

CU CHURCH
ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



CONTENTS

2	<i>Introduction</i>
3	<i>About this Devotional</i>
4	HOPE
5	<i>Day 1, December 2</i>
6	<i>Day 2, December 3</i>
7	<i>Day 3, December 4</i>
8	<i>Day 4, December 5</i>
9	<i>Day 5, December 6</i>
10	<i>Day 6, December 7</i>
11	PEACE
12	<i>Day 1, December 8</i>
13	<i>Day 2, December 9</i>
14	<i>Day 3, December 10</i>
15	<i>Day 4, December 11</i>
16	<i>Day 5, December 12</i>
17	<i>Day 6, December 13</i>
18	JOY
19	<i>Day 1, December 14</i>
20	<i>Day 2, December 15</i>
21	<i>Day 3, December 16</i>
22	<i>Day 4, December 17</i>
23	<i>Day 5, December 18</i>
24	<i>Day 6, December 19</i>
25	LOVE
26	<i>Day 1, December 20</i>
27	<i>Day 2, December 21</i>
28	<i>Day 3, December 22</i>
29	<i>Day 4, December 23</i>
30	<i>Day 5, December 24</i>
31	<i>Day 6, December 25</i>

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On one side
of the first
Christmas was
a long period
of waiting.

**On the other
side was *hope*.**

On one side,
there was chaos.

**On the other
side was *peace*.**

On one side,
there was
restlessness.

**On the other
side was *joy*.**

On one side of
Christmas was
loneliness and
distance.

**On the other
side was *love*.**

INTRODUCTION

Advent is the story of moving from one side of Christmas to the other. The term *advent* comes from a Latin word that means “coming.” When Jesus came, He brought with Him the hope, peace, joy, and love of heaven. His birth and life made it possible for us to have a new birth and a new way of life.

But, just because Jesus came all those years ago and changed the course of history, it doesn't always mean that it changes the course of your day, week, or month. Even though Jesus came and set God's salvation plan into action, we are still waiting for everything to be made completely right.

We still need hope. We still need peace. We still need joy. We still need God's love. Desperately. Maybe especially at Christmas time.

Here's some good news. Jesus didn't just come to earth once a long time ago. He's coming again.

During this Christmas season, we don't only want to focus on the birth of Jesus at His First Advent; we also look forward to the Second Advent when He will come again.

We are longing for the world to be completely made right.

We are waiting for God to bring us from one side of Christmas to the other.

ABOUT THIS **DEVOTIONAL**

This daily devotional is designed to take you through the entire story of Scripture in just a few weeks. That may sound daunting, but don't let it scare you! Some days you might read a couple verses from the Bible, and some days you might read a couple paragraphs.

Each week, you will find one devotion from the Creation story, one from the story of Abraham, one from Exodus, one from the Psalms, one from the prophet Isaiah telling about Jesus's coming birth and ministry, one out of the Gospels.

In the Creation story, we see God's goodness and original intentions for mankind.

In the life of Abraham, we see God calling people to work with Him to bring His blessing to the world.

The story of the Exodus foreshadows the time when Jesus would bring *us* out of slavery.

The music and poetry of the Psalms celebrate who God is and what He has done.

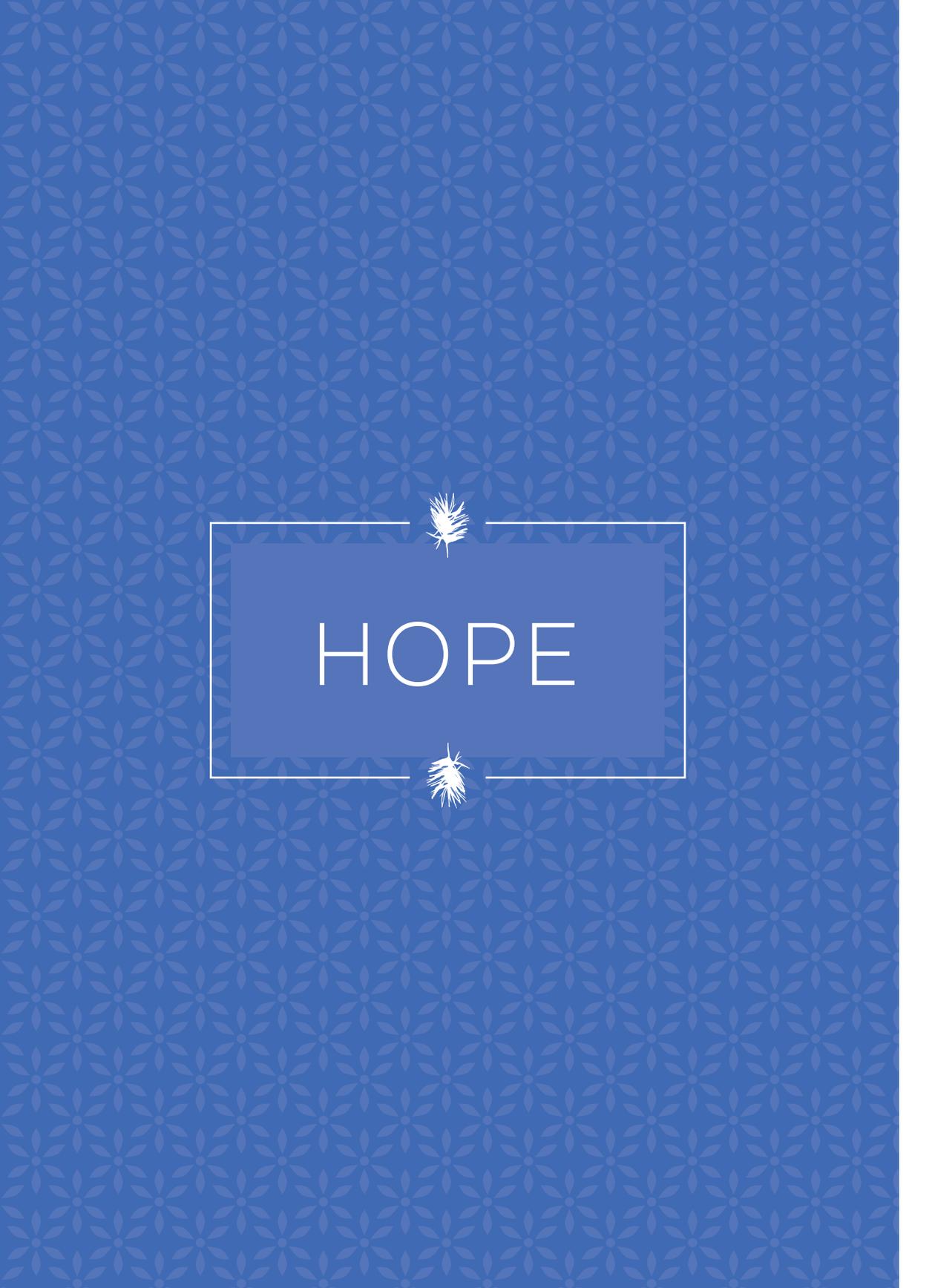
Isaiah stands in between the Old and New Testaments, pointing to the coming of Jesus as the key that unlocks God's purposes for the world.

The Gospels tell the actual story of Jesus—what Christmas is all about!

Each day, you'll also see an **Advent Action**. These are designed to give you practical, tangible ways to live out the things you read in Scripture and in the devotions. Some of them will be fun and lighthearted, and some may be challenging action steps.

OUR PRAYER FOR YOU

We pray that as you go through this devotional, you will encounter Christmas in a new way. But most of all, our prayer is that during this Advent season, Jesus will be more than just a reason to throw a party, wear a sweater, or give presents. We pray that on the other side of Christmas this year, Jesus will be *your* hope, peace, joy, and love.



HOPE



Sunday, December 2

READ GENESIS 3:1-15

With one bite, sin enters the world and brings with it the painful realities of death, disaster, disease, and—perhaps worst of all—distance between God and humanity. The response of Adam and Eve to the awareness of their sin is to hide and try to fix it on their own by covering their shame. This is often our response as well. Knowing this, God calls out to Adam and Eve and asks, “...Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9 NIV®) God is not unaware of where they are. Rather, He desires for His children to come to Him, knowing that it is only in Him that they can receive what they *really* need.

As He invites them out of hiding, God’s response to Adam and Eve reveals that Genesis 3 is about much more than the disastrous story of humanity’s Fall into sin. Genesis 3:15 lays the foundation of our hope by providing the first glimpse of the Gospel. **Adam and Eve responded to sin by hiding; God responded with hope.** God’s curse on Satan (vv. 14-15) contains within it the powerful and hope-filled promise that there will be a descendant of Eve who will deal a death blow to the serpent once and for all.

The Old Testament ends without that particular child being born yet. But the New Testament begins with the story of Jesus: the very One promised in Genesis 3:15. Our God is the God who meets our pain with a promise—the promise of hope that is rooted in His strength and victory over sin and its effects in our lives. Today we remember and rest in the comforting truth that our God came to deliver us, just like we’d hoped. Christmas reminds us that God is the faithful keeper of His promises.

ADVENT ACTION

Write a letter to yourself about how you hope to grow this Advent season, and seal it. Put it on your fridge—you will open it up on December 25!

READ GENESIS 12:1-3

Just before God called Abram in Genesis 12 is the story of a people that sought to make a name for themselves. Led by fear, they disobeyed God's original command to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:9); instead, they chose to gather together and build something that would preserve and promote their own glory. God interrupted their disobedient efforts by confusing their languages. Confused and unable to understand one another, they dispersed over all the earth.

But God doesn't leave humanity without hope for long. In Genesis 12, God speaks to Abraham and sets His plan for hope in motion. Once again, God provides a promise, and it is through this promise that God's blessing—His *hope*—would spread to all mankind. God promises to bless Abram so that He will be a blessing. Specifically, through Abram's descendants the world will come to know the One who provides the ultimate blessing of new life.

Matthew, the first book of the New Testament, begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Who does it begin with? Abraham! In recording this, Matthew helps us see that the plan for hope that began long ago is now being fulfilled in the form of a person. **Hope has a name, and His name is Jesus.**

The book of Matthew ends in the same way Abraham's journey began—with a commissioning for us to go with God and to take our *hope* with us. We, like Abraham, are blessed to be a blessing. As we live out that commissioning, we carry out God's plan of bringing *hope* to the world.

ADVENT ACTION

Decorate for Christmas! If you have already decorated, listen to your favorite Christmas music, and work with your hands to create something—it could be fun, meaningful, pretty, ugly, or all of the above!

Tuesday, December 4

READ EXODUS 1:6-14 & 2:23-25

With a plan in place for hope to move in and through the people of God, the book of Genesis closes with a timely call to remember. Aware that his life is coming to an end, Joseph reminds his brothers and the Israelites of this promise: "...God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." (Genesis 50:24 NIV®) Whether the Israelites knew it or not, their faith and trust in this promise was about to be tested.

Have you ever found yourself in a circumstance or season that led you to feel like all hope was lost? You look back on what was, you look ahead to what could be, but maybe where you find yourself today feels like an island with no connecting roads to get you where you long to be. Maybe you begin to wonder, *Did God mean what He said when He promised to bless me and give me life to the full? Because right now my circumstances feel like anything but that!*

This is how God's people must have felt while they were enslaved in Egypt. Overwhelmed by the oppression and opposition they were facing, the Israelites cried out to God, desperate for Him to come and set them free. In their eyes, their current circumstances seemed to scream that all hope was lost, and in their hopelessness they cried out to God.

Sometimes we can feel enslaved and oppressed because of our circumstances, causing us to doubt that God really is who He says He is and that He'll do what He says He will do. When the people of Israel were hopelessly enslaved, God responded. And He'll respond to us, too. God's people will not be defined by the circumstances, people, or shortcomings that have sought to enslave them, but by their covenant relationship with the God who hears their cries and keeps His promises.

Wherever you are and whatever you're facing, cry out to God. He hears you, He remembers you, and He is faithful to keep His promises.

ADVENT ACTION

Pray today that God would give you the opportunity and boldness to share your hope in Jesus with someone.

READ PSALM 25

For many of us, the Christmas season is indeed “the most wonderful time of the year!” For others, this season brings the painful reminder of an empty chair at the dinner table that was once filled by a loved one. Maybe this season highlights a financial burden or an overwhelming pressure to provide your kids with the “perfect” Christmas experience. Maybe the gray skies and cold air have a way of working their way into your heart, causing you to feel a bit numb and disconnected from it all. Wherever you are, wherever you have been, it is clear that walking faithfully with God does not mean that we are exempt from painful or difficult times. Perhaps the most significant question we can ask and answer when faced with long, trying times is, *Where do I turn while I wait?*

In Psalm 25, David laments to the Lord. He is in the midst of a mess. A mess that includes enemies seeking to revel in his demise accompanied by overwhelming feelings of loneliness, affliction, and distress. In this Psalm, David lays out his heart, and all the troubles contained within it, before the Lord. In doing so, he models for us what Biblical *hope* looks like.

In seasons of waiting or difficulty, we often fall prey to one of two things. First, we may take matters into our own hands, seeking to control things in order to create a “better way.” Second, we may feel the need to downplay our painful circumstances to make sure others don’t misinterpret us as not having enough trust or hope in the Lord. David models a different way. David turns toward the Lord. Verse 21 uses the word *hope* to translate a term that means “to wait eagerly” for God. This kind of waiting is not resignation or passivity, but an active stance toward life. David actively seeks to obey and practice the presence of the Lord as he waits.

What are you tempted to turn toward in seasons of waiting or difficulty?

In this Psalm, we see David hoping, not for his circumstances to change or for deliverance from his current situation, but for a Person: God Himself. Likewise, we do not place our hope in a new situation, a human person, or a material thing. At the First Advent, God entered our world through Jesus, and that’s where we can turn when hope seems lost. Our hope today is in Jesus who has come, and we wait eagerly for His return.

ADVENT ACTION

Memorize Psalm 25:5 NIV®: “Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.”

Thursday, December 6

READ ISAIAH 55:6-13

The Old Testament is the long journey toward the coming of Jesus, packed with powerful and promising moments right alongside weeping and war. Isaiah 55 sits in the middle of this long journey and presents an invitation to hold onto the promises of God.

Isaiah compares God's promise of a coming Savior to the journey of rain and snow, which always do their work on earth before returning to a vapor. Rain and snow fall freely down in different seasons, and it is difficult to predict exactly when, where, or why they come. Rain and snow refresh the world, bringing life just when it is needed. In one moment, rain transforms a place from drought to abundance. With one drop, it pierces the hardened ground like a knife and begins to work loose the trampled earth. Snow carries an invitation to newness, the opportunity for a restart. It can sit preserved upon a mountaintop, displayed in great beauty for all to see until it fills streams, rivers, and lakes to the brim. There is a great mystery in the gifts of rain and snow.

So it is with the hope of God.

This Advent season, God invites you to trust His ways, to see His truth fall down on your life like fresh snow. He invites you to trust that while His Word and His promises may feel like they're sitting on a mountaintop right now, they will rush down to refresh and restore you in His perfect timing.

The hope God wants to give you this Advent season is that *He will not waste what he allows*. Your pain, your loneliness, and your sorrow are seen, and they will not be wasted. His promises, His truth, and His hope for your life will not be wasted. It's mysterious (and maybe even frustrating) from our limited perspective, but **we can live in the hope of God's promise when we fix our eyes on His perspective.**

His ways are not our ways, so this Advent season we hold on to the perspective of God, who is writing a bigger story than we can see right now. Isaiah was waiting for a Savior to come. The timing was mysterious (and maybe even frustrating), but Jesus came at just the right time. Hope was proven true. Whatever may fall in our lives, hope will rise.

ADVENT ACTION

Go for a walk outside (if possible), enjoy the season, and spend some time thanking God for the hope you have in Jesus.

READ LUKE 1:26-38

Mary was waiting, along with all of Israel, in hopeful expectation for the Messiah, the promised One who would free them from oppression. She would have known from Scripture that this hope was promised to come, but she never could have imagined hearing the words, "...Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28 NIV®) In that moment, God chose to include and involve her in His plan to restore people back to Himself.

Mary's response of being "greatly troubled" seems fair. An angel appeared and was speaking to her—and telling her something like *this*? The Lord goes on to tell her that she will bear the Son of God. The thoughts must have flooded into her mind. *How can this be? Why did You choose me? What will others say?* Perhaps a host of other doubts and insecurities filled her mind. Luke records one question that rises to the surface of Mary's heart: "How will this be...since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34 NIV®). God meets her question with the one powerful truth she needed to be reminded of: "For nothing will be impossible with God." (Luke 1:37 CSB)

Notice that verse 37 says that "nothing is impossible *with* God," not that "nothing is impossible *for* God." These are both true statements, but saying "*with* God" seems to indicate Mary's role to play. This shows us that **God wants to invite people to participate in His mission of bringing hope to the world.**

And like Abraham centuries earlier when God made a similar invitation to join in His work, Mary receives this truth and responds in faith as a servant by trusting His words.

How might God also be inviting you to play a part in bringing hope to those around you? During this Advent season, as you consider how you can join His mission, remember this: Nothing is impossible *with* God.

ADVENT ACTION

Spend 20 minutes today intentionally being still and quiet. Recognize that we are made with limits and that even when we are limited, God is still limitless. As you pause today, say this prayer out loud: *God, teach me to celebrate my limits and Your bigness.*



PEACE

Saturday, December 8

READ GENESIS 1:27-2:3

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1 NIV®) Take just a moment to think about the enormity of that sentence. On day one, God created light. On day two, He made the sky and seas. On the third day, the Lord formed dry land and plant life. Day four saw His creation of the sun, moon, and stars. On the fifth day, He gave life to the sky and sea animals. And then, on day six, God finished by making the land animals and creating human beings in His image.

It cannot be overstated how monumental this task was. It marks the very beginning of history! And after all of this creation, God, the Father of the universe, took the seventh day of the week to rest. He is the All-powerful Maker of the universe, yet He felt it was necessary to take a day of rest. Do you suppose God *needed* a day of rest? Probably not. So why take a day of rest and document it in the book that people will read for millennia to come? Because God was modeling for us that *we need* what only *He can provide*.

We live in a world dominated by TV, smartphones, and computers that saturate us with constant entertainment, distraction, and information. Our schedules are packed full with everything from work to school to extracurricular activities. Many of us feel tired and overwhelmed and unable to stop running through life. But **from the very beginning, God instituted a rhythm and reason for us to have peace in our lives, even in the midst of a chaotic world.**

Maybe especially at Christmastime, we need the reminder that God built intentional rest and peace into the fabric of creation. As you reflect on your own life, consider how God's purposeful prescription of rest could offer a peace that you've been missing.

ADVENT ACTION

Pray this prayer: "God, help me to experience Your peace this week."

READ GENESIS 15

The season of Advent is, by definition, a season of waiting. As we've seen, *advent* comes from the Latin word which means "coming," so celebrating Advent means thinking about something *coming*. For Christians all over the world, it is a time spent acknowledging the coming of Christ as a baby, but also eagerly waiting for the day when He will come again. Sometimes we get distracted and we eagerly anticipate gifts and parties more than Jesus' return, but we all find ourselves waiting for and anticipating *something*.

Abram finds himself in this place of waiting in Genesis 15. As we read last week in Genesis 12, God called Abram and promised to make his family into a great nation. In the intervening time, Abram faithfully followed God's directions, going when he was called and moving according to God's will. In chapter 15, Abram begins feeling fearful and anxious about the fact that he doesn't have any children of his own to make up this "great nation" that God had promised (Genesis 12:2). He's been waiting anxiously for children, but none have come.

God's promise seems to be baseless because Abram can't see any progress. But the Lord makes a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15:18. Notice here that God does not immediately provide Abram with children, and He doesn't physically give him worldly power over any nation. What God gives Abram is a covenant—a legal, binding contract—stating that God will remain committed to give Abram both descendants and land. God gives Abram a promise that He will be faithful and that He has a plan. Now Abram can live in peace, because no matter what life might look like or feel at any moment, God's plan *will prevail*.

During Advent, our job is to remember that we are in the same position that Abram was. Jesus has promised us that He will return. We haven't seen it yet and we may feel like there is no progress. But **God's plan will prevail, and because of that, we can live in peace.**

ADVENT ACTION

God promised Abram that He would use Abram's descendants to bless all the nations of the world. In fulfillment of that promise, Jesus has commissioned us to bring His Good News to every nation. Look at a map, choose a country, and learn how Christmas is celebrated there.

Monday, December 10

READ EXODUS 13:17-14:31

The Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. Four centuries—that's older than the United States! While you might assume the Israelites would have jumped at the first chance to leave, in some ways they came to think of Egypt as their home. But God knew this about His people. So, He prepared a way for them to escape that would prevent them from changing their minds.

The Lord led His people straight to the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's army closing in on them from behind. From an outside perspective, this looks insane. Why would God lead them into what looked like certain death, with the sea on one side and their enemies on the other? Exodus 13:17 gives us the answer: *"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'"*

Even as He was saving Israel, God understood that they were humans who would succumb to fear of the unknown. God's people continued to doubt His ability to save them throughout Exodus 14. At first they were "marching out boldly" in 14:8, but by verses 10 and 11 NIV®, they had great fear: "They said to Moses, 'Was it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?'"

Even though God's people doubted Him, He knew every angle of His plan. The Red Sea was ahead, Pharaoh's army behind. The only option was for God to show up and rescue His people. In Exodus 14:15 NIV®, "...the LORD said to Moses, 'Why are you crying to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.'" This simple, straightforward command was their salvation. **God's people only had to obey in order to find the peace that God was offering them.**

When our lives feel out of control, and it seems like God has disappeared, maybe we need to stop and gain some perspective. Maybe we're not listening to a simple command like "Go forward." God knows His people. He loves His people. He offers His people peace, even in the most difficult circumstances. The way out that He provides may not be ideal in our own minds, but God has a far better perspective than we do: He can see above the sea.

ADVENT ACTION

A little change in perspective can go a long way. Make a list of a few things you are thankful for, and thank God out loud.

READ PSALM 84

There once was a contest that sought to find the perfect picture of *peace*. It was a great challenge to artists everywhere, and hundreds of paintings were wrapped and sent to the judges. When the judges opened all the paintings, they found beautiful art depicting calm lakes, green trees, grassy shorelines, and flocks of sheep grazing undisturbed.

Everyone assumed one of these paintings would have been the winner. But the man who had commissioned the contest opened one last painting that shocked everyone. It featured a tumultuous waterfall in front of a rocky cliff, with storm clouds looming overhead. There was a ragged-looking tree growing out of the side of the cliff, with a bird's nest precariously perched on one of the branches. A tiny bird had built her nest there on the branch, and she was sitting peacefully, protecting her eggs under her open wings.

It was the perfect picture of peace, despite all that was happening around the bird's nest. This picture was chosen as the winner.

The story of this contest sounds very similar to Psalm 84. In this section of the Psalms, the Psalmist is lamenting the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, longing to return to the Temple of the Lord, the symbol of God's presence on Earth. Things were out of control for the Israelites; but this Psalm reminded them that despite it all, God is always there. The Lord is always available to His people—with or without a temple building.

Our busy lives today often feel out of control. **We may feel like God is distant, but He is our perfect peace in the midst of the storms that swirl and loom around us.** Let Psalm 84 remind you this Advent season: no matter what else fills your schedule or your mind, the presence of God is the one thing that can truly bring *peace*.

ADVENT ACTION

Sometimes God reminds us of His presence through the comforting words of a friend. Write an encouraging letter to someone in your workplace, school, or neighborhood.

Wednesday, December 12

READ ISAIAH 9:2-7

The prophet Isaiah lived in a time of turmoil. The people of God had been split into two kingdoms: Israel in the north, which had been captured by the Assyrians; and Judah in the south, which was in imminent danger of being overtaken by Babylon. In chapter 9 of Isaiah, Ahaz was the king, and he refused to turn to God. God warned His people through the prophet Isaiah: They needed to turn back to the Lord, or else they would face the enemies surrounding them. This was a dark and frightening time for God's people, but Isaiah's prophecy offered the promise of a new day.

In this promise, Isaiah recognized that God's people were walking in deep darkness. But Isaiah promised that God's judgment would not last forever. There would be a new day of expansion, joy, deliverance, and peace (Isaiah 9:3-5). The Kingdom of God would one day expand, including people from every nation. This would be a day of joy, because God's people would be delivered from their oppression. Peace would reign after years of strife.

The final promise, found in verses 6 and 7, is the promise of a Messiah: a child called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. All the nations of the world will fall, but His Kingdom will never come to an end. What a bright hope in the midst of ongoing torment for the people of Israel and Judah!

We live in a war-torn and chaotic world, much like Isaiah did. His prophecy still holds true. Jesus came as a child 2,000 years ago, and He opened the door to peace with God and each other through the Gospel of His grace. And we believe that He will come again to fully and finally establish peace on earth, and the words of Isaiah 9:7 NIV® will ring true: **"Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end..."** Jesus will come again, and He will bring peace. We need only to turn to Him and believe.

ADVENT ACTION

Tonight, eat dinner by candlelight with your family or some friends. Talk together, or write your thoughts, about what it means to be a light in the darkness.

READ MATTHEW 1:18-25

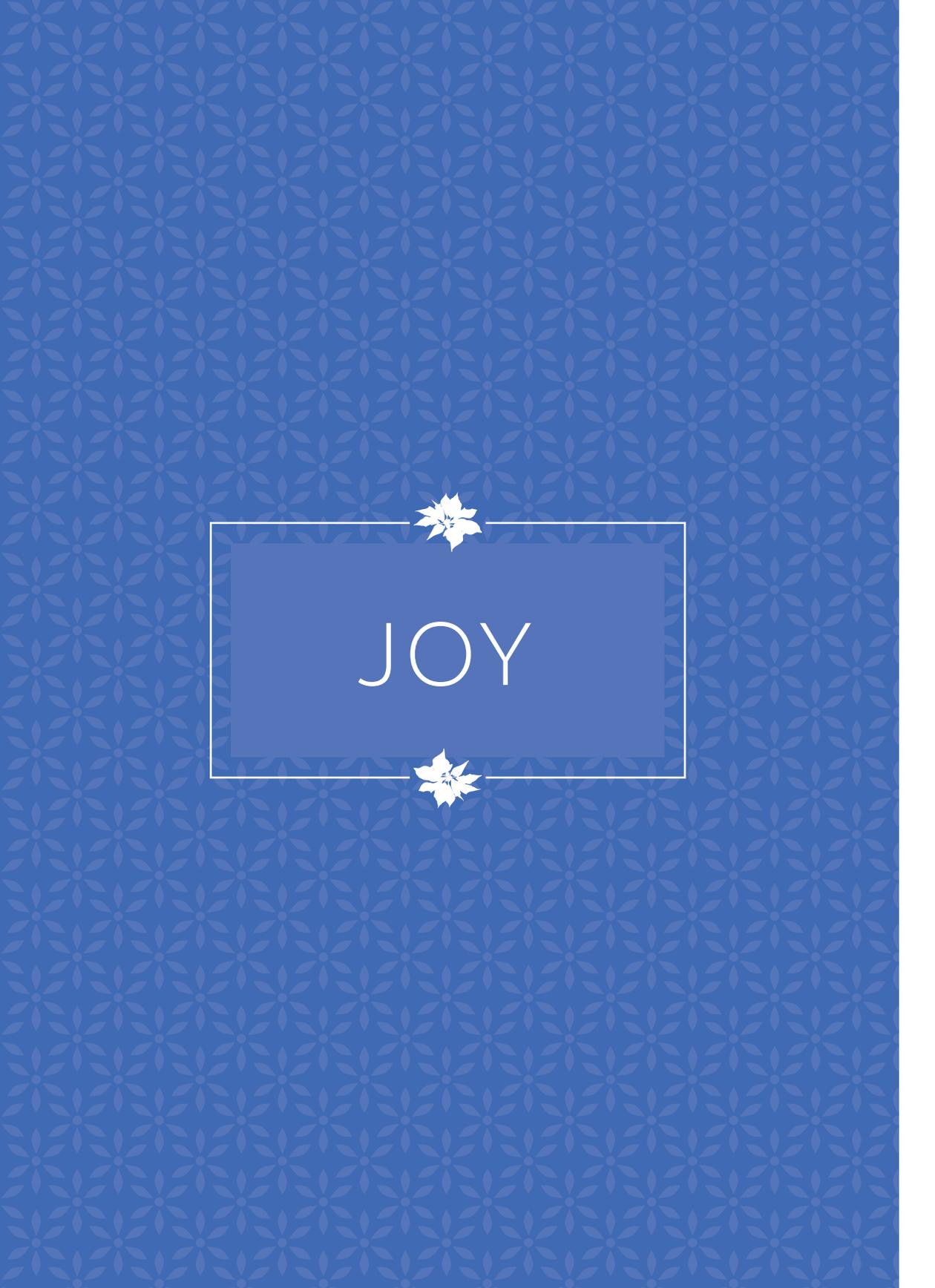
Matthew's account of Jesus' birth highlights a unique perspective—namely, Joseph's perspective. Joseph was a fair man who was unwilling to shame his young fiancée, even though he found out that she was pregnant before they were married. This must have felt like a punch in the gut to Joseph; he surely felt that Mary had betrayed him. His world and his plans were crumbling around him, when out of nowhere an angel appeared to him and told him news that must have seemed unbelievable. The baby in Mary's womb was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit, and He would grow up to save the world. The child would be given the title of Immanuel, *God with us*.

When Joseph was experiencing *anything but* peace, God told him that the Prince of Peace would be his son. Soon, Joseph would hold the embodiment of perfect Peace in his arms. Joseph changed his plans of divorce and quietly obeyed the words of the Lord.

Has your world ever felt like it is crumbling around you? Have you ever gotten news that took your breath away—and not in a good way? It's during these times that we rely on the peace that only Jesus can provide. He came and He was the embodiment of peace on the earth. **Peace became present at the First Advent.** And when Jesus left earth to go back to His Father, He gave the Holy Spirit to His church. Because of this, we can continue to live in God's peace on earth and good will toward men as we await our Lord's return.

ADVENT ACTION

Individually, or with your loved ones, set aside 20 minutes today to intentionally rest, and invite God's peace into the upcoming weekend.



JOY



Friday, December 14

READ GENESIS 4:1-12

The first murder happened early in history. You would think it would have taken mankind a while to reach that kind of darkness, but it didn't. It happened in the first family, Adam and Eve's boys. Cain, the older brother, violently killed Abel. Nothing could obliterate a parent's joy like this must have. It seems impossible to even fathom this shock and heartbreak. Living a detached, autopilot life would become the new normal, the only way to live from that tragic moment on. Unless the God who created all of us would miraculously intervene.

[Spoiler alert: He did.]

Remember, this first family started in the garden of perfection. They had everything: the freshest food, all animals named as friends, and intimate walks with the God of the universe. Perfection was their norm.

Then, with one choice, their lives lost all hope and peace and any ongoing chance for joy. The consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience began showing up in their kids. Cain was ruled by anger and stole his brother's life. While Cain wanted to win God's approval, he was too blinded by his own deeply-rooted depravity. He could not free himself from the poison of his sin.

[Spoiler alert: Freedom can't be earned—it's a gift! Cain didn't need to earn anything from God; he needed a Savior.]

Amidst one of history's darkest and worst-kept family secrets, God entered into their mess. He defended Abel's memory, grieved with the family, even protected Cain's life, and finally gave another son to Adam and Eve.

Only the God who created us can piece a devastated family back together. **Only a Savior sent by God Himself can bring restoration to our lives.** He meets us in our jealousy, hurt, and loss; He even enters into our angry, murderous, consuming thoughts with a plan to make us new. He can replace grieving, loss, pain, anger, hurt—all of it. He came to trade them for joy.

God's Son, Jesus, will return to the earth to walk among us and make us a perfect family with Him again. Jesus didn't kill to get what He wanted like Cain did. Jesus died to get what He came for: *us*. Our joy at Christmas is Jesus. Christmas means God chose to step into our mess, to be with us—like He did with Cain.

ADVENT ACTION

Pray this prayer: "God, help me to experience Your joy this weekend."

READ GENESIS 21:1-7

Here's some very good news of great joy in this season: God always keeps His promises. Genesis 21:1-7 is the story of a crazy, joy-filled promise come true. The existence of God's chosen people, those who know and follow Him, depended on the fulfillment and timing of this promise. So, when Isaac was born, there was joy in Abraham's household.

What a relief from where we left off with history's first family! (Remember Cain and Abel?) God was and is still very close by—it's not quite walking in the Garden of Eden, but His presence, His Word, and His blessings are all still active and available. Look at Genesis 21:1 NIV®: "*Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised.*" This serves as an example of how much God loves to give blessings and keep promises, especially to people who aren't expecting Him to.

God uses Abraham and Sarah's loss and deep desire to reveal His love for surprises. Sarah actually says in verse 6 NIV®, "...*God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.*" This elderly woman isn't just happy, she is *filled* with laughter!

During the season of Advent, we remember **our only chance of being filled with real laughter and lasting joy is in the promise of Jesus**. He will keep His promises—even when the timing doesn't seem right to us. If we can wait in Him, His timing is always just right. Then the joy will come.

There is so much grace and promise and surprise here. You can almost sense God saying to Sarah, *Just wait until you hear about My son, Jesus. He will be a baby that will give promise and joy forever! He is more than a surprise for an old, hopeful couple—My Son is for everyone.*

ADVENT ACTION

As you reflect on God's unfailing promises, do something at home today that brings you joy!

Sunday, December 16

READ EXODUS 15:1-18

There is a certain man who has been in prison for most of his life—more than 20 years now—yet he knows how to sing of deliverance. Outwardly speaking, he has no freedom whatsoever; but inwardly, he has great joy. Because of Jesus' resurrection, his prison sentence is not the sum of his life. Because Christ has delivered his soul, he is free to live purposefully and to the full—even in prison.

He will continue paying for his crime for a long time in prison, but his soul has been set free—no payment or hard time required. Jesus' death has delivered him from the power of sin long before he leaves the prison yard. Songs of deliverance don't have to wait until you cross the Red Sea to get away from an evil king. Singing doesn't need to be delayed until you pry free from an addiction, an unloving marriage, a toxic job environment, or a bleak diagnosis. You can sing today, knowing God's deliverance is yours today through Jesus.

The joy that comes from deliverance needs to have an outlet. God gave us worship; He gave us music to praise Him for His deliverance. The Israelites were freed from Egypt after 400 long years of slavery; we were set free from the bondage of our own sin. If we can grasp that the same power that parted the Red Sea is available to us today, we have a reason to sing as the Israelites did.

If you are desperately awaiting deliverance from something or someone, start rehearsing your song now, because the promise of God to set the Israelites free has become our promise, too, by the power of Jesus. This is what Advent celebrates: the Son of God came to meet us in our slavery on the earth, die to purchase our freedom, and deliver us to the eternal promised land. **When He comes again, He won't part the Red Sea—Jesus will part the sky.** There will be a song of deliverance like the Israelites never sang, heard, or imagined.

ADVENT ACTION

Sing or play some Christmas music today, and let it bring you some joy!

READ PSALM 66

The Psalms are a perfect place to go to press your “joy reset button.” In the morning, looking to the day ahead and hitting reset to focus on the great things God has done can be key for living a life of joy.

Children love good secrets; they hold their breath as they listen. Reach deep into your childhood memories for the next few sentences and picture a preschooler talking with wide eyes. Imagine the parentheses inserted into the words of Psalm 66:16-20 NIV® below like a child calling over another child to excitedly share what just happened!

“Come and listen, all you who fear God;”

(“Come over here and listen! Uh, you fear God, right?!”)

“Let me tell you what he has done for me.”

(“I need to tell you what He did!”)

“I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.”

(I was crying for help, singing to God—as I was crying! Funny to be singing and crying at the same time, ya know? Have you ever done cry-singing before? It was weird...but good.)

“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened;”

(I had to say what I did wrong first, or else the Lord wouldn’t hear me crying and singing. It was hard, but worth it!)

“but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.”

(But GOD LISTENED TO ME!)

“Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!”

(So now I am singing really loudly to God, because HE LISTENS TO ME AND LOVES ME!)

These few verses are like a secret recipe for joy: Remember to *fear* God. Then *tell* what He has done for you. *Cry out* where you need His help. *Confess*. Say what God says about the sin stuck in your heart, knowing that *He listens and loves you all the time*.

Joy is a decision to be out-loud about the greatness of God. In other words, don’t be afraid to sound like a child sometimes! The psalmist didn’t care—he openly praised God. You can, too. And you’ll find you’ll be full of a lot more joy.

ADVENT ACTION

Share joy by bringing coffee, tea, or cocoa to a coworker, teacher, or friend. If you’re willing, sing or hum a joy-filled tune as you do it!

Tuesday, December 18

READ ISAIAH 61:1-3

Jesus' coming to the earth made a monumental shift in the way we live. We are not qualified or worthy to live in this kind of joy, but God's Son is, and He invites us in.

See if you find yourself hoping, praying, or seeking for something on this list that Isaiah wrote:

The Spirit of the Lord
 The Lord's anointing
 The proclaiming of good news to the poor
 The releasing of prisoners
 The freeing of captives
 The Lord's favor, vengeance, comfort, provision, and beauty

Need some joy this Christmas season to replace mourning or praise instead of despair? Sound too good to be true? It may seem like it. But Jesus lived out all this good news in the day-to-day with every person He came in contact with. Isaiah knew the time was coming when a life like that would be possible. The First Advent meant that Isaiah's promises became reality. And because of Jesus' work on earth, we can live that kind of joyful life now. And we can *share* that kind of joyful life, too.

So, know that the Spirit of God is on *you*.
 The anointing of the Lord is on *you*.
 Proclaiming good news to the poor is *your* calling.
 The releasing of prisoners is *your* calling.
 The freeing of captives? Yup, *your* calling.

The Lord's favor, vengeance, comfort, provision, and beauty are the result of the good news of great joy that will be for all people. It is starting to be uncovered here in Isaiah. Jesus' birth was still centuries away when Isaiah wrote, but it was getting closer every day!

Believe in the trade God is offering here: accept the good news to gain grace to live a Spirit-led, anointed, free, and favored life. And remember: it's for all people—the poor, the prisoner, and the captive alike. Everyone. Let your joy be contagious this Christmas, and watch the good news of Jesus set people free.

ADVENT ACTION

Get ready to "anoint" your Christmas tree by creating an ornament out of items you already have around your house. Have some fun (joy!) with this.

JOY

DAY 6

Wednesday, December 19

READ LUKE 2:8-16

One of the hallmarks of the birth of Jesus is *joy*. The host of angels declare to shepherds in their fields that Christmas is “...*good news of great joy for all the people.*” (Luke 2:10 NIV®)

These verses are incredible. Really, *incredible* is an understatement when we consider how the sad news about the fate of the world is replaced with dramatically good news. Seeing an army of angels delivering this news is incredible. Who the news was delivered to is incredible. The news itself is *most* incredible.

Let your imagination run for a minute. Do you think that maybe the angels were questioning this mission. God was coming down to live with the people He created. As a baby. Completely dependent on His creation. *Really?* They had to be excited, but maybe also confused. Surely the angels knew how people blew it the first time God walked among us in the Garden of Eden. Could human beings really be trusted again?

And yet, the angels were sent to be the announcers that He had come. Right then. That night!

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord... Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”
(Luke 2:11,14 NIV®)

The angels first delivered this incredible news to shepherds. Remember, shepherds were some of the lowest people in society. But it's no accident that the poor shepherds heard first. The angels didn't just randomly pick the first group of people they came across on that silent night. God sent them to the shepherds to make a statement: **The good news of great joy is for everybody, starting with the unknown, unnoticed, and unloved.**

Surely the “joy meter” in the lives of these shepherds was never the same. Surely they never sat out under the night sky the same way. They must have repeated the story of the angels, the message, and the baby to everyone they knew. After all, the good news is for everyone, and it will bring great joy to all people. God noticed. God found them. God cared. God *came!* God is with us...again!

The first *Advent* brought great joy to a bunch of shepherds, and it brings joy to us, too.

ADVENT ACTION

Set aside 20 minutes today to simply be thankful. Make a list of the things in your life you're grateful for, talk about it with friends or family, and take joy in looking back over God's goodness in your life.



LOVE

Thursday, December 20

READ GENESIS 7:24-8:22

The first thing you think of when you read about Noah's ark probably isn't the word *love*. Picture enough rain for a long enough time that the entire earth was covered, and animals and people were wiped out. And it lasted long enough that Noah and his family were on the ark for an entire year (Genesis 7:11-13; 8:14)! That doesn't exactly scream "love."

But even in this story, you can see a beautiful expression of God's love for His people—if you know where to look.

These past few weeks, we've been talking about Advent—what it means to wait for God to *come* into the world. But this story of God's people waiting on Him to act didn't begin with us—and it didn't even start on Christmas. It started a long time ago. It's woven into the fabric of all of Scripture. The story of Noah's ark is part of the bigger story of God coming to deliver His people.

In Noah's day, he was faithful to God when no one else was. He was living a righteous life when the people around him were doing the exact opposite. Just listen to the contrast of God's judgment and grace in Genesis 7 and 8. Genesis 7:24 NIV® says, "*The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.*" The very next verse, 8:1, says, "*But God remembered Noah...*"

Do you see the love of God in those two verses? God still acted in righteous judgment to destroy the disobedient and evil world with a flood, but it's clear that He had *love* for His people. The flood came, but God remembered Noah. The waters covered the earth, but God remembered Noah. That's the love of God: He hasn't guaranteed that nothing bad will ever happen, but **when bad things happen, God will not forget His people.**

Maybe you're surrounded by a flood. You may feel like you're surrounded by chaos. Maybe you're waiting for God a lot longer than you thought you would need to. But in this Advent season, hear this encouragement: you won't have to wait forever.

God doesn't forget His people. He remembered Noah. He'll remember us.

ADVENT ACTION

Pray this prayer: "God, help me to experience Your love this week."

LOVE

DAY 2

Friday, December 21

READ GENESIS 22:1-19

If you've read through this story before, it can be easy to read pretty quickly without feeling the full impact of it. Think about it for a minute: Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, to literally tie him to an altar and kill him. That's crazy!

Add to that the fact that God has already told Abraham that his descendants would be numerous and become a huge nation. But up to this point, Abraham just has his one legitimate son, with no hope for more. Isaac was the embodiment of the promise that brought hope, the opportunity for God's peace to come to everyone. Isaac's name means "laughter"—he *is* the joy of God's fulfilled promise. And God is asking Abraham to kill him?

It's a mystery to us why God does things this way. We can't know all the motivation behind His decision to test Abraham in this way. But we do know how this story ends: with an incredible display of the *love* of God.

As we see Abraham preparing to sacrifice his only son, it may remind you of another one and only Son who was sacrificed. Two thousand years after Abraham, Jesus—one of Abraham's descendants—would face His own crucial moment. The biggest difference is that in Genesis, God showed His love by stopping the sacrifice from happening; but later, God showed His love by allowing the ultimate sacrifice to happen.

When God stopped the sacrifice of Isaac, He made possible the birth of a nation. When God allowed the sacrifice of Jesus, He made possible the *new birth* of His people worldwide. God's people waited for centuries for the Son to come who would save them. Sacrifice may not have seemed like the best way to go about it, but God's plan was perfect.

God's ways are not our ways. His plans are not our plans. His timing is not our timing. We often don't know why God does what He does when He does it. Sometimes it makes sense to our limited perspective, and sometimes it doesn't. But while we wait, and while we wonder, we can trust God, because He has proven Himself to be a God of *love*.

ADVENT ACTION

As you celebrate Christmas today, take some time to remember that baby Jesus is also our Savior Jesus. Thank God for His ultimate Gift.

Saturday, December 22

READ EXODUS 20:1-21

The Ten Commandments? Isn't this a Christmas devotional? Let us explain.

Ever since Adam and Eve first sinned and were removed from the Garden of Eden and the presence of God, humanity has needed to be restored back into His presence. And God has graciously desired to bridge that gap. So, after the Exodus, when God's people had seen Him do something amazing by freeing them from their slavery, God gave them the Law. God giving His people the Law may not seem like love to us, but it really was.

Most ancient religions were based on the fear of unknown and unknowable "gods." The ancient "gods" were so unpredictable (they were often based on things like weather), that people never really knew what these invented "gods" were like or even what they wanted from the people who supposedly worshiped them. They just had to try and live up to imagined standards that were impossible to measure and impossible to know or predict. Sounds stressful, huh?

But that's not what our God did. Our God gave clear expectations, guidelines, and explanations of who He is and what He expected. He wasn't distant; He came near. He wasn't unpredictable; He was clear. He wasn't scary. He wasn't cruel. He didn't hide. He revealed Himself. He spoke. He showed His *love*.

God made His identity very clear by giving the Law, and the people were able to see, know, and respond to Him. When God revealed His will to His people, He revealed His love.

But that wasn't the full extent of His love. *There was still more to wait for.*

God made His love most clear, most present, and most powerful when He gave us more than just the Law. **God's love shined bright on the first Christmas.**

When we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate the coming of Jesus into our world. When the Law was given, Israel saw an expression of the love of God revealed to them. The first Christmas is when we saw the love of God revealed to all humanity in a new way. We have seen God's love, and His name is Jesus.

But the beauty of Advent is that the story still isn't over. *There's still even more to wait for!* Christ who came once will come again.

ADVENT ACTION

Tell someone close to you something specific that you love about them.

READ PSALM 136

Part of the beauty of Psalm 136 is that it puts into poetry one of the foundational truths of Biblical theology: **God's love is woven throughout all of history.**

The writer of this Psalm is incredibly intentional to highlight the great love of God at every single turn in the story—literally, as part of every sentence! The writer can't tell the story of God and His people without painstakingly pointing out that God's love is behind every detail. He has seen God's work and plan unfolding for centuries, and he celebrates it with a song of God's love. He is waiting for the ultimate redemption that will eventually come through Jesus, and in the meantime, he is singing about the great love of God.

If you have eyes to see God's love for you and for the people around you at every turn in your story, it really will start to change you from the inside out.

You will worry less. You will pray more.

You will stress less. You will rest more.

You will argue less. You will forgive—and apologize—more.

And one other thing: If you can see, live in, and breathe in God's love for you at every turn of *your* story, you will love more, too.

Christmas is one of the places in history where we most clearly see God's love on display, so what better time than now to embrace a Psalm 136 way of life? What would be different about your life if God's love for you and the people around you was part of every single sentence? What would be different about your attitude? About your patience? About your relationships? How would you be able to love others more—with the kind of love God has for you?

In the season of Advent, we celebrate that God came into the world through His Son Jesus. But we also wait and long for Him to return again. What sustains us is looking back over the course of history—and our own story—and seeing the love of God in every sentence. Not only can we sing of God's great love for us, but we can become representatives of God's love to the world until He comes again.

ADVENT ACTION

Memorize 1 John 4:19 NIV®: "We love because He first loved us."

Monday, December 24

READ ISAIAH 53:4-6

About 700 years before the first Christmas, Isaiah wrote these words. He looked ahead to a time when God's people would have a Representative who would fight for them and bear their punishment. He saw a time when God's chosen Servant would make an incredible sacrifice in order to lead the people out of their slavery. He saw a time when God's people would no longer have to wonder if God cared about their suffering. Isaiah saw a time when God Himself would come into the world to show His love for all humankind.

As we've looked through Scripture, we've seen places throughout the Bible that point to Christmas—the First Advent. God didn't just create people, speak to people, or direct people. He promised so much more than that: He promised to come *be with* people. Even better—He promised to come *suffer* on behalf of people. What other god would do that? What other god would see the problem of sin that his people had gotten themselves into and take the painful solution upon himself? What other god has *love* like that?

That's what Christmas is all about: a God who loves His people enough to enter their world, face their pain, endure their death, and erase their sin. Even though God knew that the path of His Savior would have to lead to a cross, He took the first step anyway. As God's people waited for Him to come the first time, they were waiting on a God of love to come into the world and right what was wrong.

Now, as we wait for Him to come again, we can trust that God is the same: a God of love who will come to right what is wrong. When He came the first time, He came to make a way for salvation. When He comes the second time, He will come to bring salvation publicly to His people. **God went to incredible lengths at the First Advent in order to save the ones He loves, and we can trust that He will do it again at the Second Advent.** We won't have to wait forever, because we know that our God is a God of incredible, never-ending, almost unbelievable love.

ADVENT ACTION

Share the love of Christ if you go out today.
Try encouraging someone who works in retail. Get creative!

LOVE

DAY 6

Tuesday, December 25

READ 1 JOHN 4:7-21

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

1 John 4:8 NIV®

We’ve seen glimpses and promises of God’s love throughout Scripture, and we saw in the Gospel of John yesterday that the simplest summary of God’s entrance into the world is *love*. God’s love for people is unmatched, unparalleled, and unrelenting. It’s amazing! It’s beautiful! And it’s what the Christmas season is all about. But, it doesn’t stop there.

That’s why John—the same John who wrote the Gospel—can say that if you don’t love others, you don’t really know God very well. Because to be around God is to be around love. And **God’s love is contagious**.

John would know! He spent several years with Jesus Himself. John knew firsthand that being around Jesus meant seeing love that he had only imagined before. And then, before he knew it, John found himself giving that same kind of love to others. In fact, you can count more than 20 times that the word “love” appears in some form in 1 John 4:7-21. Love just pours out of John because he watched it pour out of Jesus.

As this devotional comes to a close, and as Christmastime is ending, we hope you’ve found yourself coming to know God more. We hope you’ve spent some time with Jesus throughout the past month and experienced His love through our celebration of Advent. God Himself came into the world through Jesus to give us hope, peace, and joy, and to show us His love. We hope you’ve seen it. We hope you’ve felt it. But even more than that, we hope you’ll *share* it. Because **God’s love is contagious**.

Don’t keep the message of Advent to yourself. Jesus came into the world at Christmas, and He’s coming again soon. In between, we are called to be people who love others in a way that points them to the source of all love: God, our Father. So, here’s your challenge: Carry the love of God for people with you wherever you are, and watch Him change lives around you.

ADVENT ACTION

Open and read the letter you wrote yourself on Day 1 of this devotional. Reflect on what God has taught you and challenged you with this Advent season. After that, pray and choose a word that reflects who you want to be or how you want to live in 2018. Write that word on a notecard and put it on your fridge.