

brought to the light

ADVENT FOR ALL WHO NEED IT



ANNA GRACE LEGBAND

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Contents

Introduction	xi
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HOPE

Day 1: It's Time to Wake Up! (Isaiah 9:2-7)	3
Day 2: Own Our Part in the Story (Luke 1:26-38)	11
Day 3: Waiting Well (Psalm 42)	17
Day 4: Groaning to Glory (Romans 8:18-27)	25
Day 5: Look in Both Directions (Revelation 22:1-7)	31
Day 6: Mary's Song (Luke 1:46-55)	35

PEACE

Day 7: How to Survive an Invasion (Micah 5:2-5a)	41
Day 8: Moving from Results to Communion (Philippians 4:4-9)	47

Day 9: Breaking the Cycle (Matthew 6:25–34)	53
Day 10: When God Delights in Helping Us (Ephesians 4:1–6)	59
Day 11: In the Soil of Pain and Shame (Luke 1:5–7, 11–22)	65
Day 12: Zechariah's Song (Luke 1:62–79)	71

JOY

Day 13: Away from Idols, toward God (Psalm 16)	79
Day 14: Best When Enjoyed Together (Luke 1:39–45)	85
Day 15: The Holiness Highway (Isaiah 35)	89
Day 16: More than a Passing Glance (Hebrews 12:1–3)	95
Day 17: Bringing God Joy (Psalm 51:16–17)	101
Day 18: The Angels' Song (Luke 2:8–16)	109

LOVE

Day 19: What Is Love? (Isaiah 53)	117
Day 20: Remaining in Love (John 15:9–17)	125
Day 21: The Maximum Amount (Philippians 1:9–11)	131

Day 22: Challenging Our Success Metrics (1 Corinthians 13)	137
Day 23: Love Comes First (1 John 4:7-16)	145
Day 24: God with Us (Matthew 1:18-25)	151
Day 25: Simeon's Song (Luke 2:25-35)	157
 The Sower's Creed	 162

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No one can celebrate
a genuine Christmas
without being truly poor.
The self-sufficient, the proud,
those who, because they have
everything, look down on others,
those who have no need
even of God—for them there
will be no Christmas.
Only the poor, the hungry,
those who need someone
to come on their behalf,
will have that someone.
That someone is God.
Emmanuel. God-with-us.
Without poverty of spirit
there can be no abundance of God.

—Óscar Romero
“The God We Hardly Knew”

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Introduction

Almost immediately after setting out to write this work, my husband and I received news that left us devastated. A dream we carried for years—something we had hoped for, prayed for, and longed for—was not going to work out. While we appreciated the clarity of a closed door, we were gutted, confused, and it felt like we had more questions than answers.

The next morning, I opened a blank document to begin working on this project and typed out the word *hope*. It felt like a joke.

What does it mean to carry hope in disappointment? Peace in disillusionment? Joy in grief? Love in heartbreak?

Many in our community were also wrestling with similar questions. Loss, unexpected challenges, and

deep disappointment left us longing for more than seasonal cheer. We arrived at Advent together, feeling a bit beat-up.

This turned out to be a strange gift. Why?

Advent is most precious to those who know their need for it.

Too often, we reduce the four themes of Advent—hope, peace, joy, and love—to sentimental clichés tied more to the holidays than to the reality of life. But Advent isn’t about pretending everything is fine. It’s about Light showing up in the midst of darkness.

The Light of Advent isn’t a neat string of twinkling bulbs. It’s a flame piercing through the chaos—a messy, disruptive, and beautiful interruption.

Advent invites us to wrestle honestly with what hope, peace, joy, and love mean in the midst of real life—to look beyond surface-level comforts and encounter something deeper and truer in the person of Jesus.

Over the next few weeks, we’ll explore how Jesus doesn’t just offer hope, peace, joy, and love as ideals to aspire to. He *is* these things.

Advent reminds us that the Light has come—and that it’s for those who know how deeply they need it.

How to Use This Book

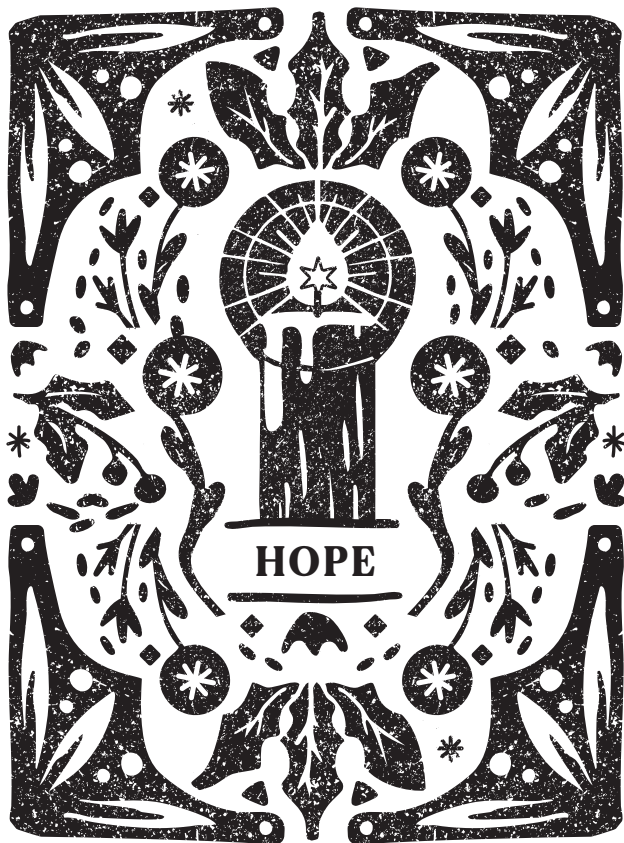
This devotional begins on December 1 and continues through Christmas Day.

The Advent wreath is a cherished tradition for many, centered on the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. Though its origins are a little mysterious, it reaches back hundreds of years and has oriented families and congregations to these transcendent virtues. Lighting a candle with the opening prayer each day (or, as is tradition, at dinnertime) can be a simple yet meaningful way to mark this season. If you don't have a wreath, get creative and adapt the practice in a way that is meaningful for you and your family.

Songs of Advent

The Christmas story in Scripture is told not only through narrative but also through songs—hymns of praise that reveal deep truths about who Jesus is and what His coming means for the world.

Each week, as we sit with the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love, we'll conclude with one of these songs, reflecting on its message. Instead of traditional discussion questions, you'll find creative response prompts. These are designed to invite you into a fresh expression of worship, helping connect your story to the greater story in which it belongs. I hope you find these prompts refreshing and different—and that you'll give them a try!



*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.*

*I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

—Psalm 130:5–6

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DAY 1

It's Time to Wake Up!



Isaiah 9:2-7

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered*

*the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.*

Consider This

Isaiah's words are just as relevant today as they were when they were uttered thousands of years ago—a word for people in desperate need of the light.

Maybe you're arriving at this Christmas season resonating with the people Isaiah describes as walking in darkness. Perhaps you've been stumbling your way through the year, wrestling with weariness, or are feeling lost. Or maybe this past year hasn't felt like walking in darkness, but actually living in it. Disappointment, grief, unmet longings, despair, doubt, loneliness, depression, anxiety, or any other life experiences we'd rather not experience stand in stark contrast with the cheer and ribbons and sparkling lights that characterize December.

If so, I'd like to bypass wishing you a happy holiday season and welcome you to Advent. Advent carries within itself a message of hope for the whole world. Those who are most aware of their need for it will likely receive it most eagerly.

Hear these words again:

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned. (v. 2)*

This isn't a light that brings warm fuzzies or superficial platitudes that aim to ease the situation with no real impact at all. It changes everything, including us.

Light exposes the reality of things and wakes us up.

In Advent, we aren't just spotting an abstract light glowing in the distance that gives us some slight illumination or piece of information. The Light of Advent is a person: Jesus.

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on
his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (v. 6,
emphasis added)*

Instead of stumbling in darkness, things become clear. Not clear in a way that we have all the solutions and problems go away, or even that our circumstances change, but clear in the sense that we see things more rightly. We gain a more accurate perspective of our circumstances in the light of Jesus, and a more accurate perspective of Jesus, who entered into the darkness, and discover that He is with us.

Our disappointments, disillusionments, and places of pain become places of transformation and encountering the one who is our “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (v. 6).

Perhaps you’ve been reading this and you’re actually arriving at Advent relatively okay. Maybe you’ve had a good year, or perhaps you’ve even had the best year of your life. But if you were to honestly assess your spiritual temperature, you’d probably fall somewhere in the lukewarm, indifferent, or distracted category. I’d like to welcome you to Advent as well.

Advent isn’t just a call to observe the light—it’s a call to *respond* to it. Advent is a wake-up call.

To wake up is to recognize that we’ve been slumbering, to admit that perhaps we’ve been sleepwalking through our faith, distracted by the noise or comforts of life. Waking up requires us to pause, to ask the hard questions, and to make room for the light to break in.

While the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season makes it easy to forget the light has dawned, Advent calls us to wake up.

The apostle Paul echoes Isaiah’s message in his letter to the Ephesians with a call to action: “Wake up,

sleeper, rise from the dead, and *Christ* will shine on you” (5:14, emphasis added).

If you feel lukewarm, indifferent, or distracted, take heart—this is not a word of condemnation, but an invitation. But honestly admitting you fall into one of these categories is the first sign of waking up and a signal that the Spirit is already at work in this. The important question is: How will we respond to the Spirit’s stirring—will we hit the snooze button, or will we rise to meet the light?

Advent begins with an invitation: to wake up and encounter the light of Jesus—a light that is not distant or abstract, but here with us, changing everything.

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned. (v. 2)*

It’s time to wake up.

Response Prompts

1. How are you showing up to Advent this year?
2. Are you awake? How do you know?

Prayer

Lord, I don't want to go through this season asleep. Light of the world, help me to see clearly and walk freely. Where there was death and darkness, I received Your light and Your life. I declare Your words out loud to myself: *Wake up, sleeper. Rise from the dead. And Christ will shine on you.* Amen.



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DAY 2

Own Our Part in the Story



Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord

God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Consider This

I love the authenticity of Mary's question in response to an angelic visitation about conceiving and giving birth to the Son of God whose kingdom will never end. She's practical and jumps straight to logistics: "I'm a virgin, so how's that going to work?" My kind of girl.

Upon closer examination, the nature of her question assumes that what the angel said will happen. It's not a question of if, but how.

Faith in God's promises does not mean the absence of questions. My own journey with God, and the stories found in the Scriptures, reveal that God welcomes these types of questions. The promises of God make room for us, our humanity, and our questions.

In a season that often feels shiny, polished, and glazed over with inauthenticity, Advent keeps it real and invites us to do the same.

I'm curious if Mary was really asking a variation of this question: What part do I need to play in this? What do I need to do?

The angel responds by explaining how in a way that is still quite mysterious but contains a core message: the Holy Spirit, God Himself, will do this.

The reason: Not because you'll do your part perfectly or because of you at all, but because "no word from God will ever fail" (v. 37). In other words, you get to play a part, but this is a work only God can do.

The nature of the incarnation reveals much about God's methods.

This began with God, was conceived by God, and Mary gets to carry it out. God's plan, even sending the Messiah to the world, always involves His people. His plans are conceived in us, birthed through us, we

are carriers and co-partners. Mary, pregnant with the promise of God, is a co-laborer (all puns intended) in bringing the Messiah into the world.

It's the same for us today. God invites each of us to partner with Him in this moment in history in bringing about His kingdom on earth. Instead of becoming pregnant as a virgin and giving birth to the Messiah, it may look like loving your (physically next-door) neighbor, giving to the point you feel it sacrificially, hosting strangers in your home, honoring colleagues at work, and a million other small but significant expressions of the kingdom.

We may not have the same calling as Mary, but we can embody her posture: "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (v. 38). There's still room for questions, still room for fear—but she said yes.

The incarnation reveals much about the nature of God.

Think about how absolutely gloriously wild, mysterious, and awe-inspiring the whole thing is. God could have arrived in any way He wanted. Yet, He first showed up in the womb. I recently had a friend share with me that she was pregnant early on, and in our joy, she told a handful of us that her baby was the size of a poppy seed. At one point, this is how Jesus

was: the “fullness of God” (Col. 1:19 ESV) dwelling in the size of a poppy seed. The glory of God, in such a tiny form. And He chose to come as the child of a poor, young woman—dependent on her. She carried Him in her womb for nine months, gave birth to Him, and continued to care for Him. She nursed Him, taught Him to speak, and witnessed His first steps. What does this reveal about the character of God?

An often overlooked but significant part of this story is that the angel shares the news of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy with Mary. This not only strengthens Mary’s faith, showing that no word from God will ever fail, but also sparks a community of hope. Mary will not wait alone; she will wait in and with a community. Both women, together, are pregnant with the promises of God—not just for the two of them, but for the whole world.

God’s vision for carrying hope into the world is not a solo act, but a communal one. God’s grandest promises are never fulfilled in isolation, but within the context of community. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we, too, are invited to partner with God, not in solitary effort, but alongside one another. His plans are always bigger than us, but He always invites us to be a part of them. When the invitation comes, may we be like Mary and respond in faith saying, “I am the

Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled"
(Luke 1:38).

Response Prompts

1. What does it look like to participate in the kingdom of God in your life right now? Are there aspects of this that feel unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or challenging to you?
2. Who do you carry hope with? How can you encourage them today?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for choosing to come to us in such a humble and intimate way. Thank You for inviting us into Your kingdom and giving us a part to play in Your redemptive story. Holy Spirit, overshadow me and my community so that we are pregnant with hope, and help us to embrace what You desire to do in and through us for the sake of the world. Amen.



DAY 3

Waiting Well



Psalm 42

*As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, my God.*

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When can I go and meet with God?

*My tears have been my food
day and night,*

*while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

*These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:*

*how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One*

*with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.*

*My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan,
the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.*

*By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.*

*I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?”
My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,*

*saying to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”*

*Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.*

Consider This

Psalm 42 captures a soul in the midst of longing—a deep, desperate thirst for God. In many ways, this is the heart-cry of Advent: longing and hoping and waiting for God.

This season of waiting invites us to embrace the tension between our joy in what we have received already and our hope for what is yet to come.

Unfortunately, waiting isn’t something most of us are naturally good at, and few of us ever learn to wait well. This has only been exacerbated as things become more and more efficient and we have access to the whole world of information and things to buy at our fingertips.

Waiting is an active posture that requires very little action other than the thing itself. It can feel discouraging, boring, and even unsettling. This is

why waiting is one of the most formative experiences in our lives.

Waiting confronts things in us, bringing things to the surface we would not have otherwise known were there—things we believe about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us when we wait. For example, we may think we have dealt with our control issues, but waiting *just* beyond the threshold of what we can tolerate, we realize we have much further to go.

Scripture reveals that how we wait matters. It shapes us in ways nothing else can.

There are many ways to wait. We can wait patiently, angrily, quietly, loudly, anxiously, hopefully, and so forth. The question I want to ask us today is this: How do we wait well? By *well*, I mean: How do we wait in a way that welcomes all that God is wanting to do in us in this moment? What does waiting that honors God look like? That trusts instead of grabs for control? That embraces the gift of waiting? How do we wait in hope? Not just hope for a certain outcome, but hope in God?

The psalm reveals there are actually a few practices we can engage in while waiting to help us wait well: remember, pray, and worship.

REMEMBER—Builds Faith

These things I remember . . . (v. 4a)

The words of the psalmist here are not just looking back on the good old days, but rather the trusting cries of someone who believes God's past goodness is a promise for the future and in this present moment. Remembering isn't just nostalgia. It's an act which builds faith and anchors us in the memory of God's past faithfulness. When we remember while we wait, we are reorienting our hearts to trust that God will act faithfully again. Remembering reminds us that our stories are part of a much bigger and grander story—one in which God has never faltered and will not now.

PRAY—Builds Intimacy

. . . as I pour out my soul . . . (v. 4a)

If you've ever had to wait for something, you know that waiting has a way of bringing things to the surface—worries, doubts, questions, beliefs we didn't know we had, and a variety of emotions. While it may seem easier to ignore them for various reasons, prayer gives us a space to name these and lay them before God.

The psalms are full of examples. Looking at our psalm today, we see that no question is too offensive and no concern is too small for God: “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?” (v. 9).

When we name these things, it’s not like God wasn’t aware of them already. He knows us more deeply than we know ourselves, and “before a word is on [our] tongue[, He knows] it completely” (Ps. 139:4). The invitation to pour out one’s soul is not about being more known by God, but becoming more aware of God’s knowledge of us and the depth to which God desires to bring healing and wholeness to us.

WORSHIP—Expresses Love

Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God. (v. 5)

In this verse, the psalmist expresses the deep sadness of his soul but chooses to respond to it by worshipping. Why? Because worship is an act of response to God. Despite feeling downcast and

disturbed, the psalmist calls himself to hope in God and to praise God as Savior.

This is a powerful moment of self-coaching, where the psalmist doesn't wait for his emotions to change but chooses to lift his eyes to the truth of who God is. This decision to worship shifts his perspective from the present state of his soul to the faithfulness of God. This does not *deny* the state of the soul, but is actually what heals it.

Worship helps us see God more clearly, which is why remembering and prayer are such important practices that lead us into worship. As we recall God's past faithfulness and pour out our souls before Him, we start to see more fully the goodness and love of God, even in the midst of hardship. In that clarity, we are moved to respond with love and adoration.

*Deep calls to deep
in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers
have swept over me.*

*By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life. (vv. 7–8)*

Response Prompts

1. Remember—Do you have something to remember? A past story of God's faithfulness?
2. Pray—Is there anything in your soul that you'd like to pour out before God? It may be a big thing, or it may be a small thing. He cares.
3. Worship—What are the ways you can turn your heart to worship today, even in the midst of waiting?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, help me to wait well. I open up my heart to how You might want to meet me and shape me in the waiting. Help me to remember Your past faithfulness, to pour out my soul to You in honest prayer, and to respond to You in worship. Strengthen my hope, even when the waiting feels long, and draw me closer to the heart of the Father. Amen.



DAY 4

Groaning to Glory



Romans 8:18–27

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits

of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

Consider This

Hope is difficult to hold onto at times. Whether it's hoping for good news, healing, or an answer to prayer, the space between what we hope for and what we already have can feel endless—and the temptation to tap out can be strong. But it's in these moments of longing for what we don't yet have that our awareness of reality sharpens. With the Spirit's help, we begin to sense the weight of what is missing, to yearn for resolution, and to realize that the longing we experience is not isolated—it's part of something deeper, something shared by all of creation.

Paul's words to the Romans reveal that frustration awakens this yearning in us. Our inward groans, born of hardship, mirror creation's cry for liberation from decay and its longing for the fullness of God's glory to be revealed. Suffering doesn't leave our faith untouched. It can rattle us, landing solid blows to our souls and leaving us wrestling with hard questions. But as the dust settles, we often find that it has drawn us into deeper waters than where we started.

The questions we ask, the wilderness we wander through, and the wrestling we do produces a greater depth of relationship and communion with God. The pain we experience magnifies the hope we have for the day when Jesus will return and the fullness of God's kingdom will be expressed. In suffering, the promise of that day becomes sharper, more urgent, and more deeply treasured.

Christian hope is not aimless optimism. It is the hope we were saved into, a hope that gives us the strength to wait patiently for what we do not yet see. Paul compares this waiting to the pains of childbirth—agony paired with anticipation. Labor is painful, but it's endured for something precious: new life. The discomfort of this not-yet-fully-realized hope doesn't diminish its value or reality. Instead, it highlights its worth and nearness.

Thankfully, we aren't left to hope in our own devices, methods, or strength. Paul lets us know the Spirit of God who cultivates this longing in us also "helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (vv. 26b–27).

Take a moment and sit with this reality: Right now, the Spirit is interceding for God's people in accordance with God's will. What does this mean? To intercede literally means to intervene or petition on behalf of another. It's no wonder when Jesus promises His Spirit to His disciples in John 14, He gives the Spirit a name: the "Advocate." This means the Spirit of God—who knows your heart and every detail of your life—is advocating for you at this very moment in accordance with God's purposes. The same is true for your friends, your family, and your community.

So, we wait—not passively, but with patience and expectation—with the prayers and intercession of the Spirit in us and for us and for all creation, holding fast to hope.

Response Prompts

1. In what ways has suffering or hardship deepened your understanding of God's promises?
2. Paul describes the Spirit interceding for us in our weakness. How does this truth influence the way you approach prayer during difficult seasons?
3. How might the Spirit's intercession for all of creation shape the way you pray for your community and for the world?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, thank You that You are interceding for me even now. I lay before You any frustration I'm experiencing in my life—big or small—and ask that You help me hold onto hope. Help me in my weakness when I don't know what to pray for and teach me to wait patiently in hope for what is to come. Amen.



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DAY 5

Look in Both Directions



Revelation 22:1-7

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the

light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”

Consider This

Advent is a season of tension—of already and not yet. It’s a time for remembering and anticipating, looking back to Christ’s first coming and forward to His promised return.

In the tradition I grew up in, Advent often focused on the past—Jesus in the manger, the fulfillment of the long-awaited promise of a Messiah. But as I’ve come to understand it, Advent also invites us to look ahead, to anchor our hope in Christ’s return and the restoration He will bring.

Our text today gives us a glimpse of that future.

As a whole, the book of Revelation can feel mysterious, overwhelming, and even a bit intimidating. But it’s an important part of Scripture, meant to stir our hearts and evoke response from every generation

of the church. As we read the text today, total understanding is not our goal; deep, faith-filled hope in the person of Jesus and His promises is.

Here's what is clear and certain: Jesus will return. Evil will be eradicated, and the curse will be no more. All that has been wrong will be made right and everything that has been broken will be made new.

What some see as the end of time is actually a great and glorious beginning—the fulfillment of all God's promises.

The presence of God and the Lamb, once confined to the temple, will now fill all creation. The throne of God will be in the city, where His servants will see His face and bear His name. There will be no night, no need for lamps or even the sun, for God Himself will be their light. God's servants will rule and reign over creation with God in unbroken relationship and communion forever (vv. 3–5).

Talk about something to look forward to!

Our hope isn't hopefulness about a possible future outcome we wish will happen. It's built on past experience of the promises of God coming to fruition. Looking back helps us to look forward with greater expectation and confidence.

Advent invites us to look in both directions—to discover “these words are trustworthy and true”

(v. 6), and allow the reality of this hope to change how we live in the present.

Response Prompts

1. How have you typically understood Advent? Has it been more about looking back at Christ's first coming or anticipating His return? What do you think it might look like to hold both together?
2. How might the promise of Christ's return shape the way you live today? What difference does it make to anchor your hope in this promise?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You that You came as a baby, fulfilling the promise of the Messiah. This Advent, teach me more about the significance of Your past arrival, and to hope expectantly for Your return. I look forward to the day in which everything that is wrong will be made right and Your people will live in unbroken communion with You. My hope is in You and You alone. Amen.

DAY 6

Mary's Song



Luke 1:46–55

And Mary said:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.*

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”*

Consider This

As a Jewish woman, Mary's life was steeped in rhythms of remembrance. From feasts and festivals to the recitation of Scripture, her identity was deeply rooted in the story of God's faithfulness to His people. So when the angel appeared to her with the announcement that she would bear the Messiah, Mary responded in a way that reflected her grounding in that story.

The Magnificat, as this passage is often referred to, is a master lesson in thanksgiving and remembrance. What began as a small, personal moment of praise increased to a crescendo of worship that acknowledged the moment fully for what it was, glorifying God's faithfulness from generation to generation.

It's important to remember the bigger story we belong to. It's also important to embrace the chapter

God writes in our own lives. Remembering the big picture grounds us in a grander and greater narrative than we could ever imagine. God is redeeming His whole creation and fulfilling His promises to His people. But remembering the small picture—the ways God has worked in our own lives—reminds us the story is deeply personal.

Together, these perspectives fuel our worship, helping us to glorify God for His greatness and rejoice in His nearness to us.

Response Prompt

Take time to write your own praise of thanksgiving and remembrance, thanking God for what He has done for you and how it connects to His greater work of redemption. It can be in whatever form you want—a poem, a song, or a few paragraphs. No singing required. Don't worry about it being good and don't worry about length. The goal is to have fun and engage creatively in response to the goodness of God.

Prayer

Mighty God, thank You that Your plan for redeeming the whole world also includes me. Help me to know the story I belong to more deeply, to be shaped by it more fully, and to grow in love for You so that I can participate in it more faithfully. Amen.



“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”

—John 14:27a

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DAY 7

How to Survive an Invasion



Micah 5:2–5a

*“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”*

*Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears
a son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.*

*He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.*

*And he will be our peace
when the Assyrians invade our land
and march through our fortresses.*

Consider This

The word of the Lord through the prophets continued to reveal more and more about the nature of the coming Messiah. Micah's prophecy promises a shepherd leader whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. Not only will he "stand and shepherd his flock in the strength . . . [and] in the majesty of the name of the LORD" (v. 4), but "he will be our peace . . ."—*Christmas card worthy*—"when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses" (v. 5)—*probably not making it onto the Christmas card*.

While it's tempting to want to cut and paste the first half of the verse and toss out the second bit, we actually miss the significance of what Micah is saying here in doing so. The disruption of peace as

we understand it—freedom from conflict, problems, stress, and so forth—is crucial to understanding the peace Jesus offers.

In the midst of the invasion of their land and losing their fortresses to their enemies, He will be their peace. Not *if* something bad happens, but *when* something bad happens, He will be our peace.

I notice the word choice: *fortresses*. A fortress is a place of security, refuge, protection, strength, and safety. It's a stronghold where we expect to be safe from the enemy, a place that is not meant to be disturbed, much less overrun by invaders. And yet, the scripture says, "He will be our peace when the Assyrians invade our land and march through our fortresses" (v. 5). These strong, secure places—where we expect to be safe—are not immune to destruction. It's in these moments of vulnerability, when everything we thought was secure is shaken, that God promises to be our peace. This is why the psalms are full of songs and prayers describing God as a fortress:

*Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation;
he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
(Ps. 62:5–6)*

We are not promised the absence of pain, suffering, trials, grief, or loss. In fact, Scripture tells us these things will come. Following Jesus doesn't make us immune to hardship. But we are promised presence. One of the greatest promises of the Bible is that God is with us. That's what Advent is all about: God being with us (Immanuel).

God does not offer peace by removing the challenges but by entering into them with us; not peace in the absence of adversity, but peace in the midst of it.

The Messiah doesn't just bring peace, *He is* peace. He will be our peace, not a change in circumstances or a favorable outcome, but the presence of Jesus Himself. God with us, Immanuel.

And he will be my peace when . . .

There are bills to pay and the bank account
doesn't add up.

The test results come back negative.

I face the weight of loss that seems too heavy
to bear.

The job I thought was secure is no longer
mine.

The world around me is chaotic.

I get the diagnosis I never could have
imagined.

A relationship I've held dear begins to fall
apart.

The uncertainty of the future keeps me
awake at night.

The fortresses in which I have taken refuge
come falling down.

In all of these things, He will be my peace.

Response Prompts

1. If you had to write a definition for “peace” based on how it’s described in Scripture, what would it be?
2. What does it mean for you personally that Jesus doesn’t just bring peace, but that He *is* peace? How have you experienced this in your life?
3. Is there a situation or circumstance where you need to experience Jesus’s peace? If so, I encourage you to fill in the blank: He will be my peace when _____. Read it out loud, write it down, and put it somewhere you’ll see it often.

Prayer

Lord, You are my good shepherd. My strong fortress.
My peace. Thank You for Your promise to be with me.
Help me to know this reality more deeply, to recognize that Your presence is always with me, and that You never leave my side. Amen.



DAY 8

Moving from Results to Communion



Philippians 4:4–9

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from

me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you

Consider This

A couple of years ago I had a horrible bout of nighttime panic attacks. I would fall asleep and, about fifteen minutes later, I'd wake up trembling and gasping for air, with my heart racing, and in a state of utter terror. It would take me hours to get back to sleep and, at its worst, was happening about five nights a week and went on for months.

I did everything I knew to do to alleviate the problem. I shared with close friends and pastors, went to counseling, talked with a doctor, read Scripture before bed, deleted social media, gathered friends to fast and pray with me, developed a nighttime routine to help myself relax, reduced my caffeine intake, and much much more. During this time, if someone told me to “try praying about it,” I think I would have internally screamed a few choice words and externally left the conversation as quickly as possible (on a good day).

I felt like I was in a constant state of prayer, and scriptures like Philippians 4 left me feeling confused and frustrated. I wanted prayer to fix my anxiety.

I thought it was a simple formula: $A + B = C$. “Okay, God, I said my prayers. Now, please slow my heart rate, still my mind, and give me more than four hours of sleep. Thanks!” As I wrestled with what seemed to be a conflict between the promises of Scripture and the reality of my current situation, I discovered prayer is more than a formula for reducing anxiety—it’s an invitation to intimacy.

Whenever I had a panic episode, my mind was so scattered I couldn’t think clearly, let alone pray. I slept with a Bible next to my bed and read psalms out loud, shaking, clinging to the promises of God and praying my way through the Scriptures until I fell back asleep.

Over time, the episodes started happening less and less and, slowly but surely, they went away altogether. That season of my life was pretty awful and I still struggle to make sense of it. But I do know this: I know God more deeply and am more convinced that He’s the only one who can truly give us peace.

Peace didn’t come in the way I expected—immediately after saying the right prayers; it came through intimacy with Him. The promises of His presence became more beautiful and desirable and precious to me. I look back on those moments of pain and am keenly aware of His presence with me.

His delay in answering my prayers actually brought a deeper level of healing and restoration in me than had it been immediate.

I know the Scriptures in a way I wouldn't have known them and read them in a way I would not have read them. I now realize that in clinging to the promises of God during those moments, I was also following the exhortation: "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (v. 8). What we think about and how we think about it influences how we live and respond to the world. This is why cognitive behavioral therapy, a common treatment for anxiety, focuses on identifying unhelpful thoughts, reframing them, and responding to situations more effectively.

True, lasting peace comes from the secret place. Peace is ultimately a fruit of the spirit which comes to bear through an abiding life with God. Prayer isn't a quick fix to deal with our fear or anxiety, it's a lifeline that fuels abiding and brings us into awareness of the presence of God with us. In prayer we surrender control, embrace our own limitations, and declare our dependence on and need for God.

This is why we are exhorted to pray when faced with anxiety. Not for instant results or solutions, but for deep communion with the one who Himself is peace. Not so we can experience a feeling of peace momentarily, but come to know peace personally. Peace is not found in the absence of anxiety, but in the presence of God.

Response Prompts

1. How does the perspective that prayer is less about solving problems or quick solutions and more about deepening intimacy with God change your understanding of prayer?
2. What helps you fix your mind on what is true, noble, and lovely? What would it look like for you to do that right now?
3. Is there any concern or anxiety you would like to bring to God in prayer?

Prayer

Father, thank You for Your nearness. I bring any anxiety I'm carrying to You, and I release it. I ask that I would come to know You more deeply, and be more aware of Your presence with me. I receive Your peace. Help me to fix my mind on what is true, noble,

right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praise-worthy. Amen.



DAY 9

Breaking the Cycle



Matthew 6:25–34

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how

God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Consider This

When was the last time you worried about something? What did you do about it? How did you handle it?

We live in a culture of worry. The entire system we live in often feels like it is built on our worry and fear, feeding our insecurities and convincing us to try and control things we cannot control.

When we worry, our impulse is often to respond in ways that actually feed that worry—causing it to grow and produce more. For example, if we worry about financial security, we may obsessively check our bank accounts in hope of reassurance. Instead of

resolving our concern, our stress increases and we are kept in a cycle of fear.

In this teaching, Jesus mentions three areas where we are prone to worry:

1. Food: Worrying about where our next meal will come from or if we're eating the right things.
2. Clothes: Concerned about keeping up appearances or maintaining a certain lifestyle.
3. Tomorrow: Stressing about the future.

Jesus doesn't mince words. He plainly states that our worry is unproductive and unhelpful: "Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?" (v. 27). There is no benefit to worry. If anything, worry takes away an hour of your life. Worry is like running on a hamster wheel—frantically moving, working hard, and yet not actually going anywhere.

Stressing about these things is not for the children of God; it's what the pagans do. Our Father knows what we need, and we can rest in His provision.

Instead of worrying, Jesus invites us to redirect our effort, energy, and thoughts toward something better—to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

This sounds great. But what does that actually mean? What does it look like? What is the kingdom of God?

The last question wasn't rhetorical. We talk much about the kingdom in our churches and read about it in our Bibles. How would you explain it? Take a few minutes and answer the question to the best of your ability.

To give us a more robust understanding, Scot McKnight outlines five qualities of the kingdom:¹

1. The kingdom of God has a king, and this king is Jesus.
2. The kingdom of God has a king who rules [by redeeming and governing His people].
3. The kingdom of God has a distinct people, [those who have been redeemed by the King and find themselves under the lordship of the King].
4. The kingdom of God has a law, [which is followed by the people of the kingdom].
5. The kingdom of God has a land, [sacred space where the people of the kingdom embody the

1. Scot McKnight, "What and Where Is the Kingdom of God?" *Seedbed*, <https://seedbed.com/where-is-the-kingdom-of-god/>.

will of God for this world in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit].

Simply put: the kingdom of God is where God is King.

So what does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God? It means to live as people of the kingdom, redeemed and governed by the King. As people of the kingdom, we live under a different ethic and ethos than the cultural norm.

Our text today comes in the middle of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, teachings which define what it means to live in the kingdom. The sermon is packed with a call to live in a way radically different than the wider culture. If you have time today, consider reading through the whole sermon (Matthew 5–7) and writing down any insights about living as a citizen of the kingdom. You'll realize that the way of living Jesus presents addresses the three areas we are prone to worry about—food, clothes, and tomorrow—and challenges us to reimagine life through the lens of the kingdom of God.

Jesus concludes the sermon with these words: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24).

Instead of worrying about the things the pagans (those outside the kingdom) worry about, we're invited to step off the hamster wheel and begin building on the Rock. There, we find stability, purpose, and the freedom to live as God's redeemed and beloved people.

*Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as
well. (6:33)*

Response Prompts

1. How would you define the kingdom of God?
2. What does it mean for you to seek first the kingdom of God today? Read through Matthew 5–7 with this question in mind. Pay attention to anything the Spirit highlights as you read.

Prayer

God, thank You that because of Your redemption in my life I live as a citizen of Your kingdom! Even now, I declare out loud: "Jesus, you are King over my life." I belong to You. Holy Spirit, help me to release my tendency to worry and to, instead, seek first the kingdom of God. Lord, let Your kingdom come and Your will be done in me, in my church, my house, my neighborhood, my workplace, and my city. Amen.

DAY 10

When God Delights in Helping Us



Ephesians 4:1–6

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Consider This

The peace of God is not just something we receive for ourselves. As people who carry God's peace and

presence, it impacts our relationships and the world around us.

Paul exhorts the Ephesians to “live a life worthy of the calling [they] have received” (v. 1). This way of living is marked by humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and putting in the effort to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (v. 3).

This is not passive. It doesn’t just happen, but is an active work we engage in as God’s children. It requires effort on our part.

There’s a key word that’s crucial for us to catch: *keep*. Unity and peace are not things we earn or create, but that we receive from God and share in the keeping of. This is important because it gets at the source of our peace and unity and where we draw these things from—not human strength or effort or ideas, but God.

The peace and unity God gives us is able to be given because of a great disruption of peace—the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As He was preparing to be arrested and go to the cross, Jesus prayed this prayer to the Father for those who would come to believe in Him:

“I have given them the glory that you gave me . . .” [Pause. Read that again.] “I have given them the glory that you gave me,” [What is that glory?] “that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:22–23)

This reveals something profound: our unity is a *glory* that we share with God, given to us by Jesus, for the sake of the world knowing that the Father has sent Jesus and that the Father loves them.

No human effort toward unity can achieve anything remotely like this. But we are charged to keep this unity through the bond of peace.

What does that look like? Does this mean we never disagree, everyone gets along all the time, and we all think the same way? I don’t think that’s the case.

Oneness isn’t sameness, which means there’s room for disagreement.

Looking to our text today, where Paul details what a life worthy of the calling we’ve received looks like, I see that we are urged to relate to one another with certain postures and practices that maintain unity

and peace, while still making room for differences and disagreement. We're called to be:

- Humble instead of defensive, controlling, or demanding our way.
- Gentle instead of aggressive or accusatory.
- Patient, taking the time to understand the other.
- Loving, no matter what.

Have you ever entered into a disagreement and someone responded in one of these ways? It doesn't resolve the conflict immediately, but it changes the trajectory and nature of the entire conversation.

A significant part of my husband's job is conflict management, and he has this profound ability to diffuse tense situations. This also makes him a great person to be married to. Many times when we've disagreed, I've been surprised to be met with gentleness, humility, and patience. While there still may be conflict, peace is now in the midst of it, and I feel loved and unified with my husband.

I think God knew this would be difficult for us. Of all the things Jesus could have prayed for in Gethsemane, this made the list.

We are charged to keep this unity but, thankfully, we don't have to do so in our own strength. Paul's description of a life worthy of the calling—marked by

gentleness, patience, love, and peace—echoes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. These are not qualities we muster on our own; they are the natural outgrowth of an abiding life with God, keeping in step with the Spirit.

God has not only given us unity and peace, but He enables and empowers us to keep what we have been given. This is why Paul exhorts us to “keep the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3). It’s a cooperative work, a daily reliance on God to empower us to reflect His peace in our relationships. God delights to help us in this: Jesus, who prayed for our unity, now intercedes for us, and the Spirit works within us to bring His prayer to fruition.

As we commit to keeping these things, we are drawn closer to God and to one another, reflecting the love and glory of God for the sake of the world.

Response Prompts

1. Think of a time when someone showed humility, gentleness, patience, or love in a disagreement. How did it impact the situation or your relationship?
2. What practices or rhythms help you cultivate an abiding life with Jesus that bears the fruit of the Spirit?

Prayer

Father, thank You for the calling I have received and the unity and peace made available to me through the sacrifice of Your Son. Help Your church keep the unity of Your Spirit through the bond of peace. Help us to be completely humble and gentle, to be patient, and to bear with one another in love, so that the world may know of Your love. Amen.



DAY 11

In the Soil of Pain and Shame



Luke 1:5–7, 11–22

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. . . .

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah;

your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Consider This

Zechariah isn't exactly the character you'd want to be cast in the Christmas play. He's definitely not the hero of the story, and is a complex supporting role. In the face of an angel showing up to tell him that the prayer he has likely been praying for decades has been heard, he responds: "How can I be sure of this?" (v. 18).

Looking at Zechariah's situation, I empathize with his question. This question comes from a place of pain—a wound developed over years of not being able to conceive. As a spiritual leader and elder in the community, Zechariah and his wife were the modern-day equivalent of a couple who "would have made such great parents." In an effort to explain why they had not been able to have a child, it was likely assumed by the community that something was wrong with one of them; sin or something of the sort caused God to withhold the experience of parenthood.

In the soil of pain and shame, Zechariah's demand for certainty grew, yielding the fruit of unbelief when met with the promise of God.

The question isn't just one of unbelief, but a grab for control in an area in which he had never experienced it. In her book *The Cost of Control*, Sharon Miller

suggests: “behind every struggle for control is a hurting person searching for peace in a chaotic world.”²

The need to know cost Zechariah the joy that came from the answer to the seemingly unheard prayers of him and his wife and the peace that comes from trusting God and believing His word. His own certainty that this would happen became central over the word of God spoken through Gabriel.

His question differs from Mary’s in that it does not assume this will happen. Mary asked, “How will this be?” (v. 34). Zechariah asked, “How can I be sure?” (v. 18). Mary’s question modeled agency and faith, Zechariah’s was one of control and unbelief. As a result, the angel declares: “Now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time” (v. 20).

This chapter of the redemption story is reminiscent of a much earlier one. We’ve seen this situation before: A couple who had been unable to conceive receives a word from God in their old age, promising a child that would not only be the answer to their

2. Sharon Hodde Miller, *The Cost of Control: Why We Crave It, the Anxiety It Gives Us, and the Real Power God Promises* (Baker Books, 2022), 33.

prayers, but play a huge part in the grander narrative of redemption. I'm talking about Abraham and Sarah.

To make a long story short, Abraham initially believed God's promise, but he and Sarah took things into their own hands. Instead of conceiving a child with his wife, Abraham slept with her slave, Hagar (as Sarah suggested), and had a son named Ishmael. Messy.

When God circles back to Abraham (who was at the ripe age of one hundred) and says that actually this child will come through Sarah (who was ninety) and is to be called Isaac, Abraham falls down, laughs in God's face, and essentially asks for Ishmael to be blessed instead. Not exactly a response of faith.

As I sit with these two stories side by side, I can't help but wonder why Zechariah was silenced. Was his silence a punishment? Doesn't it seem a bit harsh, considering what Abraham did?

Instead of seeing this as a punishment from God, I wonder if Zechariah's silence is actually better seen as a grace that did a couple of things: It prevented him from trying to expedite the promise of God and producing something out of his own control (like Ishmael) and confirmed the words spoken by the angel were true.

It was in the silence that God began to heal wounds from decades of unmet longing for a child. It

was in the silence that God revealed Himself and the trustworthiness of His word. And it was in the silence that the embers of faith were stoked in Zechariah, yielding the fruit of prophetic praise and worship, which we'll read together tomorrow.

Response Prompts

1. When prayers seem unanswered for a long time, what emotions or thoughts tend to surface in your heart? How have these experiences shaped your view of God or your faith journey over time?
2. Zechariah's reaction reflects both doubt and a desire for control. Have you ever found yourself in a similar place? How did it impact your trust in God's promises, and what helped you move forward?

Prayer

God, thank You for Your direction in my life, even when it feels like disappointment or delay. Though I don't like to admit it, I relate to Zechariah's need for control, doubt, and even unbelief. I ask that You replace these things in me with trust in You and Your goodness, and with faith in Your promises. Amen.

DAY 12

Zechariah's Song



Luke 1:62–79

Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

*“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and
redeemed them.*

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all
our days.*

*And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the
Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the
way for him,
to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us
from heaven*

*to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

Consider This

Like all of ours, Zechariah's story is one of redemption. His story is a reminder to those of us who have failed that it is the faithfulness of God to His word (not our performance, believing and doing the right things) that brings about redemption in the world.

I love this story, because it shows both the big and small ways in which God works. In this single moment of naming his son, we see both personal and cosmic redemption. Zechariah's story intersects with the sweeping story of salvation history. Zechariah and Elizabeth's desire for a baby intersects with God's desire to send the one who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

As John grew in Elizabeth's womb, we see that something also grew in Zechariah. The song that burst forth from him upon John's arrival was forged in disappointment, waiting, and his own failure. In silence, Zechariah's voice was transformed from one of doubt, control, and fear to prophetic boldness, adoration, and faith.

Zechariah's story invites us to consider what God might be doing in us during seasons of waiting and delay. God is always working to bring forth something greater than we could ask or imagine. This doesn't mean that these plans will be free from suffering or loss. But His redemptive plans for us and through us are always better than we expect—marked by mercy, faithfulness, and the tender love of a God who redeems all things—big and small.

Response Prompt

Zechariah's song came after a long season of disappointment followed by a time of waiting and silence. Reflect on a time in your life when you were waiting for God to move. Write a prayer, letter, or psalm that captures the emotions of that season—your fears, hopes, and how you see God's faithfulness now. If you're currently in a waiting season, write the prayer you hope to sing when you see God's promise fulfilled.

Prayer

Lord, thank You that all of Your promises come to bear at the right time. Thank You that my own failures don't thwart Your plans, and that You desire to redeem me and my story just as much as You desire to redeem all creation. In times of waiting and silence,

I trust that You are working to bring forth something greater than I could ask or imagine. I welcome all that You desire to do in me. Amen.





*But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.*
—Psalm 5:11

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DAY 13

Away from Idols, toward God



Psalm 16

*Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.*

*I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."
I say of the holy people who are in the land,
"They are the noble ones in whom is all
my delight."*

*Those who run after other gods will suffer more
and more.*

*I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods
or take up their names on my lips.*

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

Consider This

This psalm is a master class in what it looks like to rejoice in God. At the beginning, the psalmist makes a bold statement: “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing” (v. 2). It’s a declaration that all true goodness, satisfaction, and joy can only come from a loving relationship with God.

But what about when our joy is absent? When our hearts are restless and burdened?

The answer likely lies in where our love and devotion are being directed.

Verse 4 contains a sobering insight into why we may be experiencing a lack of joy: “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.” The word translated as *suffering* here specifically refers to a sorrow, pain, injury, or wound. The ESV puts it this way: “The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.”

Many idols promise to bring us joy: money, power, status, sex, approval, beauty, popularity, control, success . . . the list goes on and on. We pursue these things in hope that they will live up to their promise, but we find that the opposite is true. We’re left wounded and empty, in some cases worse off than when we started. Our sorrows have multiplied.

We were created to worship, and the human desire for joy and contentment is actually a good thing. I believe God created us with these desires so that we might find they are met in Him. The problem is when our design as worshippers and these God-given desires are directed toward the wrong things.

The psalm exemplifies to us that lasting joy is found in friendship and relationship with God. The

psalmist receives counsel from God in the late watches of the night, his eyes are on God always, and he knows God is at his right hand. Life with God is a priority and friendship with God is a reality.

This results in a glad heart, a mouth that rejoices in God, and a body that rests secure in the promise that we will not be abandoned. The love and proximity of God *to* us produces joy and love for God *in* us.

Why? Because God can live up to the promise other gods can't. The deepest desires and longings of our hearts can only be perfectly fulfilled in God.

If you're feeling empty, joyless, sorrowful, or wounded, I'd like to invite you to consider that God may be inviting you to deeper companionship and delight in Himself, to turn away from idols and return to Him afresh.

Response Prompt

1. What idols are you tempted to pursue in search of joy? Consider the following: approval, control, comfort, doctrinal pride, entertainment, politics, success, productivity, and so forth.

Prayer

My God, You are my God. In Your presence there is fullness of joy. I know that apart from You I have no good thing. With You, I have every good thing. I confess that I have worshipped lesser gods and I have loved lesser things more than I have loved You. Today, I turn away from the idol(s) of [name what you answered in the prompt] and turn toward You. I receive Your forgiveness. Thank You, God, that You loved me first. Help me to love You rightly and to rest in Your love for me. Amen.



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DAY 14

Best When Enjoyed Together



Luke 1:39–45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Consider This

It's no secret that the best experiences in life are shared with those we love.

I recently saw a video on social media of two sisters surprising one another with the news they were both pregnant. As it should, the video ended with squeals, tears, laughter, and jumping up and down together.

The shared experience of being pregnant at the same time as a close friend or relative is undeniably special. In Mary and Elizabeth's case, their pregnancies were both miraculous and as a direct result of God's personal and cosmic promises.

Yet, they were also markedly different. Elizabeth, significantly older, had longed for a child for years, and endured much heartache and waiting. Mary, likely a teenager, was unexpectedly pregnant before marriage, a situation ripe for misunderstanding and judgment.

Elizabeth could have responded to her young cousin with bitterness or criticism. Instead, her reaction was one of overwhelming joy and blessing.

How? "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 41).

The Spirit superseded human instinct and filled Elizabeth with joy. She was empowered to respond to the reality of the moment these two women were in.

The Spirit superseded human knowledge and gave Elizabeth the knowledge of God. She declares Mary is “the mother of my Lord” (v. 43).

Here we see the little community of hope, that began when the Spirit overshadowed Mary and the angel told her about her cousin’s pregnancy, developing into a larger community of joy, including the two of them and the children in their wombs.

This story is a beautiful example of an intergenerational friendship, empowered and created by the Spirit. Elizabeth considers herself favored to be visited by Mary and rejoices in what God is doing in and through her. Mary responds in joy as well, singing the Magnificat we read at the end of our focus on hope.

Both of these women together celebrate the broader work of God, His faithfulness to generations, and to one another. Their story invites us to do the same—to rejoice not only in what God is doing in our own lives but also to celebrate His work in the lives of others, even when they are younger (or older) than us.

The Spirit desires to fill us and empower us for this work. Through the power of the Spirit, we can affirm and encourage one another in faith, knowing that God's promises are always best enjoyed together.

Response Prompts

1. Who are you in friendship with in a different generation than you (older or younger)?
2. How can you bless them and encourage them in what God is doing in their life?

Prayer

Holy Spirit, fill me and empower me to bless what You are doing in the lives of those around me. Help me to develop friendships across generations and knit us together in hope and joy for Your unfolding promises and purposes in the world. Amen.



DAY 15

The Holiness Highway



Isaiah 35

*The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.*

*Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear;*

*your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”*

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*

*And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and those the LORD has rescued will return.*

*They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

Consider This

Isaiah's words in chapter 35 paint a vibrant picture of joy and hope, a vision where life bursts forth from unexpected places, and all of creation sings with gladness. Even the desert and wilderness—the places we might consider barren and lifeless—are caught up in this symphony of renewal:

*The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
(vv. 1b–2a)*

This language reminds me of a phenomenon I witnessed once while traveling to California: a superbloom. A superbloom occurs when a unique combination of extremely dry and rainy seasons causes dormant wildflower seeds, built up over time, to germinate and bloom all at once. What was supposed to look like a barren landscape of dark

brown and light brown was bursting forth with life and color.

It's important to note what is happening here: not the obliteration of what is bad and broken, or the dismissal of it, but the transformation of it.

Burning sands—places of pain—become pools of healing.

Thirsty ground—places of longing—become bubbling springs of refreshment.

The haunts where jackals lay—places of death—become places of life.

Joy bursts forth precisely in the places that seem most barren, broken, and in need of it. The text comes with a message of hope regarding these places: *They will be renewed and transformed.*

Too often, we think redemption means starting over, wiping the slate clean. But biblical redemption is not about obliterating what was broken. It's about redeeming it, recognizing its potential and believing in the possibility of renewal beyond what is immediately observable.

In Isaiah's prophecy, it is not the strong or self-sufficient who lead the rejoicing. Instead, joy springs forth from those carrying some level of weakness or need: the fearful, feeble, blind, deaf, lame, and mute.

A highway appears: the Way of Holiness. The highway isn't for everyone. *Only the redeemed will walk there.* To be redeemed inherently means having been in need of rescue and restoration. I love the interplay of redemption and holiness here. Holiness is not about perfection, rule-following, or striving. It is about welcoming the transforming grace of God. It's His redemption that qualifies the redeemed to walk this path

Isaiah prophesies that everlasting joy will crown their heads. Imagine being overtaken by gladness so profound that sorrow and sighing completely vanish.

Revelation 21:5 (ESV) echoes this hope: "Behold, I am making all things new." Not some things, or most things, but *all* things. Every place of pain, suffering, grief, and loss will be made new in the age to come. This is the scope of God's redemptive work: Nothing will be left untouched by it. It is from that reality our joy will burst forth.

Response Prompts

1. Do you have any places you long for renewal or transformation?
2. What would it look like for you to bring those before God today, trusting that He will make all things new?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for Your promise that You will make all things new. I look forward to the day in which the places in my life and in the world that seem the most destitute and broken will spring forth with life and joy because of You. Amen.



DAY 16

More than a Passing Glance



Hebrews 12:1-3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Consider This

It was the hope of future joy that motivated and empowered Jesus to endure the suffering of the cross.

The author of Hebrews invites us to follow the example of the pioneer of our faith and to play with the long game in mind—to expand our capacity to endure suffering in this present moment for the sake of the joy that is set before us. We experience this joy in part, but not yet in full. The implications of future joy come to bear on the present, bringing purpose and hope to us in the midst of opposition and hardship.

We are not called to run quickly, but to run with perseverance. To persist and run with the tenacity needed to finish. The goal is simple: keep going. We are able to do this because of the one who has pioneered the way. He is the one we are to look to, to fix our eyes on.

This is why we are urged to “consider” Jesus. To consider means to engage fully with who Jesus is. A passing glance won’t sustain us; we are to gaze upon Him, ponder His example, and seriously ask ourselves about the implications of His life, death, and resurrection.

Why? So that we don't grow weary and lose heart. Fixing our eyes on Jesus makes joy available to us, even in weariness, discouragement, or suffering, which seek to eclipse the joy we have before us.

We are not the first and only followers of God to do this. The opening words of our text today remind us of that: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . ." (v. 1). This is in reference to the great cloud of witnesses of our faith detailed in the previous chapter of Hebrews. Their running of the race encourages us to do the same.

The cloud of witnesses extends beyond those recorded in Scripture. Throughout church history, countless others have faithfully run the race, standing as examples of perseverance and faith. Some of these have shared in the sufferings of Jesus to the point of death. It is on their shoulders that many of us stand today.

Among these witnesses are early church martyrs like Perpetua and Felicitas, two young women who were arrested for converting to Christianity in the third century as they were preparing to be baptized. Their story is a powerful testimony of what it looks like to fix our eyes on Jesus and to experience the joy of knowing Jesus in the face of death.

[Perpetua] was a young, well-to-do woman nursing her infant child. . . . When Perpetua and her companions were arrested, her father tried to persuade her to save her life by abandoning her faith. She answered that, just as everything has a name and it is useless to try to give it a different name, she had the name of Christian, and this could not be changed. . . .

Felicitas, who was pregnant when arrested, was afraid that her life would be spared for that reason, or that her martyrdom would be postponed and she would not be able to join her four companions. The account of her martyrdom tells us that her prayers were answered, and in her eighth month she gave birth to a girl who was then adopted by another Christian woman. Seeing her moan in childbirth, her jailers asked how she expected to be able to face the beasts in the arena. Her answer . . . “Now my sufferings are only mine. But when I face the beasts there will be another who will live in me, and will suffer for me since I shall be suffering for him.” . . .

Perpetua and Felicitas were placed in the arena to be attacked by a crazed cow. Having been hit and thrown by the animal, Perpetua asked to be able to retie her hair, for loose hair was a sign of mourning, and this was a joyful day for her.³

In light of these things . . .

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb. 12:1–3)

3. Justo L. Gonzáles, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Vol. I (HarperCollins, 2010), 98–99.

Response Prompts

1. Who in your life has run their race of faith in a way that encourages you to keep going?
2. What would it look like for you to consider Jesus? Not glance at Him, or remember Him for a moment, but to really consider Him?

Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, that You are the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Thank You that You endured the pain and suffering of the cross for the joy set before You. Thank You for the cloud of witnesses that have gone before me and finished the race. I pray today for the persecuted church around the world. Strengthen them, uphold them, empower them, fill them with the joy and hope of Your presence today. Amen.



DAY 17

Bringing God Joy



Psalm 51:16–17

*You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
you, God, will not despise.*

Consider This

As we explore the theme of joy this Advent, we must go beyond our own experience of joy and ask an important question: What brings joy to God?

The psalm reveals that we, as human beings, can actually do something that pleases the God of the universe.

If we hadn't just read these verses and I had asked you what you thought brings joy to God, many of us would likely have pointed to practices and spiritual disciplines. We might have said things like reading Scripture, praying, worship, loving our neighbor, giving to the poor, sharing the gospel, or other outward demonstrations of our faith.

While these are good and meaningful in our following Jesus, Psalm 51 names two things God delights in: "a broken spirit" and "a broken and contrite heart" (v. 17).

This isn't an exhaustive list of the things God delights in, but it's an important start to making one.

This is equal parts refreshing and jarring (depending on the day). In a world that celebrates achievement and getting it right all the time, this shocks our entire operating system and confronts many of our assumptions about God.

If many of us were honest, we'd say that it's in brokenness and failure we feel God is actually least pleased with us. If we're really, *really* honest, we'd acknowledge that this is the fruit of projecting the way we love onto the way God loves. But God does

not rejoice in our self-sufficiency or our lack of need. What brings joy to His heart is far simpler and sometimes more difficult: honesty. He rejoices in our honest admission of how crushed we are and how desperately we need Him.

Much of the Christian journey involves unlearning the patterns of striving, earning, and performance. We are formed out of the ways of doing the right thing in an effort to earn approval or acceptance and formed into the freedom of dependence on God.

Why? In brokenness and need is when the joy of salvation is realized.

Psalms 51 is the prayer David prayed after a significant major moral failure as a leader became public knowledge. We began with a small excerpt, but I want us to read the whole psalm together now, listening for what the Spirit might want to teach us about what it looks like to offer the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart to God:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother
conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that
secret place.*

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and
blot out all my iniquity.*

*Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to
sustain me.*

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your
righteousness.
Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would
bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt
offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.
May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of
the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

In arguably the greatest failure of his lifetime, David brought God delight. Not because of his sin, but because of his posture: one of brokenness and need. This is a tough pill for many of us to swallow, but it's

the essence of grace. Despite our biggest failures and mess-ups, and all the pain that we cause ourselves and those around us, God loves us and always invites us to turn to Him. He delights when we come to Him in this posture of need. And we find that we rediscover the joy of our salvation in the process.

David's words in verse 19 highlight a third item to the list of what brings God joy: "the sacrifices of the righteous." Acts of worship—prayers, songs, and disciplines—do bring God joy, but only when they flow from a heart that has been laid down, broken and needy, before Him. These acts are not in an effort to earn God's love or approval, but come from a place of response to His love.

So what brings joy to God? It's not our striving, achievements, or performance. It's the honesty of a broken and contrite heart that acknowledges our need for Him. When we come to God in this posture, He doesn't turn away; He delights in us. Then and only then, with hearts made right through His grace, do our acts of worship—our sacrifices, prayers, songs—truly bring Him pleasure.

Response Prompts

1. What brings God joy? Do you know of any other passages of Scripture that answer this question?
2. Is there anything you need to confess to God today? Is there a sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart you can bring before Him?

Prayer

Thank You, Father, for taking delight in me, not when I'm at my best, but when I admit my brokenness and need for You. Jesus, I release my self-sufficiency and take up the sufficiency of the cross. Holy Spirit, free me from striving and empower me to walk in the goodness and grace of God. Amen.



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DAY 18

The Angels' Song



Luke 2:8-16

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his
favor rests.”*

*When the angels had left them and gone into
heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go
to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened,
which the Lord has told us about.”*

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph,
and the baby, who was lying in the manger.*

Consider This

The third song of Advent is short and sweet, a one-liner, but arguably with the best production value—multitudes of angels appearing all at once, singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (v. 14).

The angels were announcing that the Messiah had come. There’s a bit of irony in this situation. It would make sense for the Messiah to arrive with the same kind of heavenly glory the shepherds witnessed in the field—angels, light, and divine splendor. Instead, the angels’ grand announcement pointed to something very different: go look for a newborn baby in a nearby town, lying in a manger. That’s where the real glory is.

God's glory and presence were not found in the angelic visitation or the heavenly host on display. Instead, the presence of God was found in a manger, hidden in the darkness of the night.

How often do we worship the wrong thing? We are awed by the things of God, and we stop there. We end up worshipping the moments instead of the God they point to.

The glory of God in this story appeared to an unlikely group of people (shepherds) in an unlikely location (a field) in an unlikely way (a baby in a manger). It redefines what we often think of as glorious and calls us to expand our understanding of where God's presence is found.

Reflecting on the irony of this story, I'm reminded of another story. In 1 Kings 19, Elijah—who had encountered God in dramatic ways, like a column of fire and a rainstorm—was hiding in a cave, running for his life. God told him to stand outside the cave because the Lord was about to pass by. A powerful windstorm came, but God wasn't in the wind. Then an earthquake came, but God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a fire came, but God wasn't in the fire. Finally, a gentle whisper came, and that's where Elijah encountered God.

Just because Elijah had experienced God's presence in one way before didn't mean God would always show up the same way. The glory wasn't in the packaging, it was in the presence of God.

And that's the point. It's not that dramatic manifestations of God's power are bad. I've had moments in my life where I've encountered the presence of God in powerful, *heaven-meets-earth* ways. Even this past year, I can think of a moment that felt like something you'd read about in revival history books.

But the point is this: God's glory isn't tied to any specific form or experience. His glory is in His presence—sometimes loud and obvious, other times quiet and hidden. Are we paying attention to where God's glory might be showing up? And how are we responding to it?

Response Prompts

List moments when you've experienced God's glory—big or small. For each moment, write a one-liner in response, inspired by the angels' song in Luke 2. As you reflect and write, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- How was God's presence revealed to you?
- What does this moment reveal about who God is?

If you feel inspired, go beyond words: create a visual representation of one or more of these experiences. Use a medium like drawing, painting, collage, or photography to capture God's glory in your story.

Prayer

Lord, thank You for the ways in which Your glory and presence have been revealed to me. Help me to respond to You when You reveal Yourself in unexpected or new ways. Amen.





*This is how we know what love is:
Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.
And we ought to lay down our lives
for our brothers and sisters.*

—1 John 3:16

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DAY 19

What Is Love?



Isaiah 53

*Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD
been revealed?*

*He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.*

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should
desire him.*

*He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*

*Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he
was punished.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,*

*though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

*Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him
to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life an offering
for sin,*

*he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.*

*After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will
justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.*

*Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.*

*For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Consider This

What is love? For years, human beings have asked this question. Love is often misunderstood. It's commonly reduced to fleeting emotions, romantic

affection, or the feelings we have for something or someone we value. For Christians, love is more than an emotion—it's the defining mark of our faith. If love is so central, followers of Jesus must ask a similar question: What is love according to God?

The clearest answer is found in Jesus. Love is not fleeting feelings or performance-based but grounded in a real, historical event: the cross. This is the place where God's love is most clearly defined and demonstrated to us.

Isaiah 53 is a prophecy about the coming Messiah, written centuries before Jesus lived. It paints a vivid picture of God's love through the suffering of His servant. We begin our focus on love with this text because it gives profound insight into what the Messiah would be like, what happened on the cross, and the nature of God's love.

According to the passage, the cross teaches us a few things about God's love.

1. God's love is sacrificial: "He was pierced for our transgressions, . . . crushed for our iniquities" (v. 5a). The cross reveals that love involves personal cost. Jesus bore the punishment we deserved, taking on the weight of our sins so we could be healed and restored. True love, as God demonstrates it, is not self-seeking; it willingly lays down

personal comfort, preference, and privilege for the good of another.

2. God's love brings healing and peace: "The punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (v. 5b). God's love doesn't stop at removing guilt; it actively restores and reconciles. The cross brings us peace with God, one another, and creation and heals the deepest wounds in us. Love, in its truest form, seeks the flourishing of its recipients.

3. God's love is a willing choice: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (v. 7a). Love is not coerced; it is chosen. Jesus willingly endured suffering for our sake. He laid down His own rights as the Son of God and became human to redeem the world.

4. God's love is demonstrated in action: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering" (v. 4a). Jesus did not merely express love in words—He acted. He entered into our brokenness, bore our burdens, and suffered in our place.

The first letter of John affirms this notion and encourages us to love in the same way: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (1 John 3:16).

As followers of Jesus, our lives are to be marked by love—not mere sentiment; good feelings toward others; or even the withholding of bad, like judgment or gossip. Love, as defined by God, is sacrificial and selfless. It is laying down one’s life for another, even when they don’t deserve it.

But what does it look like to lay down our life in love? First John 3 continues: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (vv. 17–18). The word *pity* here doesn’t quite convey the depth of action intended. The ESV translation offers greater clarity: “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (v. 17).

An open heart toward those in need indicates the presence of God’s love in us. This reflects the active, compassionate posture of Jesus toward us in our need. In His abundance, He came to us in our poverty. His heart was open toward us. The love of God moving toward us and abiding in us always moves us toward the other.

To answer the question “How does God define love?” we look to the cross and find that love is a

person: Jesus. God defines love by Himself. Love is not fleeting emotion or conditional affection, it is sacrificial action, rooted in God's character and revealed in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection.

Response Prompts

1. What stands out to you about God's love as described in today's text?
2. I listed four things the passage reveals about God's love. Would you add anything to that list, either from today's text or another passage of Scripture?
3. What opportunities has God placed before you to demonstrate love through action, particularly when it costs you something?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for Your sacrifice on the cross. Thank You that You are the perfect revelation of love, that You looked upon us and Your heart was open toward us. Fill us with Your Holy Spirit, that we might abide more deeply in Your love and walk faithfully in Your command to lay our lives down for one another, particularly when it's inconvenient or requires sacrifice on our behalf. Amen.

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DAY 20

Remaining in Love



John 15:9–17

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 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. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have

made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.”

Consider This

This passage is part of what some have called the “Upper Room Discourse,” a glimpse into the final conversations Jesus had with His friends before His arrest in Gethsemane. Fully aware of what was to come, Jesus distilled the absolute essentials of His teaching—the truths His disciples would need to carry forward—during this final evening together.

In the middle of these conversations, Jesus shares a profound truth: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (v. 9a). Sit with that for a minute. We are loved with the same love the Father has for the Son.

He then issues a command and an invitation based on this reality: “Now remain in my love” (v. 9b). Seems simple and sounds great. But how do we remain in His love? Jesus’s answer may seem surprising: “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" (v. 10).

At first glance, this raises some questions. Does this mean God's love is conditional upon our behavior? Isn't God's love supposed to be unconditional? To answer these, we must look carefully at what command Jesus is referring to. He explains it clearly in verse 12: "Love each other as I have loved you."

This command is consistent with the commandments of Jesus throughout Scripture. When asked what the greatest commandment is in Matthew's gospel, Jesus replied: "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'" (Matt. 22:37-39).

The commands of Jesus are commandments of love.

Jesus compares our keeping of His commands to His keeping of His Father's commands.

Going back to our original question about the love of God being conditional, we know that the Father's love never ceased for Jesus. It would be an impossibility. And we know within the wider narrative of

Scripture that God's love is revealed to not be contingent on human obedience or faithfulness.

So what are we to make of the statement: "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love" (v. 10)?

Jesus is not saying His love for us ceases to exist if we don't keep His commands. But He does seem to suggest that our remaining in it—in other words, our awareness of it, our abiding in it, living in it—is impacted by our obedience to love one another.

Jesus elaborates and goes on to say: "You are my friends if you do what I command" (v. 14). This may sound like a condition, but within the wider context of what Jesus is saying, it is actually an invitation to greater intimacy. Obedience to Jesus's commands is not about earning His love but about participating in His friendship.

Jesus declares that He will no longer call His disciples servants, but friends. Why? Servants don't know the master's business, but friends do (v. 15). In other words, we don't just know His commands, but also His heart.

The roles of a servant and a friend both involve obedience, but one involves intimacy. Obedience *without* intimacy leads to legalism, fear, and self-righteousness. It assumes that God's love is

conditional or does not exist at all. Obedience *from* intimacy leads to love, freedom, and delight. It knows God's love is unconditional because it is aligned with the heart of the Father.

Friendship with Jesus does not mean we have the freedom to disobey Him. Rather, it transforms the nature of our obedience. It distinguishes between *earning* God's love (which we cannot do) or *striving* to avoid punishment and putting in *effort* to respond to His love and *seeking* to know Him more deeply.

As we remain in God's love, we are compelled to love one another. As we love one another, we are drawn deeper into God's love. This is not about meeting conditions for God's love but about stepping into the fullness of it.

As we remain in God's love and love one another, we step into the fullness of His love—a love that transforms us, draws us closer to Him, and overflows into the world. In this, our joy is made complete, and we bear fruit that lasts.

Response Prompts

1. How do you understand the connection between obedience and remaining in God's love?

2. Do you tend to operate as a friend of Jesus, obeying Jesus from intimacy, or a servant of Jesus, obeying Him out of fear or trying to earn His approval?

Prayer

Jesus, thank You for calling us friends. Help us to obey Your command to love, not in our own strength or striving, but from a place of deep friendship with You. Draw us into deeper awareness of Your love for us and one another. Amen.



DAY 21

The Maximum Amount



Philippians 1:9–11

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Consider This

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi begins with an overflowing expression of love and gratitude. He shares his joy in their companionship and his deep appreciation for their partnership in the gospel. As

he concludes his greeting, Paul invites them into his prayer for them, our text today.

In Pauline fashion, his prayer is one long, theologically dense sentence. Let's move through the prayer verse by verse, and see how God might want to meet us in His Word today:

*... that your love may abound more and more
in knowledge and depth of insight (v. 9b)*

What does it mean for love to abound in knowledge and depth of insight? Knowledge refers to the information, study, and facts we acquire through education or experience—both theoretical and practical. Insight, on the other hand, involves intuition and deep understanding that goes beyond the surface. It often reflects a wisdom that is not always public or commonly shared.

Together, knowledge and insight represent a combination of study and deep understanding, as well as knowing and practicing truth. Paul is praying that their love would not only grow in quantity but also in quality, shaping the way they live. Eugene Peterson puts it this way in The Message translation: “that your love will flourish and you will not only love much but love well.”

Why?

so that you may be able to discern what is best
... (v.10a)

When we face decisions that require discernment, what do we typically ask for? Advice? Wisdom? Prayer? In my own experience, I've prayed with people seeking discernment for all kinds of decisions—career, calling, relationships, moving, and so forth. In those times, I've always asked for things like clarity, direction, and peace. I can confidently say I have never asked for more love, and I don't think anyone has ever prayed for more love.

Yet here, Paul connects love to our ability to discern what is best. This is a profound insight into discernment: to discern is to be guided by love.

Notice, Paul doesn't say "what is right" but "what is best." In my own experience around discerning these things, I'm highly motivated by making the right decision—and even more motivated to avoid making the wrong one.

But Paul isn't talking about right or wrong here. There may be multiple right decisions, but a decision made in love is always the best. This isn't necessarily about a particular choice being objectively better than another, but about the way or posture in which we make that choice. When a decision is made with

the maximum amount of love—when love abounds—we can move forward with confidence.

... and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. (v. 10b–11a)

This prayer doesn't just impact major life decisions, but our whole way of being in the world. It's not only about discerning life choices, but about the culmination of what our life produces slowly over time. Paul isn't asking about what measurable results you have to show for at the end of your life, but what you are like at the end of it. He's talking about the fruit of the Spirit, which he outlines in his letter to the Galatians: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23 ESV). These are the "fruit of righteousness" that come through a life with Jesus (Phil. 1:11a).

Unto what purpose is all of this?

... to the glory and praise of God (v. 11b)

This does not bring glory to you or me, but to God. Our lives, abounding in love and marked by the fruit of the Spirit, point back to Him, magnifying His goodness and bringing praise to His name.

Response Prompts

1. Is there anything in your life you need discernment around? Pray for more love.
2. If not you, what about a friend?

Prayer

Lord, I pray that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. Amen.



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DAY 22

Challenging Our Success Metrics



1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but

rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Consider This

How do you define success? In the world's eyes, success is often measured by a combination of accomplishments, recognition, material wealth, physical appearance, and status. Even in Christian circles, success might be defined by doing the right things—serving faithfully, achieving great things for God, or mastering spiritual disciplines.

The kingdom of God presents a different metric of success: love.

This shifts the focus entirely. A life with few accolades, little recognition, or nothing impressive to list on a résumé carries immeasurable value if it is marked by love. The kingdom's value system flips the question from "What did you do today?" to "How did you go about your day? Was it in love?"

In God's eyes, how we do things matters more than what we do. The manner in which we carry out the work matters more than the work itself. Words, gifts, faith, good deeds—even the most self-sacrificial actions—have no real value if they are not done in love.

These words contain a sobering reality that serves as a warning: It is possible to express spiritual gifts, have great faith, practice generosity, and do all the Christian "stuff," yet still fail to love. Someone might preach a powerful sermon, be part of a thriving ministry, or give generously to those in need, but if their actions are not rooted in love, Paul says they amount to nothing.

This warning is especially poignant in light of recent failures in church leadership. Many gifted leaders have fallen, not because they lacked gifts,

calling, or talent, but because their character wasn't grounded in love.

Love is not just the ideal, but the indicator of spiritual health and maturity in the kingdom of God. Giftedness is not the same as spiritual maturity. We need to recover kingdom value for maturity in love over giftedness and spiritual charisma.

How do we know if we have love? How can we recognize love in us and in others?

Paul provides a few sentences that serve as a thermometer for our love in everyday life:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. (vv. 4–8a)

Contrary to its popular use, this passage was not written to be read exclusively at weddings. These words go far beyond a romantic context. They apply to our friendships, our interactions with coworkers,

our treatment of family members, and even our encounters with strangers.

Reading these words invites us to ask: *Does my love look like this? Am I patient and kind? Do I avoid envy, boasting, and pride? Do I dishonor others, seek my own interests, or hold grudges?*

If we answer these questions honestly, we realize although love never fails, we fail to love often. Failing to love isn't always dramatic—it shows up in the small, ordinary moments of life. It's the impatient response to an interruption, the self-righteous attitude in a disagreement, or the lack of kindness to someone who can't repay us.

The standard can feel impossibly high. Who among us can live this out perfectly? Even starting with the first line, "love is patient" (v. 4), is enough to convict most of us.

Our failures to love can actually draw us deeper into the love of God. These attributes are not simply ideals we aspire to, they're a reflection of God's own love for us. In other words, we aren't giving what we haven't received. While we may fail in the moment, we are being transformed into people who reflect the love of Christ more fully. Our failures to love are not the end of the story—they are opportunities to turn

back to God, receive His love, and let it overflow into our relationships.

The kind of love Paul describes doesn't come naturally. We don't wake up thinking, *I really feel like being patient and humble today*. Love is a daily, intentional choice—a decision to act in ways that reflect God's love, even when we don't feel like it.

One of the most encouraging promises in the New Testament is found in Philippians 2:13: "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (NLT). This means the desire to love well is itself evidence that the Spirit is already at work in us. Through the Holy Spirit, we are given not only the gifts we need to serve others, but also the capacity and the power to love—the very thing that allows us to carry those gifts well.

The language Paul uses at the end of the passage suggests that we can grow in love. As we mature in faith, we're invited to leave behind childish ways of thinking and step into a deeper understanding and demonstration of love.

In many ways, the Christian life is a journey of love: receiving it, being transformed by it, and sharing it with the world. This is not a path we walk alone. The Spirit is at work within us, shaping us day by day into people who reflect God's love more fully. And we

live in the hope that, one day, we will see Him face to face—the one whose love never fails, who loves perfectly and without end.

Response Prompts

1. Are there areas in your life where you're doing the Christian “stuff” without love?
2. In a world that often values success, status, and performance, how can you more deeply embrace the kingdom perspective that love is the greatest measure of success?

Prayer

Father, thank You that Your love never fails. I confess the ways in which I fail to love You, others, and myself daily. I acknowledge that I have not valued the way of love as You do. Thank You, Jesus, for showing the world what love looks like, and that Your love covers all of my failures to love. Holy Spirit, I open myself to You and ask You to give me the desire and the power to love well. Amen



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DAY 23

Love Comes First



1 John 4:7-16

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 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.

Consider This

The author of First John makes it clear: God is the origin of love.

Love does not begin with us, but with God loving us and sending His Son into the world. His love unquestionably comes first. Our love is always in response to His.

Love, in the Christian sense, is not based on our ability to love, but on God's. His love is the foundation, and it has implications for how we live: "since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11). Our knowledge of God ought to be measured by our love. This is not about mustering up our own love, but rather, an expression of the love of God in us.

God's love doesn't come to us and stop. His love nurtures us, finds expression in us, and moves to the world through us.

What does this actually look like in our lives? Sometimes it is comforting, but at other times, it challenges us, convicts us, and even disciplines us. This is true in any relationship that involves deep care. Thinking about my own life, those who have loved me most deeply have not only shown affection but have challenged me, said hard things to me, and even offended me at times.

God bears His witness to the world, in part, through how we love one another: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (v. 12).

Our love for one another reveals God more clearly. "His love is made complete in us" (v. 12). Our participation in it reveals the fullness of its purpose. He loves us so much that His love doesn't just come to us and stay there, but actually shapes and transforms us. It has actual real implications for us.

The language used here is the first-person plural "us." God's love is revealed to and in a community. We love and are loved. We don't just express the love

of God to one another, we also receive the love of God through one another.

To reiterate an earlier point, the Christian life is a journey of love: receiving it, being transformed by it, and sharing it with the world. This is not a solo journey, but one we go on together. God's love cannot find its full expression in solitude. We actually need one another to more deeply know and understand the love of God.

“And so we know and rely on the love God has for us” (v. 16). This brings us back to the starting statement: God's love “comes first.” When we know the love God has for us, we find we are free to love in the way He calls us to, beyond our own capacities and abilities. To love as God loves us requires us to rely on His love. God sent His Son so that we might live through Him. His Son came as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, not because we deserved it, but because of His great love for us. In the end, it is only by continually relying on God's love that we are equipped to love one another as He has called us to. As we do so, God Himself is more clearly revealed to us and His love is made complete in us.

Response Prompts

1. Can you think of a time you experienced God's love through someone else?
2. What does loving one another look like in real, tangible ways in your current context?

Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, that You came into the world so that we might have life through You. Thank You for Your sacrifice and the ultimate demonstration of love on the cross. Make Your love complete in us. Help us to love one another. Lead us to know more deeply and rely more fully on the love You have for us. Amen.



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DAY 24

God with Us



Matthew 1:18–25

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are

to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Consider This

In Scripture, names are never random. They carry meaning, signal identity, and point to purpose. This passage gives us two names for the baby Mary carried: Jesus and Immanuel.

The angel told Joseph and Mary to name the child Jesus. What does Jesus’s name actually mean?

The name Jesus is translated “The Lord is salvation.” Pay attention to the phrasing. It’s not just “The Lord saves,” as if salvation were something God does from a distance. It’s part of who God *is*; salvation is related to His very nature.

When we talk about salvation, we sometimes reduce it to only refer to the forgiveness of sins.

While this is certainly part of it, salvation also offers so much more. In theological terms, salvation encompasses justification, reconciliation, and sanctification.

Justification—Salvation means we are rescued from the curse of sin and destruction.

Reconciliation—Salvation means we are reconciled to God, to creation, and to one another.

Sanctification—Salvation means we are transformed. In other words, we aren't just saved from something but saved *for* something: to become more like Jesus.

Joseph and Mary were told what to name the baby, but I love the detail that Joseph gets to actually name Him Jesus. God could have spoken the name, declared it from the heavens upon Jesus's birth. Instead, He invites Joseph to participate. Even in sending the Messiah to the world, God involves His people. Joseph and Mary were some of the first carriers and co-partners with God in bringing about the Messiah to the world. Joseph trusted what God was doing and demonstrated love toward God and Mary. As a result, he was likely the first one to officially declare Jesus's name, "the Lord is salvation."

The second name in this passage is *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us" (v. 23). The angel is quoting

a prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. Think about that for a moment. From the very beginning, God's desire has been to dwell with His people. In Genesis, He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. Even after sin disrupted that intimacy, His goal has always been to be with His people. God is not a remote worker, managing things from far away—He is present, active, and near.

I notice the plural “they will call him” (v. 23) in Isaiah's words. This isn't just a private revelation or an individual experience—it's a collective reality. Immanuel is a truth shared and experienced within a community. God's presence isn't confined to a single moment or person. Instead, it's a promise that spans generations, inviting all of God's people to know and declare Him as the God who is with us.

These two names—Jesus and Immanuel—hold the heart of Advent and the hope we celebrate: the God who is salvation is also the God who is with us.

Response Prompts

1. When you hear the name Jesus, what comes to mind first? How might understanding His name as “The Lord is salvation” deepen that picture?

2. How does the name Immanuel challenge or deepen your perception of God's proximity to you?

Prayer

Jesus, Immanuel, thank You that You are salvation and that You are God with us. I pray for those who will be preaching the good news of Your arrival today. Fill them with words, power, and wisdom to boldly declare the truth of who You are. May their message ring out with clarity and conviction. I also pray for all those walking into churches around the world to celebrate Christmas Eve. I particularly pray for those who have not been in church in a while—perhaps all year, or in many years, or maybe never at all. Holy Spirit, surprise them with Your presence. Open their eyes to the reality of Jesus and draw them into a life-changing encounter with You. I pray also for those whose hearts have grown lukewarm to this good news. I ask You to reignite their passion and awaken fresh wonder in them. Stir our hearts with the truth that You are salvation and that You are Immanuel, God with us. Amen.

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DAY 25

Simeon's Song



Luke 2:25–35

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant
in peace.*

*For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of
all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”*

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Consider This

Our final Christmas song comes after the birth of Jesus, in response to the infant Jesus being brought into the temple.

Simeon is described as a “righteous and devout” man (v. 25). His name, meaning “he who listens” or “he who hears,” reflects a life of attentiveness to God’s voice. His entire story is a testimony to the Spirit’s work. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he waited faithfully, having been assured that he would not die before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. Simeon

didn't happen upon the temple courts by chance—he was led there by the Spirit.

For Simeon, the “consolation of Israel” (v. 25) was not merely a theological idea; it was the longing of his heart—the hope for redemption, freedom, and the restoration of God’s people. The work of the Holy Spirit in Simeon’s life shaped his longings and positioned him to respond to the presence of Jesus when He arrived.

As Simeon held the infant Jesus, he declared: “For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (vv. 30–32).

In this declaration, Simeon recognized that Jesus’s mission extended far beyond Israel. He proclaimed that this child was not just the consolation for Israel, but the Savior of all nations, the light that would reveal God’s salvation to the Gentiles—to people like us.

These words were spoken in the temple, the heart of Jewish worship and life. To declare that the Messiah had come and would not just save Israel but also be a light of revelation to Gentiles was significant. Simeon’s worship caused Joseph and

Mary—already aware of who Jesus was—to marvel at the magnitude of His mission.

Entering the temple courts, Jesus's presence carried profound implications for the Jewish people within its walls and the Gentiles outside of it. Simeon's song reminds us of a vital truth about Christmas: While it is a profound celebration for those who know and love Jesus, it is even more important for those who don't.

Simeon's life, shaped by the Spirit's work and marked by his readiness to recognize God's presence, challenges us to live with the same attentiveness and mission. My guess is, if you're reading an Advent devotional, you likely have some degree of devout faith, similar to Simeon. Today, as you encounter and remember the person of Jesus, I want to invite you to join Simeon's song, proclaiming Jesus as the "light for revelation" to the world (v. 32).

Response Prompt

Think of someone you'll encounter today—whether a family member, a friend, or even someone working during your Christmas celebrations—who may not yet know the light of Jesus. How might the Spirit be inviting you to join in Simeon's song and share the good news of Christmas with them? Take a moment

to listen to how Jesus might be inviting you to step into His mission today.

Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, that You are a light of revelation to the Gentiles. Thank You, Holy Spirit, that You are at work in my life, and invite me to join in the proclamation of the good news of Jesus's arrival to the whole world. I pray now for those You have brought to mind who do not yet know Jesus. Holy Spirit, open their hearts to receive the love of the Father as revealed in the person of Jesus. Help them to respond to Your love. I ask that You lead me and guide me in whatever step You are inviting me to take today, and ask that You would give me the courage to take it. I trust that You are at work in their lives and want to join You faithfully in that work. Amen.



The Sower's Creed

Today,
I sow for a great awakening.

Today,
I stake everything on the promise of the Word of God.
I depend entirely on the power of the Holy Spirit.
I have the same mind in me that was in Christ Jesus.
Because Jesus is good news and Jesus is in me, I am
good news.

Today,
I will sow the extravagance of the gospel
everywhere I go and into everyone I meet.

Today,
I will love others as Jesus has loved me.

Today,
I will remember that the tiniest seeds become the
tallest trees;
that the seeds of today become the shade of
tomorrow;
that the faith of right now becomes the future of
the everlasting kingdom.

Today,
I sow for a great awakening.