ADVENT

LIVING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

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Advent: Living in the In-Between

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INTRODUCTION

The in-between; there is a lot that happens in the in-between.

In-between happens:

- At the beginning and end of the school year
- In the summer months
- In your middle and high school years
- During your college years
- From the day you start your job to the day your job ends (hopefully under good circumstances)
- When a loved one dies, and you wait to see them again
- In the time between your birth and your death

There is *a lot* that happens in the in-between.

We start yet another Christmas season. There are people to see, presents to buy, and parties to attend, and our schedules do not let up as this season begins! It is a busy season, for sure.

However, as you read the words on the coming pages, may you find some time *in between* the beginning of this Christmas season and the New Year to slow down and look at Jesus. *Really* look at Jesus. Consider what Jesus is calling you to do and be in all of these years in between.

Jesus came to earth as a baby boy. A baby that needed everything any other baby needs, like food from mom, diaper changes, being rocked to sleep, and parents that are barely awake doing all of this while trying to make ends meet. His birth, however, changed the world. His birth has the potential to change your life, too.

The prophets of Israel foretold of Jesus' birth centuries and millennia before. The people of Israel looked forward to His birth, though many of them did not see Jesus as who He was: the Messiah, the Savior of the World. Angels appeared to shepherds announcing His

birth. Foreign kings, Magi, came to honor Him, bow down in worship to Him, and present Him with gifts. A political leader tried to murder Him.

Jesus will come again to rule and reign. He will judge the world and make all things right. The King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Messiah, and the Savior of the World deserves our worship, and no one could or can stop Him. His first Advent declared how much God loves us. His second Advent will do the same.

So, this Christmas, we look at Jesus' first and second Advents. How should this shape our hearts, our families, our lives, our passions, and our goals? I look forward to this journey together as we take a look at *"Advent: Living in the In-Between."*

PREFACE

It is Christmas!

Can you believe it? We just finished up Thanksgiving last week, and this coming Sunday is considered the first Sunday of Advent. It is the official start of the Christmas season. (No, the start of Christmas is NOT Black Friday!)

As you pick up this book, you may be wondering about Advent. For many of us, the only time we have thought about Advent was to get some sort of calendar that would give us a piece of chocolate, LEGO brick, or prize on each of the days in December leading up to Christmas. If that is your current understanding of Advent, that is great! However, there is *so much more* to this season of Advent.

Advent comes from the word “Adventus,” which signifies a coming. The season of Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of the Savior, the Messiah, Jesus. Advent began sometime in the 5th century and became a part of the liturgical year. It is not traditionally celebrated amongst Protestant congregations, as it is definitely more liturgical. However, as I have celebrated Advent, both as a pastor and as a father, there is something special about this season.

Advent begins the Sunday immediately following Thanksgiving and is observed the four Sundays before Christmas Eve. The celebration culminates on Christmas Eve, celebrating the fact that Jesus has come! Different traditions celebrate Advent in different ways, but it is traditionally celebrated around an Advent Wreath that has three darker candles (usually purple), one pink candle, and a center white candle. Each week celebrates a different part of the Christmas story and how Jesus’ Advent brings us true hope, peace, joy, and love. The darker candles represent the darkness of the world before Jesus came, the pink shows that the Light is coming into the world, and the white candle represents Jesus Himself - the Christ Candle.

My hope in writing this devotional book is that you will be drawn to look at the Baby in the manger this Christmas. I want you and your family to see how Jesus has truly brought hope, peace, joy, and love into our lives through His Advent, through His coming. I would encourage you to try an Advent Wreath this season. Light a candle each Sunday and consider what Jesus has brought to you. Each week, you will find a direction for lighting your own Advent Wreath. There will be directions for worship with directions including suggested Scriptures, and a reading to do each week as you light the candles. The readings are worded with a family in mind but can easily be adapted for anyone. I have added a fifth week to continue looking at Jesus as you enter the new year and as we wait for His second Advent.

I pray that you find Jesus throughout this Christmas season. May His hope, peace, joy, and love fill your heart, stir your soul, and draw you closer to your loved ones. May you grow closer to Jesus and worship Him at the manger.

Welcome to Advent!

DIY ADVENT WREATH



Photo by KaLisa Veer on Unsplash

SUPPLIES:

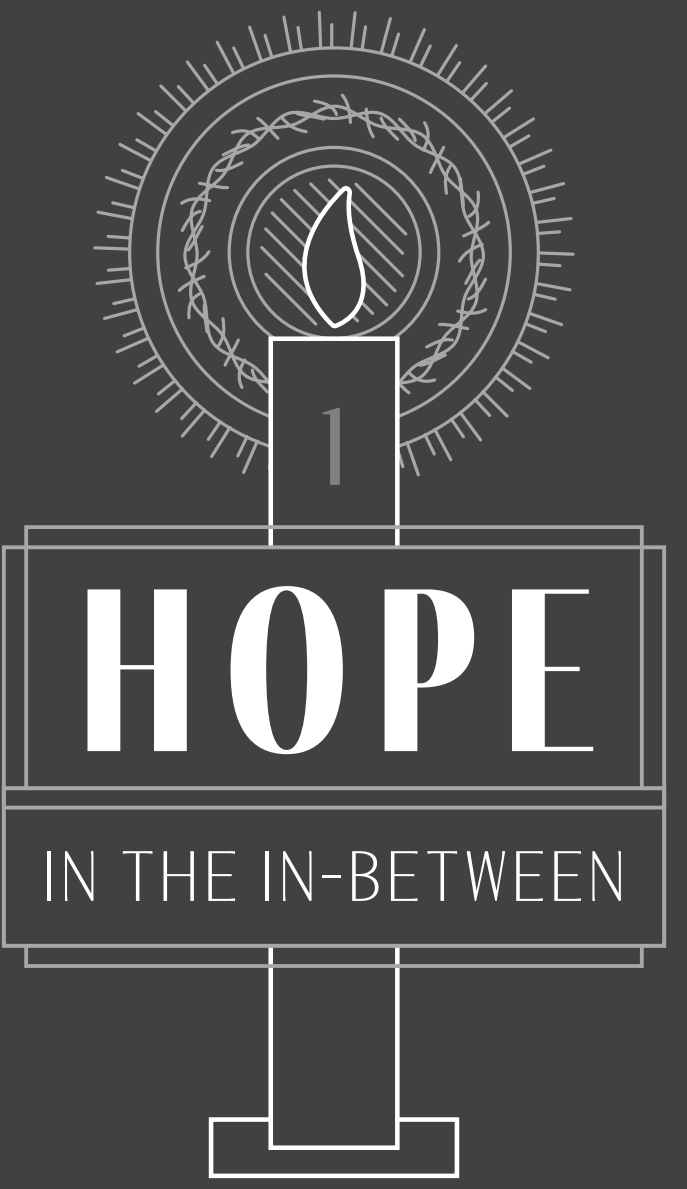
- Advent Candles: 5 dripless, tapered candles (3 purple, 1 pink, 1 white – you can also use a pillar candle for the center white candle)
- Styrofoam Wreath Form (You can also use candle holders to make a free-form wreath on a tray or platter.)
- Assorted Greenery
- Assorted Decorations: Choose items such as faux sugared cranberries, small oranges, pinecones, popcorn, stars, ornaments, etc.
- Hot Glue Gun and/or green florist wire
- OR, if you are not into crafts, try finding a pretty, premade wreath instead!

DIRECTIONS:

1. Add greenery to the wreath. Add several layers of greenery and adhere them with hot glue or florist wire.

2. Add in little details like cranberries and pinecones. Customize the wreath to your liking. This is a great opportunity to involve other family members.
3. After the decorations are complete, you can finish the wreath by adding candle holders and candles around the wreath. Set the four colored candles equidistant around the wreath and the white candle in the center.




1
HOPE
IN THE IN-BETWEEN

FAMILY ADVENT READING

First Reader: Today is special because it is the beginning of a new season. We call this season Advent.

First Child: What does that mean?

First Reader: Advent is a word that means “to come.” It is a time when we get ready, preparing ourselves for the coming of the Christ Child.

Second Reader: What are some things that we might be doing to get ready?

Second Child: We should get our hearts ready by thinking about Him.

Another Child: We should become expecters.

Second Reader: What we are doing right now around our Advent Wreath is a way of preparing for Christmas.

Take time as a family to plan ways to prepare your hearts and home for the birth of the Savior.

First Child: (*Light the first candle.*) I light this candle on the first Sunday in Advent to remind us that we must prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child.

First Reader: Isaiah 9:2, 6–7 (NIV) says, ***“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned ... 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 increase 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."

Talk about the preparation in the Old Testament for the coming of the Messiah through the words of the prophets.

First Reader: This candle is symbolic of the long years of waiting and hoping. The prophets, inspired by God, kept reminding the people to look forward to the coming of Messiah, the Son of God, who was to redeem the people from their sins. The Hebrew word for Jesus means "salvation." Before Jesus left this earth to return to His home in Heaven, He told us we should watch and wait for His return.

Scan the QR Code to play the video of "O Come, O Come Immanuel". Pray and ask God to help us make room for Jesus in our hearts and in our homes.

Thought for the week: ***"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed."*** Isaiah 40:3, 5

LESSON 1

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Isaiah 7:14

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." Isaiah 9:2

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." Isaiah 9:6-7

Hope is something that we *all* need. It does not matter who you are or what you think you need; we all need hope. When we are hopeless, we do things we would never do. We think poorly, we act poorly, and we make decisions that are desperate. Without hope, life is DARK.

Christmas brings out the best and the worst in us. We love to look at the lights on the tree and anticipate what the season will bring. Family, shopping for gifts (yeah, that can go either way), giving and receiving gifts, food, and friends can all bring that joy we look forward to. The season also brings out things in us that we thought we had dealt with, like guilt, loss, pain, greed, and even anger.

Hope is so fleeting. One day can be hopeful and the next can be hopeless. Living in between the time when Jesus came and when He will come again is fraught with so many ups and downs.

Perhaps you have walked through some darkness in your life. Maybe you are reading this very moment and struggling to see anything *but* darkness. Maybe you even feel like you have been left out from family, friends, and fellowship with others.

Perhaps you have been spared from darkness, or at least such a darkness that you cannot see light.

Perhaps you are in a place this Christmas season where you have so much to look forward to with family, times together, and things going well for you.

Whether or not you have hope today is directly related to your foundation of hope. Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). He is the Light that has dawned in the middle of a land of deep darkness.

No matter where you are this Christmas, we all have something to learn from Jesus. We have something to look *forward* to. This is what Advent is all about.

The people of Israel had walked away from God and followed other things. They had followed after power, pleasure, and possessions.

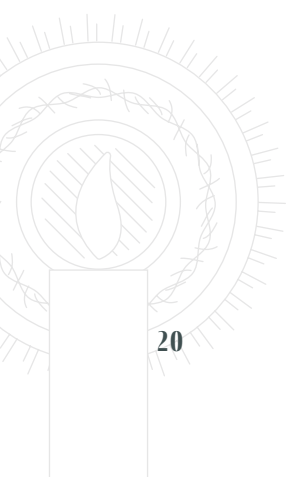
- Power - as they had looked to other kings and kingdoms of the world so often when problems came upon them, whether financial, fear from outside attack or even wanting to be like other nations. They wanted a king rather than "just" following *the* King.
- Pleasure - as they had followed after other gods that brought them what they desired. Pleasure in the world takes on many forms, and they went after them all.
- Possessions - as they desired to have wealth more than purity. They desired things over obedience to God. They worshipped the created rather than the Creator.

Israel was waiting for the coming of the Messiah. They had experienced so much sorrow and struggle and were longing for freedom. They were longing for restoration. They were longing for HOPE. This hope had been prophesied for centuries when Jesus was born. The in-between was long and troubled for the Israelites; then, Immanuel came.
GOD CAME.

God fulfilled His promise in Jesus. His birth was foretold centuries before His birth in Bethlehem. The longing of Israel had come to its fulfillment! He would sit on David's throne, and righteousness and justice would be hallmarks of the Kingdom of Christ. As the prophet Isaiah had said, the zeal of the Lord of Hosts would accomplish this (Isaiah 9:7).

God comes to you today right where you are. God is present with you whether this Christmas is coming with anticipation of one to remember or one to forget. Immanuel has come. God has done it. He promises to be with you and to never leave you or forsake you. Have you followed after power, pleasure, or possessions, trying to fill the gaps in your life, and now find that none of these things are fulfilling? God sent Jesus to bring you the forgiveness, healing, and restoration that you are longing for. GOD CAME.

God fulfilled His promises to Israel when Jesus was born. He fulfilled what had been spoken about the Messiah centuries before. You can place your hope in God because you can be sure that He will not leave you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:8).



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR PERSONAL & GROUP STUDY

1. As you come to this Christmas season and this book on what Advent is all about, what are some things you have to look forward to?

_____
_____
_____

2. Can you see God working today? Do you know that God is present with you? What is keeping you from seeing God? How do you see God working?

_____
_____
_____

3. Where are some places where you put your hope? How have you placed your hope in God?

_____
_____
_____

4. What are you waiting for this Christmas? How can you (or do you need to) wait on God's work while you are waiting?

_____
_____
_____

5. What things do you tend to turn to, other than God, when you are waiting on Him?

_____
_____
_____

6. What does Psalm 27:14 and Isaiah 40:31 have to say about waiting on God?

_____
_____
_____

7. How has God fulfilled promises in your life?

_____
_____
_____

8. When have you been tempted to believe that God was not present with you?

_____
_____
_____

9. How can you know that God is with you?

_____
_____
_____

10. Who or what are you following this Christmas: power, pleasure, possessions, or the King?

_____
_____
_____

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FAMILIES

1. What are some of the names of God? Do you know what they mean?

_____
_____
_____

2. What is hope? What are some things you hope for?

_____
_____
_____

3. Where does hope come from?

_____
_____
_____

4. What does it feel like to wait (like waiting to open Christmas presents)?

_____
_____
_____

5. Do you know that Jesus is always with you and loves you? How have you seen Jesus this week?

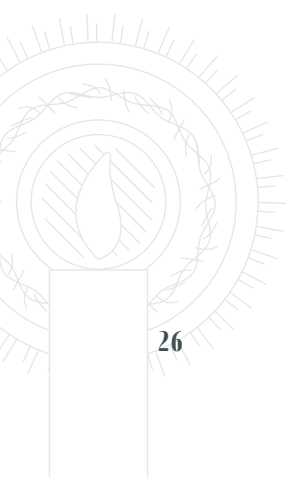
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6. What are you looking forward to this Christmas (other than the presents!)?

_____
_____
_____

NOTES





DEVOTION 1
COMING OUT OF EXILE

Coming hope is a *huge* theme in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is an Old Testament prophet, which means that he gave the people the Word of God. God used Isaiah to tell the people what He was saying and to tell them what He would do. He prophesied from 739 to 681 BC to the people of God in Jerusalem. His prophecies spanned over the reign of four different kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

During Isaiah's day, the Israelite people found themselves living in very dark times. They were living under judgment because they had broken their covenant with God, followed other gods (idols), and lived rebellious lives of sin. They followed just about everything other than God. Their kings made pacts with nations around them, hoping to save them rather than going to God. They had turned to both Egypt and Syria, nations that did not follow God and had fallen further away from the one true God. God's judgment on His people comes throughout the book of Isaiah in the form of foreign nations like Assyria and Babylon, overtaking God's people and eventually leading them into exile. They had lost their homes, possessions, and families and were in danger of losing their identity if they took their eyes off God. People who experience this kind of exile long for hope to hold on until they can be rescued and released from their captors. Exile is a place where people desire someone to save them. Isaiah spoke hope into this darkness.

We need hope in the darkness that faces us today. I speak to so many people who struggle with what is happening in the world as a whole but are also struggling with what is going on in *their* world. Exile is not necessarily a word we consider when we look at our own lives. We hear of refugee camps in other parts of the world, and those people would be considered exiles for sure. However, we do not consider ourselves exiled here, even though there are so many

people struggling. When a person wakes up and wonders if today could possibly get any worse than yesterday, that person just may be living in exile.

Some may say that the news we hear across the world today in the 21st century brings echoes of a type of exile from what life could and should be like. We long for the world to be different because we hear of terrorist attacks, abuse in all kinds of forms (child abuse, sexual exploitation, abuse of power), corruption in governments, epidemics in society from human trafficking to opioid addiction, power, and hedonism leading to oppression and exploitation. Our world is in exile.

These stories surround our lives and can make it feel like we live in a modern-day exile away from what God intended and desires our lives to be. Yet, not all of these stories are in the world around us or in the news; they are present in our *own lives* and can find us walking in a dark season. They can be divorce, disease, debt, depression, death, family struggle, expectations, and job troubles. Whether we are reading about exile in Isaiah 700 years before the birth of Jesus or experiencing it almost 21 centuries after His first Advent, people all around us and so many reading this book are experiencing the effects of exile and need hope to hold on to in life.

Where do we find hope? Where does it begin? Just as Isaiah spoke, HOPE is coming.

"And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!" Isaiah 9:6b-7 (NLT)

DEVOTION 2
WHAT IS HOPE?

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1

What is hope? What a question!

It is important to define what we are talking about. Sometimes, when it comes to things pertaining to God or faith, we talk about words that we think we know the definition of, but we move along not *really* knowing what we are talking about. So, each week, you will find a definition of each week's Advent topic. You will also consider the definition of the topic that you have held over the years. So, without any further explanation, let us look at the definition of hope.

Hope (hōp):

- As a noun: a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen, a person or thing that may help or save someone, grounds for believing that something good may happen
- As a verb: want something to happen or be the case, intend, if possible, to do something
- Biblical definition: to wait or to look for with eager expectation, trust, and confidence; the expectation of what is sure to come; and the active, faith-filled waiting for God to fulfill that which He inaugurated by the power of His Spirit

Hope can mean so many things to different people. Hope is so often centered around what we *expect* to happen. Where have you tried to find hope in your life? An expected job promotion? A precious time with family? An exception of a marriage that lasted a lifetime? An expected good grade on a test? An expected reaction from a loved one?

Our hope truly depends on who or what our hope is set upon. Living in between the Advent of Jesus coming the first time and the coming Advent when Jesus returns leaves us in a vacuum of hope. We need to have hope to keep moving forward and living life.

There is a saying that goes, “It’s the hope that kills you.” I am a BIG sports guy, and I support my teams with passion. I am a fan (which is short for fanatic, by the way) of three pro sports teams: the San Francisco 49ers, the Sacramento Kings, and Tottenham Hotspur (a Premier League Soccer team located in North London, England), and one college, the Michigan Wolverines. I am sorry if I have lost some of you, but trust me, I am getting to a point here. So often, my hope of one of my teams getting anywhere toward winning a championship has left me hope*less*. The Kings have not won a championship since the 1950s, and the Spurs just play with my emotions all the time. Yes, the Niners were in the Super Bowl in 2024, but losing a Super Bowl hurts, too! For all of you Lions fans out there, the team has struggled a lot but has been getting better. The disappointment of a team losing can be tough. “It’s the *hope* that kills you.” That may be true unless your hope is in something or someONE that will never fail you.

DEVOTION 3
WHERE DOES HOPE COME FROM?

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." Isaiah 12:2-6

Where do *you* think hope comes from? I encourage you to take a minute and consider your real answer to that question. Do not give the answer that you *think* you should have, but the *real* answer that you live in your life.

It is easy to look for hope in so many places. I look for hope in how people respond to me. I look for hope in new shiny things that I own (I *love* my gadgets). I look for hope in my sports teams. I look for hope in my family. I look for hope at church. I look for hope in how I feel about myself. And yes, I look for hope in Jesus.

The obvious answer is that Jesus is the answer to every question, right? I mean, if you have grown up in the church or around any type of faith, the reality is that if you scream JESUS, He is almost always the right answer. You would be correct to say His name here as where hope comes from.

However, it is more than just *knowing* the answer. it is about *living* the answer.

In order to live as though Jesus is your source of hope, you have to understand and recognize all of the places where you are trying to find hope. So, if you just skimmed over the question at the beginning of today's devotional, I will wait right here as you go back, stop, and seriously consider it.

Hope comes to you when you understand who Jesus is. He is your Savior, and He died for you. He was born to die. What a crazy thing to consider. He was *born* to *die*. everyone dies, but Jesus was born in order to sacrifice His life for us and to pay for our sins. He came to give us His life. He is the hope of the world and where hope is found in your day-to-day life.

How do you *live* hope? That is a great question, and I am glad you asked it.

I promise we will get to that on day five of this week. Today is about recognizing where you have been trying to find hope and grasping that hope is ONLY found in Jesus.

Hope has come, and it is not in any thing, possession, human relationship, or career. It is not found in good health or wealth. Hope has come, and the name of hope is JESUS.

DEVOTION 4
DISAPPOINTED IN HOPE

The title of today's devotional can be a bit off-putting. How can you be disappointed in hope? I mean, hope means that you are actually *hoping*, right? Doesn't that mean that you are not disappointed? I wish that were true.

What happens when:

- Your marriage is struggling, and no matter what you do, it does not seem to get better.
- Your loved one is diagnosed with cancer. This is the second round of chemo, and you do not have any idea if it will actually work this time so that you will not have to go through it all again.
- You have tried to get a job that would make ends meet, but with inflation and all of the bills you have, the pressure never lets up. Christmas gifts are not even possible this season.
- You have experienced loneliness in very deep places, and every time you try to reach out to make friends, it seems like no one will care enough to stick with you.
- You want to be married, but nothing has worked out and there does not seem to be any prospects around you.

We could talk about so many different life circumstances, and maybe you are thinking specifically of where you have struggled. It can be easy to be disappointed in hope.

Take a look at the list above. Really consider what came to mind as you read that list and possibly thought of how you have struggled. What is at the center of that struggle? What is at the center of any of the situations above? *Misplaced hope.* (That keeps coming up, doesn't it?)

We all go through so much as we live in between the Advents of Jesus. Hope came to us. Hope came in the form of a baby in the manger. He is the Son of God, born to be the hope that will *never* disappoint you. However, as you live on this earth, you will have struggles.

God gives us a process that produces hope in you. This process is not easy, but it is good. Suffering in our lives produces endurance. Endurance helps us grow and learn. Endurance produces the character that God desires for us and knows that we will need to live in hope and in His will. This character is what produces hope because you are able to see God's hand work in small and big ways.

This is the hope that does not put you to shame, and that does not disappoint. You are loved by God. If you know Jesus as your Savior, the Holy Spirit dwells in you, and Jesus died for you at the right time. The death of Jesus in your place brings *real* and *lasting* hope. Hope in Him is NEVER misplaced. Hope in Jesus does not always make everything seem alright, but it brings us perspective to trust our God in the middle of even the toughest of circumstances.

"Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person - though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die - but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:2-8

DEVOTION 5
HOW IS HOPE FOUND?

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.'"
Luke 1:46-55

Today, we finally talk about how you *live* hope and how you can *find* hope. At the risk of sounding pretty redundant over the past five days, I say again, "It is about *where you look.*"

The people of Israel had looked for hope in so many places other than God, and they were disappointed every time. They found themselves suffering and looking for hope in the wrong places. Hope was not found in other gods, nations, all kinds of sin, or in themselves.

HOPE WAS COMING.

This hope finally came on a quiet night in Bethlehem. There were sheep bleating, goats making whatever noises they make (Aren't goats a riot?), and a bright star shone in the night sky. This was all foretold to a teenage girl who was not yet married. The angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her everything that was to take place. Mary

would not know what would come next, but she would trust in God and hope in His plans. She would struggle. Joseph, her betrothed, would consider divorcing her quietly, though he could have had her stoned to death. She would face the whispers all around her of her "indiscretion."

HOPE WAS COMING, and so Mary sang.

Oh, did she sing! She magnified the Lord and rejoiced in her Savior (whom she was carrying - MIND BLOWN!). In the middle of tough circumstances and an unknown future, Mary sang of *hope*! How did she do this?

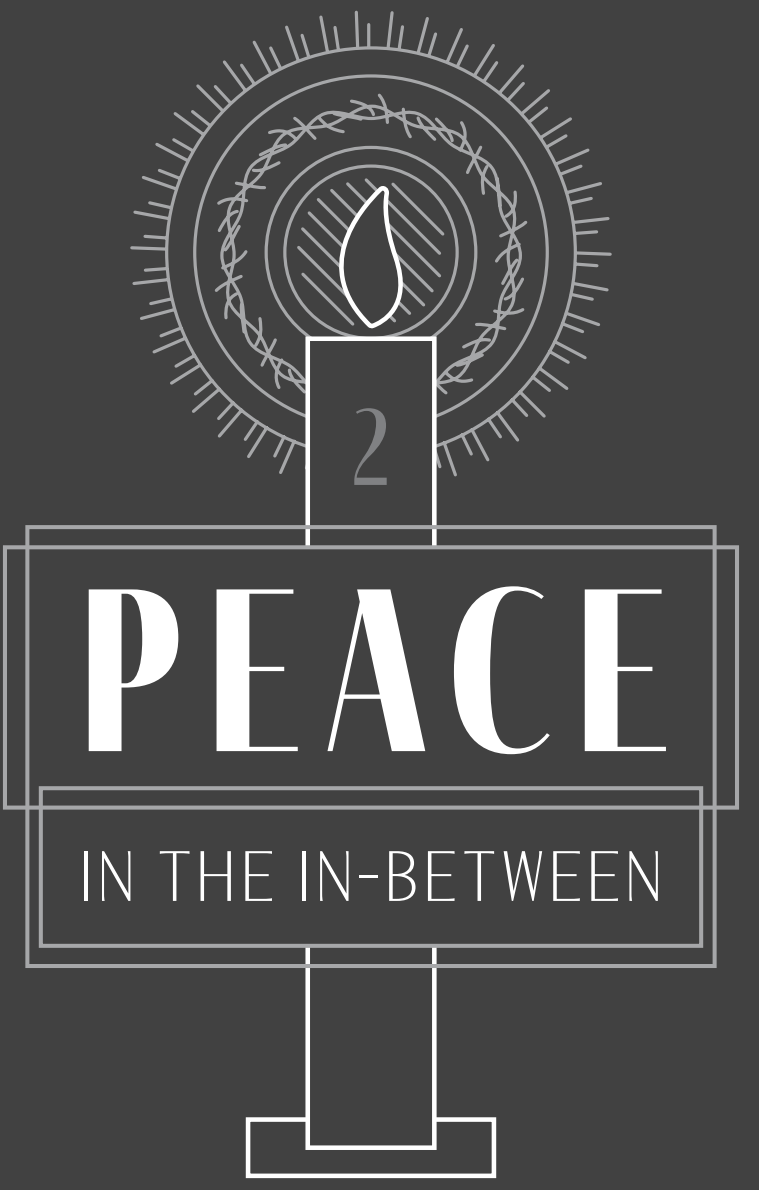
Hope found its way into her entire being because of her focus on and trust in the God who loved her, would not forsake her, and would be by her side every step of the way.

Hope will find its way into whatever situation you are facing as you seek God's face and not just His hand. As you live in the in-between, find hope in the One that will never leave you or forsake you. Find hope in the One who did not say it would be easy but that you would not be alone. Find hope in the One that was born to give glory to the Father by giving His life in place of yours.

You will find hope as you lay your life down before Jesus and worship Him for who He is and what He has done. See, as you lift your eyes and focus on the face of God, you will be able to see how He is working. Notice how that suffering is producing endurance, the endurance is producing godly character, and how character is infusing hope into your thoughts, actions, and heart.

As you live in the in-between, hope is found in Jesus and nowhere else.





PEACE

IN THE IN-BETWEEN

FAMILY ADVENT READING[1]

First Reader: *(Relight first candle.)* Lighting a candle is a simple yet profound act. It is a testimony to the power of light over darkness.

First Child: *(Light second candle.)* As we light this second candle of Advent, we continue our journey to Christmas.

Second Reader: The second candle of Advent is called the Peace candle; as we anticipate Christmas, let us remember the birth of the Prince of Peace.

Second Child: Let us remember our need for a Savior to save us from our sins and give us peace with God.

First Reader: Psalm 27:1-2, 13-14 says, ***"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall...I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"***

Another Reader: People waited a long time to see prophecies about the coming Messiah fulfilled, such as this one from Isaiah.

Second Reader: Isaiah 9:6-7 proclaims, ***"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."***

First Child: Luke 2:13-14 records when Jesus was born. ***"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'"***

Second Child: The Bible, God's Word, reminds us that true peace comes from the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

Another Reader: Let us remember Christ's birth, commemorate His death and resurrection, and anticipate His glorious return. May God grant us His perfect peace.



Scan the QR Code to play the video "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

Thought for the week: ***"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful."*** Colossians 3:15

LESSON 2

"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace." Micah 5:2-5

Peace is something that we all crave but often do not know where to find.

The Israelites had been looking for their Messiah after all that they had endured because of the judgment of God and His promises of the future. The Messiah would come to bring an end to the suffering of God's people. They knew the prophecies of old and they were anticipating God's salvation.

Advent is a time of waiting. Can you imagine living in a time where you are living in a foreign land with no one you know, and there is strife all around you? There are many in our world that are living out this reality, but for those of us in much of the western world, we have no idea.

Then again, peace is something that we all crave but often do not know where to find it. This is true even for those that live in the western world.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, there are some 400 direct references to peace, not to mention a volume of indirect allusions. While there are various words in the original languages of the Bible that refer to peace, the deepest roots stem back to a consequential

word known as shalom. Shalom, at its core, means “to be whole or complete.” While a common greeting among Jews around the world to this day is the simple word, “Shalom,” the full meaning of that word of peace is thick with substance that goes well beyond a mere feeling of calmness.

Shalom literally means: “God’s highest and most complete good be upon you and all associated with you.” Thus, the peace of God goes well beyond merely a cozy feeling or even the absence of war; it includes a relational harmony that seeks a deep commitment to the work of justice in truth and righteousness. The peace of God is a full, satisfying, and rich fruit of His Spirit to His people and creation. The shalom of God is intended for relational goodness and harmony through and through.

The people of God waited for His peace. The promises of the prophet Micah told of the place where the Messiah would come and what He would come to do. Though Bethlehem was small, the Messiah would come from there. The ruler of Israel would come from this little, seemingly insignificant place. In fact, Bethlehem would not have ever made the top ten list of cities of Israel. His coming is from old, from eternity. The Eternal One was coming.

There would definitely be hard times before this Redeemer came, and it would last until ***“she who is in labor has given birth,”*** and the people were unified again. The birth of the Messiah would unify the people of God in ways that they would not see and could not fathom. The Messiah would not come to take away the oppression of people, though His presence would lift the spirits of the oppressed. The Messiah would not give earthly riches, though His providence would give His followers everything they would need. The Messiah would not end the strife that happens in a fallen world, though His peace would fall on His people in ways that would be beyond understanding.

This Messiah would stand up and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD. His flock would see the majesty of the name of the

Lord His God. God's people would dwell securely because the Messiah would be great over all the world.

Yet, wait, has this actually happened?

The people of Israel still would suffer under the rule of the Roman Empire. In fact, even worse was coming for the Jewish people hundreds of years later during the Crusades and then, ultimately, during the Holocaust. We can look at what we go through today in wars and rumors of wars, a nation fighting against a nation, families breaking apart, abortion running rampant, people being abused in so many ways, strife, arguments, canceling others when disagreement reigns, polarized political parties, and quite simply, hate. I have tears streaming down my cheeks as I write these words.

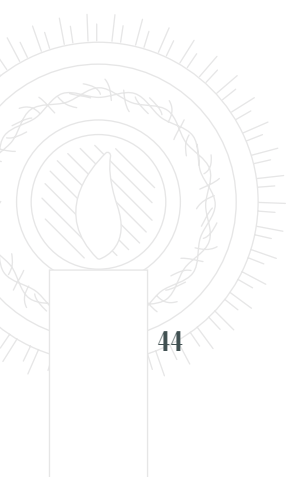
How long, O Lord? How long?

This is our longing for peace as we live in the in-between. However, there is a final phrase in the promise from Micah that we must not forget: ***"And he shall be their peace."***

The reason a Savior, the Messiah, was born on that day in the City of David was that something or someone needed saving. The earth and humanity were the ones who needed saving and deliverance due to shalom being in disarray from sin and Satan's schemes. What happened in Bethlehem in the stable was a strategic initiative that was well within the scope and sequence of God's plans, which would lead back to peace (shalom): God's highest and most complete good that was intended for all people and those with whom they associated.

God came and brought the possibility of shalom with Him.

Jesus is coming again, and His peace will be made complete.



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR PERSONAL & GROUP STUDY

1. When you think of peace, what images come to mind?

_____
_____
_____

2. What are some of the biggest things in your life that keep you from what you consider to be peace?

_____
_____
_____

3. What do you think it would have been like to live before the first Advent of Jesus?

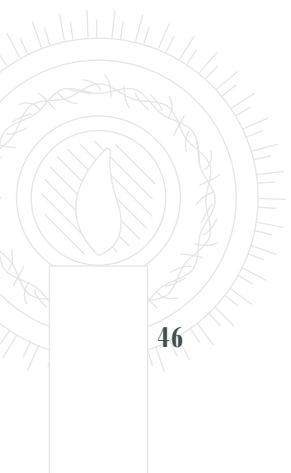
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4. What promises would bring you the most confidence and the most frustration as you looked forward to the coming of the Messiah?

_____
_____
_____

5. What is the difference between what you would call peace and God's desire for shalom?

_____
_____
_____



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FAMILIES

1. What does peace mean to you?

_____
_____
_____

2. How important is peace to you?

_____
_____
_____

3. How did Jesus bring peace when He was born?

_____
_____
_____

4. How can we create peace in our family and with our friends at school and work?

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_____
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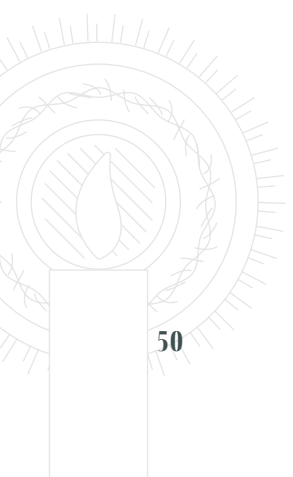
5. What do you think the world would be like if everyone tried to live like Jesus and bring His peace?

_____
_____
_____

6. Do you know that Jesus is always with you and loves you? How have you seen Jesus this week?

_____
_____
_____

NOTES



DEVOTION 1
WHAT IS PEACE?

Peace has a different definition based on the circumstances, at least that is how we usually live. Should you be living in a household of young children, you may have heard your spouse or even yourself declare, “Can we please have some peace and quiet!” Peace in this instance is simply some time alone and some time of quietness in the home.

For others, peace is the ability to take part in a hobby you enjoy. I can find peace on the golf course, but let us be honest, golf is not always peaceful. Maybe your hobby is reading, working in the yard, making a quilt, working on or washing your car, watching a movie, playing sports, milking a cow, playing a video game, or taking a walk or hike outside and enjoying God’s creation; we can find peace in our hobbies. Still, others find peace in bettering themselves through going to the gym, loving their careers, and pursuing meaningful friendships or even a person to spend the rest of their lives with.

That peace is fleeting, however. It only lasts as long as we are interested in taking part in the hobby, as long as the person that we are married to does what we think they should, as long as I am moving forward in my journey to physical health, as long as my friends make me happy, or as long as my career is fulfilling.

Do any of these things really bring us peace?

A definition of actual peace might be freedom from disturbance, quiet and tranquility, mental calm, or, in a larger context, freedom from the cessation of war or violence. This is not a bad definition of peace, but it is not complete at all. While this definition is included in the peace spoken of in God’s Word, there is more.

As I wrote in the Bible Study, the word shalom comes to mind from the Old Testament. In fact, a name of God is actually Jehovah-Shalom, the Lord is Peace. He *is* peace! Shalom is a much deeper definition of peace. This peace is completeness, wholeness, well-being, and total welfare of body, mind, and soul. This peace is positive. It is a time, place, and condition that features love, calmness, and moral uprightness. At the core of shalom is the fact that God will make everything right again.

This leads us to a conclusion that things are not right as they are. This is why we struggle for peace in our lives. We know things are not right. This is living in between the Advents. Jesus brought peace, but it is not complete yet. This is the tension of the prophecies in God's Word. There is a fulfillment in the now that is true, but there is a fulfillment that is yet to come. Living in the in-between means living in the now and the not yet.

- God is our peace. (Micah 5:2-5)
- Jesus is the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6-7)
- We can have God's peace that is beyond our understanding in the midst of terrible circumstances. (Philippians 4:7)

The question remains: *How?*

Let us meet here again tomorrow and begin that conversation.

DEVOTION 2
PHYSICAL PEACE

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified." Isaiah 61:1-3

The angels proclaimed that there would be peace on earth (Luke 2:14) after the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. There is a part of peace that is physical and tangible. What we see in front of us is not often peaceful, at least not to our definition of peace. Health issues are not peaceful. Poverty is not peaceful. Captivity and depravity are not peaceful. There is a lot of mourning in our lives, and that is not peaceful.

Then we come to this passage in Isaiah. The physical peace of God just oozes out of this passage as good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, opening the prison of those who are bound, comforting all who mourn, giving beauty for ashes, gladness instead of mourning, and giving praise instead of a faint spirit. These are all available because of God's peace.

God brings peace to us physically when we learn to trust Him. This peace does not always look like we think it should, however. So

often, what we see in front of us that is bringing us concern and upheaval is not the issue that we are actually facing.

There is *Good News* for you today and ultimately, peace begins there. No matter what you face physically, there is a reality that Jesus loves you and died for you. I do not want to get too far ahead of myself here as we will talk about this in a couple days, but peace begins with the Gospel, the Good News. This Good News is what allows the things that you struggle with to start down the path of peace.

In the middle of your brokenheartedness, the things that bind you, the things that you mourn over, the ashes that you cannot see a way of rebuilding, and a spirit within you that is faint of heart, there is *Good News*.

Jesus walks with you. He has never left you. He has not forsaken you. He died for you. Call on His name today. Go to Him with what you are struggling with. He knows and mourns with you. When you set your eyes on God, it brings an understanding of your circumstances that you cannot have apart from Him. Living in the in-between can be peaceful as you bring your physical struggles before God and leave them with Him while living your life dedicated to Him.

What about the thoughts going through your mind? How do you deal with those? This is really where peace lies. We will tackle this tomorrow, and honestly, I cannot wait!

DEVOTION 3
MENTAL PEACE

"Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely theLORD is in this place, and I did not know it.' And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'" Genesis 28:10-17

You may have just read that passage and thought, "Wait, this is not part of the Christmas account!" You are right. This does not mention Jesus specifically, but it does speak to how God works in our lives.

I need to give you a little backstory here. Jacob had stolen Esau's birthright (which Esau did not value much anyway since he sold it for a bowl of stew), and Esau was not happy. Jacob had to get out of Beersheba and flee Esau as he was coming after Jacob and his family. Can you imagine the stress in this situation? Jacob knew what he would have done and knew his big brother (granted, he was

only older by seconds) was coming for him. Jacob's state of mind was one of a person fleeing immediate danger and potential death. This is a high-stress and extremely anxious situation.

God reminds Jacob of the promise He made to Isaac and the promise that was passed down to him. When Jacob woke up, he was amazed. He realizes that God was in that place, and he did not know it. It is an "awesome" place as it is the house of God. The name of the town where Jacob first arrived was Luz, or basically an almond tree. I mean, almonds are great, but Jacob met God in this place. He was focused on fleeing danger, but he did not realize that God was still with him. So, Jacob changes the name of this town to Beth-el or Bethel, the House of God.

It is interesting that all it takes is one encounter with God to change how you see the circumstances in your life. Maybe you are looking around, and you do not know what to do; you do not know what is around the corner. Maybe you are wandering like Jacob was. Maybe you are anxious, worried, concerned, and wondering when it is going to be your turn for a promotion, marriage, or children. Are things going to work out (finances, struggle, marriage)? Will God really forgive me? Can I really overcome this addiction? Will I ever get past my depression and anxiety?

God enters into your wondering and presents His wonder in the midst of your wandering.

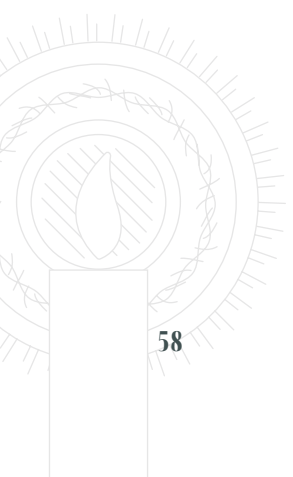
The peace of God comes into our lives when we bring Him glory, listen to Him, and we wake up. Jacob was awakened by God in this vision when he had no peace and realized that God was with him. When you wake up, you realize that God was with you in your waiting and wandering. He was with you when you were not sure when (or if) it would work out. He was with you when you needed forgiveness. He was with you when you were (or still are) addicted. When you realize this, you can look back to your Beth-el (House of God), where God changed you.

You may not be aware of the fact that God is with you now. Maybe you need to be awakened from your sleep to realize that God is with you *right where you are.* Then you can look around and exclaim like Jacob, ***"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."*** He continues, ***"How awesome is this place!"*** This is an *awesome* place, and I can find peace in God's presence!

However, it did not stop there for Jacob. Twenty-one years later, Jacob has now lived some life; he had kids, dwelt with God, struggled, and experienced blessings from God. In Genesis 35:3, God was calling Jacob back to Bethel to go and worship Him. So, Jacob goes to his family and says in Genesis 35:3, ***"Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone."***

Jacob wants to go build an altar to the God who answers him in the day of his distress and has been with him wherever he has gone! He realized that God's presence was not just in the place of Bethel. He was with him *everywhere* he went. God's presence is not just in the church building, or only when you pray, or only when you are reading your Bible, or when you are worshiping Him. It is not just where you have seen him work. He is with you always.

Wake up to God's presence! For where He is there is freedom, there is grace, and there is peace.



DEVOTION 4
SPIRITUAL PEACE

Peace is fleeting. This will be a recurring theme throughout this book. Whether or not you have peace will depend on where you look for it.

We all need to have physical peace. We long for mental peace. The reality is that the foundation of the peace that we are so desperate for is found in the spiritual peace that Jesus offers today to everyone on the face of the earth. Without spiritual peace, there can be no peace. The old adage rings true: Know Jesus, know peace; no Jesus, no peace.

Ephesians 2:14-19 says, ***"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."***

Jesus has made us one with God and has broken down the wall of hostility between us and God. He has abolished the law of commandments so that He could be the mediator between God and man. He has made a relationship with God possible! We have been reconciled to God *through the cross*, killing the hostility that existed between us and God. He came and preached to both the near and the far off, and now we have access in the Spirit to the Father! We

have *access!* We have freedom! We are no longer strangers or aliens. We are fellow citizens of the household of God!

You no longer have to be a slave to sin. You no longer have to be a stranger to God. You can be His son or daughter. You can be a child of the most high God!

God came. He came to us, as one of us, as a baby that needed everything. When I think of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, I always remember what the Genie said in Disney's "*Aladdin,"* "Phenomenal cosmic power, itty-bitty living space!" The One that created the universe humbled Himself so much that He became one of us. He came to save us from ourselves and from our sin.

The lyrics to the song that you listened to or watched for the Advent reading come to mind (if you have not listened to that yet, go listen now):

The dark night wakes
And glory breaks
The Child was born for us
Gloria

We have been reconciled by the baby in the manger. He is the God who loved us enough to come down to us.

Peace came down.

DEVOTION 5
HOW IS PEACE FOUND?

How do I find peace? (I am really glad you asked that question.)

The obvious answer is Jesus because He is the answer to every question that is asked about spiritual things, right? Give "Jesus" as the answer; it sounds really spiritual. While Jesus is the answer to your question above, how do you actually find peace in Jesus?

Let us look at what Jesus said in Luke 4:16-21:

"And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

> ***'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"***

Does that passage from Isaiah sound familiar? You read that passage earlier this week. The place where peace is found is Jesus. Only in Him can you find physical peace, mental peace, and the foundation of it all, spiritual peace. Jesus is the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied centuries earlier. Jesus was bringing glory to the Father in the fulfillment of this passage. That was His purpose.

Peace comes to the earth (and to our lives) when God's glory is the thing that we are living for. When anyone seeks to live for their own glory or other glories, peace cannot come. It is *only* a life that is pointed at Jesus, one that lives for Him and thereby brings Him glory. Then peace can reign in a life.

It is time to come before the manger and bow before Him. God's glory equals peace. It is time to be *astonished* at the peace of God, at the very glory of God. God is with you everywhere you go! When you wake up like Jacob did, you realize that the place that you are in is an *awesome* place. No matter where you are, God is with you, and that is an awesome place! That is a place of God's glory. That is a place of peace.

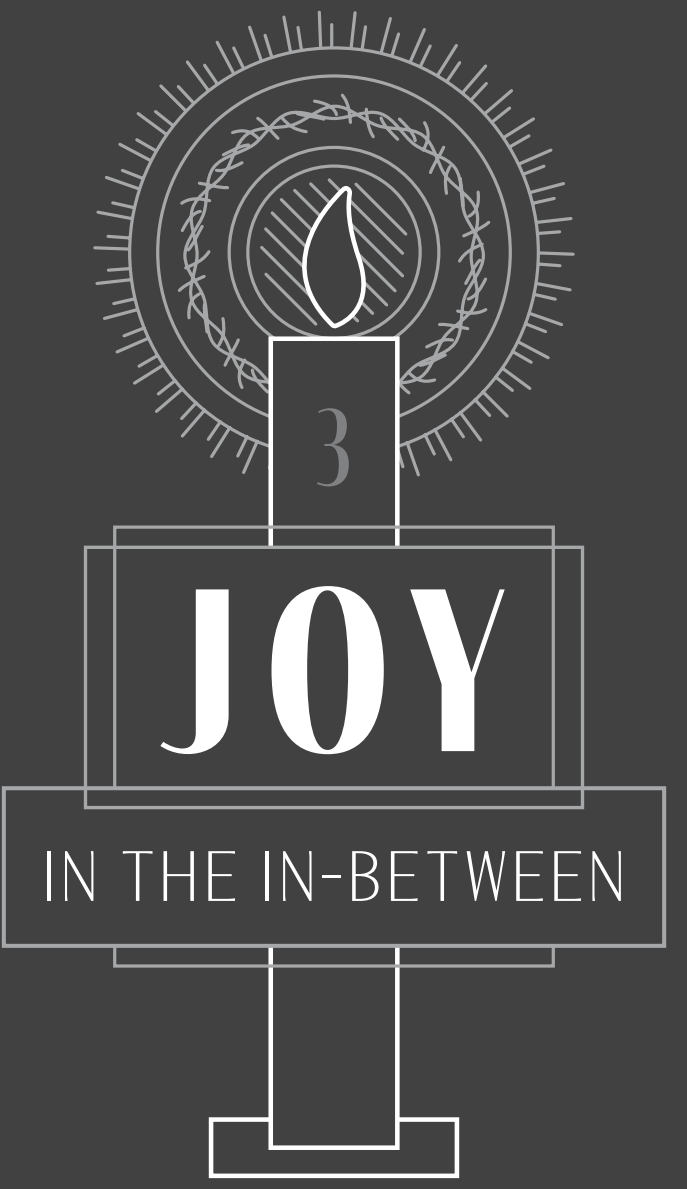
It is all about who is in control of your life. Who is in control of your life today? Where do you dwell? Where are you looking for peace? What is the name that is written on your heart? Let me propose to you that if you do not have peace, the name that is written on your heart is something other than Jesus. This can be true of *anyone*. So, this is not a time to check out because you have accepted Christ and given Him your life. We all can easily write other names on our hearts. So, what name is written? Is it an addiction, a bad marriage, dissatisfied with a job, feeling unlovable, an outcast, feeling no one cares, financial problems, failure, depression, anxiety, false independence, or is that name even your own name? If any of that is true, peace cannot be found.

Here is where things can change, though. Remember that where Jacob found himself when fleeing from Esau was named Luz. It was a normal place. However, when God showed up and Jacob had an encounter with God, the name changed to Bethel - the House of God. Here is where peace comes. Let the name that is written on your heart change from anything that it currently is, and let God replace it with the name of *Jesus.*

If you have never given your heart to Jesus, do it right where you sit reading this book. Give Him your heart and let the name that is written on your heart change! Romans 10:9-10 says, ***"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*** If you are reading right now and you have allowed other names to be written on your heart, let God erase them and re-write Jesus. Only then can you have peace.

Call on the name of Jesus today. Living in the in-between can be a place of peace as you point your life toward Jesus.

Peace came down, and His name is Jesus.


3
JOY
IN THE IN-BETWEEN

FAMILY ADVENT READING

First Reader: We have come together to light another candle on this third Sunday in Advent. Let's review our first two candles.

First Child: *(Relight first candle.)* On the first Sunday, we lit a candle to remind us to get our hearts ready for the coming of Jesus.

Second Child: *(Relight second candle.)* On the second Sunday, we lit the candle of peace.

First Reader: When we open our hearts and let the love of Jesus enter, we know joy! Today's candle is for joy.

Second Reader: Some people who knew the joy right away were the shepherds. After visiting the stable, they went back to their sheep, glorifying and praising God. But a lot of people living in Bethlehem missed it. They slept right through the whole thing and never knew it happened.

Another Child: *(Light the third candle.)* I light the candle on the third Sunday in Advent to remind us that the angels said, "We have news of great joy!"

First Reader: Philippians 4:4–7 (GNT): ***"May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again: rejoice! Show a gentle attitude toward everyone. The Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus."***

Talk about joy. As we walk through these days leading up to Christmas, how much joy do we see in the faces of people around us or in each other? Nehemiah 8:10 (NASB) tells us, ***"The joy of the Lord is your strength."*** *We can't order*

a dozen "joys" for Christmas and charge it on a credit card. What is joy, and how do we get it?



Scan the QR Code to play the video "Joy to the World."

Pray each day that the joy we know, the joy that is in our hearts, will be reflected in our faces. ***"Happy are the people whose God is the Lord!"*** Psalm 144:15 (GNT)

Thought for the week:
"For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace." Isaiah 55:12 (NASB)

This would be a good time to begin assembling a nativity scene in your home. Place a small barn or stable in a prominent location where it will be noticed, add a cow, sheep, and/or donkey, place the manger in the stable, and sprinkle straw all around.

LESSON 3

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" *Luke 2:8-14*

In inner-city Detroit, there was a *huge* storm coming, and every prediction about the big blizzard had come true. It was 3:00 AM and zero degrees outside. In a small building connected to a giant garage was a group of snowplow drivers. They were big guys. They had heavy coats. Their leather gloves, scarves, and wool hats made them look even bigger! They were standing around in a circle near the coffee pot, sipping from Styrofoam cups. They each had a refill, and then, as the group walked out the door toward the garage where a few dozen snowplows and salt trucks were warming up, there was suddenly a bright light.[2]

The angels were not going to be on T.V. The angels were not going to the White House. The angels were not going to visit the Governor at the Capitol.

These men were on the outskirts. They were in the margins. We do not even acknowledge they exist until we cannot get out of the driveway or they are holding up traffic as we try to get to work.

What is it going to take to scare these guys? A small child saying, "Fear not"? Nah. It is going to take a being with six sets of wings, eyes that look like they are burning, and a sword of fire.

These are the ones who God wants to be the first to know! God sent His messengers, the archangels, and the angelic choir to those on the fringe. They are the ones that most people never thought of.

Imagine the most emotion-laden experience that comes to mind and then multiply it by 10 to the 100th power. That is *a lot* of zeros. That volume of emotional fervor only begins to describe the scene of what the shepherds must have been feeling on the night they were not only visited by an angel of the Lord, but also found themselves in the middle of a multitude of the heavenly host. What began as an ordinary night shift in their minds would soon unfold into the most extraordinary evening of their lives! This blue-collar, minimum-wage group of men was about to get front-row seats to the *"Hallelujah Chorus"* along with backstage passes to see the King. Only Luke shares the story of the shepherds in the Gospels.

The King of kings was born in Bethlehem. There was great joy among the people because of the birth of this baby boy. Why did this message come to the shepherds first?

The shepherds had one of the most common jobs in Israel around the time of Jesus' birth. This is the most blue-collar job that could be had. These men were outside in the elements looking over sheep that were not very smart. Sheep often got into trouble and wander off. Their job was one that was easily overlooked. Yet, the angels came to the shepherds first.

These shepherds knew the prophecies of the coming Messiah. They had to, as every young Jewish boy had to memorize the entire Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and if they were good enough, the rest of the Old Testament. The ultimate goal for any Hebrew boy was to be chosen by a Rabbi and trained to become a Rabbi himself. The Rabbi would choose a boy and tell them that he believed that they had what it took to become like him. He would become a Talmudeen, one that would follow his Rabbi everywhere as he went in order to become like him. Should a Rabbi not believe a boy had what it takes, he would tell them that they

should go home and learn the trade of his father. That would be a gut-punch!

Where were these shepherds at? Were they learning from a Rabbi? No, they were in a field in the middle of the night watching sheep. They had not been chosen. Then, the angels showed up, declaring that the Messiah had been born. They were being called to come and see. They were being called to joy that they had never known before.

So, the shepherds did not just saunter toward where the angels said to go, they *ran*. They ***"went with haste"*** (Luke 2:16). Upon arriving at the place where Jesus had been born, they found Him just as the angels had said. He was laying in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

I remember being in Bethlehem in 2019. Should you ever get an opportunity to venture to Israel, I would strongly encourage you to do so. Jeannie, my wife, and I went to the shepherd's field and were able to see the skyline over Bethlehem. It is believed that this was the place where the angels came to visit the shepherds. There were many different things to see there. There were different houses and statues, as well as a cave in a rock where it is believed the shepherds sought shelter. However, when I turned my eyes to the sky, I broke down. I remember looking at Jeannie and telling her to look to the sky. "Can you see them?" I declared.

Can you even begin to imagine what the shepherds went through on this night? At first, they were afraid. This is an appropriate response to the angels of God and the multitude of the angelic choir declaring that the Messiah had been born. The shepherds glorified (desired to make famous) and praised (joyful praise) God on their way back home! They had seen the Messiah, the Savior. They declared the worth of this Messiah to all who would listen. It was loud and joyful! They were not bashful about this declaration! If they had cell phones, their social media would have been blowing up! *#messiah #bethlehem #baby #sonofgod #mindblown #halahalahalahalahalalujah #ijustsawtheangelicchoir*

As you are living in the in-between, joy is calling to you. We will dive into what joy is, where it is found, and what it is calling you to. The things we focus on at Christmas often pull us away from its true meaning. The busyness, the hustle, the presents, the things that shimmer, the stress, the pressure, and the family time can all become joyless.

You no longer have to be afraid. You no longer have to chase things to worship. Good news of great joy has come. *God came.* The Savior has come.

Joy has come at the Advent of Jesus and will be completed at His second advent.

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR PERSONAL & GROUP STUDY

1. When you think of joy, what images come to mind?

_____
_____
_____

2. What are some of the biggest things in your life that keep you from what you consider to be joy?

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_____
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3. What are some places, people, or possessions that bring you joy?

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4. Do you struggle with joy? Why or why not?

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_____
_____

5. How would you define joy?

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_____
_____

6. Are joy and happiness different? If so, how are they different?

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_____
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7. The shepherds were told not to be afraid. What are some things you are afraid of now? What do you fear? How can joy help you in the midst of fear?

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_____

8. What does it mean that the angels came to the normal shepherds first and not the top of the social spectrum?

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_____
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9. The shepherds took action once they had realized that joy had come. What action can you take this week to seek after Jesus and find joy?

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_____

10. Who needs to find joy around you? How can you help others find joy this week?

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_____
_____

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FAMILIES

1. What does joy mean to you?

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2. How important is joy to you?

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3. How did Jesus bring joy when He was born?

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4. How can we create joy in our family and with our friends at school and work?

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_____

5. What do you think it would have been like to see the angels in the sky and hear the angelic choir sing? What do you think the angels sounded like?

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_____

6. What are some things that you are afraid of? How can Jesus help you to not be afraid?

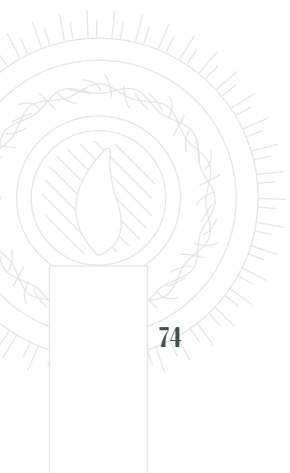
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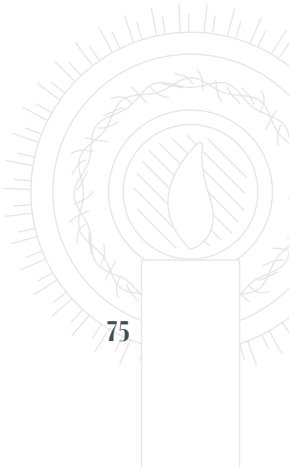
7. In what ways can you be more joyful this Christmas season?

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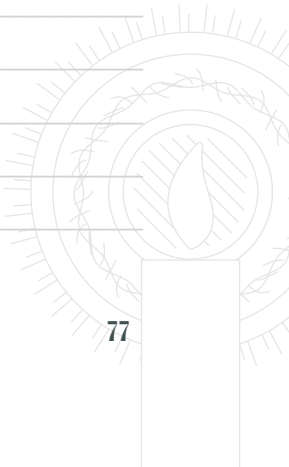
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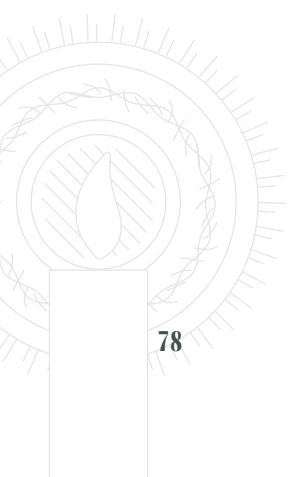
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NOTES





DEVOTION 1
WHAT IS JOY?

The question is pretty evident from the title for today. What is joy? How would you define it? Joy is one of those words that evokes a lot of emotions in us, but can be extremely hard to define. The definition of joy can be, and often is, different for each person and situation. What is joy, *really?*

We now live in a time where artificial intelligence, or AI, is a helpful tool. I realize that some of you who are reading today think that AI is a great tool, and others of you may just be freaked out by it. It is kind of like how we would define joy, right? I decided to ask ChatGPT4o for a definition of joy, and it gave a pretty good definition:

> "Joy can be defined as a deep and enduring sense of happiness and contentment that arises from positive experiences, meaningful connections, personal achievements, or moments of fulfillment. It is an emotional state characterized by feelings of delight, pleasure, and well-being. Unlike temporary feelings of happiness that might come and go quickly, joy tends to be more lasting and profound, often accompanied by a sense of appreciation and gratitude."

Joy and happiness are often linked and thought of in the same way. While happiness is absolutely a part of joy, it is an emotion of joy. You can be joyful without being happy. Happiness is contingent on your circumstances; joy is not. Listen to what James writes in James 1:2-4, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."***

Wait, you mean I am called to ***"count it all joy"*** even when life stinks? When trials are in my life and I do not know what to do, I am supposed to be joyful? When my faith is tested, I should be joyful; because, somehow, this is going to allow me to be able to stand firm and I will not lack anything when I have gone through it,

Yes! Because joy is so much more than happiness.

Joy is not an emotion that you always feel. It is something that goes so much deeper. Like our AI friend said earlier, joy is "more lasting and profound." Joy is confidence in who God is, not in how your circumstances will turn out. Gratitude is an attribute of true and lasting joy.

Joy is something that I struggle with. Joy, for me, has often been circumstantial. How I look at life situations is so often defined by my feelings, and so my joy is also defined by my feelings. However, I am learning that joy is knowing that I am held by Jesus and He is never going to leave me. The more grateful I am, the more joy that comes to me. It is not that I am always happy, nor do I always see the good in every situation, but joy comes from God alone.

Living in the in-between brings us sorrow at times, if not at many times. However, even in the midst of sorrow, you can be joyful.

Come back tomorrow for some more of the foundation for joy.

DEVOTION 2
JOYFUL GRATITUDE

I want to start where we left off yesterday with gratitude.

Does anyone else struggle with gratitude? Maybe I am the only one raising my hand? I imagine that is not the case. I can be somewhat pessimistic; however, that was not always the case.

I am going to get a bit real here; 2020 messed me up. In case you were in a coma during 2020, that was the COVID year. Everything shut down, and my anxiety hit me like a ton of bricks again. My first stint with anxiety began on September 11, 2001. Yes, *that* September 11th. I was preparing for my ordination council (I would stand in front of 25 seasoned pastors and defend my ten-page, single-spaced, back-to-back doctrinal statement the Friday after), and the planes hit the Twin Towers. My chest was heavy, and I was convinced I was going to die. During the next couple of weeks, I began to understand that this was my first panic attack. I struggled with it over the next 7-8 years or so, but saw it subside as God helped me through many sleepless nights. I still struggled occasionally, but God had delivered me.

Then COVID came. I was again convinced that I was going to die, and that the virus was all around me. Add that to the fact that I was doing my best to lead a church that had been struggling through that time already; I was vulnerable. Through COVID, my family and I did everything we could to lead our church. We took on too much; I took on too much. By January 2021, I was ready to quit the ministry. I was exhausted and convinced that I was a terrible husband, father, and pastor. My joy was gone, but God was working, and He never let us go.

God had led me to talk to some of my friends here at The River Church about potential adoption of the church I was pastoring in 2019. I had felt that God was calling us to be a part of something bigger like a fellowship, denomination, or even a multi-site as the "Lone Ranger" church did not seem to be effective for us.

Long story short, in June of 2021, the congregation voted that we would become the Lake Orion location of The River Church. I was more relieved than joyful; that was all I had left in me. Graciously and thankfully, the leadership at The River Church sent me and my family away for a six-week sabbatical and boy, did we need it! I spent so much of that time sleeping and decompressing (and playing bad golf).

I would love to tell you that I came back thankful and ready to get back to work. However, my joy was still gone. I struggled to find the good in anything. There was a point in 2022 when Jeannie, my wife, said to me, "It does not matter what it is, everything is negative for you." That was God's 2x4, and today I am thankful. I wish I had responded better at that moment, but that was not something I wanted to hear. There were reasons I was negative!

That is something that you must consider if you are lacking joy. There are good reasons to be struggling, right? What you have to remember, and I am continually learning, is that joy is not based on your circumstance but on where the foundation of your life is. Again, this theme will keep coming up.

Over the last couple of years, God has been patient with me. I am still a recovering pessimist, but I am now becoming more joyful in *who God is* rather than only feeling my circumstances. I am nowhere near where I believe God is taking me because my steadfastness (James 1:2-4) is not as strong as it needs to be. However, I know Who holds me. I see some of the ways God is working. God is doing amazing things in His church!

Here is the thing I'm finding out: when I am grateful for what I have, for what God is doing, and for the people in my life, then I am joyful. I can remember that God is always in control and my joy is in Him.

Joyful gratitude is all about where you live. It is where you abide and in what or in whom you trust.

Romans 15:13 says, ***"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."***



DEVOTION 3
HOW IS JOY FOUND?

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.' And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him." Luke 2:25-33

The account of Simeon, the priest, in Luke chapter 2 is one of my favorite parts of the Christmas story. Maybe it is because in my in-law's house, there is a picture that depicts what Simeon may have looked like when he finally held Jesus. That portrait is just stunning. Simeon's story is not one that most people think of when they think of Christmas, but it is *so* important.

Simeon was going about his normal duties as priest during his time in the Temple. It is amazing how Simeon is described in the above passage. He was righteous, devout, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Wow!

There was apparently a time in his life when God had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the ***"Lord's Christ,"*** the Messiah. Simeon had waited his entire life to see the gift of the Messiah. I am not sure he had any idea what he was looking for.

I imagine that he would have thought that he would see a man of awesome stature rise to power and come to save his people, Israel. That is what I would have thought. God's plans and ways are so much higher and greater than ours.

So, this account begins by describing what parents did in order to present their firstborn to the Lord by sacrificing a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons. On this day, however, Simeon had the Holy Spirit upon him; something was different. This young couple bringing this baby to him was electric. Simeon may have thought, "This baby… could He be…*the One?*" I can imagine that Simeon's heart rate skyrocketed as Mary handed him the baby, Jesus.

Joy had come to Simeon, but not in the way or fashion that he could have ever dreamed.

He took Jesus into his arms and blessed God. He worshiped. He praised. He sang. He held the Lord's salvation in his arms! God had not only come to the rich, the politically powerful, or those in high places. Salvation had come for everyone. Good news of great joy had come for all of the people, and Simeon held Him in his arms. I am sure Simeon held Him tight. He could not take his eyes off of Jesus. His heart overflowed with joy as he looked into the eyes of this baby who would be the Redeemer of his soul.

Perhaps you have been waiting for something. Know that God has not stopped working. He always fulfills His promises. He is ever-present with you. God's timing is always perfect and always good.

Joy is not found in circumstances. Joy is not found in possessions. Joy is not found in a place. Joy is not found in people. Joy is found in a lowly manger in Bethlehem, in the person of Jesus. Joy is found at the cross.

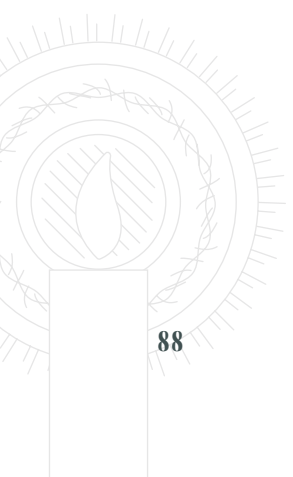
> Hark, the herald, angels sing! Glory to the newborn King!
> Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

Joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies!
With angelic host proclaim: Christ is born in Bethlehem!
Hark, the herald, angels sing. Glory to the newborn King!

Take some time to worship the Savior that is your joy. This is where joy is found in the in-between.



Scan the QR Code to play the video "Hark, The Herald, Angels Sing."



DEVOTION 4
HAVE YOU PREPARED ROOM?

The Christmas season brings so many things to do. I am not sure how many Christmas parties, family events, school plays, church things, or other events are on your calendar this season, but I am sure it is a lot!

The Christmas season also brings a lot of loneliness for many people. For some, there is not much on your calendar and you are looking at Christmas wondering if anyone will care or even know you are there.

Whether you have much to do or wondering if you will have anything to do, the question is the same today: Have you prepared room for Jesus this season?

The famous Christmas carol puts it like this:

> Joy to the world, the Lord has come.
> Let earth receive her King.
> *Let every heart prepare Him room,*
> And heavn' and nature sing,
> And heavn' and nature sing,
> And heavn' and nature sing!

"Let every heart prepare Him room" refers back to the fact that the innkeeper had "no room" for Mary and Joseph in the inn and, thus, no room for Jesus. While there is some debate about this encounter and how it all went down, the question is good for us to consider: Have you prepared room for Jesus this Christmas?

At Christmas, it is very easy to focus only on what you will or will not have. Your expectations of this season will largely determine

how you view the coming days left before December 25th. These expectations reveal to you what the foundation of your joy is.

Jesus would tell His disciples in John 15:9-11, ***"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."***

Abide in the love of Jesus. What does it mean to abide? Abiding is where you live and breathe. This is your coming and going life. Whatever you abide in is what sustains you. Joy comes when you abide by the love of Jesus, no matter the circumstance.

In the middle of everything you are doing or not doing, have you prepared room for Jesus' love to overcome it all? May I encourage you to make time to spend with Jesus this season? Read through the Christmas account, spend time with the Advent readings, and even an Advent wreath. Focus on what you have only in Jesus, not the things you currently have or what you wish you had.

Take your joy or lack of joy to Jesus and hear what He says of you. You are more than what you have or do not have. Your joy is in Jesus. Make room for Him this Christmas. Make room for Him every day as you live in the in-between.

DEVOTION 5
SHARING THE JOY

Have you ever seen the show, *"Property Brothers"*? It is a show on HGTV where a someone buys an old house to fix up. There are always problems during the demolition of the house for the renovations. There is stress and struggle because they are just not sure how it is going to turn out. After a certain point, the couple is told to stay away because the project is going to run its course, and they will be called to come back when it is all done. Without fail, the couple is amazed, and there is a ton of drama. They respond with emotion and elation as they look at all of the details that the brothers (the hosts of the show) have given them. They sing the praises of it all.

This (times a million!) is what the shepherds did after meeting Jesus. Let us read again what the shepherds did after meeting the baby Jesus. Luke 2:17-20 records, ***"And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."***

They went out and told everyone that would listen to what they had seen. Can you hear what they might have said?

- "You won't believe what we have just seen!"
- "We got to hold the Messiah in our arms!"
- "Our King has been born in Bethlehem!"
- "I feel crazy saying this, but angels told us that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem, the City of David, and then the sky was full of the angelic choir singing praises to God!"

- “Praise be to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for our Redeemer has come!”
- “Emmanuel has been born and our salvation is near!”

I do not think even those words completely describe what the shepherds testified to as they went back to their “normal” lives that would never be the same. They had met Jesus, their Messiah, and they would tell of Him forever.

We respond to things like that. When we get a new phone, car, house, or get to go on a trip, or talk about a trip we loved, we tell everyone we can about it because we are excited about it. In some way, we feel it has changed our life for the better. We revel in things, relationships, people, jobs, and finances, but have we ever found real joy?

Perhaps after almost two thousand years of publicity about Jesus, we take the amazing involvement of God with us for granted. The world around us rarely takes the time to really look and see what Jesus is all about. Usually, at Christmas it never gets past the story about the baby Jesus, if it even gets there in the first place.

Here is the question for you today: Do *you?*

You cannot share joy from Jesus if you do not have it yourself. In the middle of this Christmas season, have you gotten to the real joy that has come, or are you simply paying lip service to Jesus as the baby in a nativity scene in your house?

Every single person in the account of Jesus’ birth received a new revelation of who God is, and they were filled with *joy*! They were filled with worship and awe. The more that we come to church gatherings, to Christmas parties, and even to devotionals about Jesus while taking it all for granted results in a numbness to the joy found in Jesus. We must never take for granted or forget who this baby in the manger really is and who Jesus still is. He is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Messiah, our Redeemer and Savior!

So, what is your response to Jesus? Do you see the incarnation and are blown away? Has your response to Jesus become stale, bland, and routine? Is your worship not really worship anymore?

Joy is found as you focus on Jesus. As you marvel at who He is and what He has done. This is a time to come to the manger, bow down, and worship. Joy, true joy, is *only* found by coming to our God, bowing down, and worshiping Him.

Emmanuel has come. Joy has come. Worship Him this Christmas and share the joy you have found.


4
LOVE
IN THE IN-BETWEEN

FAMILY ADVENT READING

First Reader: This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Do you remember why we are taking time to be together in this circle around our Advent wreath?

First Child: *(Relight first candle.)* On the first Sunday, we lit the first candle to remember that Advent is a time of preparation. During these days we are getting our hearts ready for the coming of the Christ Child.

Second Child: *(Relight second candle.)* On the second Sunday, we lit the candle of peace.

Another Child: *(Relight third candle.)* We lit the third candle to remind us that the angels sang the "news of great joy."

First Reader: This Sunday we are remembering that Jesus came to earth to tell us of God's love.

Second Reader: Our family knows that love is coming. Love is Christmas. God has become involved with us. Love asks us to be open, honest, and especially to trust.

Second Child: *(Light the fourth candle.)* I light this candle on the fourth Sunday in Advent to remind us that Jesus came to earth to "show and tell" us of God's love.

First Reader: John 15:9–11 (GNT) says, ***"I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed 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."***

Second Reader: Philippians 1:9–11 (NIV) says, ***"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 until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God."[3]

Talk together about love. Love has many voices, and it speaks in many places. What are some of the voices of love? (Smiling at a friend, etc.) Where might love be spoken? (Raking leaves for an elderly person, making a card for someone who is ill, etc.)



Scan the QR Code to play the video "Noel (He is Born)."

Pray and ask God to help us love one another. Thank Him for His gift of love, which is what Christmas is all about.

Thought for the week: ***"And remember, it is a message [of love] to obey, not just to listen to"*** (James 1:22, TLB). ***"And may the Lord make your love to grow and overflow to each other and to everyone else, just as our love does toward you"*** (1 Thessalonians 3:12, TLB).

LESSON 4

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

> ***'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,***
> ***are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;***
> ***for from you shall come a ruler***
> ***who will shepherd my people Israel.'***

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.' After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way." Matthew 2:1-12

There was a reason these Magi (Wise Men) came to visit Jesus. Something different was going on in Bethlehem, so they came.

Who were these Magi?

First of all, what are some of the songs we know about these Wise Men? "*We Three Kings"* is the biggest one. There is also "*Three Wise Men Came Traveling"* and "*Wisemen Still Seek Him*."

How many Wise Men are in your nativity scene at home or in the ones that you see in stores or at other people's homes? (There is always someone who will say, "I don't have one at my house.") The answer is typically three.

How many Wise Men does it say in Matthew that came from the East? It does not say the number. Just because there were three *gifts* does not mean that there are three kings!

There may have been more. Affluent people from the East, Magi included, would travel with large amounts of people as they had people and possessions to protect as they traveled. A small army may have been the people Jesus had for company. Some of you may be looking forward to a small army this Christmas as well.

Also, we sing about the star in "*The First Noel"* and say they look-*ed* up (why do we sing it that way?) and saw a star shining in the East beyond them. They were from the East! If they were *from* the East, what direction would they have to travel to get to Jesus in Bethlehem? West! Some translations include the star in the East; some do not.

Sorry, I am messing everything up, huh? However, there is more.

We do not know their names. Now, this may be a bit more obscure to most of us, but tradition tells us that their names were Melchior, Balthasar, and Gasper. Some reports say that one was Ethiopian, one was Indian, and one was Greek. Other accounts claim that they were all baptized by Thomas (he went to Asia to spread the Gospel after Jesus' death), and a bishop in the 12th century even claimed to have found their skulls. (Weird, huh?)

They were not necessarily kings. They were men that were wise (magi) and they knew that there would be a star in the East indicating that a new king had been born. They were affluent because we know the gifts they brought; gold, frankincense, and myrrh were not cheap!

Finally, the wise men were *not* present at the birth of Jesus. What?! They do not belong in the nativity scene at all? Nope! In verse 11, where did they see Jesus for the first time? In a house. That is not a stable or a manger scene. (Those are not exactly correct either, but there is only so much we can handle in one sitting.) They probably arrived somewhere between a few months and two years after Jesus' birth.

Why do we know Jesus was probably less than two? It is because later Herod would kill male babies two years and younger in an attempt to secure his throne from this "King of the Jews." Ultimately, we do not know any of this for sure as none of it is mentioned in the Scriptures.

What we *do* know is:

- They were affluent.
- They were from the East.
- They were not just dudes on camels. They were prominent in religion and politics in their home countries and well-respected.
- They almost certainly held high positions at home.
- They had been influenced by Jewish teachings.
- They brought gifts fit for a king.
- They believed Him to be the promised King of the Jews.
- They had looked for Him, and they found Him.
- When they found Him, they bowed down and worshiped Him.

Why did they come? The obvious reason is they saw a star in the sky that had been foretold in ancient Jewish writings, but was that really it? I do not think so.

They were looking for a coming King. They were looking for Him. So, they got on their camels, got all of their homies together, and went on a long journey. What they found when they arrived was more than they could have ever imagined. Love had come for them, too.

Christmas is just around the corner, and odds are you are somewhere between frantically finishing everything you have to do, wishing you had things to do, or looking forward to all you have to do. Redirect your focus in these last days to the fact that love has come for you.

Experiencing love in the in-between is possible and offered to you. Every person wants to be fully known and fully loved. God knows you completely because, well, He is God. You also need to know that *you are loved*. You are loved by God no matter how you feel about yourself or how you think others feel about you. You are loved.

How do I know you are loved? There are two reasons. First, *God came*. He came and put skin on so that you could know Him and know how to have a relationship with Him. Second, *God died.* He died to make that relationship possible.

Love has come.

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR PERSONAL & GROUP STUDY

1. When you think of love, what images come to mind?

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_____

_____

2. When do you feel most loved? When do you feel the least loved?

_____

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3. How would you define love?

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_____

4. What is the opposite of love?

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_____

5. What are you looking for this Christmas season?

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_____

6. What did you think or know about the Wise Men in the Christmas account before this study?

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_____

7. What is one of your favorite Christmas carols about the Wise Men?

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_____
_____

8. Where in your life do you need to feel the love of Jesus today?

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_____
_____

9. Do you know that Jesus loves you today? If not, why not? If so, why?

_____
_____
_____

10. The Wise Men came to find a king and found the King, and they worshiped. How can you worship Jesus as we near Christmas?

_____
_____
_____

QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FAMILIES

1. What is love to you?

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_____

2. How important is love in our lives?

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_____

3. Where do you feel the most loved? How do you feel the most loved?

_____
_____
_____

4. How did Jesus love us when He came at Christmas?

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_____
_____

5. How can we love our family? How can we love people at school and work?

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_____

6. What do you think it would have been like to see kings come to bow down before the baby Jesus?

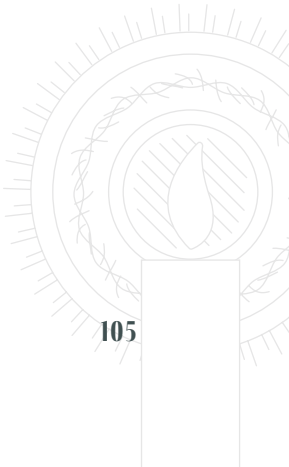
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7. How can we worship Jesus as a family at Christmas?

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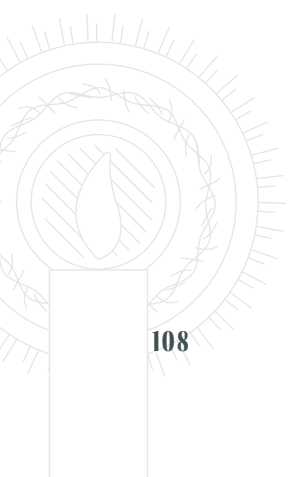
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NOTES





DEVOTION 1
THE DEFINITION OF LOVE

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."
1 Corinthians 13:4-8

The definition of love is something that has been sung about, talked about, and redefined over the years. We have "Stopped, in the name of love." Some have "just called to say I love you," and love has been "unforgettable." (You can Google those if you are not sure what songs I am talking about.) We hear that love conquers all, that love is blind, and that love is love no matter what.

However, the more we attempt to define love, the further away we get from the real definition of love. I mean, I *love* tacos, and I *love* my wife and kids. Are they the same?

What is love? ("Baby, don't hurt me…" Okay, I will stop.)

We have to know that there is only one definition of love, and that is God Himself. God defines love because He *is* love (1 John 4:8). How God acts in the world and how He came to the earth shows how He loves. Love is sacrificial (1 John 3:16), love covers wrongs (1 Peter 4:8), and there is no fear in love (1 John 4:18).

You have probably heard the verse above many times at weddings or regarding married love. However, there is so much truth about love in these verses that must be applied and understood from the reality that Jesus came as love for us.

Jesus came to us as a baby boy. Can you think about what that had to have been like (if you can, I am not sure I can either)? Jesus, the Son of God for all of eternity, has now come to earth, put on the skin on of those He created, and came as a helpless baby boy. He came to be Emmanuel, God with us. He came because humanity was (and still is) in a desperate state, mired and scarred by sin. He came to be love for us.

His coming shows us His patience; even though we have failed, He has not forsaken us. He is kind in that He actually came! He did not envy anyone, nor was there any boasting at His birth. There was no arrogance or rudeness at the manger. His coming made a way for us to know God where there was no way. His coming showed grace and mercy, not irritability or resentfulness toward anyone. His coming in no way rejoiced at wrongdoing, but revealed the truth that He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. He bore our sin, trusted the plan of God the Father, and endured suffering for our freedom.

His coming proclaims that His love *never ends.*

Did you hear that? His love never ends. It *never* ends. He is the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace. His love points to truth and never rejoices in wrong or sin. His love gives grace and mercy when anyone comes to Him.

Have you come to Him this Christmas? Have you given your heart to Him? Do you know Him? I cannot think of a better Christmas present than knowing Jesus as Savior.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. We will have the opportunity to gather with family, possibly attend a Christmas Eve gathering at church, and maybe even open a present or two, depending on your family traditions. Children will be dreaming of what Christmas Day will bring, but maybe you will be struggling with what Christmas will not be.

Wherever you are tomorrow, know that you are loved by Jesus, who came to be your Emmanuel and to be with you. He came for you.

Do you know His love? Do you know *Him*?





DEVOTION 2
HE CAME



Scan the QR Code to listen to the song, "Love Has Arrived."

Advent is all about where you are looking and have been looking for hope, peace, joy, and love!

The King of kings *is* the baby Jesus. What is seen here is so much deeper than just the nativity scenes that you own. The coming of Jesus was foretold thousands of years previous. You have heard that, and you read some of the prophecies from Isaiah earlier in this book. However, when we look at the birth of Jesus through the eyes of these Magi (the Wise Men), we see something a little bit different and a lot bit amazing.

Just how did these Magi, from a totally different part of the world, even know about this King that would be born? Yes, there were prophecies, but why did they believe them? How did they know them? Where did they receive them? They were not Jewish. How did they know?

The reference to the star dates all the way back to the people of Israel in the wilderness during their 40-year wait for the Promised Land. Numbers 24:16-17 records, ***"The oracle of him who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, falling down with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth."***

There is a scepter that would arise from God's people, One who would rule, and a star would come. This prophesied King associated with a star would deliver the people of God from their enemies. This King would not only be foretold in Numbers but also in Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied during a dark time for the people of God. However, God never forgot His people, nor would He leave them without a deliverer. Isaiah 60:1-6 says, ***"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around, and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord."***

Even the Magi were foretold to come to greet the baby born King of the Jews.

How did the Magi learn of this? God used even the captivity of His people to save them. When the people of God were taken by

Babylon into captivity, they took their culture and God's Word with them. The Magi had the ability to read the prophecy of the coming King of the Jews because of God's plan.

Jesus was worshiped by these men from other nations, and gifts fit for a king were brought to Him. The symbolism of the gifts is not found in the Bible, but maybe a type of foreshadowing of who Jesus is and what He would do:

- Gold - Jesus' royalty
- Frankincense - Jesus' deity, it is offered in worship of God
- Myrrh - Jesus' humanity, this was associated with the anointing of man and used in death when people were buried

These Wise Men (the Magi or the three kings) brought their gifts to the King of all kings. Amazingly, Jesus was possibly only a two-year-old toddler at the time.

Can you picture it? Jesus is probably somewhere between 12-24 months old. He might be cooing and maybe even toddling. These men, dressed in royal garb, came bearing gifts. Reluctant parents saw them come. The last king the Magi dealt with wanted Jesus dead. However, they came before Him, and they did not proclaim who they were. They did not talk about all of the things they had done. What did they do?

Matthew 2:10-11 records, ***"When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh."***

They rejoiced with *exceeding* joy. We are not talking about, "Oh, that is cool." They were ecstatic! They carried that joy with them into the house of Mary and Joseph.

When they saw this toddler (the King of kings, Emmanuel, the Messiah), they bowed low. These Wise Men (Magi, three kings) *bowed low*. They fell down and *worshiped* Him. They worshiped Him, and then, they offered Him the best gifts they had: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.



If you can, take a moment to scan the QR Code and play the video "He is Born."

He is born. He has come for you to offer you a relationship with the God of the universe. He is the God who loves you. He is Emmanuel. The Son of God has come to dwell with you and in you. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has come to save the world. He has come to save *you*. Now we can shout Noel! All is well because Jesus has made it well.

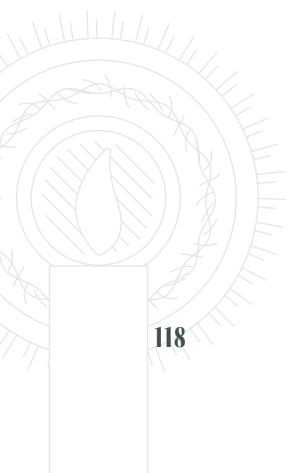
What do you have to offer Jesus this Christmas? Offer Him all of you. This is what He asks of you. Fall down before Him and believe He is who He says He is, and He did what He said He did. Romans 10:9 says, ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

If you do not know Jesus as your Savior today, you can call on the name of Jesus, and He will forgive you of your sin and renew your

life. Your eternal destiny can be changed right where you sit. If you have been walking far off from Jesus, He waits for you with open arms, wanting you to come home.

Will you bow down before the baby in the manger today? If you have made a decision about Jesus today for the first time or you desire to come home to Him today, please **text RiverConnect to 97000.** We would love to celebrate with you and answer any questions you may have.

You are loved more than you can ever know. Jesus has come, and He will never leave you or forsake you. Bow down before Jesus along with the Wise Men and worship Him today.



DEVOTION 3
HE ARRIVED



Scan the QR Code to play the video "Mary, Did You Know?"

Luke 2:1-21 says, ***"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.***

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy

that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

DEVOTION 4
THREE KINGS AT CHRISTMAS

It is the day after Christmas, and it always feels so anti-climactic. Those who love Christmas will begin to declare, "Only 364 days until next Christmas!" It is okay. I kind of roll my eyes at those people. If you are one of those people, I am so glad you are so excited about next Christmas, and I love you, too!

Here we are, living in the in-between of Jesus' advents. We have celebrated His coming, but now what? What do we do now? What do we do in the in-between? We have to recognize who we serve and worship in our lives first before we can move forward.

There were three kings in the account of Jesus' birth in addition to "The Three Kings" or Wise Men. First, Jesus is the King of kings. We have heard about Him all of Christmas. He is worthy. He is holy. He is our Savior. He is the Messiah. He is *Emmanuel*. God had come to be with us!

Second, Herod was the king of the area where Jesus was born. He signifies the world around us. The world around us is indifferent to Jesus. Most do not really care about Him, nor do they have any knowledge that they are in desperate need of a Savior. Maybe that is you today? You do not see any significance. The religious leaders of the day had no idea that a Messiah would be coming and a star would announce it. Magi, from *another country* that did not grow up studying all of this, recognized the truth when Jesus' very *own people* could not or would not. The star had risen in the western sky, and they did not see Him, or they chose not to see Him. Herod was hostile toward Jesus, and so many are still hostile toward Jesus as well. We think we are enough and we do not need a king. People are getting more and more hostile toward each other and to God in our world today.

Third, there is a king in this Christmas story, but this king is not found in the text. However, I believe that every person in the text had to decide about whether they would follow this king. This king is your *self.* In order to bow down at the feet of a toddler, you have to put yourself aside. In order to bow down at the feet of the Messiah, your Savior, and God with us (Emmanuel), you have to understand that you are poor in spirit, that you are not enough, and that you need a Savior so desperately. You must put yourself aside and accept Him.

You must fall on your face, *fall down*, and worship Him. You bring all that you are for all that He is. He is Messiah, Emmanuel, Jehovah Jireh (our provider), Jehovah Shalom (our peace), Jehovah Rapha (our healer), Jehovah Nissi (our banner or protector), and Yahweh. He is JESUS, Yeshua (Jehovah saves).

The biggest question we must answer in our lives (not just at Christmastime) is, "What king will you worship and serve with your life?"

You have a choice:

- Will you follow the world and be indifferent to Jesus? Will you choose hostility?
- Will you choose yourself and simply pay lip service to the King of kings?
- Will you choose to bow low before the child that is all that you need and saves you?

When Jesus stood before Pilate, He was accused of being the King of the Jews. This is the same title that the Magi gave to Him as they were searching. It is the same title that Herod wanted to make sure He kept. Pilate would ask Jesus if He was the King of the Jews. John 18:33-37 says, ***"So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?' Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is***

not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.' Then Pilate said to him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.'"

You have a choice to make today. It is just like the Magi, the shepherds, Pilate, and the people in the crowd who called for His crucifixion. This choice is just like every person on the face of the earth, "Are you listening to the voice of Jesus?"

"O come, all you unfaithful," to the One that died for you and is worthy of worship.

Scan the QR Code to watch/listen to "O Come, All You Unfaithful."

O come, all you unfaithful
Come, weak and unstable
Come, know you are not alone
O come, barren and waiting ones
Weary of praying, come
See what your God has done
Christ is born, Christ is born, Christ is born for you

O come, bitter and broken
Come with fears unspoken
Come, taste of His perfect love
O come, guilty and hiding ones
There is no need to run
See what your God has done
Christ is born, Christ is born, Christ is born for you

He's the Lamb who was given
Slain for our pardon
His promise is peace for those who believe
He's the Lamb who was given
Slain for our pardon
His promise is peace for those who believe

So come, though you have nothing
Come, He is the offering
Come, see what your God has done
Christ is born, Christ is born, Christ is born for you
Christ is born, Christ is born
Christ is born for you[4]

Will you worship the world around us and follow it? Will you be indifferent and just see this as a story? Will you bow before this Savior who is not only the King of the Jews but is the King of all, the King of kings, and make Him the Lord of your life?

Who is your king? Will you bow low this Christmas? Will you come to Him and make Him your King? Your Savior?

Living in the in-between is all about where you stand with Jesus. Bring Him your heart. Bring Him yourself. It does not matter where you have been. No matter what, come to Him, and He will save you.

DEVOTION 5
WHAT NOW?

You are now two days removed from Christmas. Perhaps you have said goodbye to the family that was visiting, or maybe you are still with family. Some of you reading this are over-achievers and have already started taking down the Christmas decorations. Quick question, "What is the longest you have ever left up your Christmas decorations?" I believe the record for the longest the Yates family has left up decorations was Valentine's Day. Hey, you only get them for a short time each year, and we decided to enjoy them for as long as we could!

As I mentioned yesterday, these days after Christmas seem so different for me and possibly for you. We have just had this big celebration about who Jesus is, and we have new toys to play with (kids and adults) that will probably lose their luster over the next six months. There is a question that always comes to my mind during this time: "How are you going to be different because of the celebration of Christmas this year?"

I am writing today's devotional in the middle of a heat wave in June. I have planted myself in a Starbucks, and I am watching people. (Caffeine and the bustle of a Starbucks really help me focus. I am sure some of you just shrieked and thought, "No way!") We have been talking about the love that Jesus has for us and what love truly is, and today, I have been watching people come in and out for their Starbucks fix. I have been gripped by the thought that so many people are hurting. At the most basic level, people want to be fully known and completely loved. Consider those ideas for a minute: *fully* known and *completely* loved.

Many people have walked in and out, mainly just to get their coffee and go along with their day. Every person that I have seen today is

loved by God in the middle of their in-between. A young man walked in about ten minutes ago dressed in feminine clothing. We could talk about the reality of our culture, but I do not want to digress into all that may entail. What I want to focus on is the person behind the issues that we face today. As I saw him walk into the coffee shop, my initial reaction was, "A man in feminine clothing, that is so weird." Then, I looked again, and I saw a young man who wanted to be fully known and completely loved for who he was. I do not know his story, and I have never spoken to this young man; however, we are all trying to figure out who we are, what we should be doing, what our place is in the world, and how we will get there.

In the process, we desire to be fully known. Each one of us wants to be fully known by someone. It involves all of our dreams, desires, emotions, hobbies, struggles, and faults. When we are fully known like this, that is disarming, and it is also the place where we can be vulnerable. Thus, our desire to be completely loved stands in front of being fully known. Can we be loved if someone knows all of that about us? We do not always love ourselves because of what we know about ourselves.

So, we hide. We do not let others know completely who we are, though we wish we could. We hide behind issues, politics, socio-economic structures, and groups that agree with what we think we want. In fact, some of us even hide behind Jesus and act like we have it all together when we know that we do not.

Here is what I am getting at today: How we stand on truth is as important as the truth we stand on.

John 1:14 says, ***"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."***

Ephesians 4:14-15 adds, ***"So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful***

schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

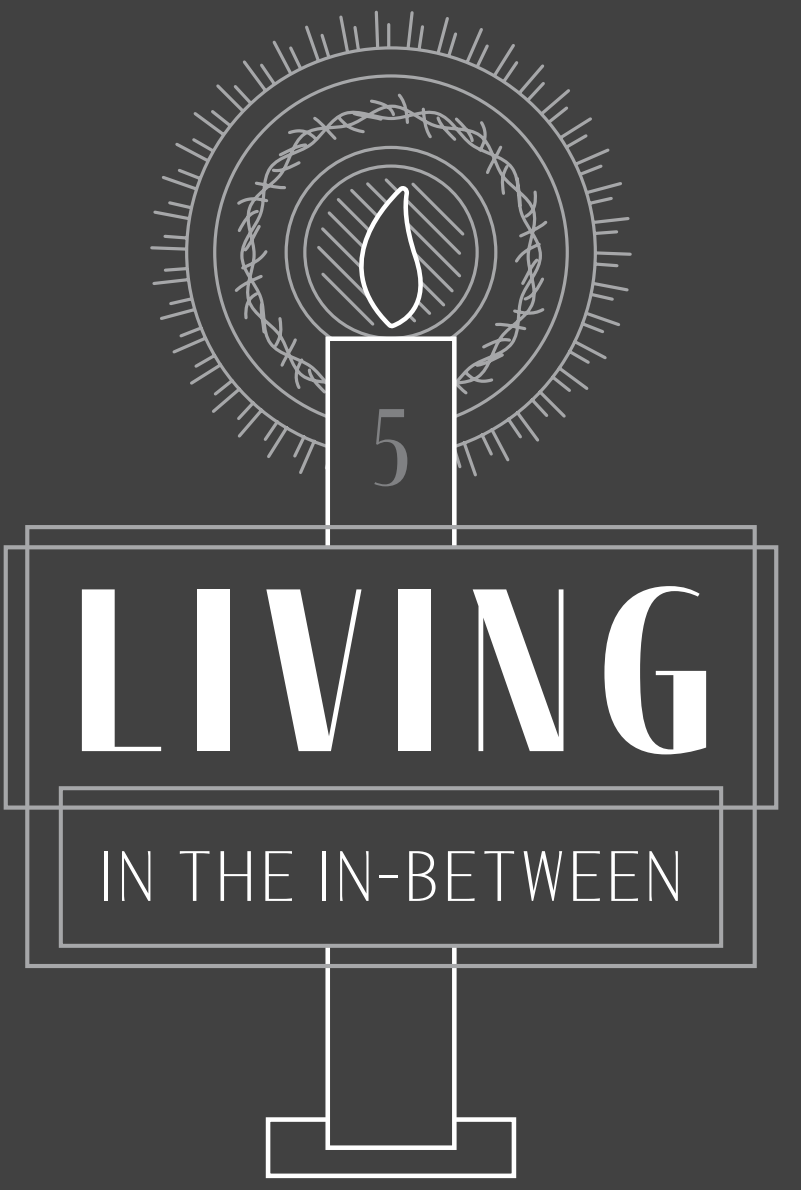
My friend, so often, we Jesus-followers are known more for what we are against than what we are for. This is because we are better at "truthing" than we are at loving. Paul is literally saying that we need to be "truthing" as we love. Jesus was full of grace and truth. He was not 50% truth and 50% love; He was 100% both. We must love as we stand on truth. Truth includes love, and love includes truth. The love of Jesus has changed you if you know Him as your Savior and the truth of Jesus has saved you. When we really think about it, though, you cannot have one without the other in the Gospel!

Randy Alcorn said it so well, "Attempts to 'soften' the gospel by minimizing truth keep people from Jesus. Attempts to 'toughen' the gospel by minimizing grace keep people from Jesus. It's not enough for us to offer grace or truth. We must offer both. When we offend everybody, we've declared truth without grace. When we offend nobody, we've watered down truth in the name of grace. John 1:14 tells us Jesus came full of grace AND truth. Let's not choose between them, but be characterized by both."[5]

People want to be fully known and completely loved. Jesus does both at the cross and in His resurrection. His love is transformative, and His truth changes eternal destinies. As we look forward to this New Year, how can you love in truth and truth in love? Who around you needs to be loved in truth? Jesus is coming back for His second advent, and we are living in the in-between. People are hurting and need to see Jesus in us.

How will the love of Jesus change how you love the people around you in this year?

What now? We turn to the first and second commandments that Jesus called us all to. I am looking forward to diving into what is next in our last week together this Christmas season.



LIVING

IN THE IN-BETWEEN

FAMILY ADVENT READING

Take this opportunity to spend some time worshipping with music and God's Word. This time will prepare you for the devotionals this week. This can be done individually or as a family. All of the suggested songs are in order in a playlist.

Scan the QR Code to access the worship playlist to accompany this reading.

1. God is the Promise Keeper

Watch the video for the song "Promise Keeper."

"This God - his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him." Psalm 18:30

"Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant." 1 Kings 8:56

"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

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." Hebrews 10:23

"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6

2. Love God with all of your…

- **HEART**

Watch the video for the song "Lord You Have My Heart."

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." Proverbs 3:5

"You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." Jeremiah 29:13

"With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!" Psalm 119:10

- **SOUL**

Watch the video for the song "Fall Like Rain."

"As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?" Psalm 42:1-2

"How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word." Psalm 119:9

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." James 4:7-8, 10

- **MIND**

Watch the video for the song "Quiet."

"In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil." Proverbs 3:6-7

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." John 14:15

"Come, behold the works of the LORD,
how he has brought desolations on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire.
'Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!'
The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.
Selah [Stop and consider]." Psalm 46:8-11

"I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you." Psalm 119:11

3. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Watch the video for the song "For the One."

"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth." 1 John 3:18

"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

"Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body." Hebrews 13:1-3

I (Josh Yates) compile and post monthly worship playlists on my Facebook page so that people can spend time in worship of God through music in different ways, using new and known music. Follow me at facebook.com/josh.yates5142 if you would like access to these playlists.

LESSON 5

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'" Revelation 22:1-7

Home. That word has varied meaning for each person reading this. For some, it brings up memories of great times, maybe even memories of this past Christmas with family. It can mean times when you were growing up and times with your children as they have grown up. For others, it conjures up memories of pain and sorrow. It brings back feelings of the way you wish it had been or wish it was now, but it just is not.

At its core, though, the word "home" is peaceful. It is a place of belonging. It is a place where everything is just right. It is where the beds are just right, the porridge is the right temperature, and the chair is so comfortable (wait, that's *"Goldilocks and the Three Bears"*). Ultimately, home is where all is right.

Home is an interesting word for me. I grew up in northern California, just north of Sacramento. My home was not the worst you have ever seen, but we definitely struggled. My parents and I lived in the same

town for my upbringing, and my mom made sure I was in church every time the doors were open. She taught me how to love God. I am thankful for how my mom raised me. My father struggled with depression and anxiety, which manifested in extreme obesity. He was bedridden and weighed close to 800 pounds for most of my life. His struggle also manifested in anger toward me and my mom. I spent the majority of my home life hoping I did not make him angry and doing whatever I could to spend time away from home. God ultimately used all of this for my good (the story is much larger), but home was not a place of safety.

Fast forward to today, my home is very different. Jeannie and I have done everything we can to change my narrative for our girls and lead our family in Jesus. We desire to place Him at the center of all we do, though we fail often. For us, home is safe and peaceful (most of the time); it is where we belong. However, home is still fluid for us. Jeannie was raised in Oregon, so we are both West Coast people. While Michigan is home to us, we still feel like a fish out of water sometimes, and we long for what we knew growing up. You may long for something like that, or you may long for home to actually feel like "home."

Advent at Christmas is all about the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus has brought with Him as He is our Emmanuel, God with us. While we are reminded of that at Christmas, and hopefully, as we enter this new year, there is a continual sense that these things are not complete in the world in which we live. In fact, it seems as though they will never be on earth. If you feel that, you would be right.

In the world around us, there are echoes of the way it was all meant to be all the way back in creation. That would include a perfect relationship with each other, no sin, no pain, and no death. Imagine walking in the gift of the Garden of Eden in a perfect relationship with God. However, that was broken by our sin and choosing another way other than God. Those echoes create in us a longing for the way it was while we live in the in-between of Jesus' Advents.

Know this: it will be made right again. Jesus is coming, and He is bringing *home* with Him.

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 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. And you know the way to where I am going." John 14:1-4

This is a promise that will be kept. Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life, and He alone is the way to the Father. He is the way home.

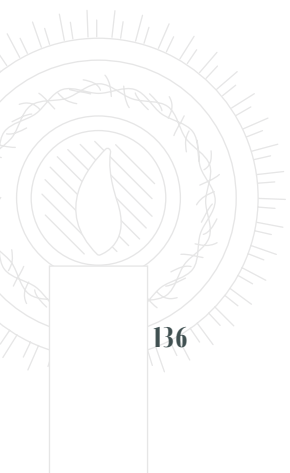
How do we live at home in the in-between? This also can only be accomplished by living for Jesus with every breath we take. While we will be looking at this during this week, Moses summarizes it well in Psalm chapter 90.

"Lord, through all the generations
you have been our home!
Before the mountains were born,
before you gave birth to the earth and the world,
from beginning to end, you are God.

O LORD, come back to us!
How long will you delay?
Take pity on your servants!
Satisfy us each morning with your unfailing love,
so we may sing for joy to the end of our lives.
Give us gladness in proportion to our former misery!
Replace the evil years with good.
Let us, your servants, see you work again;
let our children see your glory.
And may the Lord our God show us his approval
and make our efforts successful.
Yes, make our efforts successful!"
Psalm 90:1-2, 13-17 (NLT)

God *Himself* is our home. We may be tempted to look for a home in so many different places, but as we live in the in-between, our true home is only found in Him. Find satisfaction in His unfailing love. Find gladness in His glory. Seek hope, peace, joy, and love in Jesus.

He is your home, as we live in the in-between.



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR PERSONAL & GROUP STUDY

1. What emotions, memories, and images come to mind when you think of “home”?

_____
_____
_____

2. Where is home for you today?

_____
_____
_____

3. What are some things that you long to be made right?

_____
_____
_____

4. Have you ever considered the idea that we are now living in between Jesus’ first and second Advents? What are some things you have learned over this Christmas time of Advent?

_____
_____
_____

5. Where have you tried to find a home in the past? Has the home been fulfilling?

_____
_____
_____

6. Jesus is coming back in His second Advent. What does that do to you? What thoughts enter your mind? What emotions do you feel?

_____
_____
_____

7. Are you ready for Jesus' second Advent? How do you prepare for His second coming?

_____
_____
_____

8. How can you make Jesus your home as you live in the in-between?

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_____
_____

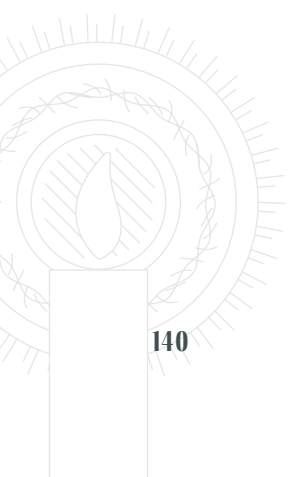
9. Is there anything in your life that you need to let go of in order to live at home with God?

_____
_____
_____

Spend some time with God today. Just be with Him. Be still and know that He is God. Ask Him to show you how He can be your home.



Scan the QR Code to spend some time in worship with the song "Hymn of Heaven."



QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR FAMILIES

1. How would you describe your home? (This can be your house, but also ask about what home is like with the people in your family. This could include school, sports, hobbies, and anything that contributes to "home.")

_____
_____
_____

2. How has home changed over the years? (Make this age-appropriate for your family.)

_____
_____
_____

3. Do you feel at home with Jesus? (Take this opportunity to talk about how much Jesus loves us and speak about the Gospel.)

_____
_____
_____

4. Did you know that Jesus is building a home for every person who has accepted Him as their Savior? What do you think that home will look like?

_____
_____
_____

5. Jesus came at Christmas, which is called His first Advent. Did you know that Jesus is coming back again in His second Advent? What do you think that will be like?

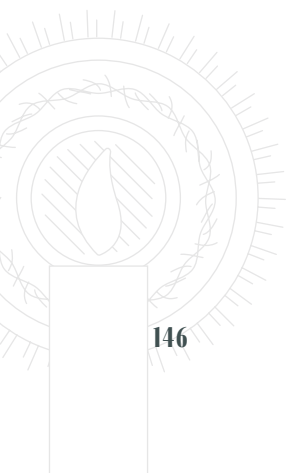
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Spend time praying that Jesus would be the center of your home and your lives. Use the song on page 40 (or another song) to worship together.



NOTES





DEVOTION 1
SUFFERING SERVANT, COMING KING

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."
Revelation 22:12-13

Every year, we are all encouraged to make New Year's resolutions. The usual suspects are health and fitness, saving money, paying off debt, and spending more time with family. For those who follow God, spending more time in the Bible and serving more may be things you consider.

The reality is that most resolutions fall by the wayside within about four months. Change is hard, and keeping a resolution about the things we feel we need to change can be difficult.

Jesus came to us as Emmanuel (God with us) for the purpose of glorifying the Father and finishing His plan of salvation. He did so by dying on the cross and raising from the dead. After spending time with His followers, Jesus returned to Heaven with the promise that He would be with us and that He would return.

Jesus came in the first Advent, and He will return for His second Advent.

During the Christmas season, we looked at a passage in Micah chapter 5 where Bethlehem is mentioned as Jesus' birthplace. However, what Jesus would accomplish was also a major prophecy that He would fulfill.

"And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And

they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. And he shall be their peace." Micah 5:4-5

Jesus would shepherd His flock (as the Messiah), and He would unify the people of God. He would bring security and be their peace. He would be *our* peace. However, these words presented a problem for the Jewish people when Jesus came. Their expectation was that the Messiah would come and overthrow all other nations and free them from their physical oppression. The prophets seem to believe this as well. What they did not see (that we can see because of what we know after Jesus came) is that the Messiah, Jesus, would do two things at two different times.

I recently read, "Because we have the benefit of New Testament revelation and historical hindsight, we understand that hidden within the mystery of God's redemptive plan for the world is a plan to send the Messiah in two distinct advents. The Messiah would come the first time to be the Savior of the world and the second time to be the King of the world."[6]

Jesus first came as the suffering servant. He came to live a perfect life, to be our example of how to have a relationship with the Father, and to die in our place. He came to pay the price for our sin which would have taken our lives because the ***"wages of sin is death"*** (Romans 6:23). He was rejected so that you would never have to be.

Jesus is coming again, but this time, He will come as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He will make all things right, and He will come for His people. He will judge sin and those who know Him as Savior will be welcomed into the very presence of God Himself. Each one will be repaid for what they have done. Every person has a choice: to allow Jesus to bear the weight of that payment by giving their life to Him and trusting Him as their Savior or to bear the weight of that payment upon themselves and be judged accordingly.

This is not a resolution that will fail. Jesus is coming back.

"'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.' The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." Revelation 22:16-17

You have read about Jesus and how to receive salvation and forgiveness for your sin in other sections of this book. If you have waited, will you receive Jesus today? Will you ask Him to forgive you of your sin, confess that Jesus is Lord of your life, and believe that He died in your place and rose from the dead? Will you trust in Jesus today?

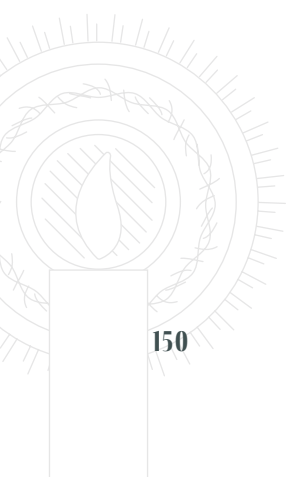
Jesus is returning and, quite possibly, very soon. As we wait, we are living in the in-between. That has been stated a lot. How do we live during this time as we wait? What does God ask of us?

The answer is quite simple to state but difficult to live out consistently.

Love God. Love People.

I look forward to our final week together. As we consider how to love God and love people during the rest of our time, may we look forward to Jesus' second Advent and respond just like the Apostle John did to Jesus' declaration:

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" Revelation 22:20



DEVOTION 2
LOVE GOD: HEART

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." Matthew 22:37-38

When I think of the heart, my mind thinks of different things. Since I am a girl dad, it goes to all of the outfits that had hearts all over them when they were little. It was hearts on bears, toys, movies, and walls. It was hearts everywhere! I also think of Valentine's Day. Coming to your local stores very soon (if not already) will be an entire aisle decorated in red with hearts to get you to buy things that will let your significant other know how much you love them. In our world today, the heart is the symbol of love.

The heart is a very important organ in the body as well. Every living and breathing thing that is on the face of the earth (for the most part) has a heart of some sort. The heart is the engine of our very lives. The heart pumps blood to the lungs, where it picks up oxygen. Then it sucks it back into the heart to pump that oxygenated blood out to the rest of the body to keep it alive. A normal human heart beats about 100,000 times per day. That equals out to around 35 million times a year and around 2.5 billion times in a normal lifespan. Without your heart, you cannot live. The heart is the central organ of the body.

God's Word looks at the heart in the same way. The heart is the central part of your being. It is integral, necessary, and signifies life. Jesus gives the Greatest Commandment, which restates the Shema in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). God lists three things we are to love Him with all of them, and He begins with the heart. How do we love God with all of our heart?

Loving God with all of your anything is a learning process. It takes time and it even takes effort. Just the concept of loving is action. It is not simply lovey-dovey feelings that you have. It is a decision, a daily decision, to place your affection on someone. Yes, there are times of intense emotion, but love is a verb (thank you, DC Talk, for that reminder from the early 90's Christian music scene) and love is a choice.

Loving God with all of your heart is to love Him at the core of your being. It involves placing all of you in His hands and making the daily choice to have God at the center of your life. This is done by spending time in God's Word, praying, and even being silent to rest in God. This means that you pray to God for every decision you make. It is loving God with all of your emotions. I realize that this may be difficult for some as religion can easily become cerebral rather than a relationship.

When you come to Jesus and give Him your life, you enter into a relationship with the living God, the Creator of the universe and the Lover of your soul. Think about this: *God loves you passionately!* The Bible tells us that continually. Jesus has shown you that in the fact that He came to earth, died for you, and rose from the dead to defeat death. What does that say about His heart for you?

Loving God with all of your heart is giving Him everything you have. It is saying yes to Him at every turn. It is surrender. It is truly loving Him first. Here is the thing, though, you do not do it naturally.

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Ezekiel 36:26-27

God speaks to His people through the prophet Ezekiel to tell them that a day would come when He would take out their hearts of stone and replace them with a heart of flesh. His Spirit would make His

home in them, and they would follow Him out of the strength of the Spirit.

What you need today is not to try harder to love God with your heart. You need a completely different heart. You need a heart transplant. You need God's heart.

One of my favorite verses in all of God's Word is John 3:30 (NIV), ***"He must become greater, I must become less."*** That is our prayer. The goal is that God would become greater in our hearts and that we would become less. It is the way that we love God with all of our heart.



DEVOTION 3
LOVE GOD: SOUL

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." Matthew 22:37-38

Soul food; it just sounds good, right? (I suppose it does right now because it is lunchtime as I write this.) What makes soul food, *soul* food? Not all Southern food is soul food, but all soul food is Southern food. Millie Peartree wrote, "Soul food is an ethnic cuisine traditionally prepared and eaten by African-Americans in the Southern United States. In the late 19th century, the Black Church became a gathering place for the Black community and impacted the development of what's now considered soul food. Particularly in rural areas, foods like fried chicken, fried fish, sweet potato pie, red drinks, black-eyed peas and others were served during Emancipation celebrations and church gatherings." Soul food today, in many ways, is food that comes from the heart. It is food that brings people together and yes, gets into your very soul. Now I am *really* hungry!

Your soul is the spiritual part of who you are. Every human being is made of both material and immaterial parts, and your soul is the immaterial part of who you are. This is your consciousness, your desires, and your will. Your mind is different, and we will talk about that tomorrow, but your soul is you. That said, we are all called to love God with all of our souls.

This is the part of you that longs for God. If you have been around church at all over the years, you have probably heard about the "God-shaped hole" that each person has. It is the place in our lives that only God can really fulfill. We all try to fill that spot with all kinds of things: hobbies, relationships, drugs, sex, alcohol, career, or money. Nothing fills that hole other than a relationship with God. Here is the thing: it is real.

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."
Ecclesiastes 3:11

God placed ***"eternity into man's heart."*** Every person on the earth knows that there is something beyond us. This is why there are so many causes around us. Everyone wants to leave something that will make the world better. There is more than just us. What we long for is transcendence. Transcendence is defined as something above and independent of the universe. Wayne Grudem describes it well: "The term often used to say that God is much greater than creation is the word transcendent. Very simply, this means that God is far 'above' the creation in the sense that he is greater than creation and is independent of it."

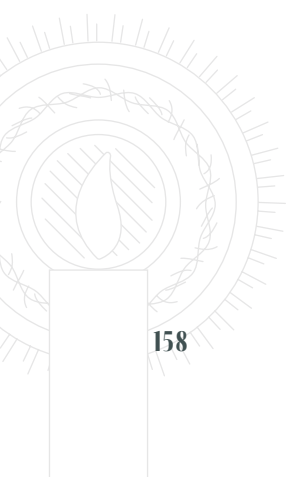
God has placed a longing for the transcendent in us, a longing for Him. This is the longing of the soul.

Loving God with all of your soul, then, is to place all of your dreams, plans, desires, will, and future at the feet of Jesus. It is to trust Him with the very soul of all you are and all you do. It is to thirst for Him at all times.

It can be a scary thing to give up your dreams, to submit your will to God. This comes down to whether or not you trust God's heart for you. Does God actually love you? Does He actually have good plans for you? Is God trustworthy? I never dreamed I would be living in Michigan for the past 21 years, but I have. God's plans for me have not always been easy and I have even fought them at times, but they have always been good.

Love God with all of your soul. Place it all at His feet and trust Him today. Should you not be completely sure about how to do that, I am confident that if you contacted your Pastor or Growth Community (small group) leader, they would love to speak with you and pray with you.

He is worthy. He loves you, has great plans for you, and will complete the work He began in you.



DEVOTION 4
LOVE GOD: MIND

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." Matthew 22:37-38

So much happens in our minds. Every single person has an ongoing conversation happening in their mind. You are reacting to the people, circumstances, events, and stimuli going on around you. Your mind is constantly processing everything it takes in. "Why did that person look at me that way? What is that car going to do? What did they mean when they said that? I can't believe things are the way they are. I'm not good enough. No one loves me. I'm worth nothing. Things will always be this way."

The Yates family loves to go to the movies. It is something that we do often as a family. The most recent movie that we went to see was a Disney movie, *"Inside Out 2."* I have to say, I love this movie and the first one that was released in 2015. I will do my best not to give any spoilers here should you want to see the movie yourself, but the overall focus of the movie is the emotions and thoughts that are going on inside of a girl named Riley. The first movie is all about Riley at the age of 11 and everything she is going through. The emotions of joy, anger, sadness, fear, and disgust fill her mind. These come together to form Riley's thoughts, decisions, and actions. *"Inside Out 2"* introduces us to new emotions now that Riley is the age of 13; one of these emotions is anxiety. You can imagine how the movie goes. (I could go on, but I do not want to give any spoilers! Suffice it to say, they did a great job.)

Anxiety is a kind of pandemic in our culture today. It affects so many people and is a crippling master for so many people. Children are being diagnosed with anxiety or depression at younger and younger

ages. As we consider how to love God with all of our minds, we have to consider where we are currently. (I would also encourage you to refer back to week two and day three of the devotional on mental peace.)

Anxiety is something that I have struggled with in my life. It is a difficult thing to deal with. I have had moments where I was convinced I was having a heart attack and dying, and COVID did a number on me. I have been on and off medication over the years, and it is something that I continually have to combat in my life. Maybe you are reading this, and you totally identify.

Our thought life is a very real part of our lives. What you think about in every conversation, interaction, and circumstance determines how you will act. Stinkin' thinkin' results in stinkin' doin'. Your mind needs to process what you see around you and make determinations about each thing it processes. Here is the thing: those determinations are not necessarily true just because you thought it!

"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Philippians 4:8

Loving God with your mind is to submit what you are thinking about, mulling over, anxious about, struggling with, or dreading to the *truth* of God's Word. When it comes to our mind and the struggle we have with negative, pervasive, sinful, lustful, and invasive thoughts, this is never a power encounter for the Jesus follower. This is a battle for *truth*. What does God really say about who you are? What does God really say about your future? What does God say will satisfy you? What does God say about the value of the person that is the object of your lust? What does God say about keeping your eyes on Him? Who has God made you through Jesus?

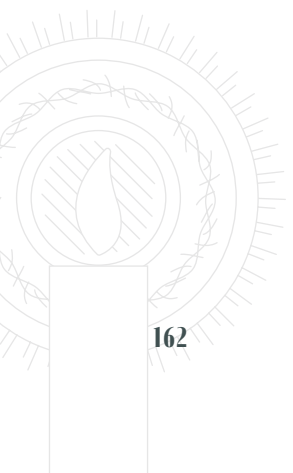
"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not

of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." 2 Corinthians 10:3-5

You fight lies with TRUTH.

Love God with your mind by diving into the truth of God's Word that He has given us so that we can be fully mature and complete. Love God with your mind by actually listening to the thoughts you have and asking God's Spirit to show you what is truth. Take every thought and submit it in obedience to Christ; this is how you love God with all of your mind.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." John 14:15



DEVOTION 5
LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Matthew 22:39

Love God. Love people.

The greatest commandment and the second one, much like it, are all summed up in four words. That might make it sound really easy. It is not.

Jesus was asked by the religious authorities what the greatest commandment was, not the two greatest commandments. There is a reason Jesus answered their question in this way. Only when you learn (and you will keep learning this until your last breath) what it means to love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind can you begin to learn how to love the people around you. Here is the paradox; however, you cannot love God that way without loving your neighbor as yourself. These commandments are forever linked.

What is the common word here? Love. Love is the main thing. It is loving like God does. The main thing has nothing to do with being right, separation from those who do not believe the same, or political affiliation. The main thing is love.

We get ourselves into trouble when we try to define who our neighbor is. Jesus knew this and even encountered a lawyer who was representative of all of us when we come across someone who is hard to love. Go and read the account in Luke 10:25-37 and come back here.

He describes the parable of the Good Samaritan. What a way to answer the question of who is our neighbor! Jesus did not pull any

punches here. The lawyer was trying to justify his lack of compassion for those he did not like and disagreed with, and Jesus threw a couple of theological jabs and then landed the knockout uppercut. This poor man that had been attacked was lying on the side of the road half dead! A priest and a Levite came across this poor man and not only ignored him, but they walked on the other side of the road! They did not want anything to do with him. Who actually stopped? The Samaritan. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews, and the feelings were mutual. This Samaritan stopped, cared for the man, and made sure he was cared for.

I love how Jesus finished the story. What a question He asks: ***"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"*** Can you imagine the body language of the lawyer in his response? I see him looking down at his feet and softly answering Jesus, ***"The one who showed him mercy."*** (Luke 10:36-37)

When it comes to loving our neighbors as Jesus' followers, we get caught up and focused on too many things that do not matter. Notice that Jesus did not give any qualifying adjectives to who your neighbor is. It is also not just the person next door, as we have seen in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

This is where the rubber meets the road, my friend. It is when Jesus commands us to love our neighbor. He is calling us to love our white, black, gay, transgender, Republican, Democrat, racist, conservative, liberal, homeless, atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, and offensive neighbor. How can we do that? We do that by learning how to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind.

The early church struggled with this, too. In Acts chapter 15, the church came up against an issue about who actually followed Jesus and who were Christians. The Jewish Christians claimed that anyone who became a Christian had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Others in the church claimed that it was not necessary and that faith in Jesus was enough. Paul and Barnabas came to the

church, and Luke (the author of Acts) tells us that ***"there was no small dissension and debate with them"*** (Acts 15:2). They were going at it! So, the apostles and the elders got together to discuss the matter.

Peter finally stood up and declared that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles as well as the Jews at Pentecost, and they all had heard the Gospel and believed! There was no longer any distinction made between them, and this issue had no bearing on their salvation. The Gentiles had been saved by faith as well.

Then, Peter says something that is *so* very convicting:

"And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God." Acts 15:19 (NLT)

How difficult do we make it for people to see Jesus when we do not love our neighbor? How much do people hear about everything else *other* than Jesus when we get on our social media? Do people know more about what you are against than what you are *for*?

As you learn to love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind (as you have been reminded of the hope, peace, joy, and love that is found in the coming of Jesus), as you bear the name of Jesus to your neighbors, may you make it easier not harder for people to see Jesus. May you be for the people around you because God is for the people around you. He died for them, and He has sent you to be His ambassador. He has sent you to be their *neighbor* as you live in the in-between.

May the result of this Advent season and our lives living in between Jesus' first and second Advents be marked by His love. Should God give you an opportunity to love in the coming days, weeks, and months, let your Pastor know it. Ask him to pray for you. The body of Christ is in this together. I would love to know it, too! Email me at jyates@theriverchurch.cc, I would love to rejoice with you.

Love God and love people in the in-between.



FOOTNOTES

1. Adapted from Advent reading by Andy Bradshaw accessed at https://www.cornerstonewestford.com/2016/12/09/advent-reading-week-2-peace-candle.

2. Illustration and some context adapted from the series “Our Coming Savior” produced by The Skit Guys, 2015. Used with permission.

3. Adapted reading by Martha Zimmerman for Crosswalk.com. Accessed at: https://www.crosswalk.com/culture/books/a-family-worship-service-for-the-four-sundays-of-advent-1235928.html

4. Music and words by Lisa Clow and Bob Kauflin © 2020 Sovereign Grace Praise/BMI (adm. worldwide at CapitolCMGPublishing.com, excluding the UK & Europe which is adm. by Integrity Music). Sovereign Grace Music, a division of Sovereign Grace Churches. All rights reserved. www.SovereignGraceMusic.org

5. Accessed via https://www.oneplace.com/devotionals/bible-study-minute/full-of-grace-and-truth-like-jesus-bible-study-minute-may-21-2018-11792207.html

6. Redmond, E., Curtis, W., & Fentress, K. (2016). Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk (p. 113). Holman Reference.

OUR VISION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "We don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

The goal of weekend gatherings at The River Church is to glorify Christ in all we do! Whether it be through singing, giving, serving, or any of the variety of ways He has gifted us and called us together, Jesus is at the center of it all. We celebrate that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher, it brings life-change!

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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