

**222 December 20, 2023**

## **Advent Week 4-Love and Christmas Day**

We continue our observance of Advent with a reminder of what Advent means. Advent is a translation of the Latin ***adventus***, meaning 'coming; arrival' which is translated from the Greek ***parousia***, or 'coming'. In the New Testament, parousia often refers to the future second coming of Jesus. Most Advent observances are from three simultaneous perspectives: 1) Jesus coming at birth in Bethlehem; 2) Jesus coming into the lives of believers at salvation, and: 3) Jesus Second Coming. The historical purpose of observing Advent is for believers to focus on these three perspectives, intentionally reflecting on Jesus' birth into this world, His present-day living in the hearts of believers, and His future return. We hope that by observing Advent it will help you focus on these three perspectives instead of our culturally consumer-focused holiday obsessions. Christ's birth should help us focus on God's plan to offer all humanity the chance to be restored to relationship with Him, the holy purposes God has for our redeemed lives, and the sure and confident hope we can have in His coming again.

We started with a focus on Hope in the first week. Then we focused on Peace. Last week we focused on Joy. Biblical joy goes far beyond momentary happiness--like the happiness a child might experience when they unwrap a gift that they'd hoped for on Christmas day. It is an extreme happiness that cannot be deterred by present circumstances. This type of joy comes from God alone. It is an eager anticipation about wonderful things to come.

### **Week 4-Love**

To prepare our hearts for Christmas, so far we have focused on Hope, Peace, and Joy. It is fitting as we draw close to the celebration of Christ's birth into this world we focus on Love. Let us admit that our use of the word 'Love' and its current cultural definition is grossly inadequate and misleading when talking about biblical love. For us, love is often a feeling, an emotion subject to the vagaries of hormones or physical attraction. We express love for a meal, the outcome of a football game, for a favorite candy. God's love is a central aspect of His character and His divine attributes. God's love is defined by consistent action and response not based on our doing anything equivalent or worthy. We struggle to grasp the reality that before God created the universe and put us in it, before we had defiled God's perfect creation with sin, God had already planned how He would

redeem us from the wages of sin, and restore us to the relationship that God always intended. For eternity.

Biblical love is centered on three relationships: 1) God's love for people; 2) people's love for God, and; 3) love between people. Let's look at each of these as it relates to Christ's birth.

### **God's love for People**

#### **John 3:16-17**

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

#### **Romans 5:8**

<sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

#### **Ephesians 2:4-5**

<sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

#### **Romans 8:31b-32**

If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

#### **Romans 8:37-39**

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

## **People's love for God**

### **Mark 12:28-31**

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

<sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [Deuteronomy 6:4,5] <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [Leviticus 19:18] There is no commandment greater than these."

### **Deuteronomy 30:20**

<sup>20</sup> and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

### **Psalms 145:17-21**

<sup>17</sup> The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does.

<sup>18</sup> The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

<sup>19</sup> He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.

<sup>20</sup> The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

<sup>21</sup> My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.

## **Love between People**

### **Matthew 7:12**

<sup>12</sup> So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

### **John 13:34-35**

<sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

### **Romans 12:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

### **1 Peter 1:22-23**

<sup>22</sup> Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>23</sup> For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

### **1 Peter 4:8**

<sup>8</sup> Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.

The biblical focus on love and the three-fold nature of God's love for us, our love for Him, and our love for one another, is neatly summarized in these passages:

### **1 John 4:7-21**

<sup>7</sup> Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. <sup>13</sup> This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup> If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. <sup>16</sup> And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. <sup>17</sup> This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup> And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

### **Advent Week 4 Prayer-Love**

Heavenly Father, the whole meaning of Christmas can be explained in one little four-letter word...LOVE. You sent your gift of pure love to us that first Christmas. Love descended from heaven to be born of a virgin. Love lay in the scratchy hay of a manger in a meager barn in Bethlehem. All of your love, God, was robed in the delicate skin of a baby and wrapped in swaddling clothes. This final week of Advent helps us to reflect on the magnitude of love that was made manifest in Jesus. You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Messiah, and Ruler of All, yet you came not as a lion but as a lamb. You came as an innocent baby whose purpose was to walk this earth in complete love and then to sacrificially give your life as an atonement for the sins of your children. Emmanuel. God with us. Love embodied in a sinless man. There is no greater gift than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends. You willingly gave the gift of your life because of your love. Your righteous blood covered our sin. You redeem and restore us when we confess you as Lord and Savior of our life. In that moment, you give us the gift of your love for all eternity. We receive grace upon grace and mercy upon mercy in that moment. The greatest gift of all came that first Christmas. It wasn't wrapped in a beautiful package and set under a decorated tree. The greatest gift came wrapped in the flesh of baby Jesus and laid in the rough wood of a manger. Our perfect gift would later be rewrapped in the scars of our sin and nailed to the rugged wood of a cross on Calvary, all because of love. Father, this final week of Advent, fill our hearts and minds with the significance of that truth. Thank you, Lord, for loving us enough to send Jesus. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen

**Group discussion questions:**

Does our common linguistic and cultural definition of love cheapen our understanding of what real love is?

If so, is there a way to change that?

Do you think much about the biblical definition of God's love for people?

Do you think much about the biblical definition of our love for God?

Do you think much about the biblical definition of your love for other people?

Does the biblical definition of love motivate you to share the gospel? Why or why not?

## **Christmas Day December 25**

### **Christ's birthday**

Our Advent preparation has reached its fulfillment. It is Christmas Day, Christ's birthday, the day the God of the Universe crept down a back staircase of Heaven with a baby in His arms to show us how much He loves us. Not because we are intrinsically good, because we are not. Because there was no other way to redeem us except by God's grace initiative, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves.

John 1:14

<sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We have focused the last four weeks on Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. On Christ's birthday, let us focus on the centrality of Christ. There is no real hope without Christ. It is only through Christ that people can have any hope. That hope is not only grounded in God doing what He said he would do, but that God also promised Jesus is coming again. Our hope in that second coming is founded on a God who keeps His promises as we have seen.

Romans 5:5

<sup>5</sup>And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

There is no real peace without Christ. Jesus came to save us from our sins so that we could be restored to right relationship with God. That restored relationship makes possible true peace—peace with God, peace with others, peace with ourselves. At His second coming, He will rule over this world and all creation in peace.

John 14:27

<sup>27</sup>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.

There is no real joy without Christ. Christ offers a way to salvation, which is true joy. Not because of who you are or what you have done, but in spite of who you are and what you done. God's grace gift is true joy, and the gift of His Holy Spirit living in you provides a joy that transcends changing circumstances. God's joy can sustain you in your deepest sorrows, because God is with you and you can trust Him to redeem your darkest night with a brilliant dawn.

Romans 15:13

<sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is no real love without Christ. We may struggle to wrap our head around God's declaration the Son made all things that were made, long before Christ was born in a barn. Christ's birthday is an example of God's love for people. And that gift makes possible a restored relationship with God, which make possible true love for other people. Let us proclaim the true Hope, true Peace, true Joy, and true Love that we have experienced through Christ to a world struggling under counterfeit definitions of hope, peace, joy and love.

1 John 4:9-10

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

### **Christmas Day Advent Prayer**

This Advent, Lord, come to the manger of my heart. Fill me with Your presence from the very start. As I prepare for the holidays and gifts to be given, remind me of the gift You gave when You sent Your Son from Heaven. The first Christmas gift, it was the greatest gift ever. You came as a baby born in a manger. Wrapped like the gifts I find under my tree, waiting to be opened, to reveal Your love to me. Restore to me the wonder that came with Jesus' birth, when He left the riches of Heaven and wrapped Himself in rags of earth. Immanuel, God with us, Your presence came that night. And angels announced, "Into your darkness, God brings His Light." "Do not be afraid," they said, to

shepherds in the field. Speak to my heart today, Lord, and help me to yield. Make me like those shepherds, obedient to Your call. Setting distractions and worries aside, to You I surrender them all. Surround me with Your presence, Lord, I long to hear Your voice. Clear my mind of countless concerns and all the holiday noise. Slow me down this Christmas, let me not be in a rush. In the midst of parties and planning, I want to feel Your hush. This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart. Invade my soul like Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part. Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day. Keep me close to You, Lord. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray. Amen.

## **Addendum 1**

### **Observing Advent at Home**

You can use the 222 study guides to observe the four weeks of Advent at home. Use the Scripture readings as listed and the weekly Advent prayer, or adjust them as needed along the same weekly focus.

You will probably want to add the traditional Advent candles to your observance. There are usually four or five advent candles, although some traditions light a candle for every day December 1-25. Typically one candle is lit on the first Sunday, two are lit on the second Sunday, three are lit on the third Sunday, and four are lit on the fourth Sunday. All five are lit on Christmas day. The candles are arranged in a circle, with the Christ candle in the center. The candles can be tapers or pillars. If you mix them, at least the Christ candle should be the tallest/largest. Jesus is the light of the world and we light Advent candles to signify this. It's also a way to build anticipation for the celebration of the first coming of Jesus. The closer one gets to Christmas, the more the candles get lit, and the brighter it shines. Advent moves us through the prophecies about Christ, to the hope he provides, to the joy he brings, and the love he gives. As we move through each week, the candles glow more brightly with significance.

The traditional candle colors are:

**First Advent Candle:** The first purple candle symbolizes hope. Also known as the "Prophecy Candle" in memory of the prophets, particularly Isaiah, who prophesied the birth of Christ. It symbolizes the anticipation felt in awaiting the coming Messiah.

**Second Advent Candle:** The second purple candle symbolizes faith. Also known as the "Bethlehem Candle," signifies Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem.

**Third Advent Candle:** The third candle is ordinarily pink and represents joy. This candle is pink because the rose color represents joy, also known as the "Shepherd's Candle." The third Sunday of Advent is meant to remind us of the world's joy at the birth of Jesus and that believers have arrived at the midpoint of Advent.

**Fourth Advent Candle:** The final purple candle marks the last week of Advent as we anticipate the birth of our Savior. This final candle, also known as the “Angel’s Candle,” signifies peace. It reminds us of the angels' message: “Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men” (Luke 2:14).

**Fifth Advent Candle (if used):** A fifth white candle is placed in the center and is lit on Christmas Day to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

### **Prayers for Lighting the Advent Wreath Candles**

Observing Advent at home gives all your family an opportunity to take part in the observance together. A traditional prayer for lighting the Advent wreath candles follows. Feel free to modify your prayers focusing on the weekly theme.

**First Week (Hope):** "O God, as we light the first candle of this Advent wreath, we open our hearts in hope. May the light of this candle remind us of the hope we have in you. May it inspire us to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ, our hope and our Savior. Amen."

**Second Week (Peace):** "Gracious God, as we light the second candle of this Advent wreath, we seek your peace. In a world filled with turmoil, may the light of this candle remind us of the peace that only you can bring. Help us to be instruments of your peace in our homes, communities, and the world. Amen."

**Third Week (Joy):** "Loving God, as we light the third candle of this Advent wreath, we rejoice in your presence. May the light of this candle fill our hearts with the joy of your salvation. Help us to share this joy with others, spreading your love and happiness to all we encounter. Amen."

**Fourth Week (Love):** "Heavenly Father, as we light the fourth candle of this Advent wreath, we are reminded of your boundless love. May the light of this candle shine forth as a symbol of the love you have shown us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Fill our hearts with your love, and help us to love one another as you have loved us. Amen."

**Christmas Day (Christ’s birthday):** “This Christmas, Jesus, come to the manger of my heart. Break into my world like you did at Bethlehem, bringing peace to every part. Dwell within and around me, as I unwrap Your presence each day. Keep me

close to You, Lord. Keep alive in me the desire for Your return. It's in Your wonderful Name I pray. Amen”

May you be blessed this holiday season as you prepare your heart for Christmas!

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**PLEASE RETURN** ALL CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM COSTUMES AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

**NO SATURDAY EVENING SERVICE 12/23**

**CHRISTMAS EVE** FAMILY SERVICE 9:30AM & 11AM AND CANDLELIGHT 4:45PM

**NO WEDNESDAY SERVICE 12/27**

CALENDAR AT A GLANCE		
<b>DECEMBER</b>		
20	LORD'S SUPPER BAPTISM POTLUCK	222
23	<b>NO SATURDAY SERVICE</b>	PJM
24	CHRISTMAS EVE service 9:30, 11am & 4:45pm	PJM
25	CHRISTMAS OFFICE CLOSED	
27	<b>NO 222 WEDNESDAY</b>	PJM
<b>2024 JANUARY</b>		
1	NEW YEARS DAY OFFICE CLOSED	
11	CELEBRATE RECOVERY BEGINS	FAM
7	Discovering Everyday Course 7th, 14th, 21st	222
21	CIB APPRECIATION LUNCHEON	FAM
24	Family Meeting & Potluck WEDNESDAY	PJM
26	D-NOW YOUTH 26-28th here at ECF!	YOU
28	MINISTRY FAIR - GET CONNECTED	222

