

FAMILY CHRISTMAS  
DEVOTIONAL 2014

WISE MEN  
STILL SEEK

HIM



First Week of Advent

# HOPE

What does Advent mean? The term “advent” literally means, “the coming,” or “the arrival,” in an anticipated sense. So, the celebration of Advent as an historical Christian tradition stems from God’s Word. In it, we are promised a coming Messiah, a Savior, Who will set right all the wrongs of a sin-ridden and fallen world. The focus of the entire Christmas season becomes the coming of Jesus Christ, born in human flesh, in His First Advent and also the future coming of Jesus, the King of Heaven Who will reign and rule in His Second Advent.

Each week of the Advent season is marked by an overarching theme that defines the state of mind of His people as they wait for their Savior. Traditionally, they are HOPE, PEACE, JOY and LOVE. From the earliest record of God’s people in the Old Testament, there has existed a pattern of God’s rescue and provision for a lost and broken population that has proclaimed their love and devotion for God, only to fall short of both. Advent takes on a penitent theme as we, God’s people, use this season to reflect on how God is still willing and ready to rescue His people when they will call upon Him. God is still the God of grace and mercy and Christmas is the very proof of both.

This week, as we begin our journey, we look at the idea of HOPE as our state of mind. Just as the Israelites eagerly awaited a Messiah, a Savior, to deliver them from political and social oppression, we too, seek His deliverance from oppression. It may be oppression that takes on a different form, but the root is still the same. The sin of mankind, of our very own hearts, has made our world, even our own lives, sick with its disease of strife, decay and rebellion toward God. Will God rescue us, not only from the world, but from ourselves? We hope in Him, we wait on Him to act on our behalf. As we hope together, let’s make our devotional time in His Word and in prayer a daily priority for our lives. We begin...

Sunday, November 30

Today’s Text: Isaiah 9:2

When I joined the Boy Scouts, one of the tests on our first camp out was to find the way back to the camp site in the dark. Older scouts would lead us out into the woods, tells us to count to 20, then find our way back (we didn’t know they were actually close by, watching us in case we needed help). It sure was great when we saw the light of the camp fire and that fire seemed like “a great light.” As I read today’s passage, I thought about those times as a young Boy Scout that we looked at the stars and other signs to help us find our way back to camp in those dark woods and how much easier it was when there was daylight!

When Jesus came into the world, it was a dark time for the Jewish people. They were looking for Messaiah to come and lead them. They were hoping for a savior that would lead them to become a nation that other nations could look to once again.

God sent His Son as the Light of the World. Jesus states in John 8:12, “I am the Light of the World. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.” Jesus declares that He is our hope for salvation. If we follow His light, we will not walk in darkness. Jesus is our HOPE.

Have you found this Light? If you are a Christian, take time today to thank God for the miracle of Christ’s coming to earth to be our Light. If you have never asked Jesus to be the Lord of your life, you can ask Him today. Romans 10:9 states, “...if you confess with your mouth, the Lord Jesus and believe with your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” It’s as simple as talking to God, confessing your need for Him and your faith in Christ and asking for forgiveness from your sins. If you just prayed to make Jesus your Lord, tell someone at church, like the pastor or another trusted person about your decision.

--John Carson



Monday, December 1

Today's Text: Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23

**E**mmanuel or Immanuel? You will notice that Isaiah and Matthew spelled this word differently. Why? Well, that's due to the different translations of the original text. Isaiah translated this word from Hebrew, while Matthew wrote in Greek, hence the different spelling. For Matthew, 'Immanuel' is the hope for the world, God with us, Messiah, the promised and expected Deliverer; Good News, as our Hope for the future. God with us, as the Word made flesh, full of grace and Truth (John 1:14). A God Who is with us always, even until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). A God Who will never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:3, Hebrews 13:5). A God Who is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). A God Who proclaims good news to the poor, binds up the brokenhearted and sets captives free (Isaiah 61:1). Our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in time of trouble (Psalm 46:1). Fully God, yet fully man. Tempted in every way yet victorious over all (Hebrews 4:15). Perfect Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Immanuel-by no other name can we be saved than by the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

The hope we have in Christ is that we can surrender everything we have to Him and safely trust that He will work all things out for our ultimate good, because we love Him (Romans 8:28). His yoke is easy, His burden light. In this life, we face many struggles but we have hope because we have overcome the world through our Immanuel, Jesus (John 16:33).

As a weak person, I can find strength and courage because of the hope I have in God's promise to be with me wherever I go (Joshua 1:9). By God's power you can hope for wisdom if you simply ask and trust (James 1:5). We have no fear of what man can do to us (Psalm 118:6) because we have hope in Christ's sacrifice and promise of eternal life through faith (John 3:16). Because of Immanuel, we are privileged to be called God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:16) and His dwelling place is among us (Ezekiel 37:27). We can choose to embrace kindness and serve others because the very nature of Christ is a Servant. He left the glory of Heaven to be Immanuel and surrender Himself to death on the cross (Philippians 2:5). That is truly the greatest gift, the greatest hope, any of us have received!

--Sharon Doring

Tuesday, December 2

Today's Text: Isaiah 8:14-18

**I**n the verses leading up to this passage, the prophet Isaiah tells his hearers that they are not to fear what the world fears (v.12), but are to honor God (v.13). As long as we honor God and walk according to His precepts we should gain comfort in knowing that God is our refuge.

The ungodly, however, have no such protection, no such hiding place, no such happy ending. In fact, they actually presently suffer because of their unbelief (v.14b-15). Isaiah had predicted the Assyrian invasion in judgment against the nations of Israel and Judah for their disobedience. Though God's words, through Isaiah, of condemnation and impending doom should have caused widespread repentance, Isaiah's countrymen found honoring God repulsive to them and chose to continue down their road to destruction. They had strayed so far that they could no longer understand God's laws and were uninterested in following them.

To Isaiah's disciples, however, these prophecies brought comfort and a promise of future deliverance. Whereas nonbelievers were shut-out from understanding Isaiah's warnings, those who honored God received what Matthew Henry called the "unspeakable privilege which the people of God enjoy in having the oracles of God consigned over to them, and being entrusted with the sacred writings." Isaiah and his group of disciples understood "the testimony." Understanding God's word gives us HOPE.

Those who trust in God understand that God works things out in His own time (v.17a) whether we understand His methods or not (v.17b). Our response should always be to rely upon Him (v.17c). In this way, our "hope" is not just wishful thinking for a future outcome; it is our full reliance on the fact that our God is in control as we act under the guarantees He gives us in His holy Scriptures.

Many of Isaiah's prophecies looked forward to the Messiah, the anointed One who would redeem all of mankind. Though Messiah has already come, we present-day Christians (like Isaiah's disciples) can also rely on a future deliverance from the troubles of this world. In the meantime, we too should be actively involved in the kingdom work God has assigned to each of us (v.18). By busying ourselves with His agenda, we show God that we rely on the truth of His promises (Heb. 6:10-12). We show Him that we are secure in our HOPE, not only for our deliverance from present circumstances, but in all of His promises for eternity.

Father, thank You for Your promises - for giving us HOPE. Amen.

--Doug Martin-Whitaker



## Wednesday, December 3 Today's Text: Isaiah 9:6-7

The book of Isaiah was written approximately 700 years prior to the birth of Christ. Look at these two verses again. Notice that they refer to a future time when a special person, the Son of God, would be born. One that would be known as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. These words are very familiar to us, but read them in the way they were first written. Isaiah writes with excitement about the future regarding Christ's reign here on earth and then in heaven. This writing reflects confidence, a definite knowledge and an expectation that these futuristic things will actually occur. This is the type of hope our Lord desires us to know and experience. We are not to live a life that is based on maybe-so's or a wishy-washy hope that is unsure. The evidence or Hope of God's promise in Christ came true. Christ was born as foretold, "the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this" (v. 7) and He came.

What is your understanding of hope? Is it one that is rooted in confident expectation and the knowledge that God delivers on what He has said He will do? Or, is your hope based upon maybe-so's, I-hope-so's, or, we'll just have to wait and see what happens? Just as God spoke to us through the prophet Isaiah with a hope of definite certainty regarding the special event of Christ's first coming, so also He wants you to know and accept the future Hope you have through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

--Jack & Luanne Caraway

## Thursday, December 4 Today's Text: Isaiah 11:1-2

Christmas...What comes to mind when you think of Christmas? In today's Scripture passage, which is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, we will take a look at where Isaiah starts his story. He speaks in terms of a tree, a stem, a branch and roots.

Christmas always reminds me of my roots. My family, gathered around the glow of a Christmas tree, is a sweet memory. We were raised on a small farm in South Texas, in a working class family with Mom, Dad, six kids, 4 dogs and numerous cats. These are my roots and I love going home to them each Christmas. It is always a time that reminds me of the simple and often underrated love of a family.

It's interesting to note that Isaiah takes us back to the roots of our Messiah. The royal line of David is not mentioned, but the line of Jesse, David's father, is. Jesse was a farmer and a sheep herder living in a small, quiet town called Bethlehem. The royal, kingly line of David has its roots with this simple hard-working family, living in a little out-of-the-way place. Yet out of this place, comes the long awaited Messiah, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This Christmas, why not go back to your roots? Remember the simple love and closeness of your family. Your bloodline is established, the roots of your family tree remain unchanged which means that families are forever! So, go home, be with your family, shine the light of Jesus, let the love of Christ flavor your words and actions, and may you find Peace. Merry Christmas!

--John Clarke



Friday, December 5

Today's Text: Isaiah 11:10

One of the special things about Christmas is all of the symbols and traditions we can share and gather around. Think about a picture or something that represents Christmas to you. Perhaps it's a nativity set you've had for years or the light tree in the San Marcos Plaza Park. Maybe a particular family tradition or childhood memory comes to mind. I really enjoy watching *It's a Wonderful Life* at Christmas time. Yet there are those who find this time of year painful because of loss. Some pictures that come to mind are difficult. Either way, it is a time when sense and emotions can be heightened because of Christmas culture.

For us as Christians, we have the most remarkable HOPE to gather around; the Root of Jesse. The hope we have in Christ is not only that He came as a child, lived a sinless life, died on a cross, and rose again, but He is coming again. There will be a time when Christ will stand as a banner and we will find a glorious resting place in Him.

Here's the thing to keep in mind today: we are able to find that resting place now. If you are like me, Christmas busyness never stopped from last year. Our culture is out of control. We are vulnerable to not recognizing the hope we have in Christ because we are searching for the best gift for someone else. As we represent the root of Jesse, may our lives represent a life that is resting in Him. Remember the words of Christ in Matthew 11:28-30...

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

Consider what you need to do to find rest in Him today? How can you reflect that rest in how you conduct yourself today and the next few weeks? In a time of prayer, lay your burdens down and seek His rest.

--Ken Naquin

Saturday, December 6

Today's Text: Micah 5:2

Micah 5:2, tells us that at one time Bethlehem was an unimportant place for Jesus to be born compared to Rome or Jerusalem. Everyone now knows the name Bethlehem. But before He was born there, Scripture tells us that this little town was insignificant. It was His birth and the record of the place of His birth in the Bible that gave this little town any significance. The insignificance of Bethlehem before Christ came to it can be applied to our lives before Jesus Christ came into them. There was a time when we wanted things many people want. We wanted to be to be successful, achieving great things for ourselves. We wanted our lives to matter, being popular with everyone loving us for who we are. These goals for many people are important. But from an eternal, God perspective, they are insignificant.

Before Christ comes into our lives, we are really unimportant but we do not know it. We are blind to our situation in life and our future destination without God. All the things we want to achieve come to nothing at the end, without Jesus. But God finds us important. He sent His Son to purchase us because His love for us was so great. Once Christ comes into our hearts, our eyes are opened and we see ourselves and our future differently. For me, this happened on July 4th, 1979, my own independence day from the shackles of sin.

Each day of our lives we encounter unimportant strangers who are unimportant in the world, but who long to be important to someone, in someway. The truth is, they are just as important to the Lord as we are. We can reach out to them with the love of Christ and share the Gospel with them. Even here, on Sunday mornings, you can greet visitors, not knowing what their life situation is or whether they know the Lord or not. Remember to place yourselves in their shoes. We have all been there. So, even if it's just here on Sundays, step out of your comfort zone. Right here at church, we have a great opportunity to be used by the Lord Jesus Christ. These visitors come searching something, tell them how important they are to the Savior and you.

--Ben Cortez



Second Week of Advent

# PEACE

Peace. It seems like an elusive thing. Does it really even exist?

Is it something we can ever truly know and experience in this life?

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines peace as, "a state of tranquility or quiet; freedom from civil disturbance, or a period of time when there is no war or fighting." Based on this definition, peace would seem to most of us to be a fairy tale idea.

If we turn our attention to the Bible, however, and look for a definition there, we see that peace is defined differently. While the Scriptural idea of peace may take on some of the same characteristics as the dictionary definition above, we will see that God's definition of peace revolves around more than a state of well-being from a human point of view. Jesus greeted His followers after His resurrection with, "Peace be with you." In this simple statement, we see that Jesus' desire was for His people to have a sense of peace when in His presence. Can we really?

This week, as we enter into our second week of Advent, may we come to each devotional time with an open heart asking the Lord to help us understand the peace He longs for us to experience. As we seek His face in our quiet time of reading His Word and praying, may we experience a new facet of Christmas in this Biblical exploration of the idea of peace.

Perhaps you would use the prayer below to help prepare your heart and mind.

*Lord, I thank You for being the God of peace. Please help me to understand You, through Your Word, in a new way this week. I ask you to provide the time and energy for me to read my daily devotional and to set aside time to meet with You. Thank You for loving me so much.*

*In Jesus name, Amen.*

Sunday, December 7

Today's Text: John 14:27

The end result of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives is deep and lasting peace. Unlike worldly peace which is often thought of as the absence of conflict, the gift of peace from the Father is confident assurance of His presence in any circumstance.

October 20, 2009, found my husband David, our son Dusty, and me at the Heart Hospital of Austin for a heart catheterization to be performed on David. The following morning found David still at the Heart Hospital of Austin, now scheduled for open heart surgery. The reality of the peace that Jesus spoke of in John 14:27 was mine during those days of surgery and recovery. John 16:33 tells us that in Him, we will experience peace. God calls us to peace and He, tells us that He, Himself, is our peace. (1Cor. 7:15)

A few weeks ago our Sunday school lesson talked about the importance of the church body supporting each other with prayer. The teacher's guide stated that "God, in ways we don't always understand fully, chooses to work through the prayers of believers." On the day of David's surgery, I was overwhelmed by a waiting area full of biological and spiritual family members. Our pastor, Dennis Spire, beat me to the hospital on the day of surgery and had prayer with David before he was taken to the OR. Prayers were offered up that morning and in the days that followed. The active love of God in my life through His Word, the presence of the Holy Spirit within me, and the tremendous support of Christian friends and family afforded me peace that passes understanding.

Jesus came into the world that we might have peace. He left this world promising to give peace: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." As we come into the season of Christmas celebration, may we give "Glory to God in the highest Heaven," (Luke 2:14a) and may you keep your mind stayed on Him that you may be kept in His perfect peace.

—Judy Glover



Monday, December 8

Today's Text: 2 Thessalonians 3:16

I will admit it here. I am an anxious person if left to my own devices. I have, over the years, dealt with anxiety and depression, and feared failure in various areas of my life. Christmas time is no exception for these feelings for me. In fact, I find myself fighting hard against the anxious thoughts even more during the holiday seasons. Do I have enough time to get everything done? Will everyone be happy with the gifts that I have spent so much time thinking about, making, or finding? Will the meal all come together? You know, typical holiday craziness! That's why I like this verse Paul wrote to the Thessalonians.

I can't look to the world for peace. The kind of peace that the world experiences is easily destroyed. It rarely lasts very long. It can be destroyed by man things. For example, failure, doubt, fear, difficulty, anxiety over the outcome of something, violated relationships, guilt, shame, distress, regret, sorrow, the fear of being overpowered or defeated, the anxiety about being wrong, the anxiety about making a bad decision or a wrong choice, the anticipation of being mistreated or maligned, actually being mistreated, being victimized by someone. That peace can be shattered by the unknown, the uncertain future, bitterness, anger, pride, vengeance, any challenge to your place, your position, your possessions or your security. That is a very fragile peace.

Paul is not talking about that kind of peace. He's talking about something completely different. He's talking about a spiritual peace, the true, deep-down peace is the attitude of the heart and mind that calmly and confidently believes and thus knows that all is well between the soul and God. God is concerned with my well-being and heaven is ahead. It's a deep-down peace, it has nothing to do with what anybody says to you. It has nothing to do with what anybody does to you, or doesn't do to you. It has nothing to do with any circumstance in life whatsoever. It is the peace that God gives to His beloved children. It is our possession and privilege by right. He purchased this peace for us on the cross and gave it to us, His people, willingly.

--Becky Sosa

Tuesday, December 9

Today's Text: Isaiah 53:5

PEACE can be defined as a state of tranquility or security or spiritual health. This seems to come out in some folks more at Christmas than any other time of the year. Maybe it is being together as a family. It could be "Peace on Earth Goodwill Toward Me" everywhere you go and could be a 365 day thought, but sadly, it is not.

I have to admit that Christmas is not my favorite time of the year, mainly because of the commercialization of the day. There are too many children that after seeing all of the ads for toys etc. end up getting nothing. There are too many folks for whom Christmas is the only time they darken the doors of a church or even think about Jesus our Savior. I am afraid that most of the Western world has no idea that the day is about Christ and not getting a pile of gifts. I think it would be great if we each had a tree in our house and we focused on what qualities we would like to share with each other and then place notes on the tree with the different qualities we would like to share. How blessed we are to have a God who loves us so much that He sent His only Son to earth to save us from our sins!

Jesus was punished for our sins and wicked ways. He was beaten, whipped, and nailed to a cross during His journey here on earth. After all this, we are still offered eternal life with Him when asking for salvation. The gift of peace is given to us when we accept Jesus as our Savior and in so doing, we know we can live in eternity with Him.

Christmas is the beginning of Christ's journey here on earth. When we share communion at the end of our Christmas Eve services, I feel such a joy and sense of peace because it represents and commemorates Jesus coming to start His journey. This Christmas, we should be aware of our feelings toward others and think about how we can share the goodness that God is bringing into our lives with the world around us as a gift to others. We can do this by sharing Christ's love not only during Christmas but also throughout the year. The point is, let's treat each other the way Christ treated all of us. What an amazing Christmas gift that would be to give and to receive!

--Jim & Diana Owen



## Wednesday, December 10 Today's Text: Ephesians 2:14-18

The collision of races was monumental in New Testament times. The Gentiles were dogs to the Jews and the Jews were homicidal enemies of the human race to the Gentiles. This is the position from which Paul comes in this passage of scripture.

In the first part of this chapter, we see that both Jews and Gentiles were spiritually separated from God. Paul states that this separation between the races was overcome by reconciliation through Jesus Christ (v. 13).

To the Jew the Gentile was hopeless and Godless; yet, Gentiles worshipped all kinds of gods, statues, and had elaborate temples. Man is born with this need to relate to a higher being.

For the Gentiles, history was going nowhere. For the Gentiles there was no Messiah, no hope. Sounds a little like our world today as it pushes ahead to nowhere, without Christ. People without Christ wrap their lives around things and refuse to think about their ultimate end. As a believer who has found hope, I can't imagine living without God's presence in my life.

This same collision of races is evident today. It is the root of the division that has haunted Northern Ireland. It's the root for the division of the Koreans. It is the root of radical Islam. It is the root of bitterness between the Jews and Palestinians. It is the root of racism in America that has just played out in Ferguson, MO and the list goes on.

Paul tells the Ephesians in v. 14 that the "two were made one." He also states that it is the blood of Jesus shed on the cross that reconciles Jew and Gentile. In the next four verses Paul uses the word "peace" four times.

(continued on next page...)

## Wednesday, December 10 Continued...

In verse 14, "He himself is our peace." Jesus ripped down the barrier by His death and rending the veil in the temple in two right down the middle. Now, there can be spiritual unity - peace. How do we get to "peace"?

1. When we come together at the cross, spiritually
2. When we come near to God in our quiet times and worship
3. When we come near to each other in the love of the Lord

This scripture says Jesus created a "new man," a new humanity, a new race known as "believers." He didn't Christianize the Jews. He didn't Judaize the Gentiles. He didn't create a half-breed. He made an entirely new man. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." This is the answer to prejudice, racism, hatred, estrangement, alienation and separation.

If only what John Oxenham penned were true:

*In Christ there is no East or West;  
In Him no South or North;  
But one great fellowship of love  
Throughout the whole wide earth.*

The world is watching to see if we are truly the body of reconciliation and "SHALOM" (peace) in a lost and separated world. Christians are not to resist reconciliation and forgiveness. Being forgiving and not holding grudges is a sign we have received God's forgiving grace - His peace in our lives.

Spend time in prayer today restoring your fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Ask for strength for reconciliation, and a forgiving attitude, and then do it.

--Bob Elliott





## Thursday, December 11 Today's Text: Colossians 1:19-20

In looking at these verses, we first need to look at two relational paths; one was in heaven and one on earth. Satan and a third of the angels had fallen out of relationship with God. They were cast out of heaven and down to earth. Humanity, by temptation from Satan through the serpent, chose to step out of relationship with God as well. A perfect relationship between man and God was now broken. This was His human creatures saying they wanted to do it their way. However, the choice they made did not come without consequences. The overarching consequence was that sin had entered into mankind through Adam and Eve who lived in a perfect garden. Their choice would have an effect on the rest of humanity. They were cast out of the Garden of Eden as a consequence for their action. Without a different path, this one would lead the earth and all that dwelt in it, to death and destruction.

So in God's wisdom, love and foreknowledge, He gave us another path we could all take. Octavius Winslow said it this way:

*"Never was there before—nor has there been since—nor ever will be again— such ancient, marvelous, stupendous love as the love of Jesus. It is the astonishment of heaven, it is the wonder of angels, and, in their best, holiest, and most self-abased moments, it is the marvel of saints on earth, and will be, through eternity, their study and their praise. His condescending stoop to our nature—His descent from heaven's glory to earth's lowliness—His bearing our sins—His endurance of our curse—His suffering our penalty—His exhaustion of our bitter cup—His resurrection from the grave, and His ascent into heaven, are facts which speak, louder and sweeter than an angel's trumpet, the love of Christ to His church."*

This way or path was the reconciliation of a broken relationship with God, mended and accomplished by Jesus, being fully man and full of God the Father. Now, there is a path we all start down which is still death and destruction, but we now have another choice which leads to life everlasting, our salvation and service to Him, by His blood. This is a narrow path, but it leads to a peace that surpasses all comprehension and guards our hearts and minds forever (Philippians 4:7). AMEN

--Gary Hamilton

## Friday, December 12 Today's Text: Romans 5:1-2

In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul proves we are all sinners. He proves that however good we are, we are not good enough; however acceptable we think we are, we are full of shortcomings and sinfulness. God wants to have a relationship with us, but standing between us and Him is the stumbling block of sin. We are helpless to change this situation. So, how can a man have peace with God?

Thankfully, with Romans 5:1-2, comes the assurance that God Himself will provide our way to peace with Him. Even though are still sinners, God's love and mercy carried out His eternal plan to remove the barrier keeping us from His reconciling peace. This peace is not just the absence of fear or a momentary feeling of contentment. This is permanent access to God given to us through the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Mediator between God and man, the payment for our sins, a Savior to take our place, the only Way for salvation. Jesus said He had finished what the Father had sent Him to do. He says to us, "Look to Me. Trust Me. I AM your peace with God the Father."

Being justified by our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and having the Holy Spirit living in us, we are able to experience God's peace. Our salvation is settled. Let us enjoy the relationship God made possible for us. Peace with God was born in a stable. It is the season to share our gratitude for God's generous love and mercy. Let us be glad in Him.

--Ralph & Judy Caperton



Saturday, December 13  
Today's Text: John 16:33

Let's face it. We live in a broken world. We are constantly bombarded with depressing images and stories on the news of death, destruction, greed, sickness, and depravity of all kinds. Our increasingly Godless culture presses in on us from every side. Life happens. No one is left untouched by trials and sorrow. It is so easy to be anxious!

I have to say, I come from a long line of worriers. Anxiety is like a sport to my family and if not careful, I tend to jump in the game right along with them. During the Christmas season, anxiety can reach epic proportions. Did we budget enough money for gifts? Did we budget at all? Are they going to like their gift? Where are we going for Christmas? Are they going to be angry that we did not spend Christmas with them this year? Do my kids understand what Christmas is about? Did I buy enough cranberries, green beans, stuffing, etc? Does my house look festive enough? How much weight have I gained?! It's enough to drive you crazy!

John 16:33 is like a lifeline to a worrier like me. The New King James version says, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." AMEN!! Yes, there will be things in our lives over which we will have the opportunity to worry. But why should we worry when Jesus has already overcome the pressures, the temptations, the anxieties that living in this world entails? The Living Bible translates this verse as, "...so that you will have peace of heart and mind." That kind of peace is available to us through Jesus, but we have to keep our eyes focused on Him. We have to stay connected to Him through prayer and daily scripture reading in order to experience "peace of heart and mind," because ultimately, HE is our peace.

It is only through Him that we do not despair at death and Ugly Christmas Sweater parties. He has overcome a broken world and the human condition. He is our Prince of Peace.

--Shelby Spire



While shepherds watched their flocks by night  
All seated on the ground  
The angel of the Lord came down  
And glory shone around

"Fear not!" said he, for mighty dread  
Had seized their troubled mind  
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring  
To you and all mankind"

"All glory be to God on high  
And to the Earth be peace  
Good will henceforth from heaven to men  
Begin and never cease"

--Nathan Tate

Taken from a poem entitled "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night" by English poet-laureate Nathan Tate. Written and published as a poem and set to music in 1703, this song has been published in hymnals all over the world across denominations. You can find this hymn listed as #135 in our CBC hymnal.



## Third Week of Advent

# JOY

**T**idings of comfort and joy! In the words of a traditional Christmas carol, joy seems to follow comfort. Who doesn't experience joy after eating comfort food? Or who of us, doesn't sense joy when we are engaged in comfortable activities such as sleeping in, hanging out with good friends, the tiny hands of a small child hugging your neck or cuddling up by a warm fire on a cold, damp night? These comforts bring us a sense of joy. And yet, we know a Biblical context for joy doesn't always follow things that bring comfort. Why is this so?

For most of us, our humanness is part of the problem. The fact that we need these "life comforts" to elicit joy is indicative of our human condition. We see joy as an emotion, as a response to a pleasant event or a response to the "right" life circumstances. Once we think we've found something that makes us experience joy, we will go back to it or look for it, sometimes obsessively. But is that what joy is or should be? And what happens when that "thing" that seemed to provide joy can no longer be found?

This week, as we explore the idea of joy from a Biblical perspective, may we gain some wisdom about obtaining joy in the way God intends. Rather than working to obtain the feeling of joy and trying to hold onto that, whatever it takes, perhaps we would see joy as less of an emotion and more of a character trait. Rather than having to be in a "mood" to set us up for feelings of joy, we would allow Scripture to transform our thinking to see that true joy is part of the character of Christ. Therefore, we are to see this character trait becoming part of our own as we grow to look more like Him. More than even that, may we consider ways we may be joy-givers to others around us because we are bestowing the love and character of Christ to them. Enjoy this week's devotionals!

Sunday, December 14  
Today's Text: John 15:10-11

**D**o you find joy elusive? Do you wonder why it seems to come and go? Ever wonder where it goes when you can't find it? Let's relate the question of joy to the hunter seeking his prey. As a hunter, you first have to decide what you are hunting for, where it might be found, and what you have to do to be successful in catching or capturing your prey. Hunters spend hours studying their prey's habits: what they eat, where they sleep, when they move around and how they can be spotted.

If you want to find joy, you could hunt for it using these tactics. Knowing where it is might be easy for some but not so easy for others. Some think joy is found in cookies and ice cream. But for some, they may be confusing the "happy" feeling that treats bring, with true joy. Happiness and joy are not the same thing. The first place that we should look, especially for a Christian, is in God's Word, the Bible.

In today's passage, Jesus speaks of obeying His commands that our "joy may be full." Jerry Bridges, in his book, Pursuit of Holiness, says that Jesus links obedience and joy in a cause and effect manner; that is, joy results from obedience. Only those who are obedient will know the joy that comes from God.

The hunter now knows his prey and where to find it. Knowing what to do to capture our prey takes distinct effort. Action has to be taken to put your training into effect. Start by praying that God will use you as He wishes and when He wishes. Next, study to know God's commands found in the Bible, that is, how He wants you to stalk your prey. When the attitude of your heart has been adjusted with the love of God, you are ready to get joy.

Joy is found when you meet someone's financial needs without them knowing; serving a neighbor when they have been sick; teaching a class or individuals in a way they can't do for themselves; showing little children love and attention; leading the lost to know heaven awaits. There are many ways God will use you if you only listen. Joy is that inner pleasure God gives when we have been obedient to His commands.

The hunter succeeds when he/she has defined their prey, learned where to find it, and goes out to get it. Start your hunt for joy today!

--David Glover



## Monday, December 15 Today's Text: Isaiah 61:10-11

**J**oy! Isn't that what everyone wants? We certainly spend a lot of money buying things that we think will give us joy. We weary ourselves on entertainment thinking that will give us joy. Unfortunately, those things just leave us longing for more. So where do we find true joy? The scriptures say: I will greatly rejoice in the Lord! My soul shall be joyful in my God! Why? Because of Who He is and what He has done. He is King of Kings, the great I AM, our Savior, Redeemer, Protector, our ever present Help in trouble.

About three years after I was saved, there came a time of testing for me. We moved from El Paso (where everything was familiar) to Houston (where everything was unfamiliar). It was my wilderness time where all my head knowledge had to become heart knowledge. I went through a time of depression, doubts, fear and loneliness. I missed my prayer group, mentor, church friends and home in El Paso. Frankly, I wanted to go back to Egypt (El Paso). One day, I was scrubbing my kitchen floor on hands and knees, crying from loneliness, when the Lord spoke quietly to my heart. He asked me, "Why can't you be happy with just you and me alone?" I was completely undone. I said, "I don't know how that is possible Lord, but I would like that."

The next morning began a fresh, new journey. I met with the Lord daily reading His word and talking with Him in prayer. Then I would sit quietly at His feet. Psalm 131:2 says, "I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." I gained new strength to live; and a fresh new love for Jesus in my soul. Then, JOY; joy in the One Who was always there; Who never gave up on me and forgave all my sins.

Psalm 16:11 says, "You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." No matter where I find myself in life or what trouble faces me; I am never alone. My Joy-Giver is with me. He is with you too, right now. Will you join with me and rejoice in the Lord?

--Loyjean Matlock

## Tuesday, December 16 Today's Text: 1 Peter 1:6-9

**A**re we joyful? If we are not careful to stay focused on Jesus, the very Reason we celebrate the season, then Satan can rob us of our joy.

When we are caught up in the hustle and bustle of our busy and burdened lives, Satan has the perfect opportunity he needs to deceive us into thinking we don't have time to sit quietly with our Lord and Savior. As our schedules are filled with programs, parties and a myriad of other stresses, we are tempted to say to ourselves, "I'll do it later or tomorrow." But tomorrow never comes. Before you know it, our joy is depleted and we wonder why. When we get discouraged and are not experiencing joy, we should remember the acronym JOY - Jesus, Others, You. If we have let JOY get out of order in our lives we need to stop what we are doing, and find a place to be alone with God.

Joy is a fruit of His Spirit. When we spend time in His presence, focused on Him, not ourselves, we are abiding in His vine and are able to produce the fruit of joy. The only way a branch (we) can produce fruit, is when it is connected to the tree (God).

We may not always rejoice in the midst of trials, but when we are filled with Him, we are strong and can handle what comes our way. We can find joy knowing God is in control of our circumstances, even in the face of terror threats, war, diseases or natural disasters. We can take comfort and find joy knowing God is on His throne and is in complete control of every situation in our lives and in every situation in the whole earth.

Trials should not rob our joy, but should prove our faith is genuine and a proven faith is a source of great joy.

--Jan Hamilton



Wednesday, December 17  
Today's Text: Romans 14:17, 15:13

Joy, especially in today's culture, is often experienced when a person, or someone we love, has accomplished a long hoped-for goal. Sometimes that feeling of elation is because of a college diploma being earned, or even a high school diploma in some cases. It may be felt when the realtor you worked with says, "The owner of the house accepted your bid. You have a new home!"

Many of us have the known relief and then elation when a doctor tells us that the new baby is just fine. At other times, our joy has been almost out of control when the doctor tells us that our loved one will be OK and medical science has an answer for the problem.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to say that the most complete joy we experience would be in our relationship with Christ? If the Holy Spirit were so apparent in our lives that our mere existence becomes a testimony of the hope given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit?

Our prayer for you is that this joy is yours as we celebrate this Christmas season.

--Dick and Virginia Nichols

Thursday, December 18  
Today's Text: John 16:22

At Christmas time, we hear these lyrics, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King!" Those lyrics are usually a reflection back to the past, when Jesus came to earth as a baby, a King veiled in flesh. As Christians, most of us love to celebrate this holiday remembering the wonder of God coming down to become a man. That brings us great joy! But more than ever before, we realize that our world is in great need of real joy. It is so easy to get depressed in the times in which we live. Even as I write this devotional, I am hearing news about a second health care worker contracting the Ebola virus. The stock market crashed some 300+ points this week, and ISIS is conquering more ground in the Middle East.

Christians must live in this world with all its woes. Yet strangely, God has given us the opportunity to still possess joy in the midst of all the conflicts. We have been allowed, through Jesus, the privilege of knowing not only peace, but actual joy in times of trouble. I like this definition of joy: "a calm delight." There isn't much calm in our world today and definitely not much delight if you listen to the news, and yet God shows us in His Word that His desire for our everyday lives is that we are to experience joy and display it for the world around us.

In John 16:22, Christ speaks of sorrow. The word sorrow means "a heaviness or a feeling of grief." We will all have those times in our lives, some more than others. It seems like holidays magnify that emotion more than normal. It could be a disappointment, the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job or a severed relationship, but sorrow is just part of the DNA of this world that we live in. We will all experience sorrow at some point in our lives.

In this passage, Christ is giving His disciples a sneak preview of what was about to happen as He faced the crucifixion. Their dreams and desires were about to be shattered, but it was not to be the end. Christ uses the word "but" here which is a word that shows contrast. He says, "It's going to look bleak, but (contrast) you will see Me again. When you do, you will receive JOY that the circumstances of this world cannot take away from you." (Spire paraphrase)

*Lord thank you for never leaving us nor forsaking us in this world as believers. Thank you for being there through all this world's disappointments, and tragedies. Thank you for giving us a joy that no man can take from us. Thanks for coming that we might obtain that hope! Amen.*

--Dennis Spire



## Friday, December 19 Today's Text: | Peter 4:12-13

In today's verse, Peter reminds you that you are to expect to be tested by trials, tests, persecution, and suffering in your life. These verses introduce two attitudes required to be triumphant when these trials occur. The first attitude is that we are to expect them (trials) and the second is to rejoice in them. A believer is not to think that these trials accidentally happen. God allows them for the believer's testing, purging, and cleansing. These trials make you a partner with Christ in the same kind of suffering He endured, that is, suffering for doing what is right in God's eyes. You should find joy in being found worthy to share trials with Jesus. When Christ returns, you can rejoice with a rapturous joy. A Christian who overcomes trials in this life will have overflowing joy in the future. Such an awareness of future joy enables you to rejoice, and find joy in these present trials.

Trials occur in your life for several reasons: to test the strength of your faith, to humble you, to wean you from worldly things, to call you to your Heavenly hope, to reveal what you truly love, to help you value God's blessings in your life, to enable you to help others in their trials, to help bear others burdens, to develop in you enduring strength for greater usefulness to God and into greater places of ministry and effectiveness.

When you are tested, you have a choice to make. You can turn away from Christ or turn to Christ. If you have accepted Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, as your Savior, then Christ lives *in* you (Col 1:27, Gal 2:20). When you are in a trial, He is right there inside you! The Christ in you is not the humble, suffering Jesus Who, though He was fully God, humbled Himself to live as man to die on the Cross for you, but He is the glorious God, the Son Who reigns in Heaven, Who spoke the Universe into existence, Who created all things, Who holds all things together. The One Who accompanied the Israelites in the desert, Whose name is above all names, Who holds the keys to Heaven and Hell, Who has all the fullness of the Godhead in Him, and Who makes you complete. You have all that power and glory living in you, always available to you, to take you victoriously through any trial if you will just let Him!

Rejoice that Christ gave Himself *for* you so He could give Himself *to* you. Allow Him to live His life through you, with you, in you, as you. If you will allow Him to, then the whole world will see!

—Kinney Simon

## Saturday, December 20 Today's Text: Habakkuk 3:17-18

For most people, Christmas is a time of joy. Some of us experience joy in decorating our homes, shopping for gifts for family and friends, and hearing Christmas music wherever we go. Others experience joy in baking, and reminiscing with family, about family Christmas traditions. Sometimes, reminiscing may include tears, when we think of loved ones that are no longer here to celebrate with us. As Christians, we sometimes think that we should be happy at all times. We confuse the meaning of joy with the feelings and emotions of being happy. We need to remind ourselves that we can have happiness with joy, but more importantly, we can have joy without feeling happy all the time.

When we look up the word joy in the dictionary, we find the words “emotions,” “feelings,” and “success,” but the Biblical definition of joy is quite the contrary. It is not about us, but rather it is ALL ABOUT JESUS. That has to put a smile on your face! Joy does not depend on us—what a relief! As stated in Galatians 5:22, joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus is the source of our joy. Jesus is the reason we can know joy. We can experience joy because of what Jesus did on the cross for us, and what He does for us as we journey on this earth. This is why the Apostle Paul could say, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”, (Phillipians 1:21). Paul trusted that even in death, he would be in the presence of Jesus, and that is eternal victory. We all desire to be happy, but we can have joy even amid unhappy circumstances.

The key verses for today's devotional are found in the book of Habakkuk. On the surface, verse 17 is not very upbeat, and optimistic. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We see a picture of emptiness. But then comes verse 18, and the focus turns from emptiness to the God of our salvation.

Rick Warren (Daily Hope Devotional) defined joy from the perspective of Scripture. “Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.” This is both comforting and encouraging.

As we celebrate Christmas, and make lasting memories with family and friends, may we be reminded that joy comes from knowing Christ the Savior in a personal relationship. It is knowing we NEVER walk alone. This Christmas, may our focus be on JESUS, the GREATEST GIFT of all. The blessed assurance that even after the Christmas season comes to an end, our joy continues because it is not based on feelings or temporary circumstances. May you experience the JOY OF KNOWING JESUS beyond December 25, 2014! Merry Christmas CBC family!

—Becky Jaimes



Fourth Week of Advent

# LOVE

How many of us would even try to venture a guess as to how many songs, poems and sonnets have been written throughout the ages on the subject of love? Whatever that number is, it's got to be at least 6 figures long! So, we have finally reached the week of Christmas and LOVE is the principal mindset. Whatever our minds may conjure up when the word "love" is presented to us, the most important viewpoint on this subject for us to receive is God's viewpoint. You have no doubt heard the Bible described as "God's loveletter to mankind." God is the very Author of love. In fact, John the Apostle tells us that "God is love."

So, Who better to have the final word on such a noble, rich and ineffable thing than God? As we work through each devotion this week, ask the Lord to help you understand what He wants to teach you about His love and how *we* should love. What expression should it take on in your daily walk? How can you distinguish between your feelings and the real thing? What steps do you need to take, what steps does the Lord need to take with your submission to Him, to grow His love in you to maturity? May we all sense some growth this week as we study His viewpoint on the subject.

*Could we with ink the ocean fill  
And were the sky of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill  
And every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above,  
Would drain the ocean dry,  
Nor could the scroll contain the whole  
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

*-Frederick Lehman*

Sunday, December 21

Today's Text: John 3:1-17

Jesus said speaking of being born again, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

What an odd thing to say to explain the workings of God, but here He said them. It had meaning and purpose. I believe He was trying to help Nicodemus see that what is at work in our lives is not the normal, but the supernatural. What to Christ was everyday in His world, to us is amazing. Jesus went so far as to criticize Nicodemus, as a teacher of the law, for not being able to see what He meant.

Are we, today, seeing what Jesus meant? Or are we like a Nicodemus, wanting to see something that fits our norms, our expectations about the way things ought to be. Jesus could see what they couldn't. He knew what heaven was, and knew that it was unique. He wanted them to get something they didn't yet.

Are we getting what Jesus wanted them to see? Or are we, like Nicodemus, trapped in an old covenant mindset, based upon laws, expectations, disappointments, and punishments? Should we be seeing with our hearts what Jesus wants us to see – a new life, a born again life – a life lifted up? He was lifted up so that we could be too. He had a heart for our heart. In His suffering, we would be healed. Through our belief in Him, we would transcend our lives of desperation. In his death, we would exchange our heart of flesh for what had been a heart of stone. Once again, we could glimpse paradise where we walk with God in the cool of the day.

May we, this season, find our new heart in Jesus. That heart may be just what is needed for those around us to be saved.

*--Paul & Cheri Martin*



## Monday, December 22

Today's Text: John 15:12-13

Love...a 4-letter word. What an easy word for us to use daily. We love certain shoes, certain foods, certain movies, certain teams, etc. You get the picture. Sometimes, we even say, "I love you" after the first kiss. But, do we really know what love is? Christ commands us to love one another as He loves us. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Am I really willing to give my one and only life so that someone else can live? Are they deserving?

During my prayer time I've caught myself asking God to help me be a reflection of Him. Also, I've heard myself asking Him to help others see Him in my behavior, my speech, my actions. It all sounds so good and so humble, doesn't it? The other day I stopped to listen to the words I was saying. Did I really want to be a reflection of Him? That might mean I couldn't get exasperated when my friend asked me for the 10th time to help her write her lesson plans. After all, how many years has she been doing this? And, I couldn't get upset when the rebellious student raised his hand for the 5th time asking the same question I had already answered five times that day. And, I should probably go sit with the new teacher during our faculty meeting and maybe have an opportunity to invite him/her to church. "Wait, not today, Lord. I can be a reflection of you tomorrow, but today I really don't feel like having a servant's heart; I've had a hard morning already." You get the picture.

This Christmas season my prayer is that I can convey true love to the people around me. I pray that He will dwell in me and show others His love, because you see, I don't have the power to do this on my own.

--Naya Garcia

## Tuesday, December 23

Today's Text: 1 John 4:7-11

When I think of the word "love" I remember what my then 4 year old son said when I asked him how much he loved me. "Mommy, I love you aces!" "Aces?" I said, "What does that mean?" He replied, "Nothing beats an ace."

Love can mean so many different things to different people. Christmas is a time that brings out a special feeling of love in me. Jesus was born and the people came. Not out of duty, but out of love. They brought gifts. Not because it was expected, but because of love. The gifts were of the finest they could find. Not to impress, but to show their love.

I am reminded of a time in my life of intense struggle and financial ruin. The lives of my two children, ages 3 and 15, would change forever. How would I manage? How would I pay the bills and care for my children? How would I protect them from the overshadowing danger? God showed me the blessing that would come from this terrible suffering; I was now free to attend church and worship whenever I chose. God then blessed me with a church family who would teach my family about God's love. As the people of the church learned of our suffering, they came. Not out of duty, but out of love. They brought fine gifts. Not to impress, but to show their love. God showed me how He uses others to show the love He has for us. I saw and experienced God's love during those 2 years. My boys saw the love of a church family at work. Because of love, we had enough food to eat and the bills were paid. Because of love, my children were blessed with gifts at Christmas. Because of that outpouring of love, my now adult children show that same love to others in need.

Jesus was born and the people came to show their love and express that love with fine gifts. Right from His birth, Jesus taught us how to love and the true meaning of giving. We give out of love not obligation. God is love and we are to reflect that love in everything we do and in everything we give. Each Christmas, my gifts are carefully chosen and beautifully wrapped. They are not expensive gifts but meaningful gifts and many times handmade gifts. I give not because it is expected but because of love. "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." -1 John 4:11

--Debby Brewington





Wednesday, December 24  
Today's Text: Titus 3:4-7

After attending church at the same place for 15 years, it's not uncommon to hear teaching and sermon illustrations more than once. One such illustration deals with the natural tendencies of our flesh, pride. When we are tempted to think pridefully, we must remember that we are not perfect. The illustration of this is presented to us by asking the question, "Whom of us would desire, and be willing to have all of our thoughts displayed on a large screen for all to see?" Through the eyes of humility, I realize that would be a scary and embarrassing challenge. But when I read these verses, I'm thankful for God's grace and kindness to me and of course, to all of us. He knows all of my sin (including my sinful thoughts) and yet, He still loves me enough to send His Son to purify my soul, then renames me as a "Child of God." He rejuvenated my spirit from death to life! All my sin is paid for, I've been justified by His grace through the blood of Christ, my Savior.

If we look back at verse 3 of today's text, we see the life you and I were destined to live without the rebirthing of our spirits. The NIV translation says, "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." Because of His un-ending love for me, I'm free from the enslaving thoughts of my flesh and empowered to live a life of righteousness.

If all my thoughts were displayed for everyone to see, there would certainly be some that would be evil. However, that "screen" would also reveal the deliverance of God through His guidance and also through the work of the Holy Spirit. Because of the renewing of my mind and the power of God, I can resist sin. I'm also thankful that when God the Father looks at me, He sees the blood of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ instead of my sin.

Do you know this kind of love? If yes; how are you responding to your freedom from sin? If not, cry out to Him, even today. No depth of sin, no sin is more powerful than His LOVE for you.

--Don Rapp

Thursday, December 25  
Today's Text: 1 John 3:1

Merry Christmas! What's the best Christmas gift you've ever received? As I look back at all my Christmas mornings, one gift stands out the most. I was about 8 years old, and desperately wanted a "big girl" bike. I remember waking up, excitedly walking down the long hallway and entering the living room. There it stood; kick stand out, gleaming in front of the Christmas tree. It was a brand new peach colored bike with a white basket on the front! I was so excited and impatient, ready to hop on and ride all day long. That is a fabulous memory and I'm so blessed that my parents wanted to bless us with such lavish gifts when they were able. We also had some Christmases that weren't so lavish.

Now, all these years later, I am incredibly blessed to see the same type of memories forming for my own daughters. Do you have some similar memories?

As we celebrate Christmas today, let's focus on God's Word. Today's text says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." We celebrate the birth of Jesus this day. It's a day God showed His love for us in person. He gave us His very own Son. What a gift!

Salvation is the ultimate gift, and I'm so glad I've received it. It far surpasses my beautiful, peach colored bicycle, even with the white basket! Another wonderful benefit of this gift is, it's not just for us. It's so awesome, we are to share it with others. So, with this in mind, let's be like the Christmas lights we see everywhere around us this time of year that make the world beautiful and let's shine like they do. Let's shine so bright others will want to know what makes us stand out. God shared the gift of Jesus with us; let's take it to our family, our neighbors, and our community.

From my family to yours, have a very Merry Christmas!

--Angie McCoy



Friday, December 26  
Today's Text: Galatians 2:20

As a little girl (who is still) growing up in this church, I have many memories of singing with the children's choir. I sang a song for many Christmas seasons, called "Happy Birthday, Jesus." I remember rehearsing with Mrs. Brenda and my mother, and there was a particular part of the song that made me almost embarrassed to even whisper it, let alone say it into a microphone. The song talked about the Christmas season, and the real meaning of the celebration, but at the very end, I was supposed to say, "I love you, Jesus."

The words were included in the song itself, and I had much less trouble singing it than I did saying it. Somehow, repeating those words when the music died down terrified me. I was saved when I was in elementary school, so I had some understanding of the love Jesus has for us, but these words seemed too mushy, yet also too powerful for a little girl like me to say. I'm sure I would've easily said that I loved my family, my friends, or my cat at the time, but saying, "I love you" to Jesus was something different.

As I have matured in my relationship with Christ, I realize how interconnected these words are to what Paul meant by, "I have been crucified with Christ" and "I live by faith in the Son of God." Sure, His love is overwhelming, and perplexing, and it can be easy to say when we are close to Him; but it is also a deliberate choice to love. He chose to love us, and we have a choice to love Him. As Paul described, we have to die to ourselves in order to allow His love to move us in our daily lives; and this will allow us to say "I love you, Jesus," with unashamed honesty. Saying that we love Jesus should be an utterance from a crucified self, as a response to Christ, "who loved me and gave Himself for me."

As you move through the Christmas season and are reminded of His love, may the words, "I love you, Jesus" be your heart's reply, and may this be evident in the "life which [you] now live in the flesh by faith in the Son of God."

-- Miranda Champion

Saturday, December 27  
Today's Text: 1 Corinthians 13

When I was asked to write a devotional about the "Love Chapter," I thought it was going to be a piece of cake, until I sat down to write. Funny thing is, I drew a blank. Nothing was coming to mind. So, I prayed about it, "Lord, what do you want me to say about love? Should I give some amazing story about a person showing a perfect stranger selfless love? Or how about a thought provoking analogy?"

Well, I read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 again and began to think about what the Love Chapter was *not*. What would it look like if it was written from a reverse angle? I think it helps us put so much of our pettiness and self-interest in stark perspective and shows love to be that much more beautiful. So, here it is in reverse:

*Impatience and unkindness is hatred.*

*Hate is envious and ego-centric.*

*Hate is arrogant and rude.*

*Hatred is insisting on one's own way.*

*Hatred is irritable or resentful;*

*it celebrates sin, and it mocks what is true.*

*Hate is whiny and thin-skinned, thoroughly skeptical,*

*always pessimistic, a born quitter.*

Putting it this way was a bit painful for me. Was it for you? How often do we say we love, yet insist on having our own way? Or do something for someone, only to inwardly give ourselves a nice pat on the back? Or take offense to something someone said, letting our feelings be hurt and hold it against that person, finding it hard to forgive? My friend, I am just as guilty. Let us really dwell on this passage in a new light. Allow the Lord to work on your heart and be willing to live out love the way God intended. How will you show love to someone this week?

Thank you Lord, for Your perfect example of what love is. Help us to remember what it means to truly love others. Amen.

-- Joanna Kidd



## The Last Days of this Year

# So Long 2014!

Every year we say it, don't we? We can't believe another year has come and gone so quickly! Some of us might even say this on a monthly or weekly basis, and yet, the twenty-four hour day has not changed since the beginning of the world. Sure, we have Daylight Savings Time and Standard Time, but the sun has risen and set in the same pattern for millennia. So, what is it about Time that takes us by surprise? *Tempus fugit*, "time flees," as the old, Latin saying goes. And it seems to be true.

We've all seen the "year in pictures" montages on newshows and in magazines. The American Media likes to define the last year in terms of world events and pop culture trends. That's not a bad way to summarize a year, but is it the whole picture? As you look back over the past year, instead of thinking about news headlines and cultural trends, why not inquire of the Lord to help you summarize your year? What did He have in store for you before the year began? Did you accomplish His goals for your spiritual growth? Were there events or milestones that He could say were pleasing to Him? Are there things we didn't accomplish that He wished we had? Do we even ask Him these questions, or take the time to read His Word and pray with this mindset?

If you can honestly say that you have not thought about the new year this way, perhaps it's time. Perhaps there are things He would communicate to you the likes of which, we cannot even yet conceive. Before you get the scoop on the past year from the media, and make all kinds of "resolutions" about the next year coming up, why not take the time over a period of days or weeks to inquire of the Lord about these things? After all, He exists outside of Time, He is the very Author of Time, so Who better than He knows what amazing things can happen, what glorious transformations and adventures await us in the new year? Why not make time to ask Him, and then wait for His reply?

Sunday, December 28

Today's Text: Jeremiah 29:11

You're coming to the end of another year. Have you ever asked yourself, "What did I accomplish this past year?" or "What do I have to show for this past year?" For today's devotional, take time and reflect on the past year and then look forward to what the Lord will do in your life in the new year.

Today's scripture passage is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote to the Israelites who had been taken captive by the Babylonians. I believe this verse was telling them not to give up and to move ahead to the hope and the future that He promised, although they were exiled in Babylon for 70 years. You may ask, "How does this verse apply to me in today's world?" Well, I can tell you that God's Word is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

When looking at the future, we need to take time to see the eternal picture/plan that God has for our lives. The bigger picture is that God has won the battle and in the end, we, as born again believers in Jesus Christ are winners! Justice prevails! In John 19:30, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, He said, "It is finished!" God sent His only Son as a sacrifice to die on a cross and shed His precious blood for mankind's sins. Through His blood, we are washed clean and we are forgiven. Praise God!!

As you look forward to 2015, hold on to the promises that God gives us in His Word. A song and very familiar passage comes to mind, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness..."(Matthew 6:33) Looking forward as Christians, we should seek God's Word for guidance and counsel. Strive to live a life fully committed and surrendered to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!!

--Sonya Evans



## Monday, December 29 Today's Text: Isaiah 43:18-19

On August 10, 2002 Scott and I were married in Dallas, Texas. Scott was born and reared in Dallas, the only place he knew as home, and I grew up in Alabama, Tennessee & Georgia. By 1988, I too, was living in Dallas. We met sometime in the summer of 2001 at a singles function at church (thanks to Scott's sister who made sure we were in the same place at the same time). Out of obedience to the Lord, Scott had recently closed his business and was planning to go back to school. I was in graduate school preparing for the next phase of my career. We started dating sometime in 2001.

I had recently been studying Moses' life and was earnestly praying the Lord direct the next steps of my own life. I distinctly remember praying for the Lord to grow my faith such that I would be able to follow "a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." I wanted to be able to trust Him and not need to know the plan before I agree to comply with His will. After all, I was 34 years old. No one starts graduate school without career goals in mind at the end...right? I had been to Indianapolis to investigate job prospects and spent the summer taking graduate classes in Guadalajara, Mexico (and seriously contemplating going to medical school there). Lo! and Behold, the man of my dreams shows up, interrupting this process. He asked me what I was going to do when I finished graduate school. I told him, "I don't know. I'm gonna follow a cloud till God shows me." Meanwhile, Scott was working and had enrolled in classes. He chose to investigate schools that had Construction Management degrees. Yes, you guessed it, the Indianapolis campus of Purdue University had the exact degree plan he wanted. Several other places did too, but how could you turn down an opportunity for a degree from Purdue?

Throughout the fall of 2001, it didn't take us very long to realize God was preparing us to get married and move. Scott's desire to go to Purdue seemed like such a dream. My desire to find and marry a godly man seemed like such a dream. Well, I can tell you, God makes dreams come true!

## Monday, December 29 Continued...

Our story illustrates today's text because just as God can do something impossible, like make "rivers in the desert," He was doing a new, seemingly impossible work in our lives. We had both come to a point that we were putting our pasts behind us and were both ready to begin anew with whatever the Lord had for us, no matter how bizarre the plan seemed. We don't have time to tell you about all the years the Lord worked in our lives separately but also in a parallel way. It was not until the right time, when we both had decided to surrender to His will and were open to whatever He wanted to do in our lives, that He crossed our paths.

God made our "roadway in the wilderness." You see, we were married at our church in Dallas, drove away and didn't look back. After our honeymoon, we went straight to Indianapolis so Scott could begin school in the next few days. While we both had been to Indianapolis, we had never been there together. Scott rented us an apartment, sight unseen. When we landed at the airport in Indianapolis and got our bags, our driver asked me where we were going. I didn't even know our address! (This was a BIG deal for me.) So fun to realize we were really leaving it all behind. God even made us our own "river in the desert." Our first apartment was located on the canal in downtown Indianapolis, which was our proverbial desert, since we knew **no one** there. We didn't even know where grocery stores, shopping malls or a gas station was!

All we really knew was that God had put us together. God made a way for us. He didn't want us to be hindered by the past so He moved us to a brand new place. Did I mention we didn't even have jobs? Nope, neither one of us! Such an exciting way to start a marriage and life together, completely by FAITH!

This New Year, wherever your life might be, may you know that He will make your life a "new thing" whenever you place it in His hands, completely trusting in Him. Our God is true to His Word.

--Penni Gordon



Tuesday, December 30

Today's Text: Colossians 3:1-3, 12-17

It is now days past Christmas. Trees and decorations are coming down, out-of-town guests are finding their ways back home, New Year's parties are on the horizon. It can be easy to feel a little worn out from the demands of the holiday season. Thankfully, we have a God Who explains where our focus and priorities should be. The first three verses of our text brings to mind the beautiful picture of baptism: dying to sin and being raised up in Christ. It is in light of this "new life" and hope in our Lord that we should "set our minds on things above."

Tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, forgiveness, peace, and above all, love. Love is described here as the "bond of perfection." Choosing to love the way God loves can, at times, be very challenging. But that kind of love, "agape" love, can bridge gaps, serve as a witness, and show true compassion and genuine care. It's easy to love loveable people, but love goes beyond caring for the kind, respected elder we sit next to on Sunday mornings or our like-minded family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The kind of love God has is for the broken, the grouchy, the mean-spirited, contemptible, prideful, and sinful people. Praise the Lord! For we were once the unlovable; we were the sinners. Yet our new life has made us new creations and given us joy unspeakable!

I often think about how glorious life will be when this world has passed away and we are at the beautiful feet of our Messiah. However, we don't have to wait to rejoice! May God fill us with a desire to learn from His holy Word, teaching one another, and singing praises to His name with our hearts. Therefore, rejoice! Christmas may be over, but His season is eternal. In all things we do, let it be a reflection of Him; from buying groceries or changing diapers or tires to heralding His Good News to a lost and dying world.

*Lord, thank you for a year in which you both provided for our needs and refined us through various trials. Some trials were more painful than others, but You, O Lord, in Your tender mercies and perfect love carried us through. Please give us strength as we enter a new year to set our minds on You, to put on love, and to be witnesses of the love You had for us in sending Your Son to die for our sins. We need You, Holy Spirit, to perfect us. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

--Sara Dull

Wednesday, December 31

Today's Text: Philippians 3:7-14

As we reflect back over the past year, we can see that God has been at work in so many ways. There have been new people who have come into our lives and several of our strong encouragers have gone to be with the Lord. Many homes and lives have been mended and some have come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior this year. There have been many changes.

Just as a runner knows that looking backward at ground that has already been covered is going to hinder you and slow down your finish time, Paul knows that we must forget what is behind us, stop glancing backward and stretch toward what is ahead of us. We have a race to win, there's a prize to be won!

It's not that we forget. It's not that we never remember. Remembering our pasts can give us encouragement or determination to keep going. Our past is always going to be part of our lives. But Paul reminds us that our past is not our goal. We must run the race, live our lives, as if the best is yet to come. God has so much more for His people. There are souls to be won for Jesus, and hurting people who need to know the love of Christ.

What a sense of expectation we get in living this way. We can face a new year with expectation of what God is going to do in our lives, and in the lives of our family and friends. Let's stretch toward that upward call in Christ Jesus this year. Let's press on and run with all our might toward the "high call" of God!

*Dear God, thank You for all You have brought me through. Help me give You my all this coming New Year. May I reach for the prize. Amen.*

--Brenda Spire



Thursday, January 1, 2015  
Today's Text: Revelation 21:1-5

Everyone of us loves a happy ending don't we? Our favorite stories are usually those that end well. It's not that tragedies aren't considered good literature, but I'll bet the majority of us would say that the stories we like to tell over and over, while they may contain drama, tragedy, adventure and danger, would still be the stories that end with the hero saving the day. We want love stories to end with the guy getting the girl. We love that The Prodigal Son is welcomed back home with a hug, a kiss, a robe and a ring from the very Father he deserted. We love happy endings. They are part of our collective story-telling and embedded deep in our human psyche.

In our text today, we see that an ending to the story is actually a new beginning. John tells us that he saw a "new heaven and a new earth." We know from the original language that the idea of "new" as it is used here, is not a "different" heaven and earth. God will restore the same heaven (atmospheric heaven) and earth that we have all known. It will be no longer "groaning" as Paul describes creation in Romans 8:22, in its fallen state.

The lack of a sea is John's way of communicating the lack of things the sea represented. The sea was a turbulent, fearsome and unpredictable obstacle that brought separation. No longer will creation be a dangerous or fearsome place for humanity. No longer will there be separation and deep, darkness.

Not only that, but the Bridegroom gets His Bride, beautiful and radiant. God (The Father) runs to meet His people, take them up in His embrace and dwell with them, forever. Every tear, every sorrow will be wiped away and no one will ever cry, worry, hurt or die again-ever. Can you even conceive of it? How is this to be? It's an ending too good to be true!

"He Who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new...write it down for these sayings are true and faithful.'" God said it, that settles it. Hallelujah and Amen!

--Rosanna Haddock

## Afterword

You made it all the way to the end! We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Christmas season and into the New Year using God's Word as a guide and the words of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage and challenge you.

A formal "Thank You" goes out to everyone involved in the making of this devotional. Thank you for giving your time and talent to study, think and write for the edification and enjoyment of your Church Family. We have much talent, spiritual wisdom and courage amongst us!

It is our express hope that if you have ever struggled to have and keep a special "quiet time" alone with the Lord on a daily basis, that having gone through this 33 day journey would help to serve as training ground. May you keep a time set aside for the Lord everyday in the coming year. Ask the Lord to help you with this--He wants to meet with you regularly, even more than you do!

In Tolkien's literature classic, The Lord of the Rings, one of the main characters, Frodo Baggins, has been on a heroic journey "through many dangers, toils and snares," to say the least. At the end of this journey, he has accomplished the task he set out to do and faces certain death. However, he is not alone. Accompanied by his fiercely loyal companion, Sam-Wise Gamgee, Frodo has set his face toward death, eager to rest from all his weariness. He turns to his faithful friend and says, "I am glad that you are with me, here at the end of all things, Sam."

On a much less dramatic note, we could say the same about the way the Lord has organized and ordained His Church. How glad we should all be to be able to say that we are here together and He is with us, now and even unto the "end of all things."



