship with Christ—and our obedience to Him. According to philosopher/theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God." Joy is not just a random experience of happiness or bliss. It is inseparable from and a byproduct of a relationship with God.

We can actually use joy as a measuring stick for the state of our walk with God. If your soul is satisfied in Christ, you will rejoice in Christ. If you take your eyes off Christ, you'll invariably lose your joy. It has been said that Christian joy is a barometer of our spiritual life. When the needle dips, we should take note.

In addition to its source and foundation being in Christ, what else does the Bible say about joy? First it says that joy is a gift from God. It is a gift to those who belong in Jesus. The word *gospel* can be defined as “good news” or “a message bringing joy.” What did the angel say to the shepherds? “...I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). What was that good news? It was that true joy had now come into the world.

Secondly, joy is a fruit of walking in the Spirit. Paul says in Galatians 5:22, “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness...*” and so on. One helpful definition of walking in the Spirit: a moment by moment choice to submit our will to the will of the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit, or “walking in the Spirit,” is not an ecstatic experience. It is an act of the will. Since joy is a fruit of that relationship, we must be walking in the Spirit to be connected to the source of joy. This highlights that joy is a choice. We can choose joy.

Next, joy is independent of circumstances. In James we read, “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds...*” (Jam 1:2). Paul said, “*But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you*” (Phil 2:17). Peter also weighed in: “*But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed*” (1 Pet 4:13). So even if we find ourselves in the midst of a situation that genuinely brings us sorrow or pain, the joy we carry inside can never be touched. Our confidence in the sovereign hand of God filtering everything that happens to us through His watch-care gives us the perspective we need to remain joyful. Keeping in view the eternal weight of glory that awaits us outweighs and gives context to the momentary light affliction we experience.

Finally, joy is a result of thankfulness. Paul ties joy and thankfulness together when he admonishes us to, “*Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thess 5:16-18). It seems Christians are always looking for “God’s will” for their lives. How often in scripture is it as plainly laid out as in this verse? Paul tells us that joy, prayer, and thankfulness is God’s will for your life.

One question that can serve to refocus our hearts toward joy through thankfulness is this: “What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for today?” When we live in a constant state of gratitude, we are acknowledging the source of our blessings, and we are voicing that gratitude in praise. And as God has designed in us, when we voice our appreciation, admiration, and praise of something, we actually experience the joy of that veneration all the more. Our joy grows as our thankfulness—and the expression of that thankfulness—increases.

There are so many more facets of the rich topic of joy we could explore. Yet there is some misunderstanding of joy we need to address as well. Unfortunately, despite all the good that the Bible says about joy, an idea has crept into our Christian ethos which purports that somehow seeking joy, benefit, or reward from serving God somehow runs counter to the

self-denial and ascetic kind of life we have been taught that we're called to. A couple of erroneous teachings highlight this idea:

Immanuel Kant, the 18th century German philosopher, taught the notion that the moral value of an act decreases as we aim to derive any benefit from it. Acts are good only if the doer is "disinterested." We should do the good only because it is good. Any motivation to seek joy or reward corrupts the act.

Atheistic philosopher Ayn Rand pointed back to Kant when she noted, "An action is moral ... only if one has no desire to perform it, but performs it out of a sense of duty and derives no benefit from it of any sort, neither material nor spiritual. A benefit destroys the moral value of an action" (Rand, *For the New Intellectual*).

This wrongheaded idea has wound its way into much of what we Christians hear taught regarding the motivation we ought to have when doing good or seeking rewards. Yes, self-denial is taught in scripture, but it is for the sake of finding our ultimate satisfaction and joy in God. We must not give in to the notion that it is somehow selfish to seek after joy in our lives. Joy is commanded by God. Joy is a good gift from a good God who wants good things for us. Since joy is, in essence, a byproduct of relationship with God, to deny ourselves the benefits of that relationship in any respect is an assault upon our reason for being—namely glorifying God and enjoying Him forever.

There is a quote from C.S. Lewis that is often cited that illustrates this idea well:

If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. (C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*)

This idea from Lewis is that the paltry little thrills we so often seek after pale in comparison to all that God has in store for us. Yet he is also saying that God that has given us good things to enjoy, precisely because He wants us to enjoy them. Seeking the enjoyment of those gifts is a good thing.

The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do contains an appeal to desire.

God promises us rewards as benefits of being His children. One of these rewards is joy. To ignore this reality is myopic and unbiblical. To deny ourselves the enjoyment of these

rewards is to undermine the purpose of God giving them in the first place. There is nothing wrong with seeking the joy that comes from being in relationship with God. In fact, there is everything right with it. God is a God of joy. He created us to revel in that joy. Heaven is all about the full and unhindered celebration of God—a celebration that is nothing if not completely full of joy.

The world-renowned evangelist and founder of orphanages George Müller also saw this was true. He said:

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit. (*Autobiography of George Müller*)

Many modern believers have inherited a false idea of what holiness really means. Perhaps this is a vestige of monasticism and the weeping and wailing that asceticism encouraged. But we have bought into a false dichotomy that does not appear in scripture. Happiness and holiness are not pitted against each other. In fact, joy is so much more than just a wonderful promise for those who decide to take advantage of it. Seeking joy as a gift from God, and seeking it as a benefit of being in relationship with Him, is actually commanded of us by God.

Several times in the book of Philippians, Paul goes beyond just encouraging the choice of joy, and actually commands it—using the imperative mood. In Philippians 4:4 he says, “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” This is not a suggestion. It is a command. Again, this reminds us that we can choose joy. If it is commanded of us, then it cannot simply be a result of feelings related to circumstances. And this joy is not some sort of fake smile we paste on in the parking lot as we arrive at church. It is an inner conviction, a rested assurance, a confident trust in the One from Whom joy flows.

Joy, in addition to being a gift from God, a fruit of walking in the Spirit, a state that is independent of circumstances, and a result of thankfulness, is a choice we can make—and are actually commanded to make. Our lives are to be reflections of the character of God. As such, our lives ought to accurately reflect God’s joyful heart. We have a calling, and even a duty to be faithful representatives to the world of our joyful God.

Even trials and suffering cannot touch that rested assurance deep within our souls. Paul says that our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. Our joy now, even in the midst of suffering, anticipates the complete satisfaction and pleasure of that day when there will be no more tears...forever.

The reward for following Jesus is Jesus. Jesus really is the definition of joy. Our connection to Him—our relationship with Him—grounds us in the foundation, origin, and basis for joy.

Devotional questions:

Joy is the jubilant cry of the heart that declares we are blessed and God is good. Joy is not only an incalculable blessing that God pours out upon us, it is also commanded of us. After reading the introductory notes, take some time this week to meditate on the idea of joy and how perhaps we can reorient our thinking on this important idea. Talk and pray with your family or small group through these questions on joy:

1. How is joy different than happiness? What is happiness based on? What is joy based on? Describe a time when you felt true joy, even though circumstances around you were less than ideal.
2. What is the connection between joy and a relationship with Jesus? What is the relationship between joy and obedience? Why do you think this connection exists? What does a lack of joy say about our relationship with Jesus? When have you experienced the most joy (not merely happiness)? When have you had the least joy? Take some time to pray about what God is saying to you about choosing joy.
3. How can an understanding of the sovereignty of God affect our joy? What does it mean that God is sovereign? What does God's sovereignty have to do with your well-being and your destiny? Do you regularly praise God for His sovereignty? Talk to God about how His sovereignty makes you feel. Praise Him for His power, control, and authority—all within the context of His goodness. Try to incorporate this into your prayers regularly and see what effect it has on your joy and your peace.
4. How do you think thankfulness can affect our joy? How can a thankful heart change us? How can voicing our appreciation of something increase our joy and enjoyment of it? Why do you think rejoicing is God's will for us? What does it accomplish in us?
5. How can joy be a measuring stick for the state of our relationship with God? What does our joy say about our relationship with God? Why would God want us to be joyful? What does a Christian who is joyful communicate to a watching world about who God is? When has a lack of joy been a stumbling block for you?

Additional Discussion questions:

1. What role does self-denial play in the Christian life? What role ought the promise of rewards play in the Christian life? Is it wrong to be motivated by rewards? Why or why not? What are the eternal rewards scripture refers to?
2. What do you think Paul means when he talks about "an eternal weight of glory" in 2 Corinthians 4:17? Describe what "momentary light affliction" means, and how can it be eclipsed by this "eternal weight of glory?" How is suffering now a needed preparation for the glory that is to come?

CHRIST

December 24th, 2021

We have spent the last four weeks thinking through and meditating on the truths of advent; focusing our hearts on four key themes that embody much of God's message to us. This is the journey of Advent—hope, peace, love, and joy—all working together to paint a picture of both God's desires and provisions for us and draw us toward gazing fully at Christ. This gaze is the purpose and destination of Advent. We focus on these four themes so that we can ultimately focus more fully, accurately, and passionately on Jesus.

So many thoughts come to mind when we think of Jesus: thoughts of love and sacrifice, thoughts of obedience and humility, thoughts of gentleness and power. One other truth also comes to mind—one word that encapsulates so much of what He was about. That word is mission. Even as a young boy, Jesus was focused on His mission. Jesus knew He must be about his Father's business. Throughout His life we see that Jesus knew the mission He had been dispatched on, and He would not be deterred. He knew that opposition would come to that mission in form of trials and suffering—in fact, the mission itself entailed untold suffering. He knew this suffering was inevitable and that as followers of His, we would experience suffering as well. When we think of the mission of Jesus, the word that best captures it is, indeed, suffering. Jesus knew that the cross must come before the glory that would follow—just as the two comings of Messiah can be summarized as, first: “the suffering servant,” and then: “the King coming in His glory.” It could not be in any other order. So as we seek to explore one of the many, many facets of who Jesus is, we settle on the (perhaps) surprising facet of suffering.

Hebrews 12:2 reminds us that for the joy set before Jesus, He endured the cross. He had His eyes fixed squarely on His mission. Jesus knew that this was the prescribed path. When thinking about Jesus and what advent represented, so many aspects could be focused on. But the idea of Jesus as a man on a mission, whose mission was suffering, is such an important idea to look at. What was the nature of this mission and what did it require?

This mindset that Jesus possessed—this understanding that guided His actions—is an important reality that must be grappled with. This mindset is that the cross must come before the glory. In other words, suffering is the necessary path to glory. This is true for both Jesus and His followers. If we are to understand Jesus and His mission at all, this is a truth we must wrestle with.

Why is suffering the necessary path to glory? In what way was the cross the necessary path for Christ? We must ask: why would He choose to leave the splendor and majesty on high and condescend to become one of us? Jesus understood this was His predestined path. But even though it was the road Christ had to follow, a secondary question is: why must we travel it too? The Scriptures are crystal clear on this point: “*Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22). The good news, though, is that as we share in His

suffering, we will also share in His glory. If we don't understand the purpose for suffering, we won't understand Jesus. These two questions bear exploring—why the cross comes before the glory for Jesus, and why suffering comes before Heaven for us.

Jesus knew that something we now call “the messianic woes” would have to precede His triumph. He knew that He had to face Calvary, so He set His face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). There was no thought of worldly pursuits or entanglements with passing fancies. He was on a mission—a divine rescue mission—and nothing would deter Him from that course. He knew why He was here. The first answer to the question “why the cross before the glory?” is that that was His mission. Jesus knew it was the only way.

Not only did Jesus know it but the Scriptures foretold it. How is this idea of necessity expressed in scripture? The Greek word *dei* is a word that conveys the idea of “must” or “it is necessary.” In the book of Luke alone, we see this word used over 40 times. For example, in Luke 9:22, it says, “*The Son of Man must (dei) suffer many things, and be rejected ... and be killed.*” In Luke 13:33 Jesus tells us, “*I must (dei) go on my way ... for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.*” In Luke 17:25, Jesus again tells His disciples that the Son of man must (*dei*) suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. In Luke 24:6-7, the angels at the tomb reminded the women of Jesus' words saying, “*Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must (dei) be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.*” Then again on the road to Emmaus, Jesus rebuked His disciples saying, “*Was it not necessary (dei) for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?*” This theme is also found in the other gospels as well (Matt 16:21, 26:54, Mark 8:31, John 3:14).

The language scripture uses to describe the necessity (*dei*) of His suffering and dying is unambiguous. Scripture clearly says He must suffer, be crucified, and be glorified. Yet, not only in terms of the language of scripture, but also in the content and message of scripture do we see the suffering of the Messiah is an absolute necessity. In Isaiah 53, in what some have called the “Holy of Holies” of the Old Testament, we see foretold what the character and purpose of our needed sacrifice would be like. It says, “*My servant will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities*” (Isa 53:11b). Integral to the salvific plan of God was the coming of a savior, a Messiah, who would redeem mankind from sin through His substitutionary suffering and death.

Scripture requires the cross not only in the language, content and message of scripture, but also the images, pictures and types. Many examples could be cited, but the one that is most central to the meaning of the cross is the image of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. All the constant daily sacrifices the people were required to perform pointed to the ultimate sacrifice that would one day truly take away their sins, not just temporarily cover them. “*For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified*” (Heb 10:14). This sacrifice was the only means by which sin could be dealt with fully and finally. So from all this, it is clear that the cross was the only way.

Jesus knew it. The Scriptures foretold it. And also, mankind needed it. As scripture clearly describes, there is a barrier that separates us from God—a great chasm fixed between mankind and our maker. That chasm is sin. There is no way for man to bridge that chasm. The cross was required if man was to be set free from the law of sin and death. The first Adam failed. Our first representative did what we all would have and also truly have done, and committed cosmic treason against the creator. Mankind's predicament required the second Adam (Jesus) to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus did not have to volunteer for the mission. He could have left us where we were: in sin and destined for Hell. But He knew that His sacrifice was our only chance of ever being reconciled back to Himself. So He left the comforts and privileges of glory, and condescended to take upon Himself human flesh, and faced the gauntlet of the cross. He had to. Mankind needed it.

Jesus knew it, scripture foretold it, mankind needed it, and (as a subset of this last point) our sin required it. St. Anselm of Canterbury, in his seminal work on the atonement, entitled *Cur Deus Homo* (which means, "Why the God-man?"), set out to answer the question, "Why should God have humbled Himself so far as to become man and suffer death?" In other words, why did our Messiah need to be both God and man? In his answer, we can see that it was not only required for God to become man, but also that it was our sin that necessitated it in the first place.

The first point Anselm makes is that since it was a man who committed sin against God—who violated the holy nature of God—it must also be a man who effectuates the remedy. It was mankind that owed the debt, so it must be a man that pays it. The second point is that the enormity of the offense against God required that it be God Himself who provided satisfaction. This point is supported by theologian Millard Erickson who writes, "God is a being of infinite or perfect holiness and goodness. An offense against Him is much more serious than an offense against an ordinary sinful human" (*Systematic Theology*). Not only was the offense enormous, but the scope of the work of atoning for the sins of all humanity necessitated God perform it Himself. Hence, the necessity of the God-man. Christ, by virtue of being a man, did owe obedience to God, but because of His sinlessness, did not owe death. So, when Christ died, both requirements were met. The sin sacrifice was a man, as required. Yet, being God, He was also able to atone for the sins of the whole world.

In addition to the arguments of Anselm, there is the fact that sin justly requires punishment. The holy nature of God required satisfaction. For God to ignore sin would entail God not being just. This would undermine the very distinction between right and wrong. God is not only holy and righteous, but is also the judge of the universe. He could not overlook sin and still be holy. Satisfaction needed to be made. This, again, was something only Christ could do. John Walvoord has said, "Christ in His death fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God for judgment upon sinners and, as their infinite sacrifice, provided a ground not only for the believer's forgiveness, but for his justification and sanctification." Only through Christ's death could justification, redemption, propitiation, and reconciliation all be accomplished. It was our sin that required God to become man and also required that sin itself be punished. This all required the cross.

From these reasons we see that it was necessary for Christ to choose the path of the cross. He knew it, the Scriptures foretold it, mankind needed it, and our sin required it. Why the cross before the glory? Because it was part of the eternal plan of God to create man to be in fellowship with Him. For the love that He would receive from man to mean anything, it must be given freely, which necessitated man having free will. Giving man free will risked the possibility of God's will being defied. God was willing to take that risk, realizing that if man rebelled (and God knew man would rebel), then the cross was the only way for Him to, once again, enjoy fellowship with us. And He was still willing to endure that suffering for the sake of our love. Why did Christ choose the cross rather than the glory? He loved us that much.

It is clear that for Jesus, the cross must come before the glory. But why is that true for us as well? Why must our path lead through suffering before we get to the glory? It has been asked, "If the gospel means only suffering, in what sense is it good news?" With all the focus on suffering thus far in this discussion, one might get the impression that life is nothing but a drudgery that must be endured while we wait for the relief of death to come and release us from our sad lot of misery and pain. Yet suffering is only part of the picture. The Christian life is a sharing in the life of Christ. But the plain truth is, the segment of Christ's life that we are exposed to in scripture, for the most part, is that of the suffering before the glory. As we are united with Christ, it is this suffering that we are called to have a share in—at least for now. Fortunately, it is the glory phase that we will be allowed to share in with Him—not just for 70 or 80 years, but for all of eternity.

So, as to the question: why must suffering come before the joys of Heaven? Why must it be suffering now rather than continual joy and peace and rest? The answer seems to lie in the fact that God has a plan—a plan that must be worked out over time. Life is not a completed puzzle handed to us on a silver platter. It is a process—a process of growth, and change, and progress. It is not really a question of suffering vs. joy, it is more a question of timing. The image of rewards and prizes is used in the exhortations of scripture to spur us on to run the race with endurance—to inspire and motivate us to reach for the goal. This language can be very helpful in that regard. But it can also be a little misleading if looked at in another way. When glory is seen as the reward for suffering, this implies an accidental connection between the two. It suggests to one writer that, "...heaven is thrown in as some kind of consolation prize, in order to keep us going here below."

C. S. Lewis addressed this same question in his inspiring sermon, "The Weight of Glory":

There are different kinds of reward. There is the reward that has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany those things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it...The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activities for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation.

There is a danger in seeing the connection between suffering and glory as accidental—heaven simply ‘tacked on’ to end of our trials as a bonus. There is a much more natural, intimate connection between the two. Alistair McGrath illustrates this well when he writes,

When a seed is planted in the ground, it begins to grow and will eventually bear fruit. Can we say that its bearing fruit is a reward for its growth? No. We would say that there is an organic and natural connection between one and the other. That is just the way things are. It is not a question of declaring, in some arbitrary way, that a seed which grows will be rewarded with fruit, or that the prize for growth is fruit. Rather, we view germination, growth, and the bearing of fruit as all part of the same overall process. They are all stages in the natural cycle of growth and development.

The same reasoning applies to suffering and glorification. They are intimately connected. It is not really a question of why suffering rather than glory, it is more a question of God’s perfect timing and the natural order of events. McGrath goes on to say:

Suffering and glory are part of, but represent different stages in the process of growth in the Christian life. We are adopted into the family of God, we suffer, and we are glorified (Rom. 8:15-18). This is not an accidental relationship. Each step is intimately connected within the overall pattern of Christian growth and progress toward the ultimate goal of the Christian life—being finally united with God and remaining with Him forever. Heaven is the consummation of a process of which suffering is a present part.

Seeing suffering as simply the present stage in God’s plan of preparing us for His kingdom frees us to trust Him more and rely on His sovereign wisdom in allowing the trials we are going through. Without this perspective, we feel out of control when tragedy strikes. We fail to see such events as God-filtered—experiences He is allowing us to go through to build in us character, trust, faith, or whatever our current need is. Facing such trials with the thought that this trial, this test, is simply God’s way of saying, “Do you trust me?” gives us the freedom to not worry about the outcome, because everything is in His control.

Why suffering now rather than glory? Why must we bear the cross now rather than enjoy the fruits of heaven? Because it is a matter of God having foreordained the natural order of events. Suffering must come before glory just as the seed being planted must come before the sprout, which must come before the growth, which must come before the fruit. It is the necessary order of things. The thought of a tiny sapling trying to bear up under the weight of a full harvest of fruit that a full-grown tree might carry is impossible to imagine. Perhaps that is what C. S. Lewis meant by his title “The Weight of Glory.” It is the unimaginable weight of true glory as it will be laid upon us. As he puts it, “To be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain.” This is surely what Paul meant by it when he coined the term “the weight of glory” (2 Cor 4:17). We are God’s works of art. He is fashioning and forming us into His masterpieces. But again, this

molding and shaping is a process. Suffering is simply a natural and necessary part of the process.

Suffering now is a needed preparation for the glory that is to come. Why suffering now rather than glory? Why must the suffering come first? Perhaps because we cannot now sustain the weight of glory that He has planned for us. Perhaps we need to suffer more—to grow more.

By exploring this idea of the necessity of suffering, we are able to see the heart and mission of Jesus in perhaps a new way. Unfortunately, as a consequence of our sin, suffering has had to become a significant element of the identity of Messiah. When we see suffering more clearly, we see Jesus more clearly. When we see Jesus more clearly, we can worship Him more fully.

Devotional questions:

There are so many facets and features to who Jesus is. Each one bears exploring. One not often explored facet is the role that suffering played in both His life and in His mission. Suffering clearly marked the time Jesus spent here on earth. Was this accidental or necessary? What is the role that suffering plays in our life? After reading through the introductory thoughts, take some time this week to talk about and pray through with your family or small group these questions on the sufferings of Jesus:

1. What feelings come to mind when you hear the name "Jesus?" Finish this sentence in as many ways as you can: "Jesus is _____." What is one truth about Jesus that really inspires you? What is one truth about Jesus that is hard for you to comprehend? Spend some time in prayer telling Jesus what He means to you.
2. What does it mean in 1 Peter 4:13 when it says that we are to rejoice as we share the sufferings of Christ because we will also share in His glory? How do we share in the sufferings of Christ? Why were the sufferings of Christ necessary? Why are our sufferings necessary? What has God taught you through the suffering that you have experienced? Talk to God about your sufferings and ask Him to help you learn how to be thankful for them (James 1:2-3).
3. How would you describe the mission of Jesus? What did this mission involve? What happened to Jesus in the incarnation? What happened to Jesus at the crucifixion? In other words, how would you describe what He experienced? What happened to Jesus at the resurrection and ascension? What is Jesus doing now? Spend some time thanking Jesus for all these things.
4. What does it mean to be Christ-like? How can we imitate Christ in our attitudes, in our actions, in our suffering, in our priorities, in our mission? Ask God what areas He would have you pay more attention to.
5. What do we learn about Jesus by looking at Him through the lens of hope, the lens of peace, the lens of love, and the lens of joy? Talk about these one at a time. What has come into focus for you more clearly through this study?

Additional Discussion questions:

1. Read Philippians 2:1-11. What stands out to you? What is the primary message of this passage? What do we learn about Jesus? What path do we see Jesus take in this passage? How can these insights help us when we are encountering trials?
2. Carefully read Isaiah chapter 53. What do we learn about Jesus, from this passage written some 700 years before He was born?