



CALVARY BAPTIST

CHURCH

— CHRISTMAS DEVOTIONAL 2017 —



THE 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, December 3

Today's Text: Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

The word HOPE is often misused. For example: "I hope it doesn't rain," while dark thunder clouds roll in. "I hope I don't fail the exam," while never having attended class or studied the textbook. "I hope I can win the race," having never run to prepare. Not only is this word misused, but its meaning has also evolved. However, a more accurate use of the word is "a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen which comes with a sense of trust."

The Word of God is filled with promises. Many of these promises have been fulfilled and still many promises are events and joys that are yet to come. God gave a promise of hope to His people. The children of Israel anticipated this promise, looking forward with hope, toward God's fulfillment of that promise.

Today, we hold fast to the knowledge that Christ Jesus is our hope and that the promises God gives us in His Word are trustworthy. We have hope in our God, through Jesus. Our hope is also based on fulfilled scripture and God's faithfulness toward us as we walk according to His Word and experience His amazing grace in our lives.

~Joy & Gary Beall

Additional readings for you to enjoy:

Genesis 8:1

Psalms 3:2-6

Mark 4:30-34

Romans 5:2-7

I Peter 1:3-6

Monday, November 28

Today's Text: Isaiah 7:14

Ever since that fateful day that sin entered into the world through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, there seemed to be no hope for mankind. Man was doomed to spend eternal separation from God. Man had to do the best he could to follow the commandments of God if he hoped to be able to spend eternity with Him.

On one hot day in Viet Nam, a UH-1E(Huey) helicopter was dispatched to provide cover for Medevac choppers to retrieve wounded Marines from a hot LZ. During the mission, this Huey had received an onslaught of enemy fire from the ground. One round went through the transmission, and the chopper crash landed on the ground. The pilot was killed, and the co-pilot and crew chief were seriously injured. The door gunner was slightly injured, so he set up his machine gun on its bipod and kept firing at the enemy in hopes that they would be rescued by another Huey. He held off the enemy for about 45 minutes. He had warped 3 barrels and was on his last belt of ammunition when he heard the distinct sound of approaching Hueys. That was a sign of his hope of rescue. Ten minutes later, they were in one of the Hueys headed back to safety.

Mankind's sign of hope of eternal salvation was the birth of Jesus. He was born of a virgin just like it was prophesied in Isaiah. He was called Immanuel, which means God with us. He is our Blessed Hope. Through Him, we have eternal life.

~Bill Russell

Today's Text: Isaiah 11:1-2 **Tuesday, November 29**

Since coming on staff at CBC, I've realized quickly that children can show you some of the purest forms of joy, and some of the purest forms of an opposing emotion. If you can think of a time where you've witnessed a child impulsively jump or scream from either feeling, then you know what I mean. They can do that so well. No matter our efforts, a good cry or a good belly laugh can come out of them for any reason. They can giggle during a prayer, whoop and holler over a new plaything, or even bawl their eyes out during an outing or a perfect photo opportunity.



I think one of the best examples of joy that I see most often here amongst our kiddos at Calvary is watching them retell a story, or talk about something they are really excited about. They tend to talk faster, talk louder, and you'd have a hard time interrupting them if you tried. *They can't contain their joy.* Whether their talking about their chickens, their school friends, their latest family trip, or even their favorite Sonic treat, they can't keep it in.

As believers, our joy cannot be taken away from us, or contained, either. We are assured of that in John 15 and 16. Christ told us how to abide in His love, and that he tells us these things "...so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (15:11). He also goes on to say that we will experience grief now, in this life, but that when we see Him again, our hearts "...will rejoice, and no one will take [our] joy away from [us.]" (16:22)

With a week before Christmas Eve, I encourage you to examine your heart. Have you found yourself unable to contain your joy in Christ? Has it felt like it has been threatened to be taken away from you? In light of any heartaches, disappointments, and weariness you may have in reaching this season, ask the Lord to remind you of his goodness, and of the truth in these verses. Ask for these verses to continue to be true, even when more hurts come. Today, I ask that you cling to a memory, a song, or a prayer, along with these verses- Whatever it takes to remind you of the joy that we have been given. Make like a child and don't let anyone steal your joy! ***"Cause I'm so happy, so very happy, I have the love of Jesus in my heart.."***

~Miranda Champion

Wednesday, November 30

Today's Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Look around at the people who surround you, or turn on the TV and you will see a continuous newsreel showing the futile actions of people trying to live without Biblical hope; without a life fixed on God. What was once called evil is today, called good. What was once considered light is now considered darkness. Our problem is that we have become wise in our own eyes and clever in our own sight. In effect, we want to be our own god.

In America, we see the futile activity of a world full of people who know not the comfort of God, nor the light of His presence. So many prefer the darkness and have made an existence in the "valley of the shadow of death" rather than enjoying the light of Jesus Christ.

The condition is not new. These discouraging words describe Jerusalem at the time of Isaiah. Into this morass, came God's judgment and ultimately His forgiveness and salvation.

Isaiah 40:1 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people..." God means business when He loves His children. God's people need comfort because we have been wounded and broken by the power of sin and evil. The Hebrew word used for comfort is "nachum" which means "breathe deeply." It's the idea when someone counsels, "Take a deep breath." Let God get hold of you. God is generous with His love.

Like the town crier, there are three voices proclaiming the coming salvation. In verse 3, the first voice proclaims a coming change. John the Baptist would be this voice preparing the way of the Lord. In Matthew's gospel, (1:21) the angel proclaims, "You shall name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins." This was to fulfill the ancient prophecy, "They will call him Immanuel which means, 'God with us.'" That's comfort and hope.

The second voice (vs.6) cries that the things and people of this world will not survive. Everything dies, nothing lasts except God and His Word. What people think is happiness and comfort in this world will pass away. Only the comfort found in God will last.

The third voice (vs.9) proclaims the salvation of our God. God saves His people with His powerful Love, none other than the Lord Jesus Himself, God's strong and gentle Love.

Christmas is the time we remember how much our God loves us and far He is willing to go to save us. In our busyness, take a deep breath and let God get a hold of you. Only God counts. Accept His salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior and remember, God is WITH us!

~Pete and Stew Harris

Thursday, December 1

Today's Text: Psalm 146:5

God's ways are not our ways. Because of the unfathomable wisdom of God, the (seemingly) unworthy are frequently used by God to accomplish great things. This should be a source of hope for us all.

Jacob's shortcomings are obvious to even the casual observer; he was deceitful and conniving from birth (Gen. 25:26) and he displayed this pattern of behavior for much of his life. Yet despite his imperfections, Jacob was found worthy of seeing God face to face at Peniel (Gen.32:30); being the progenitor of the 12 tribes; and, providing his name to an entire nation when God renamed him Israel (Gen.32:28). The Lord's use of a deeply flawed individual such as Jacob should instill a sense of hope in us that we could be similarly used by God.

An additional source of hope stems from God's steadfastness. We can hope in the Lord because He is dependable. He is not capricious like a human ruler, and, also unlike a human, He is all powerful. This should hearten us in that when God makes a promise to His people, He intends on keeping it, and nothing can stop Him from bringing it to fruition.

Finally, we dare hope because of God's undeserved mercy. Like Jacob, '... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Even though Jacob's flaws were manifold, God was able to see past his shortcomings and enable Jacob to do great things. Likewise, God can choose to give us, not what we deserve, because none of us want what we've truly earned – condemnation. Instead, God can choose to forgive our frailties and shortcomings, which is the greatest Hope we have in the God of Jacob.

~Billie Heiser

Friday, December 2 *Today's Text: Psalm 33:18*

Fear: Revere

Hope: to wait, to expect

Mercy: Goodness, kindness, faithfulness

What caught my eye in this verse is the part about fear. This isn't a bad fear. This fear is the good fear the LORD calls us to have when approaching Him or speaking of Him, we are to revere Him. We are to respect His power and we are to hold Him in the highest regard. That is the fear the LORD is looking upon and is spoken of here. The LORD looks upon those that have HOPE in His MERCY. I see a picture of someone waiting for the news of a loved one who gave their life to Christ after praying for them expectantly; a prayer to bring a wayward soul back into fellowship; a prayer to restore a broken relationship whether it is a marriage, parent-child, or even a friendship that has been broken.

Do we pray these things expecting the LORD to fulfill them? When the above prayers are answered God is showing us His never-ending mercy, His goodness, kindness and His faithfulness.

As we enter into the Christmas season there are many families that are hurting, that aren't getting together and eating around the same table or opening up too many presents to count. Some are only PRAYING that their family will come to know Christ, some are praying that God would keep their wayward child safe and alive. Some are even praying for a Christmas miracle so that their family can enjoy a Christmas at all.

The birth of Jesus has brought so many of us the ability to have hope. Without Jesus's birth we would not have His death on the cross, nor His burial or His resurrection power in our life. While we wait on the LORD, let's not forget that He is WATCHING and He knows our prayers and He sees our hope in His mercy. May you find joy, peace and love in Christ and Christ alone during this Christmas season.

~Hillary Trumbull

Today's Text: Romans 8:24-25 **Saturday, December 3**

"I don't believe in God. I have no hope." Wait, wait, wait a minute! That's not what we say. We know that defining what it means to be a "Christian" is to say that we believe God, and His Son, Jesus Christ. The operative word is "believe." But here's the crux: Do we believe? Believe means to trust, to have hope. Then why do we worry? If we worry, then why pray? If we pray, then why worry?

There is an old Greek proverb that says, "*The bow that is always bent will soon break.*" What the proverb seems to be implying is that the bow that is always under pressure, that never has an opportunity to release or let go, will soon break into a million pieces.

If there is ever a proverb that fits today's society, this is it. Many people, like that bow, are strung out, full of tension, turmoil, fear, and frustration. "*If one more thing happens, enters their lives, they will snap.*" If I had to choose one word to summarize how people feel today, I would have to choose the word "worried." People are worried today: Finances, Children, Parents, Drugs, Government, Retirement, Health, Loneliness, Unemployment, Cancer, Rising costs, the Future.

If you've never worried, don't worry, you will. You see, worry has a way of coming into our lives at the worst times. Once worry grabs you, it can squeeze out every joy of living. Instead of overcoming, you'll be overwhelmed. That's worry – a formidable foe. The question, then, is "*How can you & I handle worry when it comes our way?*" It's not "if," it's "when."

The reason we become overwhelmed with our problems is that we lose perspective of How Great God is. If God is so great that HE put this world, and universe together-and I believe HE did-and HE holds this world together-and I believe HE does-let me ask the question, "*What is the problem?*" I don't want to minimize the problems we face. They're real, they're painful, they hurt, and they're no fun. But the reason we need to focus on the Greatness of God is to remind ourselves that we're not in it alone. We have resources.

There are reasons why we should worship and NOT worry: First, because God is IN control, even when we're OUT of control. Second, HE is the Creator. Third, we're the sheep of the Great Shepherd. HIS sheep hear HIS voice (and obey) that voice. In Hebrews, the word "hear" is coupled with "obey." Fourth, we should worship and not worry because God is saddened when HIS children worry.

I remember asking a buddy of mine, "Bill if you could get ONE thing for your kids, what would it be?" He surprised me when he said, "If there's one thing I would want for my children, it would be for them to believe me. They'd just believe that I had their best interest at heart. I only want what's best for them when I tell them something." That's exactly what God wants --- for us to believe HIM. Believe whom HE is and that He'll do what HE promises. Then, we have HOPE!

We must trust him as the BEST, most PERFECT Father, the Great Shepherd. Follow Him, Listen to Him, And Trust Him. Obey Him, and we'll have Happiness, Joy, and Peace.

~Larry Barnett



THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT



PEACE

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.” And so He did. The solution to Man’s enmity with God arrived, right on time, in a stable in Bethlehem. God the Son was revealed, packaged in human flesh, tightly bound and tiny, in the swaddling cloths His mother had wrapped around His fresh, but frail little body.

Do you ever wonder whether our world will ever truly have peace? According to the scriptures, God announced “Peace on Earth” a long time ago. The Kingdom that Jesus ushered in was not what the Jews of the first century were expectantly hoping for, and yet are we much different? Our political leaders place a lot of emphasis on peace in our world, perhaps because they believe it’s what the people want. Perhaps it’s because it would be a real feather in the cap of any world leader that could actually achieve a lasting peace.

Once again, we enter into the second week of the Advent season longing for the peace we so desperately need in our homes, our work, our lives. We need look no further than the cross of Calvary to understand that He made peace with Humanity, once and for all on that eternal day. He also extends peace to us in relationship to Him—over and over. His mercies are new every morning. This truth is reflected in the beauty and power of His resurrection as we realize He resurrects us daily. Just as He bids us to “Come and die...taking up our crosses daily, He will crucify and bury the strife, enmity and warring of the flesh and will resurrect more of Himself in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Father, may we seek You in our quest for peace. For apart from You, we will ever be warring within and without. Thank you for the peace Your Son has purchased for us!



Sunday, December 4

Today's Text: Colossians 1:19-20

When I got baptized in January of 2002, I always felt that all but one of the sins that I had done were washed away. I have always struggled with it from my 20's. I would push it back down deep hoping to forget about it or that it would not resurface. It would always resurface and deep depression come right along with it. I was always beating my self up over it. I knew at the time that it was wrong and that there were other options. However I chose the "easy" option the one that no one would know about. But it did not work that way because *I* knew about it. So even after I started going to Calvary and got baptized I could not let it go. I knew God had forgiven me but I could not forgive myself.

It was not until the following Mother's Day that I finally found peace. After church that Sunday I went home in depression and laid there on the bed. I asked God to forgive me for the abortion that I'd had so many years ago. A song began to play. It was Rebecca St James'. "Go and Sin No More." I felt a wave of peace come over my soul. I felt that He had really forgiven me. I will not say that I no longer have these doubts but I know that God loves me and that gives me peace. I can begin the process of forgiving myself. No matter what we have done in our past, with God, we can find peace. When we ask God into our lives and mean it, we are FORGIVEN.

~Maria Haney



Monday, December 5

Today's Text: Isaiah 26:3

Finding peace these days can be difficult. We all want peace, we want peace in the world, with our families and friends. But true peace can only come from God (John 14:27). There is everyday life challenges; finances, jobs, children, etc.... Everybody faces these things on a daily bases sooner or later. I know we have. Yes, worry is a part of our human nature. Unfortunately when sin entered the world, emotions like worry did too. Our fallen human nature always clarifies what being separated from God looks like. It often looks like fear.

As God's children we are called by faith, not fear. "God is in charge of my life; I will trust Him, even when circumstances might suggest He's not there. We believe God loves and knows what is best for us. Faith always wins out over fear.

Our heart longs to live in faith, but at times this is difficult. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the Word of God" (Romans 10:17). If you haven't made time to hear from God through His Word, you will find your prayers being more of a monologue of fearful worry. But when you make time to listen to God, you're reminded of His promises. God's Word reminds us to put the Kingdom of God first and the things we need will be ours (Matthew 6:33 ESV). When we devote ourselves to God first, all the rest will sort itself out, and this will bring you peace.

What is the most pressing thing in life right now? Whatever it is, put God's Word there instead. Replace fear and worry with the truth of God's love and power. Then we can trust that God's will do as He says; "Keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed" on Him (Isaiah 26:3) ESV. When you think about God's promises, worry turns to praise, praise turns to peace, peace turns to rest. "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) KJV.

It is possible to experience God's peace. When we learn to cast our cares on God and trust Him to handle them, faith replaces fear. The most important quality of life is having peace with God. "Peace I leave you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27). We hope that you can find peace this Christmas season. God Bless you.



-Jeff and Karen Sones

Today's Text: Philippians 4:6-9 **Tuesday, December 6**

Anxiety has seemed to become a huge part of our culture in America, and subsequently, the American Church. We live in strange times with constant uncertainties in economy and finance, job security, family, friends, health and so much more. Our natural response is to worry and become overwhelmed with anxiety.

When I was 18, my father passed away in a traumatic event, in which I was present, and the following months were full of uncertainty. My father, who was the sole bread winner of the family, had passed and my mother who had not worked in the last 10 years was now forced to seek employment while dealing with the death of a spouse and depression. As I saw the effect of sin and death consume our lives, I sought more personal control instead of relinquishing control to God. This caused unwanted anxiety and stress that turned to depression and ultimately hiding from God. Too many times we see the effect of sin and want to point the finger at God instead of running into his arms of refuge and grace. After time and counsel I realized that I needed to cast all my cares upon the Lord. When I gave God control, anxieties turned to hope, worry to joy, and suffering to PEACE.

When I look back at our lives during this time, God was constantly and consistently raining down blessings on us. Not necessarily in finance and possession, but with love and grace. I was able to see that when man forgot our struggle and moved on, God was still loving us and showing us His abounding Grace. God cares and knows and will never leave us.

My hope for you this Christmas season and with the New Year, is that you seek the Lord in times of trouble and worry. Do not hesitate to petition and cry out to God your cares; He wants to listen. For when we cry out to God he will hear "And the PEACE of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Go enjoy your Christmas, remember the reason for the season and enjoy the PEACE of the Father!



-Andrew Clardy

Wednesday, December 7

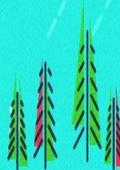
Today's Text: John 14:27

In today's world we can get overwhelmed with everything changing around us. We can experience so many different emotions: frustration, depression, confusion, anxiety, and not knowing what to do in the situations around us.

God sent Jesus to advise us how to live; He is our light in this dark world. He talked to His disciples before he was going to leave to be in the Father's presence. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." The Lord gives us PEACE and it is up to us to receive the gifts of the Lord. Sometimes we get swamped in our everyday lives and we need to stop here and there and have a moment with the Lord. Let Him fill you with His gifts; the gift of PEACE and the Holy Spirit are one of the daily doses I need in order to continue and cope with everyday living.

We cannot control some of the situations around us but we can control how we let it affect our lives: a family member diagnosed with cancer, a death of a loved one, a divorce we did not plan, children that stray from the Word and our care, the loss of a job, weather disasters, or your health. I had a very hard life-changing situation (that I would never want anyone to go through) and had to make a decision. I never thought in a million years I would have to make a decision like that. It made me bitter to the point that I no longer wanted to be around anyone, not even my lovely children and my amazing husband. I felt like a failure, like I had reached the point of no return. I felt like waste of a person, but through my difficult time, I remember falling on my knees and asking God, "Why?" Why did I have to make the decision I made?

I prayed for strength and PEACE throughout my difficult days and still do till this day. I look back through the storm and can say that He was there, like the story of the footprints. The Lord is always there for us even if we think He is not. We need to talk to Him and believe in what He is capable of doing for us. He is our gift and we need to take His word and believe. Life is not easy, but in the right path of the Lord it can be a little bit sweeter and full of PEACE. Let us pray to the Lord today and ask Him for PEACE in our times of need.



~Diane and Jerry Groves

Thursday, December 8

Today's Text: Hebrews 13:20-21

One thing we all have in common is our desire for Peace. Peace – everybody wants it. We want to be “At Peace” with other nations, we want our dead to “Rest in Peace”, we want our travelers to “Go in Peace,” the dreamers want “World Peace,” the hippies still declare “Peace, Love”. We want peace in all of our relationships with family, at work, with extended family, even with our “in-laws”. Our innermost souls desire peace with our maker. It’s a common goal of all people in all things. So if everybody wants peace, then why is it so hard to attain?

The problem with finding and keeping the peace is that there is always an Agitator present. This Agitator comes in many forms, all of which contain a portion of greed and pride. Greed says “I want it my way.” Pride says “my way is better.” Greed and Pride is the two sided coin used by the Devil to steal away our Peace.

So, how do we deal with this? That’s just the point, we don’t have the capacity to deal with it on our own! However, as born-again believers we have a Spiritual Father who is the God of Peace. We have access to our Spiritual Father through his Son, Jesus Christ who is the Prince of Peace. The Prince can get you in to see the King. The King then can give you the Spirit of Peace to take with you into the battle for Peace. There is our answer – the Spirit of Peace that dwells within us. He first gives us peace within ourselves. This peace then empowers us to do good works of righteousness. These works of righteousness are the means of suppressing and exposing the Agitator that wants to steal our Peace. Once the Agitator is exposed, then that is the beginning of putting it in its proper place.

So, beginning this Christmas season, let us resolve to do what the Angels proclaimed to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth, Peace and Goodwill toward men”. Let’s give Glory to God and practice Peace through works of Goodwill to all. Begin to experience the pure and lasting Peace that can only be brought to you by our Spiritual Father, the God of Peace. Merry Christmas!

-John Clarke



Friday, December 9 *Today's Text: Psalm 29:11*

Have you ever been faced with making a big move in your life? My wife Judy and I had that big move facing us. We wanted to move to Colorado Springs, Co. to be with our daughter, son in-law and our first granddaughter. We had good jobs that we had been at for many years, had just bought a brand new house and were happy with where we were in our life.

We needed to know if the move was GOD's will. We needed to have peace with what WE wanted to do. Judy and I started praying about it, ask our church family to pray, as well as our family. I would need a job and a place to live. We would need to sell the new house which we had been in less than a year.

The company that I worked for had a customer in Colorado Springs. In speaking with him one day he told me that they had a job opening. I flew to Colorado Springs for an interview and was hired. One problem solved. We still needed a house. Our daughter found a house for rent across the street from them. It was more money then I wanted to pay starting a new job. Was told that they would not lower rent. We continued praying. A couple weeks later our daughter called and said the people were lowering the rent to what I could pay. Our new house sold by owner for more then we bought it for.

God not only open doors , but he was kicking them down. Our pastor told us he did not want us to leave but GOD opened the doors. He also said we would be making a mistake if we did not go through the doors he had opened.

We needed an answer and GOD gave us PEACE that we were doing the right thing. We lived there thirteen years and were there when our second granddaughter was born. Oh and Judy froze for thirteen years.

When a big move are decision is facing you, PRAY. If it is what GOD wants you to do the doors will open and you will have PEACE in all that you do.

~Ronnie and Judy Butler



Today's Text: Numbers 6:24-26 **Saturday, December 10**

Our passage today is referred to as the “Priestly Blessing.” This blessing is commonly used in synagogues around the world to this day. It may be used as a benediction or as an opening to the service. Whatever its use, originally, it was given to Moses, by the Lord, to then be given to Aaron and his sons.

Notice that this blessing is not initiated by the priest. God initiates it. We see that God is the source, the fountain-head of all blessing. Blessing is God’s idea. God thought of it. He thinks of it. He’s the one who initiated blessing with the Children of Israel. He’s the one who initiates it in our lives.

The immediate context here is that the Children of Israel, as we walk with them through the book of Numbers, are in the wilderness. They just left Egypt where they were slaves for 400 years. They’ve been delivered by God through the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb. God has delivered them out of Egypt. He’s taken them through the Red Sea, delivered them from their enemies, the Egyptians. They have been to Mount Sinai where they have received the Law of God, and now it’s time for them to go into the Promised Land.

What God knows at this point that the Children of Israel don’t know is that they’re going to spend the next 30 years—two million Jews, perhaps—traipsing around through this barren desert land. God knows that they are going to need this blessing.

God knows what wilderness you’re in right now. God knows what wilderness you may be walking in a year or two or 35 years from now. God tailors His blessings to exactly what He knows we need at that moment and in that season of life.

And at the end of the blessing, authored by our God, what does He offer? HIS PEACE. Don’t you love how it’s worded? “...and give you HIS peace.” Read through the passage again, this time, allow yourself to receive the blessing, although once given for God’s people in Israel, now available to all in Christ. Receive it as though God Himself was pronouncing blessing and His peace over you.



~The Church Mouse



In Hebrews 12, we are told that Christ endured the shame and indignity of the cross because of the “joy that was set before Him.” (NKJV) The New Living Translation says, “the joy that awaited Him.” Have you ever had great joy set before you or awaiting you? Have you ever had something so joyous to look forward to that the means of getting there had to be overlooked, even though painful and difficult? Childbirth is probably the closest analogy. The pain and sorrow of labor, which would otherwise be unbearable, is made bearable simply because what awaits a mother at the end of that trial is so joyous, it’s simply worth it.

So then, what joy awaited Christ, what was set before Him that was so joyous that He would bear the agony, the cruelty and the fatality of the cross and deem it worthwhile? Again, we look to scripture, which describes Him “despising the shame” (NKJV) or disregarding the shame (NLT) for this joy.

As we look at JOY this week, challenge yourself to see a new facet of Christ’s suffering on our behalf as you consider the joy to which He looked forward. Do you know this joy personally? Would you like to? Let’s dig into our devotionals for the week with resolve to endure what is needed so that we too might attain what joys may be set before us.

“Joy is the serious business of Heaven.” ~ C.S. Lewis

“The only lasting and fully satisfying joys for any man lie on the other side of a cross.” ~ Walter J. Chantry

Sunday, December 11

Today's Text: Isaiah 61:10-11

Our passage begins by declaring that He clothes us in salvation. We are covered in His righteousness, just as one of the first things we do each day, is to dress ourselves for the day. However, dressing ourselves properly for the day requires acknowledging and living out the salvation our Lord has given us. Likewise, a bride and groom prepare themselves and dress for their wedding. Each day we must prepare ourselves for our Lord if we expect to be called His and display the jewels of His righteousness.

Furthermore, the garden produces what is planted. The Lord will cause His righteousness to sprout up per His will. His will is for the nations to see and experience the joy of His righteousness and favor. He uses those who exalt Him to reveal his righteousness around the world. Think of His saints in our congregation and how they carry the Lord's name into the marketplace, the schools, and government daily. Pray for them that the jewels of their salvation may be seen by many and that their word and walk will direct the souls they encounter back to the garden of nurturing that is prepared at our church.

Do we allow The Lord to clothe us during this Holiday season as He revealed to Isaiah? We must have His salvation to experience the joys that come from His righteousness. I was fortunate to have been properly planted in His garden so that I could sprout up and be nurtured in my faith. Our church is instrumental in providing the fertile soil so that our Heavenly Father can provide the nurturing of a gardener to those who sprout up in the faith.

This season gives us opportunity to pause and rejoice before our Lord and Savior through the joy He provides those whom He clothes in His righteousness. Our part is to let Him. We must not strive to clothe ourselves on our own, but to allow Him to do so. Otherwise, we risk self-righteousness and destruction. Please pause and allow Him to clothe and nurture you during this season of His advent that others will come to know Him and experience the jewels of His salvation.

~Dwayne Anderson



Monday, December 12

Today's Text: Psalm 16:11

I remember walking into Bro. Dennis' office late one August morning. I was just getting comfortable with Calvary and had recently decided to make it our "family" church. The church provided an abundance of opportunities for my children and that was important to me. I was dropping the kids off for whatever function they were doing that day and ran across Bro. Dennis. And for whatever reason, I felt compelled to say to him.... "I believe in God, I pray and I have conversations with Him often. But how do people know they are going to heaven? I don't feel like I am "good" enough. How do you know for sure? I want to know for sure." That "compulsion" opened my eyes to what is so easily attainable. The joy I felt was unbelievable.

It was hard to believe that it could be so easy. I believe that Christ was crucified, died, and was buried. I believe that on the third day He rose from the dead. I believe that He sits with His Father in heaven and I believe that through His grace I am saved. It is so simple and easy. And yet, I know there are people out there that are just like me. Afraid to even think that there is hope for salvation. Why? Because many do not believe they are worthy. Many don't believe they are good enough. Many believe that they have done so many things wrong in their life that there is no hope for them. And many don't understand that it really is as easy as ABC. A = Accept. Accept that Christ is your Lord and Savior. It is only through Him that you will be saved. B = Believe. Believe that Christ was crucified, died, was buried and rose again. This act of love shows that He died for our sins so that we could be saved. And C = Confess. Confess your sins to Him. Open up your heart and let Him heal your hurts. Let Him know you are willing to give it all up to Him.

Once you realize how easy it is, then your life will be forever changed. Joy is abundant. Just knowing that there is a light in my life that shows me the way, that I will someday be in His presence and knowing that when that day comes I will know the pleasures of living in eternity with HIM is amazing! And to think that it really is easy to accomplish and it is available to everyone!

If you have not had a chance to think about the joys in your life, then take a minute to list them. The list you make can range from emotional joys to material joys. These things on your list make you happy. But for how long? Are these joys a constant in your life? Maybe? Maybe not? One thing I know for sure is that God is constant. He has the ability to make your life joyful. All you have to do is ask. Never be afraid to ask.

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." (Jer 29:11) He has a plan for you. That plan should fill you with joy. Why? Because God will never forget you. He wants you with Him. We are His children and He loves us so much. He is just waiting for you to take Him by the hand and cling to Him.



~Roxi Heiser

Tuesday, December 13

Today's Text: Habbakuk 3:17-18

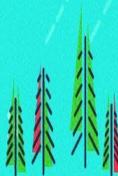
O. Henry wrote a timeless short story entitled *The Gift of the Magi*. Perhaps, you recall the tale of the young bride who sold her long, flowing hair to buy a platinum chain for her husband's heirloom watch. What she discovered is that he had sold his watch to buy beautiful combs for her hair. They each sacrificed their most prized possessions in an effort to bring joy to the one they loved and cherished.

This pales in comparison to the sacrifice God made for us. He allowed His only begotten son to suffer and die on a cross for our sins. Our joy is that He loves us so much. He cherishes us. He calls us His own. By Jesus' crucifixion and death we are redeemed. At His expense our sins are forgiven. With His resurrection we delight in the promise of praising Him for eternity.

My Lord, with joyful praise I stand before you. Thank you for your steadfast love. You know all my worries and problems. Please help me to focus on my relationship with you. My tribulations are but a speck of sand in the desert. You gave it all for me. I am eternally grateful for your love.

Even when I feel like I have nothing, I know I am never alone. Thank you for your wisdom, your protection, your provision. Thank you for loving me.

~Maureen Jeanes



Wednesday, December 14

Today's Text: Romans 15:13

As we face everyday events, issues, trials, and tribulations, it is easy to forget that beyond our earthly existence awaits the joy and peace of being with the Lord one day and we can rest assured in this thru the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we face each day we must ask the Lord to watch over us, guide our actions and words that we might be an example of hope and joy we have in knowing that on this one day we will have the joy of being with our Lord. So that on the day somebody comes up to you and says, "How can you seem to be so peaceful and happy all the time?" you will be ready to tell them about your hope and real joy about the Lord.

In Romans 14: 13-17 it says, "Use the power of the Holy Spirit to help you spread this hope to others by setting an example that the Kingdom of God is not food and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." In Psalms 16:11, we are told to have joy in being in the presence of the Lord. In James 1:24, we are to have joy in encountering our trials as this will help test our faith. and, in John 15:10-11 that there is joy in keeping his commandments.

Joy is especially prevalent as we approach this time of the year as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, and what that means to so many believers now, in the past, and in the future as we await his Glorious return and the world will forever be changed and God will rejoice in it. While over the last several years there has been an effort to remove the true meaning of Christmas from our memories, celebrations, and plans for the Christmas season in its true meaning we can stand strong in our belief of the real reason for this time as it is the birth of our Lord and Savior, and no one can take that away from us. It is our duty to spread this real meaning with peace and joy in our hearts but firm in the hope that it will be received by more and more people that are "lost", or temporarily wandering.

So this Christmas season decorate your tree with joy, top it off with peace, and fill your stockings with hope as we pray for the Lords' help as we go about balancing our everyday lives and the need for our priority of spreading His word, and being an example for him.



~Dick Critz

Thursday, December 15

Today's Text: James 1:2-4

Sometimes we as Christians think that we should not show that we are enjoying our lives. Growing up as a child Christmas in my immediate household was just about giving and we were joyful, but it was a different joy.

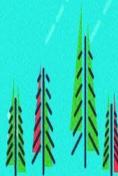
As I grew up my grandmother and two very Godly and faithful aunts helped me to know what joyful in your heart for the Lord really was. I am sure I am not the only one that had this similar life, but giving my life to the Lord because of people around me with joy and love in their hearts helped me be the person I am.

Both the old and the New Testament give us promises of joy and not a temporary feeling of enthusiasm, but gives us a joyous (happy and patient) attitude that gets us through both the good and the bad days.

Because of faith God has brought us into this place of highest privileges where we can stand and be confident and joyful in the life God has given us. This season is all the reason to be Joyful in God.

This is the day the Lord has made , we will rejoice and be glad in it!

~Deb Stalboerger



Friday, December 16

Today's Text: I Peter 4:12-13

As I read this passage, and observed the word “rejoice” in verse 13, I began to reflect on how often I have seen the words, “joy,” “rejoiced,” or “rejoicing” in Scripture and how we as believers in the Lord Jesus, are to be a joyful people and rejoice evermore. To rejoice is to joy and joy and joy again and to keep rejoicing. Our Christian life is to be a rejoicing life.

This is certainly a major theme in the Book of Philippians. The word “joy” is mentioned about sixteen times. “Christ” is mentioned some thirty-six times in this small book of only four chapters. Jesus and joy go hand in hand. Jesus was a joyful man!

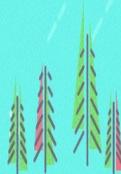
My wife Billie and I were recently reflecting on past Christmas seasons we have enjoyed (there is joy again) together. There have been forty-eight of them. But we also reflected on Christmases growing up. We concluded that whatever else might be happening in the world, it seemed that Christmas was always joy time. During my childhood, going to see Santa, decorating the Christmas tree, gift-giving and receiving, a lot of eating and going to stores in Austin (where I was raised) and watching electric trains running, those were special times. Then years later when our children came along, we remembered the joy we felt as we observed their Christmas joy!

As good as all of that was, there was nothing that compared to church Christmas programs and worship services with the singing of Christmas carols. Billie told me that in the small church where she attended with her grandmother and aunt in Quanah, Texas, the children would be given bags containing fruit, candy, and nuts. For a poor little girl, going to church of poor people, that was a big deal.

No celebration can take the place of the Christmas story in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Babe of Bethlehem came to save us, show us the Father, and fill our hearts with His very special joy that only a believer in Him can experience.

No matter the energy expended by some to remove Christ from this wonderful season of the year, they can never remove Him from our hearts because it's there that He dwells and His joy is manifested in us. Thank God for this very special season!

~ David and Billie Kavecki



Saturday, December 17

Today's Text: John 15:10-11, 16:22

Growing up as a child in the 80's, one of the most coveted gifts for Christmas was a Pound Puppy. These plush doggies came with their own collar and adoption certificate, a real cardboard doghouse, and hours of "loveable huggable" fun. Every kid wanted one, including me. As Christmas 1987 approached, I was old enough to know that presents were stashed around our house in various locations and curious enough to go looking for them when my mom was busy doing other things around the house. One morning, I hit the jackpot. In my mom's closet I uncovered a trash bag full of goodies and what to my wondering eyes should appear? Not one, but TWO Pound Puppies! Not just any Pound Puppies, either. Poodles, with a Continental Clip and pink bow to match their pink heart shaped nametag. I knew that only one of those lovely poodle puppies was for me and that the other would be given to my little sister. So after admiring and petting and kissing the puppy's nose that I secretly hoped would be mine instead of my sister's, I carefully packed them in the trash bag and replaced everything exactly how I had found it. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, I eagerly counted down the days.

Christmas Eve finally arrived and there, under the plastic branches of our artificial tree sat two oddly shaped packages wrapped in brightly colored paper. I do not remember what I received before I opened my Pound Puppy or after, but I remember asking my dad right then and there to cut the plastic anchors that held my poodle puppy in her cardboard doghouse with his pocket knife. I just could not wait to hold my Pound Puppy in my arms! It was and is still one of the best gifts I ever received as a child.

Christmas has changed quite a lot for me since 1987. Now I am the one stashing Christmas gifts for my girls in my closet. Even more importantly, Christmas means so much more to me as a child of God. Christmas is the beginning of Hope for us all. Scripture says in Isaiah 11:1-2, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." This "shoot from the stump of Jesse" is Jesus, our Hope. He has come once already and if we are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we anxiously await his glorious return. Like a child who discovers the most precious Christmas gift they can only hope for and then has to wait for the coming day when it will be hers, face to face, we wait for Him. I pray that as this Christmas season draws closer to Christmas Day, our day of celebration, that our hearts would draw closer to him in anticipation, in longing, in hope. Let your heart be full of Hope this season because King Jesus is returning. And yes, I still have my Pound Puppy from Christmas 1987.



~Shelby Spire



Such a grossly overused word is “LOVE.” We love this, we love that. It is easy to miss the depth and beauty the true meaning of this word embodies. Can we fathom its depths? The Apostle Paul was skeptical about the human ability to do so and even penned a treatise on love to prove his point. I Corinthians 13 is considered by many to be one of Paul’s most eloquent and beautiful pieces of writing. We who are in Christ know even more than that. Paul was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Himself. Here we have God’s take on love. The Apostle John tells us later in his letter (I John 4:7) that “God is love.” So in Paul’s writing, we see that God explains what He isn’t and then what He is, for He is the embodiment of love in character and in action as the Son, coming to earth to live as a man and purchase us back as His own with His very own life.

This love, His love, is a far cry from our pop culture rantings, our television and film depictions, and even our very best poetry. This love exchanges its own life to save ours, even while we were and may be still rejecting it and it is continually offered even to those who have no desire to ever accept it. Amazing love!

As we look into love this week, may we find ourselves contrasting what the world bombards us with concerning the concept of love with the truth of God’s Word on the subject.

Holy Spirit, we ask that You will implant the Word deeply in our hearts this week. May we be a people so laden with the truth about real love, that anything else is starkly contrasted. Thank you for loving us! - Amen.



*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign*

*Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
Worship we our Jesus:
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign*

~Christina Rosetti, 1885

Sunday, December 18

Today's Text: John 3:1-17

We are Adam and Brandy Reyes and this is our testimony of God's love in our lives. Adam and I were both from broken homes. My parents got divorced when I was two and growing up going back and forth between 2 households on weekends and holidays was normal to me. My dad and stepmom were both Catholic and very involved in the church. My mother was never very religious, but from time to time we visited several Baptist churches with friends and family members. At the age of fifteen I made the decision to be baptized, so my mom and I were baptized together, but then we stopped going to church about a month later. I still attended Catholic church with my dad on some weekends and holidays throughout my teen years.

Adam grew up in a household with his single mother and six siblings. His only experience with God was pretty much seeing his mother's rosary on her dresser, crosses on the wall, and he had attended a youth group for a very short time at the catholic church when he was a young. When Adam and I started our lives together, we never really discussed God. It wasn't that we didn't believe in God, it just wasn't something we talked about much.

So we went on about our lives "putting God in a box" as they say not really giving him much thought. "God please help us give the kids a good Christmas this year", or "please let my car start today!" these were the usual prayers. I knew God was tugging at my heart, I wanted my kids to know him, but again it was just something we brushed aside. Adam and I would discuss it and we would say to ourselves "We believe in God, we know He's there. We're good people, that's all that matters." This was our life and for the most part we were happy, until almost 4 years ago when tragedy struck our family.

Our lives were turned upside down in a way that we never could have imagined or expected. I will not speak as to what happened because it is still very painful and we are still in the healing process, but I will say this. When something happens to someone you love that is out of their control and out of your control, it can break you. We were broken. Life had pulled us under and we did not know how to swim back up. We went through a great time of despair. After despair came anger, after the anger, came the bitterness. This went on for about a year. Friends and loved ones tried to help and offer support, but no one understood. Time was marching on, but we were stuck. All I kept thinking was "Where were you God?" It seemed like the more we tried to move forward and make life seem "normal" again, the more we fell back into despair.



(Sunday continued)

However, looking back we didn't realize it at the time, but God had been there all along. You see sometimes God places people in your life. You don't always recognize it, you may never realize it, but God works through his people. For years Adam had this great God loving Christian friend. This friend's name is Curtis. Curtis had been telling Adam for years that he should just give church a chance. He would say "you need Jesus in your life." Adam would just laugh it off and say yeah, yeah whatever. Then one night when Adam was at work he found himself tired and weary. He could no longer contain his sadness and he began to break down and cry. He felt helpless, hopeless, and most of all lost. Curtis came upon him and once again he said, "Adam, you need to take your family to church." When he came home from work that morning he told me what had happened and everything Curtis had said. We cried together and made the decision that that Sunday for the very first time in our married lives, we were going to take our family to church.

We decided we would try out a couple different places because to be honest we weren't even sure what we were looking for in a church. All we knew was we needed to at least try. Our son Derek mentioned a church that a few of his friends had been attending in San Marcos. That's how we landed here. On our very first visit to Calvary, brother Dennis was preaching the message and I knew right away that God was calling out to us. Though I can't recall what passage we read I do remember this. Brother Dennis was talking about how even when life knocks you down and you feel like there's no hope, if you turn to God he will help you. He spoke of how holding on to anger and bitterness will destroy your life if you let it and only when you give it to God, will you begin to heal. I broke down.

Adam and I are here to tell you all, this message was true. We began to open our hearts to the Lord and He has blessed us so. I am happy to say we are all here today and we are a work in progress. As a family we are slowly overcoming the tragedy that took over our lives. It has not been an easy road, we still have our bad days. We are still healing, but God's love has carried us through the darkest of times and brought us through to His everlasting light. And when I look up at our beautiful children's faces I see that light. Adam and I are loving and growing with the Lord. Our children have come to know the Lord and they have felt His love. So we are here to tell you this: If you are hurting, give it to God. If you hold anger in your heart, give it to God. If you feel unloved cry out to God. His amazing love is waiting for you. He wants to give you this amazing gift of love, and all you have to do is receive it. Do this and He will raise you up out of the dark and His glory will shine down on you like a warm sunny day. God is love.



~Adam and Brandy Reyes

Monday, December 19

Today's Text: I Corinthians 13:4-8

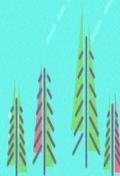
What this verse mean to me knowing that love is what I want to have in my heart. But sometimes, you have to go through a lot of hurt to get that love where you want it to be.

You see, I have dyslexia and the difficult things that come with it would make me so mad at the world and even at my mother. Mother would try to make it better for me, but we would fight like cats and dogs. Even then, our love would be there for each other no matter what we said. She told me that even though I have a disability, I still knew how to get things done. She also taught me to look at what other people have to go through to find the love I had.

Over the years, I have experienced a lot of hurt from people because of my disability, but I kept trying to look past all that and still love them as commanded by God's Word.

Today, I still have a lot to look past but it's so much better knowing that I have God's love in my life. He loves me and so I know because of His love, I can keep trying to love others. It doesn't matter what color, background or beliefs, we can have God's love for other people because He will help us. Hopefully, they love you back, especially in God's family. But, if not, you keep on going, striving to love with God on your side.

~Sharon Richey



Tuesday, December 20

Today's Text: 1 John 4:7-8

Love seems so rare these days. Turn on any social media platform and what you'll find is the exact opposite of love; hate, anger, jealousy, envy, violence, etc.. It's enough to make a grown man cry. But God's word says in 1 John 4:7-8, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love."

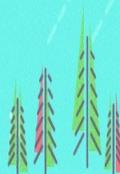
In a world full of hate, I, Eric, am so very grateful for the love I do have in my life. Specifically, the overwhelming sense of love that I experienced at the birth of each of my children and continue to feel with each passing year of their lives. Interestingly, this love came when we were both strangers, the baby and I. But I have never felt a stronger love in all my life. And then there's the wonderful feeling knowing full well that God had given each child to me and the love I felt towards them was from Him.

Alex, our first child, was due on January 1, 2000. Well, in true Alex fashion she wanted to get here early so as not to miss out on any of the fun. On December 22, 1999 at 3:28 am, our beautiful baby girl joined us just in time for our Christmas celebrations. At just two days old we took Alex to meet Eric's extended family on Christmas Eve. This was the first time I, or Jessica, had ever met most of these people. Walking into that house that night I would have thought that I had been apart of this wonderful family all of my life. I had never felt so welcome or so loved. And Alex, well, I hardly saw her that night. Tias, Tios, and cousins showered her with love and affection passing her around for all to see. But as immense as this love was, it doesn't even compare to the love that Christ has for us, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."- Romans 5:8.

As the celebration of Christ's birth approaches, I pray we could all come together as a body of Christ to show love and be a light in a world full of darkness.

Merry Christmas!

~The Sandovals



Wednesday, December 21

Today's Text: Romans 5:7-8

There are two words that immediately pop into my mind when reading these verses: ***love*** and ***conviction***. When my actions don't align with Christ's love for us, I am convicted. I'll give you an example that immediately comes to mind when I found it challenging to "hardly die for a righteous man." In college, I had one friend who struggled with alcoholism. She would always ask me for rides or just to lend an ear to what was going on in her life. The first few months were great, because emotionally, I had compassion for her and I knew that she was reaching out for help. I happened to be that person that would stop and listen. It was easy to show the love of Christ to her...until the 2:00 AM rides, the three-hour phone calls, the unexpected house-visits that persisted for about 6 months. I started to show less and less empathy towards her situation as my stress load intensified with papers that I needed to write, group projects for which I needed to meet, and studying for exams. Needless to say, I became standoffish and selfish with my life. I started to ignore her calls, or if I saw her on campus I would tell her that I had to meet someone, or would "listen" to her by staring blankly at her and letting her problems go through one ear and out the other. I wanted to be comfortable in my day-to-day experiences, which at this moment and time meant ignoring a friend in need.

I really wanted to share that little life tid-bit, because when I was going through that time with my friend it was verses like Romans 5: 7-8 that really convicted me of what God's love really means. After confiding in my roommates of what was happening and what I was feeling, they reminded me of a few things: that we are only human and we can't love people well 24/7, but that God loves well 24/7. All I thought was "Wow, God is amazing!" Think about it, God loves you through everything and loves you even in your brokenness. He even went so far as to die on a cross for us. Christ being perfect and pure died for us, rose up from the grave, and conquered death. Because of this, you and I have the chance to be with the God, who loves you even in all your imperfections. God doesn't care what you did, He sees you as His child which is awesome. As I said, I know that as humans we are not perfect, nowhere close to perfect, but I do know that as Christians we should have a wanting to love like Christ. **GOD IS LOVE.**

Reflection Question: What are some instances in your life recently that you have shown God's love to others?



~Hannah Heiser

Thursday, December 22

Today's Text: Ephesians 2:4-7

Around this time every year I start looking back on the past months and analyze certain choices that I've made. Sometimes I can honestly say that I took a couple steps forward, but other times, I have taken a few steps backwards or have even stayed completely stagnate. The older I get and the more I grow in my relationship with the Lord, I'm realizing that the back and forth, staying still, ups and downs of life, even your spiritual walk are normal and is going to be apart of our human life until the day we meet Jesus face to face.

Growing up I always thought God's grace was out of reach, that I somehow needed to earn it. If I don't lie, if I don't curse, if I don't drink or do drugs, if I don't watch bad movies, if I don't listen to bad music, then just maybe God will love me and will keep loving me. Wait... If I struggle with an addiction though then I must not be saved because it's a constant battle. I can never win. I'm always stumbling. How can He still love me if I'm constantly doing this thing that He hates? I was chained by legalism.

This week of advent is about love. While this short story is about love, I also wanted to expound on God's grace. Ephesians 2:4-5 states, "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! (HCSB) God's immeasurable love and grace are coupled together. You can't have one without the other. For as long as I could remember I lived in bondage. I was bound by the rules: the "dos and don'ts" of religion. There is nothing I can do to receive God's grace and nothing I can do to lose it. He loves me no matter what and there is freedom in that realization. There is freedom in His love and grace. We are not free to do whatever we want, but to be all that we can be for Him.

A verse that sticks with me day and night is 2 Timothy 2:13 which says, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." I can never fall out of God's grace. Never! Once I'm His, I'm His for eternity. Though there will be days that I'll slip and fall back into selfish habits, He's still there and He's waiting for me. As I look back on this year I know that I made a lot of mistakes however, one thing that's different than last year is that I know I'm not tied down to those mistakes. I'm forgiven, I'm loved, and I am surrounded by His grace. I can wake up each morning and freely make the choice to live for Him.

Now, I'm not against New Year's resolutions by any means. Some are beneficial, like trying to eat and live healthier. Nevertheless, I know this year mine won't be to try and do everything right to keep God's grace. As you continue to finish out this devotional, I hope you keep in mind and understand that God loves you no matter what. "As far as the east is from the west so far as He removed our transgressions from us." – Psalm 103:12 He doesn't see our sin but sees us covered by the blood of The Lamb. Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! God Bless.



~Sarah Trumbull

Friday, December 23

Today's Text: Zephaniah 3:17

Jesus loves me. He delights in me. I am overwhelmed when I think about Christ's love for me. The God who created me rejoices over me. He is pleased with me. How humbling.

You see, I should not be where I am in life today. I should not feel this deep love, peace and joy that comes from God the Father. The love that He has for me has carried me through difficult times and has brought me to a place of peace and joy. Years ago, this was not the direction that my life was taking.

My past, which includes divorce and abuse, robbed me of the ability to trust and love. It left me broken, ashamed and lost. There was nothing I could do to change my past. I had become a Christian at the age of 16 and had a personal relationship with Christ, yet I found myself empty and abandoned. I longed for a deeper and intimate relationship with Christ, but this meant that I would have to trust Him in order to submit to Him. I had to trust that He would not leave me. I had to trust that He would not hurt me. It meant being vulnerable and allowing Him to see all my shame. As I begin to spend time with the Lord through reading His Word and in prayer, I began to understand the character of God and His love for me. His love for me is everlasting. It is kind and loyal. It is selfless. It never changes. It is patient. It is forgiving. It was the reason He died for me.

Finally, with heart surrendered, I allowed His love to fill my heart. In this intimate relationship, Christ has been everything I needed. He has been my Protector, Provider, Healer, constant Friend and Savior.

I will never fully understand His love for me, but I am so grateful for it. Today, after eight years of being in this love relationship with the Lord I find myself at peace and filled with joy. I can finally believe His words and know that He has loved me with an ever lasting love and with loving kindness He has drawn me. Christ extended His hand and I have held it tightly allowing Him to guide me and love me. God's will for me now is to love others as He has loved me. Rejoicing over others and seeking their best interest. I thank my God for His perfect love for me!



~Nancy Rodriguez

Today's Texts: Saturday, December 24
Luke 2:8-20; Romans 8:37-39

Throughout my life, I have seen many types of Love. I have experienced parental love when I scraped my knee as a child and received comfort from my mom and dad. I have been acquainted with the superficial love of a teenage relationship. I have known the love of a woman who said yes and became my wife, and I've seen that love produce two precious children.

When Shelby and I were trying to have a child the first time, it would be an understatement to say that we had our struggles. We tried for about a year and a half but felt like we were getting nowhere. We talked to doctors, talked about adoption and prayed continually. In the end, God answered our prayers and we now have 2 energetic little girls and are delighted to say that we have one on the way. Through all this, I could never imagine seeing one of my children being gone before me.

We all know about the great sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross to make a way to heaven for us, but do we really think about the full story? God personally formed his Son's human body in Mary's womb knowing that 33 years later, Jesus would be our sacrificial Lamb. The beginning of the sacrifice started way before the cross. It started in a lowly stable, in a dirty manger, with common people. God's love was on full display. In Luke 2:8-20, we read the awesome account of the revelation of Jesus' birth to the shepherds by an angel of the Lord. What a glorious night it must have been for the shepherds to see the "great company of the heavenly host" singing of the Messiah. This entire aerial display trumpeted the Love that God has for each of us. Christ's birth and his death and resurrection are not the end of God's Love Story.

Jesus is returning to fulfill that love one day when we will meet Him in the air. In Revelation 8:38b, the Bible says that "...neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries for tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love." So as you go through this Christmas season, remember the Love Story that was penned by God Himself and announced through a host of singing angels. This tiny, all divine and all human infant was sent so we could have everlasting life through his death and resurrection. And He is returning for His Beloved.



~Mark Spire



Entering the last week of 2016, what will you be sad to see end? What will you be thrilled to see in your past? Whether this has been a good year or a tough year, a fresh start is ALWAYS a good idea.

Since the last week of the year begins with Christmas Day, it might be difficult to think ahead to the New Year while still thinking about Christmas, but why not purpose in your own heart starting today to make this a week of reflection and remembrance. What better day to commemorate the great things about this past year than on the day we remember God coming to become one of us and walk this mortal life with us? He's been here, He knows what human achievement and frailty are all about.

By the same token, what better day to put to rest the hard things of this past year than a day when God pronounces new life that will make peace between God and Man and put the curse of sin in its place when this new life is given on our behalf.

Won't you purpose in your heart today to begin reflecting this last week of the year? Ask the Lord to shed light on the things that you should love and cherish, keep and remember and to help you let go of those hard things that were painful, difficult or even tragic. He will, you know. He longs to do IN us what only He can do. Don't strive to make resolutions, unless they are from Him. Those are the ones that count. Merry Christmas....and Happy New Year!

“New Year's Day is every man's birthday.” ~Charles Lamb

Sunday, December 25

***Today's Text:
Luke 1:46-55; 2:6-7***

Well, here it is, Christmas Day, a day that changed the world forever. The Savior of the world came into our world with a 100% human body. This was not a surprise to Mary, she knew the child that she was carrying was not going to be your average bouncing, baby boy, but this child was the incarnate promised Messiah.

I remember back when I was about nine years old, I wanted a set of Army trucks for Christmas. It was no surprise to me that I got that big set with a jeep and trailer, dump truck, bulldozer and road grader. They were all Army green and had the logo on the side. When I opened them on Christmas morning, I already knew. I knew why because I had already seen them in the store and asked for them, but I had also already seen them in the attic in the back garage and had carefully taken each one out of the package and inspected them. So I knew what I was getting. I had already asked, but then I had seen also. This wasn't quite like it was with Mary. But, eventually, the day came and she saw the promised Messiah. Mary and Joseph were the first two people in the world to see the Messiah. There was no mid-wife, there was no doctors or nurses. Just her and him and some boarded animals in a dusty, musty stable. It might have been a cave, it might have been a built structure. The kind of stable is not important. What is relevant is that the Christ Child was born. This revelation did not come to Mary that day, but some nine months before.

Mary was elated and honored that God would have chosen her to help bring this much-needed and long-awaited for Hope into the world. She regarded herself as lowly with the attitude of, "Who AM I that I should have such honor and privilege to be used by God in such a way?" What about you? You might not be pregnant and carrying the Christ Child, but if you are a born again you do have the Messiah of the world in you. Just like Mary, He has chosen a lowly, unworthy vessel like me and you to carry Him into a hopeless world. I am elated that He is in me. His desire is that I share with a world that same hope that Mary shared with Elizabeth.

So as you celebrate Christmas, remember just as there came a day when Mary delivered the Messiah into a world that needed hope, may we also deliver the Messiah from within us to a world that needs to see Him!

~Bro. Dennis



Monday, December 26 *Today's Text: Ecclesiastes 3:11*

It was the day after Christmas.....after recycling the Christmas Day debris. (Do you really recycle...in Texas?) When you have written all your thank you cards, (this can wait till next year, you know) after you have admired and displayed your favorite gifts or stuff (I tell you, they will all burn in the judgment) and you have put away the gifts you don't like for re-gifting next year, (Come on, who hasn't?) the writer of Ecclesiastes has this uncanny way of bringing our thoughts back to reality.

The day after Christmas is the best time to celebrate the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. What a perfect time to count the blessings of the closing year and a time to look forward to the Lord's faithfulness in the coming year.

Our lives revolve around times, seasons and even holidays as described by Ecclesiastes 3:1-10. These verses are true descriptions of our lives. We often forget that God is not subject to time. When we go through trials and tribulation, we long for the Lord's deliverance "now." We often forget that in the midst of our trials, He is there. He is there, sustaining us and directing each step. He is in the process of "Making things beautiful in our lives." Ecclesiastes 3:11 brings to mind 2 people: Job, from the Bible, and Joni Ericson Tada, a modern-day Christian.

Before testing Job, God saw the beauty of Job's heart. The trial that he went through strengthened his faith and character. His trials allowed the beauty of the Lord to shine through his life. Job did not understand why his life was turned upside down. Even his wife abandoned him and his friends judged him. But Job came out victorious. Because of what Job experienced, boils and all, only he can say in all of Scriptures, "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the later day upon the earth; And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." Job 19:25, 26.

At the age of 17, Joni Ericson Tada was in a diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. She asked for healing but the Lord denied her prayer because He has a better plan for her. Out of the ashes, she came out victorious. How can one be victorious when you are bound to the wheelchair for life? After over forty years, she now has a worldwide ministry, Wheels for the World and she paints beautiful pictures using her mouth/teeth. Truly, He makes things beautiful in His time.

About 2 years ago, I struggled with a major decision in life. I tried to hang on to something that I thought was God's will. I was sick on and off for 2 months ignoring God's still small voice. I can describe that season of my life as living in a fog. My spiritual visibility was limited. My decisions were clouded by doubts. After much prayer and guidance from godly men, I realized that I was not trusting God. Only when I gave up control to Him that He showed me the better way, His way. Only then, did His promises fill my heart each day like sunshine chasing away the gloom of life. I became aware of His guidance one step at a time and gave me a clear vision of the future.

Is my life now perfect? Far from it. I still go through the seasons of life. However, I can now look back and be reminded that I can look forward with confidence, claiming God's promise that "He makes things beautiful in His time."

~*Ruth Rice*

Today's Text: Joel 2:25-27 ***Tuesday, December 27***

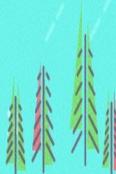
As I reflect upon this past year, I see a pattern of decreasing time spent in prayer in my daily life. I have allowed many distractions to derail my communication with Jesus. This leaves me more vulnerable to sin which results in worry, depression, impatience and frustration with my life. Consequently, my sense of security and happiness are diminished which also affects my attitude and relationships with others. This leads to sin and sadness.

The prophet Joel speaks about no longer having to suffer through the plagues of the locust, cankerworm, caterpillar and palmerworm if God's people will repent of their sins and turn to God. Joel describes God as quick to forgive, loving and merciful. Although God's people are not promised wealth and prosperity on earth, God promises to walk with us through our troubles in life with love and forgiveness.

I can look back on 2016 and see that my life was plagued by frustration, unhappiness and insecurity due to lack of prayer. Reading my Bible daily is not enough. Praying daily for forgiveness, strength, wisdom, and love is necessary to live a life that has peace, happiness and fulfillment.

So, as I look forward to 2017, my goal will be to make prayer a priority. Holy Spirit, please forgive me for neglecting prayer time with you. Please give me the strength, Father, to persevere in improving my prayer life now and always.

~Cathleen Chidester



Wednesday, December 28

Today's Text: Matthew 7:7-11

This year has been a rollercoaster for me, between not knowing where I was going to live when my apartment lease ran out in the summer, to a new relationship that didn't work out. My old self would have been angry, worried, and even mad at God for putting me in those situations. Not to say I handled it perfectly, but as I grow in Christ, so I better learn how to handle things that don't go the way I planned. In these situations, I turned to prayer, asking for guidance and I put my hope and trust in God's will for me.

Earlier in the year a church friend openly asked on Facebook for help moving a rather large sectional couch. I reluctantly offered to help. I figured it would be good practice for when I moved wherever God has planned for me. After we were done moving I asked about the complex she was in, I honestly thought this place was going to be way out of my price range but it wouldn't hurt to ask. Surprisingly, it was under the price I had budgeted for, it was pet-friendly, and the owner was a Christian. So I put in my application that week and moved in a few months later.

Just as God lead me to my home, I know He also desired my recent relationship to fail. I know that sounds strange, but I've always prayed for a wife that I could have a strong Christian family with and I still have faith that God will fulfill that prayer. Sometimes what we learn from the failures in life better prepare us for where God is leading us. I know that God will fulfill what I've prayed for in His timing. So keep praying, while seeking His will in all things.

~Daniel Walker



Thursday, December 29

Today's Text: Isaiah 43:18-19

The nation Israel had seen God deliver them from Egypt, Babylon and from many oppressing nations. As powerful and awesome as those deliverances were, God told them not to remember or consider the things of old. He was going to do a new thing that would make past deliverances pale in comparison. Jump to the future; the day when God's chosen nation would see their Messiah and He would set up his earthly kingdom and rule as their King again. This time He would deliver them from their enemy sin and death. He would lead them by a road in the wilderness called the "Highway of Holiness." (Isaiah 35:8) He would make "rivers in the desert" which speaks of satisfying their physical thirst, and they would draw water from the "wells of salvation" which speaks to their spiritual thirst. (Isaiah 12:3) Just as God provided for His people physically in the wilderness He will provide spiritually in the Millennial reign.

We (the Church) are also reminded in Philippians 3:13 to forget those things which are behind and to reach forward to those things which are ahead. We are not to dwell on our past accomplishments or our past failures. We aren't supposed to live in the past and waste the present. Remember that God's mercies are new every morning and his compassions fail not. We are new creations in Christ and we have a new identity and a new purpose.

So if you find that you have been stuck in the past, ask the Lord to pick you up and brush you off so you can start afresh. Let's "Press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus"; Looking unto Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith."

~Loyjean Matlock



Friday, December 30

Today's Text: Lamentations 3:22-24

Have you ever done something so horrible you thought God could never forgive you? Is there a dark secret in your past; a skeleton in your closet? Most of us could travel down memory lane and find something of which we are not proud. Some of us may even have a closet full of skeletons. If we let them, these dark secrets can consume us, define us, and control us. How do we escape being controlled by our past sins? How could my heavenly Father possibly forgive me?

When my oldest son was around 6 he came up with a great idea. He thought to himself, "Wouldn't it be cool to tie a long string around this red pen and swing it in circles in the air?" He was inquisitive like that, always experimenting. I heard an unusual whirring sound coming from the upstairs. I climbed the stairs to see what was happening. What I saw was red! Red carpet, red lampshade, red couch, red blinds, red ceiling; red, red, red everywhere. He had a smile on his face, proud of how his experiment was going. I was furious and sent him to his room while I cooled down.

When we finally talked he realized what a mistake he had made and the damage he had done. He felt terrible. I loved this child and openly forgave him. But as his parent I had to discipline him. During future years of making mistakes he knew I would always love and forgive him. I had shown him that he should never doubt my ability to forgive and love. No matter what happens I will always have compassion.

In these verses, Jeremiah finds hope in God's great compassion. Jeremiah is surrounded by sin and evil and weeps for the destruction of Jerusalem. He knows that God must punish the people for their sins but he also knows that God, the Father, has great love for His children. He has faith that God will forgive and good things will come from this. God's compassion is always there for His people. Jeremiah knows that God will be faithful to His people now and forever.

Sin can carry some heavy consequences but God promises to be there to carry us through and turn it into good. During the roughest times in life we can have hope in God. God is love, God is compassionate, God is faithful, and God NEVER fails.



~Debby Brewington

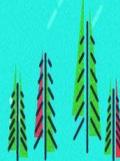
Today's Text: Philippians 3:7-14 **Saturday, December 31**

In these verses Paul tells us that he considered the things he had done in the past as rubbish in comparison to knowing Christ. The Greek word here at one time actually meant “dung,” which is something that would make him ceremonially unclean to enter the temple. Verses 4-6 had listed those accomplishments. To the pious Jews, Paul looked like a superstar. Paul realized that he could not earn righteousness by following the law, but it came through faith that was God-given. 2 Cor 5:21 states: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” No amount of following biblical laws or traditions or the laws of man can make you right with God. It is only by belief in Christ and His work on the cross and His resurrection that we can be considered righteous and holy before God.

Notice in verses 10-14 that Paul wanted to know Christ more perfectly and become more like Him to the point of suffering, death and resurrection. He realized that he had not obtained that perfection. He was forgetting what was in the past and pressing forward to win the prize for which God had called him, namely to be ultimately resurrected and spend eternity with God and Christ in heaven.

How does the above affect you individually? Are you a “good” person? Do you help in a cold night shelter? Do you feed and clothe the poor? Do you coach your son’s or daughter’s sports team? Do you sing in the choir? Do you teach a Sunday School class? Do you help in the nursery? Do you help in the children’s ministries? Do you help on church workdays? Do you help at any number of church events? Do you tithe? Do you give to special projects? Do you witness Christ to the lost? Are you at church whenever the church doors are open? These are all good things. But what is your purpose for doing them? Are you trying to earn brownie points? Are you trying to impress someone? Or is it because you truly love God? Your attitude makes all the difference.

Are you someone who misses church services on a regular basis because of coaching or your child’s involvement in an intermural type of team. Remember very, very few will ever be good enough to become a professional. You and your child’s spiritual condition will be for all of eternity. So be like Paul and assess what you have done and what you are doing and delete that which is rubbish and press toward the mark that God and Christ have set for you.



~Daniel Landrey

Sunday, January 1

***Today's Text:
Revelation 1:8, 21:1-6***

Seems odd to begin a new year with a scripture passage about the end, right? And yet, when you think about it, according to the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, the end and the beginning are to be found in Him. So for a few minutes, let's release our current mindset about time and attempt to use God's Word to inform us about His accounting of time.

We know that time is a construct of God. The dimension of time is a gift of God, given to us to measure out life and space in linear fashion. But God Himself lives outside of time and space. He is not limited to linear thought. We say a person was, is, or will be. God says of Himself, He simply is. When YHWH God identified Himself to Moses from the burning bush, He said, "I AM." (Exodus 3) When Jesus was challenged about a statement He made concerning His existence and those who rejoiced to see it such as Abraham, the religious leaders asked Him how He could possibly say such things since He was not yet even 50 years old. Jesus replied, "Before Abraham was, I AM." (John 8:54-59)

Here in our passages from the book of Revelation, we see the Lord Jesus dictating to the Apostle John about the things to come. Jesus states twice, the He is the beginning and He is the end. He states it at the beginning of Revelation and again toward the end of the book. We see our Lord, the infinite and eternal God, condescending to communicate to us, His people, who live within the constraints of time, that He Himself rules over all time. Time obeys Him. He was before there was time. While that has the potential to mess with my mind, I am comforted, encouraged and reassured that in all of this, He is God. There is no other. He has this...and He loves us. So, we can rest in the thought that while time is not always on our side, our Great God is. He holds the past, present and future all at the same instant, in His very timeless, ancient, and capable hands.

As we mark off another measured year of time and open up a new one, may we purpose to approach each day as a people assured that God is in control. He knows the end from the beginning and He loves us, so much so that He purchased us with His own blood. What a comfort to remember that although our lives and our world can seem to be chaotic at times, God has written the end FOR us, for our benefit and for His glory! Happy New Year!



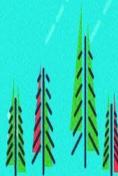
~Rosanna Haddock

Afterword

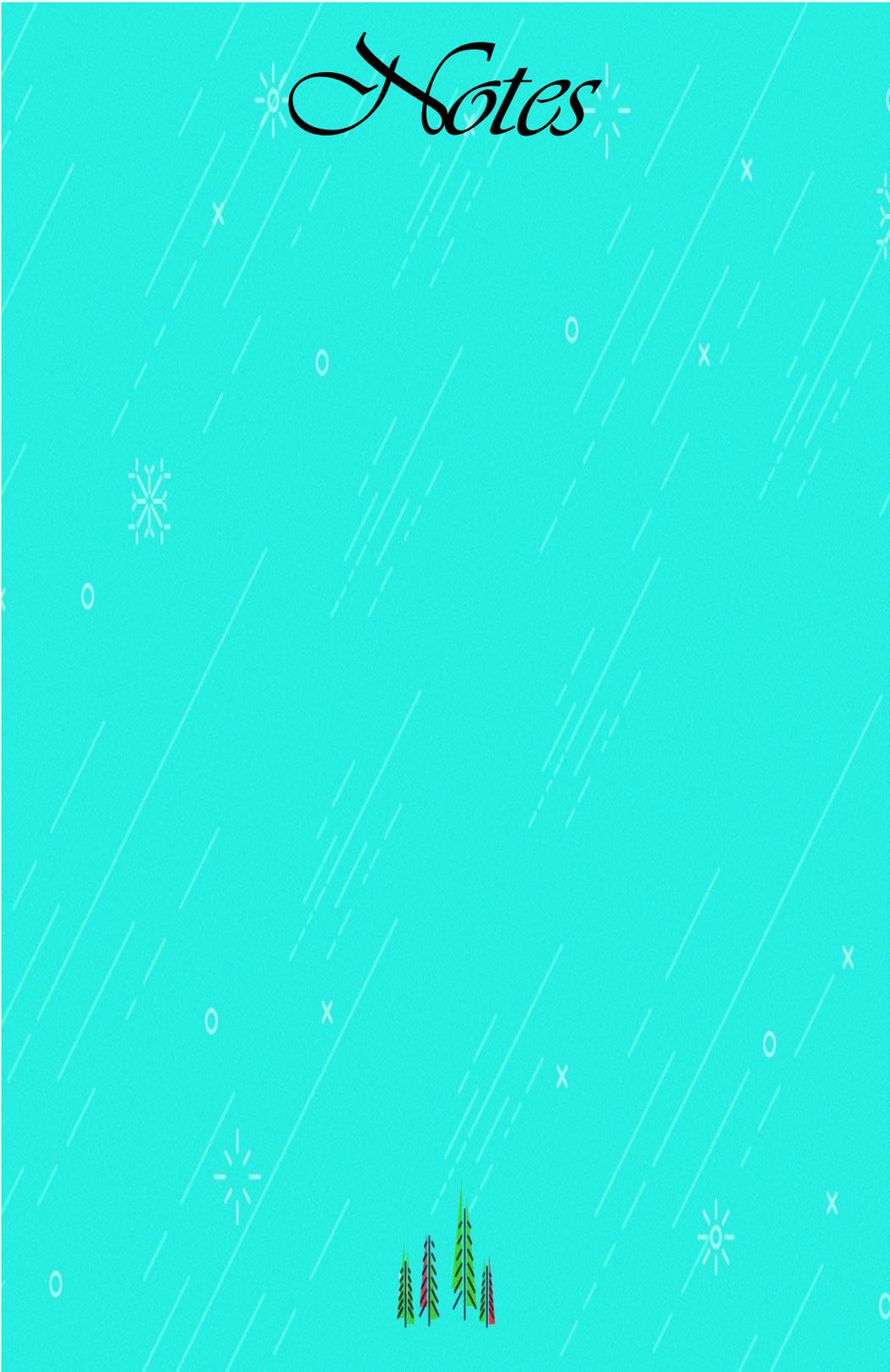
Whew! You made it another year! Once again, a formal “THANK YOU” goes out to every person involved in compiling such a diverse devotional. God has blessed us at CBC with much talent, spiritual wisdom, and perseverance! Not to mention the courage for those that were reticent but mustered up the inner fortitude to try—thank you so much.

If you have not participated in a devotional book any of the last three years we have done this, please consider contributing next year. We are a Body and every member is important, necessary...vital.

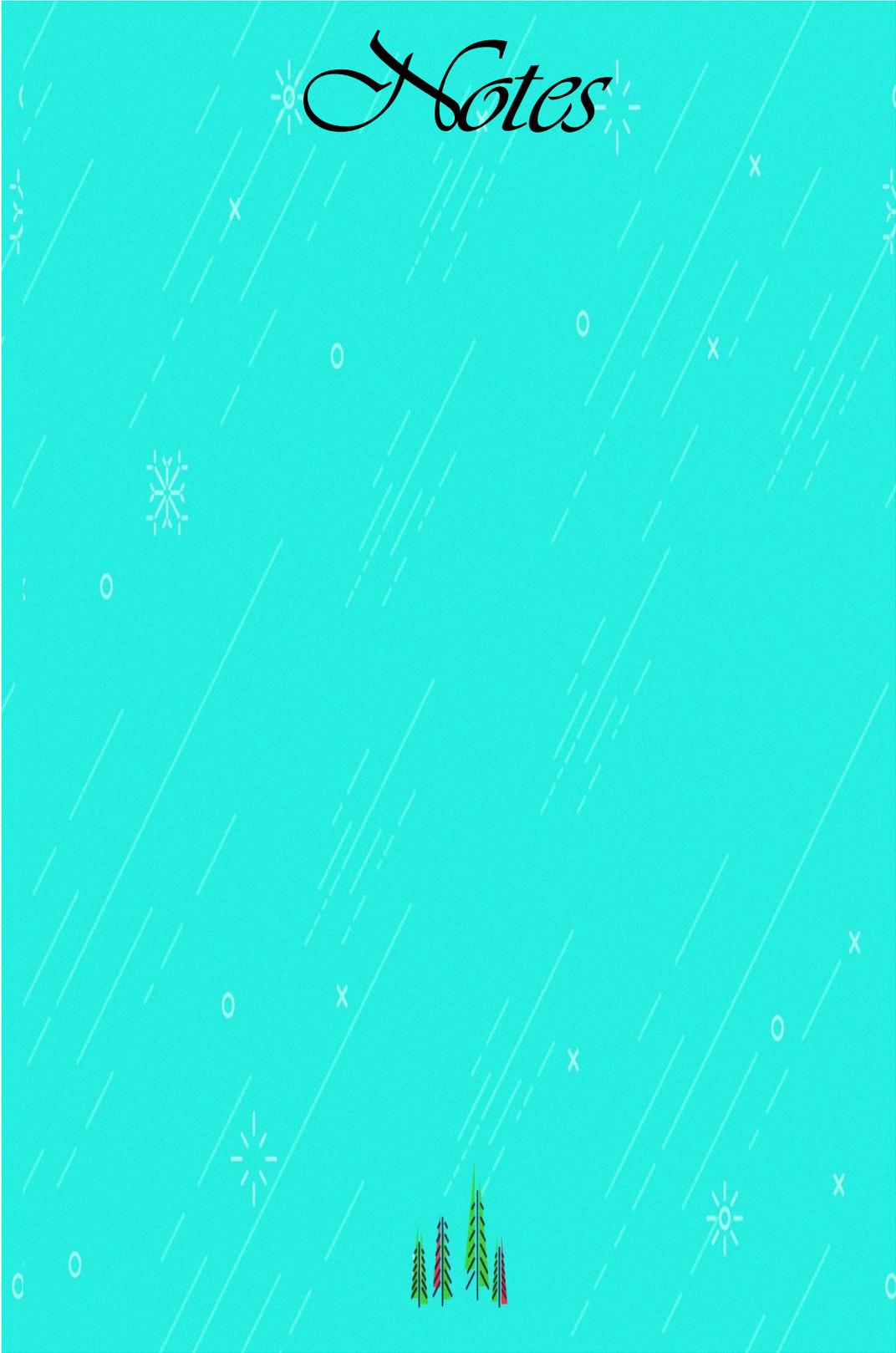
We hope this little journey has served to enrich your quiet time with the Lord and perhaps for some, provided opportunity for a daily time set aside. Perhaps this was the first time you have had a regular quiet time. We hope it served you well and that you will continue to spend daily time alone with the Lord. Every opportunity you take to grow in your walk with Him benefits us as a Church, for you have learned much and you will continue to learn much in your journey with the Lord. Please consider sharing it with your church family to edify and enrich others. May God richly bless you and your families this New Year!



Notes



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