

ADVENT:

THE COMING KING

DEVOTIONAL GUIDE



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION (PAGE 1)



WEEK ONE: HOPE (PAGE 2)

NOVEMBER 27 - DECEMBER 3, 2017

DEVOTIONALS 1 - 7



WEEK TWO: PEACE (PAGE 12)

DECEMBER 4 - 10, 2017

DEVOTIONALS 8 - 14



WEEK THREE: JOY (PAGE 21)

DECEMBER 11 - 17, 2017

DEVOTIONALS 15 - 21



WEEK FOUR: LOVE (PAGE 32)

DECEMBER 18 - 24, 2017

DEVOTIONALS 22 - 28

INTRODUCTION

The word “Advent” is a Latin word that simply means “arrival.” For centuries churches around the world have used the Christmas season to celebrate “Advent,” the long-awaited arrival of our Savior Jesus.

While Christ did indeed arrive, lived a perfect life, died a death that we deserved, and resurrected to bring us hope eternally, the story doesn’t stop there. In fact, we’re in many ways like the Israelites between Malachi and Matthew; we too are awaiting the advent, the arrival of Jesus again.

Often during Christmas season we focus on Jesus’ First Advent. However, this year we want to switch our gaze some, and focus on this current season of waiting. His First Advent made the Second Advent possible. One day Jesus will return, and make all things right, and in this we hope! In this we look forward to. In this, we wait, patiently, yet ever hoping for this reality.

Each day during this devotional we’ll focus on a different theme of the Advent season, Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Specifically, we’ll focus on what it will mean for us when Jesus does return. How He will bring a Future Hope, True Peace, Eternal Joy, and Perfected Love. We will ready our hearts to hunger and long for His return, and yet wait patiently, and work diligently until He does indeed come, or takes us home to be with Him.

We pray that this devotional guide, written by 28 different Covenant Members at The Well, will help you focus on Christ, and prepare your heart to celebrate His first coming, all the while anticipate his second!

HOPE



DAY 1

November 27, 2017

Read: Acts 1:6-11



So often, we anticipate God to act in a certain way. When we are faced with difficulty, tragedy, or a confusing situation, we sometimes struggle to make sense of what God can possibly be doing or if He is paying attention at all.

Here in Acts, the disciples had just gone through great emotional turmoil, watching the Messiah who had been so long promised die a painful and barbaric death. For three days, they wept, not understanding how things could have possibly have gone so wrong. Then, He returned, and it seemed as if all was back to plan. Certainly, now was the time when Jesus would establish His earthly reign. But even through all of the miracles they had seen and all of the prophecies that had been fulfilled, these men still had lots of room for growth in their faith. In this passage, the men were gathered with Jesus when there was a definite change in tone. In verse 5, Jesus starts giving them instructions for what to do next in a way that suggests that He will not be there to guide them. The disciples immediately react, in hope and anticipation, and perhaps a little desperation, “This is it, right?? You’re about to start your Kingdom?”

After they had endured so much, the disciples must have been disappointed to hear that Jesus’ plan was not what they expected. He points them to the scriptures, reminding them that there is NO ONE who knows all that the Father is doing at any moment. He asks them to hold out in hope, wait for the gift He just promised them, and continue in the work He called them to before His crucifixion, taking the Good News to the Jew, to the Gentile, and to all of the world.

As He ascended, the disciples just stared after Him, hearts surely deflated from going from best to worst case scenario in such a short time. In compassion, angels were there waiting with a final cheer of hope. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (vs 11). Put another way, Why are you standing there? Get going with what He said! He will be back, and your work must be done. They gave a gentle, heavenly nudge to not stand there looking back, but to look forward in hope and anticipation to His assured return.

These men had not expected the road to redemption to be so full of pain, trial, and to take so, so long. This is often true of all of us. Our circumstances can seem to defy God’s promises in our lives, but we must hold fast to the hope that He who promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23) We should not stand around, mourning what we hoped would be, but recognize how He has equipped us and walk out His calling on our lives. The reward will be here before we know it. We can look back now and see that if the story had stopped where the disciples had hoped, so much of the redemption and glory God has planned would not come to pass. We can trust also then that God’s ways are perfect and our hope in Him is well placed.

Lord, give us hope to trust in your perfect plan for our lives. Your yeses and nos are for our good. Help grow us to walk in faith into each season and situation as we await our final joy and celebration with You in our heavenly home.

-Kymberly Richard

DAY 2

November 28, 2017

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:4-9



As we enter the season of Advent, a crucial question for Christians becomes, “What is our hope?” We ask what presents we “hope” to get for Christmas, or what team we “hope” wins the Super Bowl. For Christians, the meaning of “hope” is much deeper than our modern usage suggests. Our hope of a renewed and wholly perfect creation is grounded in the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus, reinforced with our present experience of the Holy Spirit, and eagerly awaited in our belief that Jesus will be revealed to us.

In the time of Paul it was common that letters would begin with a formal greeting and praise towards the recipient. However, in his letter to the Corinthians, instead of praising them directly for their works, the first part of this section contains Paul’s expression of thanksgiving to God, for the Corinthians as people He created, and for the grace that they have been given through Him in spite of their evident shortcomings.

Paul continues his exaltation of the work that God has done in the Corinthians by reaffirming that they have been “enriched” in every way, and pointing out “knowledge” or wisdom, and “speech” in particular. Essentially, because (the Corinthians and) you live in a close relationship with Jesus Christ, God has given you many abilities; these include the ability to preach His message and the knowledge about His Spirit. The theme of knowledge and wisdom as a God-given ability is very important because Paul is identifying false teachers, who claimed to have secret knowledge about God and the universe.

As Paul continues in the second half of verse 7, he turns his attention from what Christ has already done for the Corinthians to what He will do. The word “wait” does not suggest a passive attitude but one of eager expectation. Our belief that God will reveal Jesus Christ to us once again is one of resounding hopefulness, and we should not be able to contain our joy!

Until Jesus’ return, we are to remain steadfast in our pursuit of holiness. Paul writes that God will keep (the Corinthians and) us “firm,” not that we will be prevented from doing anything wrong until Christ comes again, but that God desires for us to be blameless at the revealing. It is His hope that we will be in the same type of fellowship with the Father that He shares with Jesus. While this sounds like an insurmountable feat, God has done this for us in Christ.

Our hope is rooted in what God has already done in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our hope is affirmed more each day by witnessing what God continues to do in and through His people by the Holy Spirit. Our hope, which is not a mere wish, is that one day we will see the revealing of Jesus, and with that revealing we will claim our ultimate inheritance.

-Paige Mercer

DAY 3

November 29, 2017

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18



If you have ever been to sub-Saharan Africa, you have probably experienced the rich cultural spirit that comes from the joy of its people (and often results in lots of dancing). And if you haven't, let me take you on a quick trip to Zambia, Africa and to a people that feel like a second family to me.

Zambia is a beautiful country filled with commanding baobab trees, a fierce wildlife, and sunsets that light the sky on fire. Zambia is truly a magical place. However, the people are some of the most impoverished in the world and the number of orphans far exceeds the capabilities they have to care for them. And yet, as I mentioned, joy marks them... how does that make sense? How is joy possible when facing disease, starvation, loss and death? Simply put, it comes from their hope in Christ and their knowledge of what is to come.

During my first year in Zambia, I was given a group of boys to lead through a week of vacation Bible school camp. By the end of the week I loved these boys, I knew their stories, I had cried with them and fought for them to understand Truth. I felt panicked that I had to let them back into the world of depravity and darkness that they had come from. On my final day with them, I cried hysterically and they wrapped their arms around me to comfort me. I feared that I would never see them again, and after learning their stories and the conditions of Zambia, I knew there was a high chance that they would not live to see the next summer. How were people able to endure this realization?

That is when it all clicked... Their hope and joy wasn't coming from this world. And no matter where we come from, we cannot find comfort in this world because it is filled with a darkness and depravity that rips at the soul of every human. But in belief in Christ we are able to find life, and not just peace for today but peace for eternity. God assures us that even in death, He will not abandon us (Ps. 18: 9-10). Christ endured the most brutal death and separation from God so that we don't have to. He allowed Himself to become tainted with our sin so that we could be seen as pure and blameless before the King. This news is powerfully overtaking the world and radically changing humanity. It not only restores life here on the earth, but will literally bring believers out of death and back to life.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, we see the Lord's promise that Jesus will not abandon us to the grave, but it doesn't stop there... those who have died believing in the truth of Christ will be brought back to life and rise with Him in the final times. Hold up. Do you understand what is being said there? Dead people will become alive people again. The Lord will come back with a triumphant sound and commanding voice that will bring the dead in Him to life! Can we even fathom what that will be like? This means that loss of loved ones in Christ is not eternal loss. Those who died too young but were in Jesus will only be separated from us for a short time because "the dead in Christ will RISE" (1 Thes 4:16)!

This incredible work of the Lord shows us Christ's power that is beyond our comprehension and His love that is overabundant, and this realization drives us to our knees to worship in humility. Praise the Lord. Praise His name forever because He is coming. He will restore. The lost will be found and brought out of death to life through Christ. And He will reign forever. Amen.



(Continued from the previous page)

I never saw some of my Zambian boys again, but I know that I will. I know that through the Lord's grace and love for His people He will bring the dead to life in this life and the next. Allow this truth to produce an everlasting hope in you that comes from the incredible promise of God to restore death to life.

-Madison Miner

DAY 4

November 30, 2017

Read: Revelation 22



When I was a child, my father (like many fathers of young, early 2000s youth in the church) was consumed by the Left Behind book series. He would read it voraciously, and eventually one day I picked the book up and decided to see what all the hype was about. I read just enough to be freaked out, then put the book back on the shelf and thought to myself, “*Man, I hope Jesus never comes back. That seems scary.*”

I held onto this belief for far too long. That the end of times was going to be terrible and painful for all temporarily, forever for some. I let that form the foundation of a hope that Jesus would never come back in my lifetime, because I was afraid of the pain. I lost hope in any comfort from salvation and Christ.

Revelation 22 turns that childhood pattern of fear of mine on its head. In it, we learn that the Tree of Life, the downfall of humanity, will not only be made new, but the leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations. The passage tells us that we will be free from any curse, and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be with us in the city.

The passage tells us the exact opposite of of this silly lie I grew up believing. Jesus’ resurrection and return will not bring us pain, because we are redeemed and defended by the blood of Christ’s sacrifice. Jesus’ return will bring the fulfillment of all hope, joy, peace and love!

Isn’t that wild?!? What an amazing and hope-giving promise we’ve been given!

Jesus will rescue us.

Jesus will heal us of our pain.

Jesus will give us a new name.

Jesus will wipe every tear away.

Friends, Jesus’ return will redeem everything lost at Eden and so much more. Never lose hope in that promise. I did for a long time, and I know I never will again.

Listen: Alive by Kings Kaleidoscope <https://youtube.com/watch?v=RpasllUcjK8>

This is a song that has helped me to lose some of the fear that I held onto for so long, along with Revelation 22. Give it a listen if you’d like. It focuses on the Hope and new life we have in Christ and the pain it saves us from through the power of redemption.

-Zach Martin

DAY 5

December 1, 2017

Read: Titus 2:11-14



Lord, You looked for me in the ashes of my heart
Lord, You looked for me in my despair
Lord, You looked for me in my rebellion
Lord, You looked and found me there

Lord, You raise me when I falter
Lord, perfect me when I fail
Lord, You call me when I wander
Redeem me with every nail

My hope is in my Risen Savior
The Perfect One who makes me good
My heart desires for His Returning
When in His arms, I'll rest secured

-Sarah Anderson

DAY 6

December 2, 2017

Read: Philippians 3:12-4:1



What are you hoping for? What are you hopeful for? What are you straining towards?

Paul in his letter to the Philippians assures the people “that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). Jesus is coming back to us to bring the fulfillment of all hope, peace, joy, and love!

During this advent season, my desire is that each of us spends time dwelling on the hope that comes from knowing Jesus and being loved by our Creator. We do not know what it was like to hope for the coming of a Savior, for Jesus, but we do know what it is to hope for his return and for our place, our home in heaven. As we approach Christmas, let us take time to celebrate the life-altering, joyful hope that Jesus’s birth brought into the world and the hope that we have today through Him.

What is “it” that Paul has not already obtained, that he presses on to make his own (3:12)?

Looking back at verse eleven, we see that Paul is speaking about knowing the power of Christ’s resurrection, attaining the resurrection from the dead. He is moving toward becoming like Jesus. He is writing about that day when he will go be with his Lord and share in that eternal joy and fullness of love.

Paul does not and could not become perfect as Jesus was, but he means to live his life with Jesus’s sufferings and resurrection in focus with the hope of being with Jesus again. He sets his eyes, heart, and mind on that day and that King. (Ephesians 2:6-10, 19-22)

What does it mean for a Christian to be “straining toward the goal”?

Two of these words make me uncomfortable. *Straining*, to me, means exhaustion, pain, a pulled muscle. And the word *goal* feels all-too-worldly: a diploma, a promotion, a tax bracket. In an effort to alter my thinking about these connotations, I took a step back. I learned that the Greek word used for goal is “skopos”, meaning finish line (or final destination in faith). Finish line! Not a step up in a career or a means to an end that will be the means to another end, no, the very end of the race. It means the moment when you break the ribbons, trumpets sound, and strangers pour celebratory Gatorade on you. You are finished and you never need to run the race again. At least, that’s how I imagine the end of a race feeling—I wouldn’t know because I see running as a form of torture, which brings me back to that first word: straining. Paul uses the word *straining* because, I think, progressing in our faith as believers, entering into the process of sanctification, and looking past an earthly horizon to the heaven horizon is not always comfortable. (2 Corinthians 3:18) It requires struggling and sacrifice. We have to lean on Christ, ask him to pull us up and out. We have to yank our gaze from where it rests on idols, distractions, worries toward Jesus where we see hope and joy and satisfaction. (Romans 8:5-6, 1 Corinthians 9:24-25) Also, Paul spends his life dwelling on the beauty and glory of the finish line, so of course he strains toward it! How could we not?



(Continued from the previous page)

See, Paul has the right idea. Paul acknowledges that we are running a race, and I'm pretty sure Paul and I would agree that running is hard. But, most importantly, Paul *remembers* the finish line at all times. Paul moves with the mighty King in mind, allowing Jesus' perfect sacrifice to strengthen his earthly body during the difficult times. Paul lives in the hope of Christ. He reminds us of that finish line, being with our Creator, Bridegroom, King, and Father. Paul reminds us that our citizenship, our belonging, is in heaven—where running is actually pleasant. He reminds us that our home is with a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who, through no strength of our own, no endurance we have built, no power we have acquired, transforms us to be like Himself and with Himself. He promises us that we will be together, that He will return in glory just as He promised that He would come the first time (1 Peter 5:10). Read Revelation 21:1-22:5 and 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 if you want to know or dwell on what it is we are all so excited about.

“Therefore, my brothers [and sisters], whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.” - Philippians 4:1

We are looking forward. We are hoping for Jesus's return. We are hoping for a beautiful reunion in heaven. We are waiting, expecting, straining for this future, working for His glory to expand the kingdom and becoming more like Jesus through sanctification until that day comes (and all that through His overwhelming grace because He came to us as a baby on Christmas, died on a cross, and defeated death for us).

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
-Philippians 2:8-11

Verses to Extend this Hope Study:

- Want to celebrate our beautiful hope in Jesus Christ? Verses that meditate on that hope: *Romans 12:12, Romans 8:23, 2 Corinthians 1:10*
- Verses about what we have to look forward to: *Revelation 22:7, 17, Galatians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, Ephesians 2:6-10, 19-22*
- Verses that encourage us to keep our eyes ahead, to live in the hope of Christ: *Psalms 119:81, Romans 8:5-6, 1 Corinthians 9:24-25, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 51-58*
- Living in hope is not always easy. God gives us these verses about that endurance Christ provides for us if we allow him to: *2 Corinthians 3:18, 1 Peter 5:10, Malachi 3:2-5*

-Julia Gritte

DAY 7

December 3, 2017

Read: Luke 21:25-28, Romans 16:20



I love the quote from C.S. Lewis that says, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” It is such a balm to me when I feel dissatisfied or feel grief or feel pain. Those feelings are real, and at times, they can feel consuming. I know that the holidays can actually be hard for a lot of people. This will be the first Christmas since my grandpa passed away, and while my hope in Jesus means that I can have peace knowing he is in Heaven, the grief is still painful while I am here on Earth. If this world was all there was, we would have to despair, because sometimes the sorrows of the world are so hard that it doesn’t seem bearable (am I uplifting you yet?!).

But we were not made for this world. John 17:16 says that Jesus is not of this world, and neither are we, his followers. This life, this world, are not all we have, and our hope should not be in worldly things. Its sorrows and injustices do not define our lives, just as the happiness the world offers should not be our goal. But our redemption, where Jesus brings us to our true home, is drawing near (Luke 21:28).

We were made for heaven, for the world to come, for a life spent living forever in perfect harmony with God, for a life with no weeping, no pain, no injustice, no death. We celebrate Advent and Christmas because of the astonishing marvel that God brought that world to us when he sent Jesus here. He drew near to us, desiring our salvation (Acts 17: 26-27). At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus descending to Earth from his true home, coming from the presence of God, to our dirty, sinful, fallen world. Why? For God’s love for us, his chosen and dearly loved people. For his glory in our salvation. For his desire that all would be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

When I first read these verses from Luke, what stood out to me was that part about “anguish” and “terror” and the sun, moon, and stars themselves being shaken. I get nervous when I experience turbulence on an airplane, so if I am still around when the sun starts shaking, terror sounds about right as my reaction. But when I reread the passage, what I think we should focus on is the very last part of verse 28: “your redemption is drawing near.” Romans 16:20 says that the God of peace will “soon” crush Satan under our feet. If I watch barely five minutes of the news covering a shooting or a refugee crisis or a natural disaster, I think, I don’t want soon – I wish Jesus would come back now. But I believe that God’s promises are trustworthy, and if he says Satan and sin, including all the pain of this world, will be crushed, then they will be. I can hope in those promises, because my hope is in Christ, who has already defeated death. He has already won against sin through his death and resurrection. We feel sin’s effects in this world, but this world is not all there is for us. This advent season, remember that this is not your true home, and put your hope in Jesus that he has gone home to prepare a place for us (John 14:2-4), where we will live eternally in the peaceful, joyful presence of God.

-Jana Deardorff

PEACE



DAY 8

December 4, 2017

Read: John 14:1-3



There's a lot of talk about peace around this time of year, yet it seems so elusive. In the news, we see story after story of unrest all over the world. On social media and online comments boards we see people at war with each other. In our families, we experience discord and division. Our own hearts even seem to be at war within us. We see hatred, we see hostility, we see prejudice, we see pain. What peace is there on earth? How do we "let not [our] hearts be troubled" in such a troublesome world?

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:1-2)

A remedy to a troubled or anxious heart is belief - or *faith*. In these verses Jesus specifically directs our faith to himself. He is the one who brings ultimate peace between us and God (see Romans 5:1) and brings inner peace to our hearts. He is the one deserving of our faith, who will never break his promises. Jesus explains to his disciples that he will go prepare us an eternal home and then poses the question, "If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" His rhetorical question reminds us that he is not a God who lies or misleads us. He is a faithful God, true to his promises. If it were not so, he would not have said it. Which then begs the questions: "If it were not so, would I have told you that there is no condemnation for those in Christ?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that you are a new creation?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that you have obtained an inheritance?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that I will comfort you in your afflictions?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that there will be a way of escape from temptation?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that I will be with you always, to the end of the age?" "If it were not so, would I have told you that I will come again?"

True peace is rooted in belief. To put it another way, when we cease to trust the promises of God, we live in a lack of peace. But as we grow to take Jesus at his word, as we put our trust in him and his promises, peace grows in our hearts. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," but this is no blind faith. This is faith rooted in thousands of years of fulfilled promises, story after story of God's faithfulness. The promises of God can have an amazing impact on our lives when we live by faith, in light of God's character and faithfulness. When we place our confidence not in the shifting promises of this world, but in our eternally unchanging God, he settles the turmoil in our hearts. Instead of anxiousness, we can have assurance. In place of commotion, we can have conviction. When our hearts begin to feel troubled, may we trust God and his promises and experience his peace!

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3).

In these verses, Jesus specifically promises that he will make ready a home for us and that he will come again and bring us to himself. Many of God's promises involve the unknown and waiting, and the promise of Christ's return is no different. We've been waiting a long, long, long time.



(Continued from the previous page)

Sometimes it feels like we've been waiting so long that he's not going to come through. And sometimes we become skeptical of his return because of all the failed predictions! But Jesus *will* come back for us. If it were not so, would he have said it? As we believe in the promise of his return, and eagerly await it, we can experience peace. We can take heart because we trust that one day Jesus will come back. We believe that one day he will bring us to himself and one day we will be at home with him. We have faith that one day he will reign as King and we will have true and complete peace not only in our hearts, but in all creation.

May we grow in our faith in all the promises of God, but this Advent season, let's take heart specifically in the promise of Christ's coming. Let's eagerly await for this promise to come to fruition. When we find our hearts being troubled, may we cling tightly to the hope of Jesus' return. May we grow in our faith in regards to Jesus coming back so that faith may produce the fruit of peace in our hearts. We await the day when we will see Jesus face-to-face, and when our faith will be made sight!

-Natalie Mayo

DAY 9

December 5, 2017

Read: Isaiah 11:1-10



THE PROBLEM – In the Garden before Adam sinned, there was a perfect peace between man (Adam & Eve), between man and God, and between man and nature. This perfect peace, or harmony was known in the Hebrew as “shalom,” was shattered when Adam disobeyed God and bit into the forbidden fruit. I see the result of “The Fall” everywhere in the world, especially as it relates to the dissolution of God’s intended peace. In a given week, I watch the tense situation between the U.S. and North Korea that has everyone on edge. I see what appears to be a never-ending religious war in the Middle East between two Islamic factions, and one of those factions against the entire “West.” I see people shooting dozens of other innocent people for no reason. I see Americans who hate each other to the point of violence simply because they marked their ballots for different Presidential candidates. I hear Aggies singing songs about sawing the horns off of their rival’s mascot. Everyone is at war with someone. If there is ever peace in this life it is fragile, temporary, and pales in comparison to this perfect peace alluded to in the Garden of Eden. Even if someone does happen to live a seemingly peaceful life, he is still an enemy of God and this causes an inner turmoil that manifests itself in an infinite number of ways.

THE SOLUTION – A mediator must come if true peace is to be restored. One who is more than a broken man. The Jews called him the Messiah. Isaiah refers to him as a shoot coming up from the stump of Jesse (v. 1). This mediator has complete wisdom, is all-knowing, and all-powerful because he has the Spirit of God in Him. He is NOT an enemy of God. He is God. He comes to earth as a man and begins to show the world what it looks like to truly live at peace with God and man. He sacrifices himself on a cross making it now possible for humans who believe in Him to finally have peace with God and man as well. These select humans now get a taste of what it was like in the Garden before the Fall. They experience peace with God and if they follow the Spirit within them, they are able to achieve peace in their human relationships. Marriages that might have ended in divorce are restored. Old enemies are now able to reconcile. The world in its fallen state will never achieve perfect peace, but this same Messiah, before he left earth, promised that he would return.

THE END RESULT – The sin that destroyed peace on earth will be dealt with, and those who committed it, if they have not believed in Jesus himself, will be cast aside (v. 4). All that will remain are His people and His creation, but now in a fully redeemed form. The imagery of verses 6-9 appear hyperbolic and are difficult to imagine for us who have only experienced glimpses of peace, but we believe that they are a reality of what is to come. Even the most stubborn of enemies will be at peace with one another, and every single person will run to (not away from) Jesus in worship. Shalom will be restored.

-Tommy & Callie Ward

DAY 10

December 6, 2017

Read: Jeremiah 33:14-18



In earlier chapters of Jeremiah, God prophesied through him that Judah would be sent into exile at the hands of the Babylonians because of the Judeans' unfaithfulness to God. Jeremiah, troubled on his behalf of His people, questioned God's purpose.

God promised His people that even though they were to be scattered, He would eventually restore them to Jerusalem to dwell in peace. This promise will be fulfilled through the line of David – a righteous branch who would sit on the throne forever. A messiah who would make the ultimate sacrifice so that we would no longer dwell in darkness.

We are blessed to live in a day and age when part of this promise has already been fulfilled – on Christmas we celebrate that two thousand years ago, the fulfillment of this promise came down to earth and walked and lived among us – and we know His name – Jesus. We can live every day knowing that His work has been completed and we walk in the fulfillment of this promise – and one day we will see Him again, and live in peace for eternity.

-Esther Tan

DAY 11

December 7, 2017

Read: Daniel 7:9-14



We are so much more than idol factories. We are factories of all of our vices and conflicts. Better than all else, we've always found new and exciting things to focus our fears into. Our fears of the unknown, of the deadly, or of the painful. For every generation, a new fear which convinces us to stand up, and to the Face of the Most High, say, "This is greater than You."

For some it was the Nuclear Age, an era which threatened to bring to an abrupt end all of human achievement.

For others, it was global tensions that threatened to rip the world to pieces.

For other still, a plague that could decimate their entire country.

Political persecution.

Barbarian Hordes.

A Bear Market.

The Roman Empire.

God does not leave us much wiggle-room to wallow in our fears. Time and time and time again he takes our fears and forces us to look at them through His eyes, to see them for the tiny, mewling beasts they are. And then, in His grace, he slaughters them. The violent removal of our fears is there to tell us that God wants to leave no doubt where He stands. There is none that can match Him.

Is it any wonder why, in Philippians, Paul praises that The Lord is at hand? The truth of God's power is continually proclaimed so that we can rest sure in that same power. We are sealed by the same God that will one day establish a kingdom eternal. Greater than Rome. Greater than the atomic bomb. Greater than any of our fears.

The same God who threw down empires with the strength in His smallest finger has promised that He will never abandon us. Who are we to disagree?

-Kenneth Clark

DAY 12

December 8, 2017

Read: Revelation 19:11-16



Who is God? What are his characteristics? Can you describe Him, like you can describe a close friend?

It's hard, isn't it? God is deep, and no matter the medium, whether words or images or song, only a paltry representation of Him is possible. Even in the Bible, physical descriptions of God are rare. There are many verses which praise God, many which tell His commands, many which describe the faithful of humanity, but only a few actually describe Him. However, this passage is one of those self-descriptive verses of God's, an attempt by God to convey to us using language an infinitesimal portion of God's infinite character. John's vision of Jesus on a white horse is how Jesus decided to represent to us who He is at his return in Revelation. Understanding this passage can help us understand Jesus.

Let's break down the passage. There are several motifs than run through these few verses:

War: Jesus makes war in righteousness, He has armies of heaven following Him on white horses, and there's a sharp sword coming from His mouth.

Judgement: Jesus judges in righteousness, His robe is dipped in blood, and He will "tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty".

Sovereignty: There are many diadems (crowns) on His head, He will rule with a rod of iron, and the title of King of kings and Lord of lords (not just King, but King of other kings) is written on His robe and His thigh.

Names: Faithful and True, The Word of God, King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is a pretty terrifying image of Jesus. The common image of Jesus as a kind shepherd or being gentle with kids is true of Him, but *doesn't fully capture who He is*. Not only is He a gentle and loving savior, but *he is also* a King over all kings and lords who is coming to make war and execute a bloody judgement upon the world.

How does this relate to peace? Well, if Jesus is executing judgement, who is on the receiving end?

In Deuteronomy 32:35-36, the Lord declares, "Vengeance is mine." Why? "For the Lord will vindicate His people, and have compassion on His servants." God will punish every evil done. For the orphan and widow who suffered poverty and apathy, for the ones cut down like wheat by violent men, for the martyrs who died proclaiming their faith – "the Lord will vindicate His people." He will pour out his fury on those who were pitiless, who lived by the sword, who loved money more than men, who loved the darkness rather than the light. In God's justice we know that the evil in this world is not ignored and will be repaid. In that we have peace.

Application: Meditate for a time on this description of God. Write down who has wronged you, entrust your vindication to God, and forgive them.

-Daniel Tan

DAY 13

December 9, 2017

Read: Revelation 21



Listen: "Kingdom of Heaven" by Jenny & Tyler <https://youtu.be/ayx9AVPg6Pk>

"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man...He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

God has chosen to redeem us, to dwell with us, and to identify with us. The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven could have been free of all human influence, but instead it bears the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel on its gates and of the twelve apostles on its walls - imperfect men guilty of jealousy, betrayal, and violence. But He is making all things new. God is serious about restoration, and He is able to restore all things and all people.

"They will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

Emmanuel. "God with us." This is our future. When I wonder about what my future holds in terms of career, family, and community, I can rest in the knowledge that my future is dwelling with God and being completely His.

"It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."

Our God said that. He is coming back for us, to bring us home and establish eternal peace. Free from anxiety, from broken relationships, from weakening bodies, from grief.

"The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb... Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Can you imagine the security? No need to lock our doors, hedge our bets, or hide behind a mask. "There will be no night there." No darkness, no confusion, no pain.

We serve a good God who has laid down his life to set us free. Rest in the peace he has promised. No promise of God has ever gone unfulfilled.

-Caroline Bennighof

DAY 14

December 10, 2017

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:12-28



“A Peace of Work”

Knock knock, who's there?
We all laugh like we don't care
The reality of our times
Crawling out of backdoors, trapdoors
'Cause reality is man-made
Won't. stay.
Not forever, anyway.
We crawl out of collapsing houses
Peer through windows
Sit on sills
Thinking our fates are sealed
Forever on shifting foundations
Always shaky, never still.
Whispering to ourselves
Peace like a river
*Not getting our
Fill.*
'Cause we covet and
Kill.
Crawling in backdoors, trapdoors
Tryna sneak a steal
Every once in awhile
We catch that signal, like wifi
Thinking we were invisible
Our eyes give way to
Something more tangible
Target Locked, our hearts say
While fingers type
SMH
Man, Forget This Network
Truth is, we know a better way
That's not in vain
Where we don't have to say
Life's a—

Pinch
We know these man-made houses
Aren't here to stay
But our Father's house
Won't fall away.

So make the switch
To a life that lasts, they say
Sing louder
Peace. like a river
Sister Ekemini said
Truth comes first, which leads to salvation
Then comes peace
I thought it was just a piece of the equation
When really it was the whole
I thought peace meant be still
But a river never idles
It has one commission
Move towards the ocean
Peace, a methodical motion
A mission for rejuvenation

Stop knocking on backdoors, trapdoors
When you've got a royal priesthood
Front gate access to a kingdom
Cross over that threshold
To a fresh mold
Where a new life unfolds
And the Father's stories are
Told.

You're no sheep for slaughter
You're a new taxonomy
No need for dichotomy
Door's unlocked
No need to knock

My dear,
Welcome home.

-Mai Ho
Special Thanks: Adrian Patenaude

JOY



DAY 15

December 11, 2017

Read: John 16:16-24



Consider:

We oftentimes forget that the Bible tells us we will have trouble in this world. My autopilot perspective in life tends to be, “How can I make my life easier and find more happiness?” But the problem with this false reality is that the conditions of life are not always favorable and happiness is fleeting.

In this passage, Jesus is preparing the disciples for what is about to happen to them. He is telling them three things:

1. I will go away and it won't be easy.
2. I promise you I will see you again.
3. You will have a joy that can't be taken away!

And even when they didn't quite understand, the disciples were nevertheless being prepared for their grief to turn into joy— on Earth and in Heaven.

Thoughts on Joy In Heaven:

I love verse 21 where Jesus compares this grief-to-joy transformation to a woman giving birth. As a woman who has yet to experience childbirth, I am very intrigued by the fact that at the end, the baby is so incredibly beautiful and perfect, and the mother is so full of relief and love, that she forgets probably the most painful experience of her life. There is a stark and deliberate change from pain to joy. Does that not sound like us when we get to Heaven? The presence of Jesus is actually perfect and the joy we feel will be complete. We will so quickly forget any pain or grief or tears from our time on earth.

Thoughts on Joy on Earth:

Back to my autopilot perspective I talked about earlier- joy doesn't make life easier, or happier, for it's not circumstantial. True joy is Jesus. And because of the Gospel, we have Jesus in our hearts and therefore have access to His joy here on Earth! There is a quote from an author named Calvin Miller that describes joy as “the delirious music of those who have been delivered.” When we remember the Gospel: that Jesus Christ died on a cross to deliver us from our sins and give us eternal life, it should stir in us an unshakeable joy. A joy and assurance that doesn't just alleviate grief for a short time, but a joy that moves us to look to the Lord and remember all that He has done for us.

Questions:

- What is the difference between happiness and joy in your life? Consider if you are looking towards temporary happiness to give you a break from life's inevitable troubles or if you are looking to Jesus for your joy.
- Have you experienced a time in your life where you watched Jesus transform your grief into joy?
- How can you take the joy you have and share it with others in this advent season? Maybe this is being aware of the Holy Spirit prompting you to share the Gospel. Maybe it looks like giving gifts or affirmations to those you love. Consider what joy means for ministry and community.



(Continued from the previous page)

There is a quote from a book that I want to leave you with that describes what it's like to have joy: "Joyful persons do not necessarily make jokes, laugh, or even smile. They are not people with an optimistic outlook on life who always relativize the seriousness of a moment or event. No, joyful persons see with open eyes the hard reality of human existence and at the same time are not imprisoned by it. They have no illusion about the evil powers that roam around, 'looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8), but they also know that death has no final power. They suffer with those who suffer, yet they do not hold on to suffering; they point beyond it to an everlasting peace."
-*Lifesigns* by Henri J.M. Nouwen

Listen: Endless Years by Will Reagan <https://youtube.com/watch?v=xZ8gxjVK-lw>

Here is a song that reminds me about the Joy of being with Jesus for Eternity, but also the Joy He has for us here on Earth. Google, Spotify, Youtube search it, have a listen, and read along with the lyrics below if you want.

I will hold you child when all is done, when the world is gone, and its songs have been sung. You will be with me through endless years. We will dance and sing when your heart is fulfilled. So don't you close your eyes, don't you lose your way, don't you miss all the gifts that are unforeseen. I'm your anchor and shield, I'm the wind in the sails, I'm the song in your heart, The God who saves.

-Madeline Orr

DAY 16

December 12, 2017

Read: Zephaniah 3:14-20



My main expression of joy is a smile. I've gone through most of life with a smile on my face. At my childhood summer camp we had to choose -ing verb names for ourselves--mine was Smiling Stacy. In times of trial and hardship, I still ask myself, "Where did Smiling Stacy go?" and try to bring her back. Smiling Stacy believes that a smile is something that she can freely share with the world. She believes a smile can make the world a better place. When I smile, I mean it. The smile takes over my entire face and lights up my eyes. People have always told me that my smile tells the truth about how I am feeling.

When do I feel joy? Slapping my hand on the wall at the end of a swim race and turning around to see a personal best time. Getting up early on Christmas morning to pop the pumpkin cinnamon rolls in the oven and turn on the coffee maker before anyone else gets up. Being a witness to my parents' continued love for each other after 36 years of marriage. Seeing my parents celebrate their 36th anniversary. Feeling the wind rush against my face as I cruise down the streets on my bike or rollerblades. Watching my students walk across the stage at graduation. Listening to my favorite music in the car driving down Texas State Highway 360. It's easy to connect with joy when these experiences are pleasurable ones.

But what about when times are hard? In times of adversity it's not easy to experience joy or even see the light at the end of the tunnel. It takes a trained eye and seasoned heart to be able to find joy when it might be hidden from you. That's where hope comes in.

To me, hope is the emergency tank that kicks in when all your other reserves are empty. I feel like hope speaks to me when joy is hidden. When times are hard, hope whispers, "Try one more time" or, "It's going to be okay." Hope will hold your hand through the hard times and tell you it won't always be an uphill battle.

Because it is going to be okay. And if it's not okay, it's not the end. God is the author of hope and ultimately desires to bring you His joy. The joys of this world may be fleeting, but His Joy lasts forever. The message from Zephaniah is a happy one. It reminds us that God is always with us, with a never ending supply of hope to offer. He is always working for our good, even in times of adversity. If you are going through a tough time right now, please know that God is with you. The passage shows God's character, how he sings over us but is also quiet when we need it. We also can take comfort in the fact that God is a mighty one who will save. He knows we will have trials in this life, but with His help He will save us from each one. What other emotion could we possibly feel but joy at the wonder of this Good News?

When I look back at my life there is a common thread: God always gave me a reason to smile. God was always working for my joy, in the midst of my trials. Even through me uprooting myself from state to state, from country to country, He surrounded me with people who loved me. He was with me through it all, making me into the strong, recovered woman I am today.



(Continued from the previous page)

I've always believed in God, but had a hard time understanding and listening for his plan for my life. And on top of that, understanding Jesus' role in my life and what sort of relationship I was supposed to have with him was always particularly difficult for me. But through attending The Well, I've learned more about about Jesus than I ever have before. I am finally beginning to understand. Every message ties back to Jesus and his sacrifice, and I leave each service filled with pure gratitude and hope for the future. Simply put, I am filled with joy over the knowledge that Jesus loves me and wants to know me. I go out into the world each week, ready to share that joy with the people I meet. My heart grows ten sizes and I smile easier.

-Stacy Abrams

DAY 17

December 13, 2017

Read: Isaiah 65:17-25



I love to travel, to see new places, smell new smells, experience different cultures. When I go to a new country, I really love to meet the people that live there, to understand how they live, to hear about their experiences in life.

Yet, at the same time, traveling is a strange thing. People speak different languages, so it is hard to understand and to be understood. Different cultures react to the same social situation in different ways, so it is easy to offend without meaning to, to break relationships without really knowing what you did. Because of this, when I travel, I often experience what the Welsh call 'hiraeth', or a longing to be home.

Coming home is always a special joy and delight. Having been away from them for awhile, my own bed and my own pillow give a basic pleasure that I didn't realize I missed. I can go to the supermarket and know what the foods are that I am buying, I can speak and be understood; I can understand the response without the aid of a dictionary or of Google Translate.

Yet still this earth is plagued with sin. This sin clouds our vision and keeps us from seeing and obeying God. 1 Corinthians 13:12 says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly ... now I know in part ...".

Being home does not protect me from the effects of sin — the things that cause weeping and crying. It does not prevent misunderstandings or miscommunication. It does not protect me from harm inflicted on me by others, or protect others from harm I inflict on them.

So, even more, there is a real joy in the thought of a New Jerusalem. I have 'hiraeth', yes, but for a different home, the home where I am unencumbered from my flesh. A place of true belonging. A place of true peace. A place where I can see God face to face, where I can know fully and be fully known. A place where, truly and in all that I do, I can be a delight to God and a joy to Him. This is the joy set before us! So, rejoice! Be glad!

-Misty Nodine

DAY 18

December 14, 2017

Read: Matthew 25:14-30



Advent has been my favorite time of year as long as I can remember. This season has embodied so many events in my life that represent triumphs, sadness, fears, my best memories and my worst, but above all, this time of year leaves me with an inexpressible and ever thankful heart for the Lord that is filled with JOY!

In Matthew, we find the Parable of the Bags of Gold. I have read this passage many times and could not find fault with the servant who buried treasure in the ground so he would not lose any of what was given to him, but give it back in return with no losses. Recently, I attended a devotional on these very verses and it was pointed out that the servant who buried his treasure was at fault for not trying for fear of failure. What talent, what gift has God given you that you have buried or hidden away instead of seeing how God can make it flourish? Even in you fail, that failure can plant a seed that continues to grow.

Many refer to December as the end of the year, looking forward to the hope that a new beginning in January brings. However, if you refer to the the Liturgical year, Advent is truly the beginning of the spiritual year. Do not wait until the beginning of 2018 to take a chance on the blessings and talents God has placed on your life, start using them today and trust that if you try, God will multiply his reach through you and take your triumphs and failures and place an ever-living Joy in your heart.

Use this Advent season to seek the gifts God has placed on your life and use them to glorify and multiply God's presence in your life and others.

Prayer: Lord, we take this time to praise you for taking our failures and turning them into blessings. Give us the courage Lord to seek out the gifts from you that we have buried, to unearth them, and find ways to serve you with them. Help us, oh Lord, to make that step today and place our hope in you.

-Amanda Martinez

DAY 19

December 15, 2017

Read: Zechariah 2:10-12



God, I pray we would take time to see Your Word right now. I pray that it would wash over us like fresh water. I pray that Your promises would stir up our affection for You and give us no choice but to obey You: sing and rejoice.

“O come, O come, Emmanuel...”

I was a child, tucked in the corner of a wooden church pew, hearing my choir director solemnly sing at a Sunday evening service. (That Baptist life.) As she processed down the parquet wood aisle, I was moved to stillness. It was not the words she sang, per se, but the haunting tone of her desperate song:

*“O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.”*

Today’s passage in Zechariah reminds me of that desperation and expectation for the coming of the Lord.

Re-read today’s passage slowly.

Twice in today’s three verses, the Lord declares that He will dwell in the midst of His people, once in verse 10 and again in verse 11. *If you write in your Bible, underline the phrase “and I will dwell in your midst” (ESV) in those two verses.*

When I read that phrase, the birth and life of Jesus first comes to mind. Through faith, we have seen the coming and dwelling of the Lord when He came to earth in the form of a man and dwelt among us. We have seen Him live a perfect life, in perfect communion with God, and offer His life up as the irreplaceable payment for our sin. We have seen the Lord dwell in our hearts as the Holy Spirit. We have seen the fulfillment of God’s promise: *“I come and I will dwell in your midst” (verse 10).*

But the repetition of that beautiful phrase is striking. The repetition makes me think of two different advents—one at Christmas two thousand years ago, and one still to come. In our December 2017 Christian lives, we live between verse 10 and verse 11, between the two advents.

“I come and I will dwell in your midst...and I will dwell in your midst” (verses 10-11).

Why is the reality of two advents significant?

Go back to the verses. Read what happens in conjunction with God’s first declaration: *“...many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day and shall be My people” (verse 10).*



(Continued from the previous page)

Go back to the verses. Read what happens in conjunction with God's first declaration: *"...many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day and shall be My people" (verse 10).*

Sing and rejoice that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has made us right with God so that we can be joined to Him and be His people – even though we very much do not deserve it. The gift of Jesus's substitution will be available to all nations and all peoples. That is the joy of the first advent, the first coming of God to earth.

Now read what happens in conjunction with the repeated declaration: *"...and you shall know that the Lord of hosts sent me to you" (verse 11).*

You will know.

Sing and rejoice that there will be a day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord! There will be a second advent, a coming when the whole world will acknowledge the Godship of Jesus, and our faith will be sight! Glory to God in the highest, that He declares He *will* dwell with us for eternity and be our light!

Before you close your Bible (or Bible app) today, don't miss the first words of today's passage. It is a command, and it exemplifies our celebration in God's presence. "Sing and rejoice."

Just like my choir director sang:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.*

For further reading: Revelation 21 & 22

-Blair Onyekenne

DAY 20

December 16, 2017

Read: Psalm 24



The day was August 14, 1945. People flooded the street of New York in celebration of the soldiers returning home from war. World War 2, which had been the most costly conflict in recorded history, was over. Can you imagine the joy felt by the men and women returning home?

Well, Psalm 24 was written to commemorate a similar occasion. After years of war and civil unrest in Israel, the Ark of the Covenant was finally going to reside in Jerusalem. As David brought the Ark into the city, there was a great celebration to rejoice in the Lord's faithfulness to Israel. This was more than just a transport of religious artifacts; it was the triumphant return of the symbol of God's power.

It was clear to the people of Israel that it was in fact God who delivered them from their enemies. The nation of Israel was the underdog in every battle they fought to claim the Promised Land, and yet here they stood. After all, *"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it... Who is the King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, The Lord mighty in battle."* This Psalm illustrates to us poignantly that when we recognize where our salvation comes from, our hearts are prompted to joyful worship.

As Christians, we worship a God who not only is faithful to us, but who also sent his Son to defeat an enemy that we never could. Jesus, the ultimate Savior of Israel, conquered sin and death that we might not be defeated by it. How much more should this lead our hearts to worship? Just as the people gathered in Time Square to commemorate the end of the war, we one day will return home and celebrate the end of all sin, pain and suffering with our God. You see, for those celebrating in Time Square, peace was temporary. For the people of Israel, their time of prosperity would soon come to an end. Yet for those who find themselves in Jesus, our Joy can never be taken away. Jesus gives us this promise in John 16:22: "So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and *no one will take your joy from you.*"

-Harrison Miner

DAY 21

December 17, 2017

Read: Jude 1:17-25



In Luke 15 the Pharisees criticize Jesus saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus responds by telling three parables. In the first parable, a man loses a sheep. He searches until he finds it and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” In the second parable a woman loses a silver coin. She seeks “diligently” until she finds it, then calls her friends and neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” The third and most well known parable is of the lost son. When the lost son returns to his father, the father runs to him, embraces him, kisses him, and then throws him a celebration.

Jesus is consistent in his theme. When something of value is lost and then found, there is great joy and celebration. It is humbling to realize that we are like the sinners that the Pharisees criticized Jesus for receiving, and we are the lost sheep/coin/son. Jesus tells us with this parable, that we are valuable enough to Him, for Him to seek us, find us, and celebrate us.

So when we read in Jude that Jesus presents us “blameless before the presence of His (God’s) glory with great joy,” let us believe in the joy of Christ, and let that produce joy in our hearts. Let us believe that at best this world offers temporary and fleeting joys, but that we have hope of an eternal joy in Christ. As Jude 1:21 says, “Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, that leads to eternal life.”

Questions for reflection:

1. This passage in Jude comes to an audience with a warning of a time where false teachers will infiltrate the church and cause division. From this passage, what are ways as a church and as individuals we can look to Christ during difficult times, while we wait on Jesus to fulfill His promise?
2. What are things you look to for joy, that may be a “substitute” for true joy in Christ?

-Scott Graham

LOVE



DAY 22

December 18, 2017

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2



This has been a hard year to be a citizen of Earth. The news projected a lot of blatant hatred. Natural disasters hit basically every corner of the planet. Rampant violence and climate change have caused a record-breaking refugee crisis. Abuses of power and sexual assault have become everyday topics of conversation... “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.” (verse 7)

My friends, Paul is clear that things will be bad before Christ returns. “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction...proclaiming himself to be God.” In Matthew, Jesus says, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” (Matthew 24:21-24)

We are no better than those who practice this lawlessness, but we have a VERY different fate. “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:22-24) We are not saved because we are good. We are not saved because we make wise choices or have humbled ourselves to hear truth. In fact, we are can begin to make wise choices, humble ourselves, and live like Jesus BECAUSE we are saved. *We are saved because the Lord loves us.*

- “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved.” – 2 Thessalonians 2:13
- “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations.” – Deuteronomy 7:9
- “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, or height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 8:35, 37-39
- “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.” – Ephesians 2:4-5

Do you see all the promises of love, even in the promises of pain? Jesus said that though there would be overwhelming destruction, for our sake it would be cut short so that we can continue to stand! Paul tells us that we were given salvation that we “may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that were taught by us...” (2 Thessalonians 2:14-15)



(Continued from the previous page)

The darkness of the world and those who live to deceive will not last forever. *My friends, Jesus is coming back to make all things new.* He is coming to restore what is broken. He is coming to take what is rightfully His: glory and every heart that longs for Him. No one will need to point out His return. It will be more obvious than the dawn. “For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matt 24:27) He will utterly DESTROY sin. “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of His coming.” (2 Thessalonians 2:8) His perfect love will be fully seen, fully felt, and fully realized.

“In this [salvation] you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” – 1 Peter 1:6-7

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.” (verse 16-17) Amen.

-Takasha Smith

DAY 23

December 19, 2017

Read: Revelation 19:6-10



Weddings & Love

In almost every culture on Earth, marriage is the ultimate love commitment. A wedding is the outward ceremonial expression of marriage. In some places, wedding ceremonies last for weeks; in the US the wedding industry generates 55 billion dollars every year. If you're married, you probably went through some kind of planning process for your wedding. If you're hoping to marry at some point, you may have ideas about what you'd like to be true of your wedding ceremony. The celebration and traditions around weddings are often a symbolic celebration of a greater reality.

Reflection Questions for the Passage:

What are some differences and similarities that you know of in wedding ceremonies, symbols, and traditions around the world? Why are the traditions of wedding ceremonies so important?

What does this passage tell us about our own final wedding ceremony? Who is the "Lamb" and the "Bride"?

Across cultures, one of the most important symbols in the wedding ceremony is the attire of the bride. What is the bride wearing in this passage? Where did this clothing come from?

Read Isaiah 64:6 and 61:10. How are these passages connected to the picture of the wedding ceremony in Revelation? What is your response to these truths?

How is the bride able to be clothed in fine linen? Why is Jesus called the "Lamb" in this passage? How does this picture of our wedding display God's love for us?

-Liz Kreitler

DAY 24

December 20, 2017

Read: 2 Peter 3:1-13



If you're anything like me, an obedient Christian that loves Jesus, goes to church most Sundays, and memorizes my favorite verses, you probably read Peter's commentary on the scoffers and their scoffing (v. 3-5) and thought, "Yeah, you tell 'em Peter! Put them in their place." I mean, we worship a powerful God who shouldn't be mocked and whether or not the scoffers believe it, God will one day judge the world. As Peter says, "the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." These enemies to the Gospel need to be called out; our precious God doesn't deserve haters like this and they're only causing trouble! Right? Maybe not quite...

If you're anything like the real me— a broken, wretched sinner, more selfish than I'd ever admit— you might read those verses and realize...*I am the scoffer*. Before my eyes were opened to the truth, I was in the same position of disbelief, mocking the idea of the coming of Christ, living life according to my own rules and desires. And even in the context of this passage, I still, despite having my eyes opened to truth by the grace of God, act like a scoffer, failing to believe God's promises and commands on a daily basis. "I don't need God, I got this." Or, "Talk to people? About Jesus?! Awkward." And I definitely don't typically operate under the belief that Jesus is coming back anytime soon! Imagine the sense of urgency or concern and sympathy I'd have more often for people if I didn't scoff at the idea of Christ's return. Fortunately for us scoffers, that's not how God operates.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." 2 Peter 2:9

Despite my disbelief and continued disobedience, God was (and is) patient toward me. At best, I was ignorant of my need for a Savior; at worst, I mocked Jesus for who He claimed to be. Despite that, as we celebrate during the Advent season, He sacrificed His throne in Heaven, exchanging it for a lowly manger, so that He could live the perfect life I couldn't, die the death that I deserved, and will now take me with Him when He comes back!

That is love.

We celebrate Advent because it commemorates Christ's first coming and an anticipation of His second coming. As Israel longed for their Messiah to come, so Christians long for their Savior to come again. And despite once being in the shoes of these scoffers in 2 Peter, God promises us a future we never deserved, made possible solely by His love for us.

"But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." 2 Peter 2:13

Listen: How Deep the Father's Love For Us - Austin Stone Worship Live
https://youtube.com/watch?v=z65YxhqY0_E

*"Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders.
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice,
Call out among the scoffers.*

*It was my sin that held him there,
Until it was accomplished.
His dying breath has brought me life,
I know that it is finished."*

-Austin Deardorff

DAY 25

December 21, 2017

Read: 2 Timothy 4:6-8



A crown of righteousness! How awesome is that!?! For the believer, the one who has put their faith in Jesus and eagerly awaits Him, a crown of righteousness will be their reward. God rewards our faithfulness because He loves. God loves us so incredibly that we can respond and reciprocate that love. Our faithfulness to do His will is never in vain and it is always worth it. Because of His great love, we can respond in obedience to offer our lives, by doing His will. Jesus, our great example, poured out his life for us because He loves us. Jesus fought the good fight because He loves us. Jesus redeemed us because He loves us. Jesus died for us because He loves us. Therefore, we can walk in newness and have strength to keep the faith. Like Paul, as he writes to Timothy, we eagerly wait for the day when we get to the end of our lives here on earth and look forward to the imminent day when we will receive a crown of righteousness. All because He loves us.

Listen: "Love's Paradox" by KJ Scriven: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=31qdUrgAwhM>

-KC Onyekanne

DAY 26

December 22, 2017

Read: Revelation 1:4-8



During advent, we celebrate a tripartite arriving. We joyfully ponder the historical arrival of Jesus – emptied of power and riches, born in a manger. We eagerly anticipate the second physical arrival of Jesus to usher in the fullness of His Kingdom. We fervently seek the daily arrival of Jesus in our own hearts. (This arrival is not the arrival of Jesus so much as it is the arrival of our awareness. Daily we must awake from our spiritual slumber to the reality of His presence where we, too, with Jacob can declare: “Surely God was in the place and I did not know it.” Gen 28:16).

As we near closer to Christmas and Advent draws to a close, be careful not to miss the words the Revelator writes to us (yes, the passage is to the ‘seven churches’ in Asia specifically – but there were already more than seven churches that were in Asia, so we understand ‘seven’ used symbolically as whole or complete) in this passage. It’s easy to pass over those words without giving them the weight they deserve. So here are some activities that can help us not miss the arrival:

- Consider the gravity of receiving *grace and peace* from the Triune God. That alone is more than we deserve but by Jesus’s actions we have been individually freed from our slavery to sin, made corporately into a kingdom, and transformed into priests to the Most High.
- Contemplate on the meaning that Jesus has loosed you from your sins by his blood. The Israelites, enslaved by Egypt were freed by royal decree because they were protected by blood when all the firstborn in the land died (Exodus 12:21-31). Now we are freed from our enslavement by royal decree because of the blood of the firstborn of the dead.
- Meditate on the ramifications of being priests to He who was before there was a before, He who is now, and He who at the end of all things continues. (Maybe do this one with a pre-emptive aspirin. It could produce an awe-inspired headache.)
- Imagine what it will be like to see Christ return.

When doing these exercises, did you wonder why we have this freedom, kingdom and priesthood? Love. Love is the lynchpin and consummation of these things. It was love for us that compelled Christ to leave the comforts and riches of the heavenly throne to be born as a helpless child in utter poverty. It was love that demanded Christ to persevere to the cross and suffer in our stead even into death. It was love that prompted Christ to go prepare a place for us and send His promised Spirit. It is love that proves that He will return again for us.

Love precedes, presides and perdures.

This is all great and magnificent. However, if all you are doing is thinking intellectually about this love, and not *experiencing* it, then, for you, it is relatively meaningless. This season will be just another Christmas with shopping and parties and busyness. Maybe you will have a few joyful and meaningful moments pondering the birth of Jesus. You might even have a modest yearning for His coming so that all the earthly chaos around you comes to an end.



(Continued from the previous page)

Those experiences are well and good. But – and this is important – they pale in comparison to living with, and being aware of, God’s perfect and vital love within you.

Take a short pause wherever you are, quiet yourself, and ponder, not just with your mind but your whole being, that the Before the Beginning and After the End Himself *loves* you. That Jesus, the ruler of all the rulers of earth, loves *you*. Wait for that realization – anticipate it! Receiving the love of Christ into your being right now, hearing the Spirit speak his love to you, is the most important thing you can do today. This isn’t about eternal salvation; this is about being full of life and joy and going about your way today with all of that spilling out of you onto those around you. Anything you do, any deed, that isn’t motivated from and proceeding out of the overflow of God’s perfect love in you falls short of its potential. Think of the deed like a dimly lit bulb – it will still provide light to a dark room, but it’s lacking its full intensity.

Each day that you receive His love is a day that you walk around in the fullness of His intention for you – being part of His Kingdom and being a priest. Therefore, today, ponder God’s love for you until it penetrates and prevails upon your heart.

Behold! He is coming! Amen.

-Josh Mercer

DAY 27

December 23, 2017

Read: 1 John 2:28-3:3



One of the great hopes in the second coming of Christ is that we'd fully and finally recognize true love. Everything that our hearts crave right now in terms of the love that we long for, the Scriptures assure us, will be satisfied in Christ.

In verse 29 John tells his readers that if we believe that Christ is righteous, then by faith, we also receive that righteousness. Not only do we receive the righteousness of Christ, we actually begin to act it out, to live out in this righteousness. And then it is almost as if John pauses, like he remembers a truth that alters the core of who he is. In 3:1, you can almost hear John preaching if you listen closely enough: Beloved, see what kind of love the Father has for us, that we should be called children of God?!? What an underserved privilege, what glorious hope, what mystery of faith. We receive the righteousness of Christ, live in this righteousness, and then, when he appears, receive the love of the Father.

There are many things in the Christian life that don't make a ton of sense to me; one of them is the love of God. I long to know this love truly and deeply, and even begin to understand what it means to be a child of God. As a father, I can get this picture in fragments. I love my girls, all 3 of them. In fact, I'm convinced that I love them far more than they love me!!! This doesn't hurt my heart though. I'm not sure they can love me with the depth and ferocity that I love them. They're kids! They can't understand the love that I have for them. It is something natural, something instinctual, something... Divine.

I love them, literally, because they're mine. I actually personally don't really like kids! However, my kids... I love them so, so much, more than mere words can project. And God says that we are his children. If you're a parent, think of the love that you have for your child. If you're not a parent, imagine it, it's something that you can't really explain. Words fail, as love transcends our human language.

Now, recognize this sobering fact; we are wicked parents, with perverted love, compared to the love of the true and better Father. Jesus was telling us about God's love in Matthew 7. He said that if a child asked for a fish, you wouldn't give him a serpent. Why? Because that's just wicked (though sort of funny too!). He then goes on to say, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11).

Friends, imagine the love you have for your children, and then recognize that this is frail human love. It is faulty. (If you don't think it is, next time your kid screams and cries from 12:35am – 2:17am, tell me how pure this love is!) Not so with the love of the true and greater Father. God loves us so much that He sends His son; God loves us so much that he adopts us when we're troubled kids; God loves us so much that one day He will return and display this love perfectly, fully, and completely.



(Continued from the previous page)

One day, at the return of Christ, the love that our hearts crave will be fully revealed. One day, we will know true love. One day, we will be righteous as he is righteous, pure as he is pure, see Him completely, and yes, we will be loved as He is love! Lord, would that day come soon! Come quickly, our great Father and King.

-Tory Mayo

DAY 28

December 24, 2017

Read: Hebrews 9:27-28



Love – Fully Defined

With verses 27 and 28 being the last two of Hebrews 9, I wanted to start at the beginning to understand the full context of the chapter. Through this I saw a different view of the love Christ showed for all of us through his death on the cross. Starting in verse 11 and reading through the end of the chapter, I was reminded of the Old Testament sacrifices that were needed to be offered daily for the forgiveness of sins. Verse 22 states that almost all sins that were committed needed be purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. In the Old Testament, there was no one sacrifice that would cover all sins for all times. As long as sin was committed, sacrifices had to be made to atone for those sins. The sin/sacrifice/forgiveness cycle was never-ending.

God's love for us is certainly is seen with the provision of sacrifice and forgiveness, but His unending love for us did not stop there, it was redefined when He sent our savior to be the final offering for our sins, "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (vs.26). Christ would be the complete and final offering. His shed blood would be the final shedding of blood for all mankind.

As I think through the story of Christ during this season, I am overwhelmed by the love shown to me through Christ dying for me. To help me picture and hold onto the significance of this sacrifice, I picture what my life would be like now if I rejected the saving grace of Christ. I get overwhelmed thinking about decisions I would make only to please me. The people that I would have hurt in my pursuit of getting ahead at the expense of others. My selfishness growing to the point where the only person wanting to be around me would be me. Praise God that while I was still a sinner, Christ died for me!

I cannot put to words my thankfulness the love of love Christ provided for me. I am a new creation, my sins have been forgiven, my salvation is secured for eternity: this is love defined.

-Paul Carlson