

A Hope Eternal

A 29-Day Advent Journal

A Hope Eternal

“I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people ...”

EPHESIANS 1:18

The liturgical season of Advent is a time when we, in eternal hope, anticipate and celebrate the “coming of Christ” from three vantage points: His birth in Bethlehem, our reception of Him in our hearts, and His glorious second coming.

The term “Advent” was adopted by the early Church from the Latin *adventus*, which means “coming” or “arrival.” The Latin *adventus*, in turn, was a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, which can be translated as “arrival,” “coming,” or “presence.” This Greek word is consistently used in the New Testament to refer to the eschatological and glorious coming of Jesus Christ at the consummation. Advent celebrates the first coming and eagerly anticipates the final coming of Christ, where He will put all things right and reign forever. Advent is also the beginning of the Christian liturgical calendar, and it is a time marked by new or renewed beginnings.

Historically, the four-week observance of Advent is marked by four distinct themes, and each Sunday of Advent worship focuses on these themes. There are multiple variations throughout Church History, but for this Advent devotional, we will use the four themes of hope, joy, love, and peace to structure our prayerful anticipation. Today is Advent Sunday, and historically this Sunday (as the first day of a seven-day focus on the biblical theme of hope) has been used by the Church to anticipate the eternal hope of Christ coming into our world to bring His salvation to a broken and dying world.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Church in Ephesus, prays that God would open the eyes of their heart so that they may know the hope of God’s calling and His glorious inheritance in His holy people. We live in a world ravaged by sin and rebellion against God. It is sometimes hard not to be discouraged by the devastation we see around us. But the Holy Scriptures remind us that there is a different way to see, that if the Holy Spirit enlightens the eyes of our hearts, we can know an eternal hope—the hope of God in the birth of Christ and the sure hope of His final coming. May this Advent Sunday be a time of renewed hope, a hope eternal—Christ has come, and He is coming again!

Father, in the name of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, open the eyes of our hearts so that we might know the eternal hope of Your calling in Your holy people. Lord Jesus, thank You for coming into our world in Your lowly birth in Bethlehem! Lord Jesus, we eagerly await Your glorious coming at the end of time. Remove our cynicism, our despair, our doubt. Enlighten the darkness of our hearts so that we might know You, our eternal hope! For this, we pray in the matchless and glorious name of Christ. Amen.

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Waiting & Hope

“I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.”

PSALM 130:5

Psalm 130 is one of the *songs of ascent* (Psalms 120-134). They were sung by travelers on pilgrimages to Jerusalem as they climbed the high hills in which the city was nested. Recently I was able to visit an archeological dig in the ancient City of David that has uncovered part of the walkway from the Pool of Siloam up to the temple area. How can one hope to “ascend” to the presence of the perfectly Holy God given our sin? Psalm 130 is a prayer of repentance that is both at once honest about our desperate circumstances and hopeful. It states, “If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? 4 But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.” We can never hope to “climb to God’s presence” through our own effort or merit. It is only through God’s mercy and forgiveness that we might enter His courts. For most of the time after Psalm 130 was authored and sung as countless pilgrims made their ascent, the work of the Messiah on the cross, shedding blood to cover our sins, was still a future event. Those pilgrims were journeying towards this moment in which God descended so that we could ascend, having received His mercy and remission of sins through the work of Jesus. Their posture and mindset were aptly captured in the Psalm: “I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.”

It may seem strange to talk about one’s whole being “waiting” while singing a climbing song intended to inspire pilgrims as they stepped towards an approaching destination. But the temple rituals and culture were not the true destination for those who were on God’s intended path. The climb itself also did not bring them closer to what they sought. The sacrifices and other rituals conveyed our utter dependency on God’s mercy. A mercy poured out now by His grace through Jesus. We have entered His presence and have peace with God. We still press on, awaiting the full liberation of creation at the return of Christ, where we will stand in His presence directly. Our hope is sure that we will be able to stand, not through any steps we have taken but through His wonderful grace. That is His promise. In His Word, we can put our hope indeed.

Lord of the Heavens and Earth, we journey to You through the path of Your grace. We confess the sins and failings that have removed us far from Your presence. Yet we rejoice in Your sure word that gives us hope of Your presence and life eternal. We wait eagerly for the day on which we enter Your courts, people coming from every tribe, tongue and nation set free and made holy. Thank you for this present mercy of receiving Your forgiveness and for the sure hope of the Kingdom to fully come on earth as it is heaven.

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We Remember God

“But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

ISAIAH 40:31

In the clutter and chaos of the coming Christmas season, in the press of a world gone awry, confronted on every side by distress, discontent and disruption, we feel overwhelmed, worn thin and weary. We are tempted to lock the door, climb into bed, and pull the covers over our heads to escape the barrage. We know that such behavior ultimately will not help. So, we plod through our days exhausted and joyless.

Until ... until, like Isaiah, we remember God. A powerful God who fashioned the universe out of nothing. A creative God who measures the oceans in the palm of His hand. A sovereign God who rules with justice. A caring God who levels mountains and fills valleys. A generous God who gave us His only Son. A gentle God who deeply loves His children. A mighty God who conquers evil. An everlasting God who longs to welcome us into eternity.

When we step aside to be with God, wait in His calm and quiet presence, and recognize who He is, hope stirs in our hearts. He is the One who enables us to confront the daily challenges of this world. He strengthens, empowers, renews, revives, and reinvigorates us. Not just to walk but to run. Not just to get to the end of another day but to soar with joy. We are not alone in this battle: God is with us. God is for us. God is within us.

We cannot imagine, we cannot conceive of, we cannot anticipate the full complexity of life, but God can. God knows. When we put our confidence and hope in God and wait for God's direction, we find the best path through the darkness. His yoke is easy. His burden is light. We find we can move forward in God's strength. We do not feel faint any longer—we feel energized. We do not feel weary—we feel excited.

Not in our strength. Not by ourselves. But in accord with our Lord and Savior, in the strength of the Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We will face each day with joy and strength. We will see God at work in our lives, communities and world.

Almighty God, help us step aside from the world's clamor and spend time in Your precious presence. Help us to see things from Your perspective, hear Your voice, and trust and follow You alone. Remind us of Your unfailing, everlasting love. Lead us beside still waters in paths of righteousness that we may serve You all the days of our lives. Amen.

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The Firm Hope of God's Grace

“Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.”

1 PETER 1:13

The sacred Scriptures give witness to the eternal truth that our thoughts direct our decisions and actions. In essence, correct thinking leads to right living, and vice-versa. The Apostle Paul cautions the Roman believers in his letter when he writes: *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will”* (Romans 12:2). We resist the corrupting influence of our broken world, by allowing our minds to be renewed by God’s eternal Word through the power of the Holy Spirit. When our minds are renewed, we are transformed, and we will be able to know God’s will—which is *“good, pleasing, and perfect.”*

Christmas time can be a difficult and dark season for many. During this season celebrating joy, love, and togetherness, many face debilitating loneliness brought on by fragmented and broken relationships. The constant exposure to the 24-hour news cycles and the endless negativity of social media can cause many to spiral into depressive hopelessness. But the birth of Christ and the firm promise of His final return bring us eternal and firm hope. The grace of salvation that we received, our conversion by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), finds its consummation at the final appearance of Christ, when *“we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). What extraordinary hope! At His appearance, we will be like Him - our brokenness, pain, and fear left behind and forgotten in the glorious joy of our eternal adoration of His glory!

The Apostle Peter encourages us to have sober and alert minds, setting our hope on the return of Christ. The Greek text of this verse (1 Peter 1:13) suggests that to be sober-minded is to have a singular focus, a determined and steady gaze on a singular truth. Peter encourages us to be alert and single-minded in the hope of His grace to be revealed at His final coming. We rest our weary hearts and focus our minds on the promise that *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 1:6). During this Advent, we remind ourselves that this broken world, ravaged by sin, will be put right by Him who has all authority in heaven and earth. We can trust in the certainty of His grace. Christ has come, and He will come again!

Father, in the name of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the power of Your Holy Spirit, we ask that You wake us up to the power and certainty of Your grace. Give us the grace to have sober and alert minds that are focused on You. Remove all distractions and fears far away from us. Create in us a deep longing for You. Jesus, You have come, and You will come again! We trust in Your eternal grace! Amen.

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Our Hope

“But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.”

PSALM 33:18

Are you an optimist? A pessimist? A realist? Do you approach life's challenges with positivity or negativity? We all have natural tendencies based on personalities, family upbringing, church tradition, experience, and culture. The Psalms give words and space for all personality types and emotions. Whether pain or joy, suffering or wholeness, delight or grief, the Psalms invite God's people, including you, to bring the entire emotive bandwidth of your daily lives and all our experiences into the place of His presence. A loving, active, personal God who knows all and sees you.

In some churches, we may feel we must always pretend to be positive. While other streams never stop highlighting our brokenness and depravity. Between toxic positivity or graceless depravity, we have hope. This hope is not based on your personality or personal outlook. Additionally, this hope is not created by our efforts but comes from and through our Creator, Protector, and Redeemer's unfailing love. Christian hope emerges from the God who is active in creation and history. Our Triune God is not some distant grandpa who occasionally sends us a nice, big check for Christmas. Instead, Psalm 33 reminds us that the LORD looks, fashions, understands, and rescues. Our God's unfailing love is evident in His creation, protection and salvation.

Christian hope is rooted in a loving, active, personal God. The covenant-making Triune God never fails. Even when others fail us, God is faithful. Even when we fail others, God is faithful. Even when we fail God, God is faithful. His love is unfailing! This reality gives us true hope.

O Little Town of Bethlehem hymn writer, Phillips Brooks, reminds us during the Advent and Christmas season that “in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Sorrow, pain, and darkness may be present, but joy, healing, and light are breaking in. This Advent, as the days get darker, the blazing light of hope fueled by God's unfailing love gets brighter. As we remember the first Advent, where light penetrated the darkness over Bethlehem, and as we long for the second Advent, where Christ will forever destroy the cloud of darkness that enshrouds our world, we stand in awe of God's unfailing love and are filled with hope.

Covenant-making God, I am in awe of Your unfailing love shown in Your active presence throughout history and my life. Ignite a blazing torch of hope fueled by Your unending love inside me. Fashion my heart to carry Your light in every situation and place You lead me today. I am Yours in Christ's name.

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Freedom From Fear!

“And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.”

LUKE 1:12-13

Fear of Inadequacy (Luke 1:12-13) Zacharias and Elizabeth were just too old, too competent in their profession, too planned for their twilight years to take on this new venture, calling, paradigm ... this wild at heart John the Baptist baby who would “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children (Luke 1:17).”

Fear of Intimidation (Luke 1:30, 74) Teenager Mary knew what it meant for her to be pregnant out of wedlock in her day and culture. She had seen and heard the voices of mockery and shame that had intimidated and marginalized others in her day. Who would believe her dream and visitation, and how would this affect the most important person in her life, Joseph?

Fear of Insignificance (Luke 2:9-10) Shepherds don't count for much in any culture. Out in the hill country, they could see the glow of the city where the VIPs lived their lives in significant busyness while they followed generations of sheep trails by day and quiet star gazing by night. Seems like the same old purposeless driven life until they heard that tailor-made, just for them Word, “unto you this day ...” are you really talking to me?”

Fear of Indecisiveness (Matthew 1:20) Joseph's mind and heart were a battlefield of emotional and mental contradictions. Every decision was a lose/lose. Like so many indecisive men down the ages, he felt he was caught in a double bind with no way out. Even not making a public example of her left him numb. He feared the consequences of every decision that his mind paraded before him.

I declare freedom from fear this Christmas more than any you have experienced. You are adequate because “He who began a good work in you” is faithful to complete it. You are confident because “No weapon formed against you shall prosper.” You are significant because You have a unique design, purpose, passion, and destiny. You are single-minded because “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Here is your gift. Why not open it now so you can serve others and set the captives free from fear, one conversation at a time.

Lord, we thank you that we sing, “I'm no longer a slave to fear/I am a child of God” because God has come as the virgin-born Son into our world. We sense the angels of the Christmas Story are declaring to us this Advent season that we can be freedom fighters for those around us who are burdened down with the fears of inadequacy, intimidation, insignificance, and indecisiveness. Let them see a greater measure of power, love and a sound mind in each of us this Christmas season. Let Bethlehem birth in and through us the full confidence of the great hymn that reverberates through Your church; “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight.”

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Hope Built on Faith

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

JEREMIAH 29:11

As we tether ourselves this Advent season once more to the great promises and hopes of God towards His people of which we read in the Holy Scripture, these famous and well-worn words are lodged in the hearts of many pious souls as a tender memorial of God’s covenant fidelity through the difficulties of a lifetime.

But to the original hearers of these words, they may have seemed a small consolation. They contrasted sharply with the well-wishing words of the false prophets who promised a speedy return from exile in their own lifetimes. Instead, these words of Jeremiah came hard and fast: “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. . . multiply there and do not decrease.” There was no abrogation of the punishment and no merciful limitation of the times. These words told the grandfathers and the fathers, ‘you will die in this land, far from home.’

What was worse, for their very enemies, who had dragged them from their ivory beds and burned their houses and left their families unburied—they were to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare!” Bound not only to the full cup of wrath for 70 years but also to their persecutors! These were not their thoughts nor their plans. How were these words of hope or a future?

God’s plans are no amulets of quick good fortune or promises of special treatment, but the holy covenant faithfulness of the God who will bless ‘you’ (*plural*) according to His divine plan, which was ever-present in His divine mind: the plan for shalom, peace and deliverance from *lera-ah*, evil and affliction, through the new covenant He would inscribe on their hearts when He forgives their sins (Jeremiah 31:31). As the author of Hebrews understood: God’s covenant redemption always envisions the consummation of all things in Christ, and it is in these thoughts and plans that all our deepest longings are transformed into the kind of hope that does not disappoint. For it is a hope built on faith that rises toward love.

This advent, oh Lord, as we abandon all earthly hopes and set the anchor of our true hope firm within the veil of Your priestly ministrations before the throne of God, may we climb up the ladder of faith, drawn ever upward by spiritual cords of hope, to travel the way of love to God (Ignatius of Antioch). And as we long for Your appearing, may we yet never doubt but that there is prepared for us a sure rest in heaven through Christ our Lord. O come, o come, Emmanuel!

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Consider It Joy

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

JAMES 1:2-3

Jesus did not have an easy transition into this world. His parents were on a difficult road trip when He was born in Bethlehem, packed with pilgrims—required by the Romans to be there (Luke 1:1-5)—who slept anywhere they could. He knew from birth the strong smells of animals when He was laid in one of their feeding troughs (Luke 1:6-7). There He was, a baby Jew in a nation laid low by Roman occupation—Himself laid low with the animals. His parents were not even well-off enough to buy the standard sacrifice to claim their firstborn son back from God. They could only give the cheaper backup option of two young pigeons (Luke 2:24). His life was soon at risk from Herod, who killed all of Bethlehem’s baby boys, rather than risk a messianic competitor (Matthew 2:16-18). Road trip again: this time as exiles to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). He was an alien exile in Egypt in his first years of childhood. By the time it was safe to go “home” to Nazareth—which He hadn’t seen His whole life—Jesus was internationally traveled and had seen more of the world than many of His day. He also knew what life was like on the road. Maybe that was on His mind when He later said that the Son of Man had no place to lay His head (Matthew 8:20).

So, you want to be settled? Jesus wasn’t. Do you want to be comfortable? Jesus wasn’t. Do you want predictability? Jesus’ family had little of it. Safety? No guarantee. Yes, Jesus had good parents, a good home, and learned a good trade. The family was faithful to observe Passover every year in Jerusalem (Luke 3:41). But theirs was not an easy life. Later—much later—Jesus would again encounter deadly opposition. But we are told that He endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him (Hebrew 12:2).

All this is to say that joy doesn’t come from your circumstance. Joy is beyond circumstance. James did not promise a trial-free life. He did not even promise deliverance from trials and testing. Instead, He only offered perseverance to get through it all. That may not fly well in our comfort-wishing, safety-seeking world. Many today claim pain because they don’t “feel safe” when hearing disagreement with their pet views. Our good news is that you may never be “safe” in human terms, but peril never keeps you from joy!

Look at Jesus, from His birth to His death and beyond. Would you call His life easy? No! But would you call it joyful? Yes! Because Jesus was filled with joy in the Holy Spirit (Luke 10:21), He could face every threat, every issue and every situation with joy. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and when you ask for it from God and cultivate it in Him, no one and nothing can ever take it away. Let us, then, no matter what: rejoice along with Jesus!

Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, we ask that You grant us the faith to consider all that happens to us as joy. Help us understand that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. Give us Your joy during trials and temptations. Make us faithful. For this, we pray in the eternal name of Christ, our Savior.

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The Prospect of Joy

“The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.”

PROVERBS 10:28

The Advent season is full of anticipation as we look forward to the time when we celebrate the arrival of our Savior. There are many words that come to mind when we consider the Advent season, but few words encapsulate this time of year better than joy.

When I was a child, I remember being full of joy as we looked forward to Christmas. From a child's view, Christmas is exciting first and foremost because of presents. We give gifts, but even more, we receive them, so a child thinks. As we mature in Christ, we come to recognize the deeper joy that is found in the Advent season, and that is the sense of security that comes with knowing we have the privilege of enjoying the presence of Christ.

From a childlike perspective, receiving gifts is the pathway to joy, but as we mature in our faith, Jesus' presence is the source of our joy. When we are clothed in Christ's righteousness, our prospect is joy. It could be said that joy is the fruit of a life lived in Christ. Through Jesus' incarnation, He can identify with our humanity, and through His resurrection, we can identify with His victory. As we live our lives according to the righteousness of Christ, we experience life to the fullest, a life that is rightly ordered.

When I consider my life, there have been wonderful times and more difficult times, but there is a security that comes from joy in Christ that transcends changing circumstances. Whenever I look to myself and this world for lasting satisfaction, it leaves me empty, but when I look to Jesus, He makes me joyful.

Joy is not the absence of difficulty but the contentment we have in Christ, and it is available to us even when life is not going as planned. As we progress through this Advent season, let us not forget where joy is found. It is not found in the presents we exchange, but it is found in the presence of Christ. He is our righteousness, and “the prospect of the righteous is joy.”

Heavenly Father, thank you for the joy You have made available to us through Your Son, Jesus Christ. This Advent season, we ask that You give us the grace we need to maintain our joy regardless of our circumstances. We thank you for the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, and we ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to operate in and through us as we spend precious time with family and friends. In Jesus' name, amen.

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Shout for Joy

“Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

ISAIAH 12:6

Mary shouted aloud and sang for joy, safe in the knowledge of the Light cuddling in her womb. How joyously she proclaimed the greatness of God, forecast the arrival of the ancient promise so long in coming. The world must know, must rejoice with her, must embrace their imminent salvation.

Mary shouted but not for joy. In the grip of excruciating, unrelenting labor pain; struggling to birth the Light into the darkness of the world (an unrecognized portent of pain to come) until she finally felt the joy of cradling the Light of redemption in her arms—the world slow to awaken to the hope—the longed-for arrival of the Christ. Angels shouted aloud and sang for joy, but only a handful heard, only a scant few came and even they wondered what it all meant, their joyous marvel a mere whisper on the landscape of humanity.

Mary wept in silent grief as the blood flowed from Messiah’s side, devastated as He drew His final breath. The world shouted in anger, the earth shaking violently, torrents of pelting rain deluging the world with grief; visible requiem of broken promise as darkness extinguished the Light. Bewildered believers huddled in darkened rooms, confused and afraid.

And then. Skittering whispers of truth begin. Angels appear. Mary Magdalene can scarce believe even in His presence. Light has broken the bonds of death and banished darkness forever. He’s risen, she tells the disciples. They see Him too. They are filled with awe, joyous in the knowing, barely able to take it in, much less shout aloud or sing for joy. They can only marvel at the greatness of the Holy One of Israel among them. And then He is gone. Until. Until the Holy Spirit comes upon them, gift of the Christ, powerful presence of Light in the world.

Mary once again shouts aloud and sings for great joy. Still, the world is slow to grasp the fait accompli, to recognize the Light. They see glimpses of the Light. They long for the Light even when they don’t know it. The disciples bear witness to the Light, boldly sharing the joyous truth, shining the Light into dark corners of the world, proclaiming the greatness of the Holy One of Israel who lives among us now, vanquishing the darkness and leading us to eternal joy and fellowship.

Lord God, help us savor the joy of Your presence, to consistently be aware of Your Light within us. Grant us the grace of holding on to Your Light even in the midst of pain and suffering. Enable us to continually let Your Light shine through us into the darkness of this present world, making way for those in darkness to come to You. Help us as Your Church to shout aloud and sing for joy in witness to the greatness of the God who is with us, for us, and among us. Amen.

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We Can Have Joy!

“... and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

ISAIAH 35:10

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so. We get joy when we think of what the LORD has done for us. Advent season is a reminder that we can rejoice in knowing that Jesus Christ was born, became the ransom for many, died for our sins, rose from the grave, and provided redemption for mankind. Jesus Christ came to preach the Gospel, to heal, set free, and deliver the brokenhearted. He opened one's vision so that they might see, opened one's mouth so they may talk, healed one's legs so they may walk, and opened one's ears that they may hear. Through the preaching of the Gospel (Good News), those that were captive are made free. One can have joy when thinking of what Jesus Christ has done for them.

When reading Isaiah 35:10, several things stand out. The passage starts out declaring that life will come from a desolate and wilderness place through joy and rejoicing and that the glory of the LORD will be shown. Secondly, God's strength is revealed, and there is encouragement not to be fearful because God will come with recompense and save you. Third, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute are healed by the healing power of God. Fourth, there are water and springs of water in the wilderness, which brings about life and growth. Jesus is life. Fifth, we see a place where only the redeemed can come. This redeemed place is called the “Way of Holiness.” Another name for this place is called Heaven. The passage ends by letting us know that one can sing joy, will have everlasting joy, an eternal joy, and that there will be no sorrow in this place.

During this Advent season, we can have joy knowing that Jesus Christ will come again. We can have joy knowing that we will go to Heaven to reign with Jesus Christ when we have accepted His redemption and His saving grace.

We pray that we have the joy of the LORD in our hearts, a joy that brings about life out of a desolate place. We pray for anyone that may be in a barren place that the LORD brings you great and everlasting joy. We pray that the LORD shows you, His glory. The LORD is the giver of eternal life and growth. We pray that you accept the joy of redemption, which is Jesus Christ our Lord and Personal Saviour, so we can go and experience that Holy Place called Heaven.

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What or Who?

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

GALATIANS 5:22-23

The world wakes up each morning chasing after an elusive goal—happiness. We spend a lot of time chasing after material possessions such as the latest tech gadget. Perhaps it is the perfect job or that promotion you have been working so hard for. Maybe it is the perfect husband or spouse or that dream vacation getaway. Surely those things will make me happy.

There is nothing wrong with any of those pursuits except when they crowd out something more important. Happiness is something that is fleeting—here today and gone the next minute. It is a pursuit that is often self-centered, where the focus is me and my feelings. Thank God there is something more permanent and meaningful than happiness—it is called joy.

Advent is the perfect time to take account of what we are chasing. Advent provides a chance to stop and think about what is most important, or more precisely, who is important. While happiness is a human emotion, the Scriptures talk about joy. Joy is not human, nor is it an emotion. In Galatians 5:22, the Apostle Paul lists joy as one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. This sets joy apart from happiness. While happiness is a temporal emotion, joy is a person—the Holy Spirit. As we pursue God, come to know Him, and develop a relationship, joy flows into our hearts. It becomes a question not of what we pursue but who.

The second week of Advent focuses on joy. Take this Advent season to refocus your life. Realize that true happiness does not come from what we pursue but from who we pursue. Set aside time to draw close to the true source of joy, and you will find the happiness you have been pursuing.

Lord, I take time from my business to refocus on You. Come, Holy Spirit, with Your presence and release Your joy in my heart. I am sorry for having sought happiness in things to the degree that it has crowded out my time with You. Renew my heart and fill my life with Your presence and joy. Thank you for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and for the joy, His birth has secured for my life, which we celebrate in this holy Advent season.

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Made for Joy

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,
but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ...”

ROMANS 14:17

Joy: Three small letters that have produced no small amount of mystery and attention. It receives attention because, whether we realize it or not, we all constantly pursue joy. Every time we think about a positive change we want to see happen—we are pursuing joy. When we look forward to being with someone special—we are pursuing joy. When we hope that something bad will relent so we can move forward—we are pursuing joy.

And while joy receives our attention, it creates within us a mysterious tension. As eternal beings, we are designed for the unlimited eternal joy of God in a world where joy can seem temporary. We see a change happen but eventually find that we need another change to find joy. We find ourselves with someone special, and time removes our ability to be with them. The bad thing relents in our lives, yet we find ourselves facing another trial. Our temporary reality collides with our eternal reality. We long to live in the joy for which we have been designed, yet our pursuit of joy often collapses in the attempt.

It is in this tension that God’s design for joy shines brightest. In this world, we find glimpses of joy through temporal means—eating, drinking, traditions, and rituals. Yet we find that eternal joy must come from something more than temporary experiences. In God’s incredible design for our joy, He has created the fulfillment of our joy to be found in an eternal source of joy: God Himself. Now and forever in the Kingdom of God, God Himself brings joy to us through the Holy Spirit in us.

God has made your joy as eternal, stable, and definite as He is. God has brought joy to the world through Jesus Christ. There is no end to His rule, so that nothing can overthrow the joy He brings. His counsel and wisdom are wonderful and perfect, so every path He leads you on is full of wonderful, perfect joy. His might is ultimate, so He can overcome every other thing that could remove joy. He is the ruler of all peace, so His people will endure peace forever, no matter the world around them. Because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit within us creates the eternal, stable, definite joy of God. We are made for joy, and God has sent His perfect and eternal joy to be in you.

Father, You are the source of joy! Thank you for making me for eternal joy. Thank you for giving me access to eternal joy through Jesus Christ. Thank you for empowering me to experience joy now and forever by Your Holy Spirit. Allow me to further know and experience Your joy by more fully knowing and experiencing You. Amen.

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The Joy Set Before Him

“... fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

HEBREWS 12:2

The Advent season is that wonderful time of year when we look back to Jesus' first coming and that time when we look forward to His second coming. But sometimes, the busyness of the season can distract us from the true reason for the season. If you are anything like me, you must work hard to—as they say—keep the Christ in the Christmas season.

Perhaps one of the most relevant and challenging Scriptures for the Advent season is found in Hebrews 12:2, which states, “Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” In the previous chapter of Hebrews, the author mentions many of the great men and women of faith who went before (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Sarah). And while their faith is worthy of imitation, the writer says that we are to “fix our eyes on Jesus,” who is “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” He went before us and set the example that we are to follow. However, we must remember that Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He died in our place and made satisfactions for our sins. Thankfully, Jesus did not die reluctantly for us; on the contrary, it was for the joy set before Him that He endured the pain and humiliation of the cross. Upon completion of His earthly mission, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. He is the example of obedience and perseverance, par excellence.

The truth is that God did become one of us. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:35). The eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). He suffered, bled, and died for sinners like you and me so that we can make our way home to God. There is no better news than this! Let us fix our eyes on Jesus and never stop looking.

Father, we thank you for this season and all that it represents. This time of year reminds us of Your extraordinary love, the love shown in giving Your one and only Son to this world. We give thanks for Jesus, who willingly laid down His life so that we can have eternal life. And we are eternally grateful for the Holy Spirit, who has awakened our hearts to the glory of the Gospel. We pray that the light of Your Word will shine brighter and brighter into the darkness of this world. Jesus, you were faithful to come the first time, and we know that You will be faithful to come again. So, our prayer this Advent season is, “Come, Lord Jesus! Come again to finish Your work in this world.” Amen!

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Stargazing for the Love of God

[Give thanks to Him] “who made the great lights—His love endures forever.”

PSALM 136:7

The covenantal love of the LORD, or *chesed* in Hebrew, is the topic of Psalm 136. Through clever poetic arrangement, the psalmist shows how the love of God is woven throughout His many “great wonders” (verse 4). God’s lovingkindness is seen in His character (verses 1-3), His creation (verses 4-9), His deliverance from Egypt (verses 10-16), His fulfilled promises (verses 17-22), and His saving power (verses 23-25). The psalm then closes how it began, with a call: “Give thanks to the God of heaven. His love endures forever” (verse 26).

One focus of the psalmist is creation. While believers commonly read Genesis Chapter 1 with a view to what God is doing physically on the earth, the Hebrew composer sees *chesed* leaping off the end of every line. As we read Genesis 1:7, “And God made the expanse and separated the waters,” we imagine the love-laden psalmist crying out impatiently in liturgical reply: “For his steadfast love endures forever!” And though we could supply the psalmist’s eager interjection after every line of the creation account, it appears His primary focus is on “the heavens” (Psalm 136:4-9). The psalmist is filled with wonder as he looks out into the vastness of space. He is bewildered by the thought of immeasurable, cosmic love—of an omnipotent Creator whose exquisite arrangement of “the great lights” has revealed a heart yearning in affection for its very image: man and woman.

We are invited to join the psalmist in stargazing so that we, too, would perceive the limitless love of God. It was because he loved us that he set a great star over Bethlehem to point in the direction of His Son—Jesus, the “light of the world,” “the bright and morning star” who says to His faithful, “I have loved you” (John 9:5; Revelation 22:16; 3:9). And through His Gospel, the Holy Spirit transforms our perspective so that we begin to see His love in every ordinary thing; so that we, like the psalmist, don love-tinted glasses that have us anticipating the kindness of God around every corner.

But when you and I look into the night sky, do we see His covenantal love, His *hesed*? Do we see it in a child’s eyes? In a thunderstorm? In a pile of leaves? What about in a pile of laundry or dirty dishes? Is there really any ordinary thing in life that does not attest to the everlasting, steadfast love of the Lord? We ought to stargaze more often, but for the love of God.

Father of lights, the heavens declare Your glory, and the sky Your handiwork. But as we peer into it, let Your “great lights” also testify to Your love for us, a love manifested through the Gospel of Christ and revealed in our hearts by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

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Consistency, Love & Kindness

“The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: “I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”

JEREMIAH 31:3

During this third week of Advent—with its focus on love—we must remember the consistent love and kindness of God.

After 28 chapters of warnings and prophecies against the nation of Judah (Jeremiah 2-29), Jeremiah continues into the “Book of Consolation” (Jeremiah 30-33). These four chapters reaffirm and remind God’s people of His hope, joy, love, and peace toward them. Within this section, Jeremiah states positively: “The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.’” With these words, the prophet reminds the nation of Judah of three important truths.

First, God has consistently appeared to them in the past. God’s ways and words are not unknown. This announcement is not novel, for God has acted consistently throughout the generations. Second, God’s love is everlasting. The love with which God loves His people is not fickle, impatient, rude, malicious, self-seeking, or uninterested. God’s love is enduring, patient, benevolent, and always desires the benefit of others. His love does not fail at the first sign of trouble. Finally, God’s kindness is unfailing. He not only loves His people but has a disposition of kindness towards them. His kindness is attractive and continually draws people close. Here, Jeremiah reminds the people of God of His consistency, love, and kindness to draw them back to obedience.

For those committed to serving and loving Jesus Christ, who is the fullest expression of God’s consistency, love, and kindness, Advent is a season of hope, joy, love, and peace. However, perhaps this season reminds you, dear brothers and sisters, of the ways you are not walking in obedience to Christ. To you, I offer the same simple truths Jeremiah gave the people of Judah: God consistently desires to show you love and kindness. His deepest desire is to bring you back to Himself. He will never stop seeking after you and will never forsake you. He is for you and not against you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He is the One who loves and draws you close with kindness.

Father, today remind us by the Holy Spirit of Your continued love and kindness. Whether we walk in the valley of the shadow of death or the sunlit field, remind us of Your consistent everlasting love and unfailing kindness. Remind me, oh God, of the ways and words of Christ, who, through obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross, displayed Your perfect love and kindness. It is by His name, Jesus, I pray. Amen.

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Love & the Gifts of God

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

1 Corinthians 13 is the famous love chapter. These words can be heard proclaimed at extraordinary events, such as weddings, or read in more mundane contexts, such as on coffee mugs sitting on a work desk. Given that these powerful words are so often pulled from their original context, it can be easy to forget that this chapter is penned by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian church as part of his instructions on spiritual gifts.

Paul eloquently contrasts the temporary nature of spiritual gifts with the permanence of love (verse 8). On the day of the Lord, spiritual gifts will have finished their job. They are “suited to the times between the times” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 1997). Paul’s point is not to abandon spiritual gifts for love but to employ them in love. Indeed, the very first verse following the love chapter (1 Corinthians 14:1) commands us to “follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit ...”

Paul’s instructions about love and spiritual gifts go far beyond the specific issue of tongues or prophecy in congregational worship. It cuts through to a larger issue in all our hearts: The temptation to take the good gifts God has given us for the purpose of blessing others and glorifying His name and use them for our selfish gain.

The attitude and actions of the Corinthians are so often our own: The desire to feel more spiritual than others. The arrogance to see gifts as earned. The desire for flashier gifts so we can be admired. The tendency to rank people based on our perceived measure of importance. However, the Advent season provides the believer with the time to reflect on the fact that we serve a savior who came and “made himself nothing” and took on “the very nature of a servant” as an expression of love (Philippians 2). And we take hope in the fact that we serve a Lord who will come again, and “we shall see face to face” (verse 12).

Father God, thank you for Your love for us expressed supremely in Christ Jesus. Give us the same mind as Your servant Son. Help us not to do anything out of selfish ambition or conceit. Forgive us our impatience, our unkindness, our envy, our boasting, our pride, our contempt, our self-seeking, our anger, our unforgiveness, our delight in evil, our lies, and our self-deception. We long for the day when we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.

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The Greatest Kind of Love

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

1 JOHN 3:1

Advent is a time to reflect on the coming of the Christ child, the Messiah, Jesus! It's a time to meditate on why God the Father chose to send Jesus to become a human being by the unction of the Holy Spirit. It's a time to contemplate the greatest kind of love our glorious God has for each one of us, even when we do not deserve it.

In First John 3:1, we discover some amazing insights about God the Father and His love for us, as well as what His love does for us and in us through His Son! John is writing this letter from the Church of Ephesus to the Christians throughout the Roman world and possibly those churches mentioned later in Revelation 2-3. Two main themes just in this one verse are the greatest kind of love of God the Father and who we are in Christ.

The phrase, “See what kind of love the Father has given us,” is so powerful. “What kind of love can be translated,” “See how great a love,” or “See the greatest kind of love.” I can imagine as John writes this, the Holy Spirit is reminding him of several thoughts from the earlier work he was led to write, his Gospel. Think about this from this one verse: we observe the emphasis of God's great love that flows out of His very nature, for “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Then he remembers that because of God's great love, oh He “so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Therefore, because of God's great love for us, God gave His Son first at the first Advent, the birth of Jesus, and the Incarnation through the Virgin Mary! Then because of God's great love for us, God gave His Son at the cross and took on our sins and became “the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). And because of God's great love for us, He raised Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit, so we might experience and know this great love for us: “so that we might live through Jesus” (1 John 4:9). And because of God's great love, I can imagine John remembering the end of Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26).

The greatest kind of love that God, the Father, pours out upon us is not a worldly love, not a friendship love, but *agapé*: the highest kind of love, unconditional love, and truly divine love! And because the Father's greatest kind of love has been bestowed on you and me, we actually are called and become children of God! Again, John must have been recalling his Gospel, where he wrote, “But all who did receive Him [Jesus], who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God!” (John 1:12).

So, this Advent season, may you meditate on the greatest kind of love that God the Father has for you because He sent His Son to not only die for you but takes on your sin and the wrath we deserved so that you may truly know that you are a child of God.

Our gracious and merciful Father, we come to You this moment overwhelmed by Your great love for us! The greatest kind of love that only You can give through Your Son! May this Advent season be a time of experiencing the greatest kind of love and coming to the realization that by the Spirit of Adoption, we are a son or daughter of God through Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen.

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Expectantly Await

“But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”

PSALM 86:15

During this season of Advent, we anticipate the celebration of the Incarnation of God the Son, who dwelt among us to seek and save the lost. Centuries before the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem, David reminds us of God’s readiness to spiritually restore humanity in Psalm 86:15.

Confronted by those who opposed God (verse 14b), David emphasized not only his pleas (verses 1-4, 6) and petitions (verses 2, 11, 16, 17) in Psalm 86, but he also repeatedly appealed to the nature of God (verses 5, 8, 10, 11, 15). Among these latter statements, verse 15 stands out due to its rich theological concepts. These terms are specifically drawn from the spiritual restoration of Israel in Exodus 34:6, following the golden calf incident (Exodus 32).

After Moses’ extraordinary prayer of intercession on behalf of Israel in Exodus 33:12-16, the LORD revealed Himself anew to Moses with these familiar words: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). In Psalm 86:15, David clearly recalled the same theological truths revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6. David’s recollection of God’s provision to Israel after their infidelity in Exodus 32 is a reminder to us of God’s unchanging relentless love and grace to humanity, which we anticipate during the season of Advent.

From generation to generation, God remains the gracious and reliable Deliverer, whose provision of His Son is the pinnacle of the “good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). During this season of Advent, we expectantly await the celebration of the Incarnation in faith, as we also anticipate the return of Christ in victory at the Second Coming.

Heavenly Father, we exalt Your name for all the blessings we enjoy in Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit. You remain the compassionate God, abounding in love from generation to generation of humanity who are lost without a Savior. For Your steadfast faithfulness throughout the ages, we exalt Your name as we expectantly await the celebration of the great gift of Your Son to us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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Perfect Love of the Father

“Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.”

DEUTERONOMY 7:9

During the school year, I love driving my kids to school. Most mornings, we manage to discuss a few important things: the school lunch menu, the Dallas Cowboys, and the importance of showing up and giving it your best for the day. I cherish these moments with my children because I know someday soon, they'll prefer to drive themselves to school. My heart swells with affection for them. I want them to feel loved by their daddy, and I want them to feel love for their daddy.

Upon taking your first tour through the Book of Deuteronomy, it is possible to conclude that God's love for you is entirely dependent upon your ability to obey His commandments. That rationale goes something like this: If you can do the right things, then God will love you. And the opposite would be equally true: If you do the wrong things, God cannot and will not love you. As believers and followers of Jesus, this sounds silly. But many of us (including me) still follow Jesus as though this were true—a works-based, Gospel-less mindset and posture. When we live like this, our joy is only as real as our perception of God.

Yet, when we consider the true message of the book of Deuteronomy, we begin to see the incomparable nature of God's covenantal love. In its context, this verse reminds the people of God that His covenantal love cannot be undone. God's faithfulness to His people and His love for His people are anchored in His character, and our capacity to obey doesn't change the way He sees us or thinks about us. When we believe this, our joy is cemented in the reality of a God who is gracious, steadfast and always loving.

God's love for us is further demonstrated in the spectacular arrival of Jesus Christ upon this earth. God takes steps towards you, over and over. His fatherly affection for you does not relent. When we understand His love and grace in this way, our hearts and minds are motivated to obey. We obey God because He loves us. We obey because he is holy and worthy. Jesus Christ invites us into the joy of Christmas and the eternal, perfect love of the Father. This Advent season, let us find joy in the grace and love that the Everlasting Father has shown to all of us whom He calls His children!

You are great and glorious. Thank you for showing me Your steadfast love. Thank you for showing me complete and total love—love that is not dependent upon what I do or don't do. Father, thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ to be born. He is the promised Messiah and the Resurrected King. Help me live as a joyful disciple dependent upon Your Holy Spirit. Help me to live as a messenger of the Good News of Jesus. I love you, Lord. I pray all this in the name of Jesus.

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No Greater Love

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

ROMANS 5:8

We begin with the end in mind. To that end, let us also go back to the prophecies of the Bible describing the coming of the Christ. The Book of Isaiah, written about 700 years before Christ’s birth, contains the most prophecies of the coming Messiah, giving us the specific details of His birth and the very purpose of His coming. It contains one of the most pivotal passages and prophecies regarding the Advent season:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6).

Long before Jesus was born and died on the Cross, Isaiah points us to the Messiah and the very purpose of His birth and death. And hundreds of years later, it all happened exactly as Isaiah prophesied. The purpose of His birth and death was, is, and will be Love. God’s demonstration of His great love for us is Jesus’ death. Jesus was born to die on our behalf and in our place. In fact, long before you and I have even been born, God had put this plan in place.

There is no greater love. God’s demonstration of love is unconditional: while we were still sinners. The power of this passage has changed lives for centuries. And so, at Christmas, we not only celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. We also celebrate His death and resurrection. With Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection, the definitive move in the battle against evil was struck. More skirmishes will follow, but the war - for all intents and purposes—has been won. The battle has been waged and won for us. Love came for us. Our rescue is here. This is a love story like no other. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song at the birth of Jesus Christ, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe. There is no greater love.

Jesus, we thank you for dying for us on the Cross. We thank you for paying the prices for us. We thank you for loving us so unconditionally that while we were still sinners—and Your enemies—You died for us. Dear Father in Heaven, may Your Holy Spirit lead us into an even greater understanding of your love for us and transform our lives for Your Glory. May we join the choirs of angels this Advent and Christmas season and turn beloved Christmas hymns into prayers of awe, thanksgiving, and praise.

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The Peace of God

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

We already know the end of the story—the climactic moment of Advent is the overwhelming beauty of Incarnation. Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, entered as a babe—and we encounter God putting on flesh to dwell with humanity.

Mary did not have the advantage of “the rest of the story,” yet she waited for the fulfillment of the promise made by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38) and the revelation of the child. During her final days of pregnancy, we can imagine her unsettledness as she began to mentally and physically anticipate childbirth. Young and away from her home and family in Nazareth, Mary would have longed as any pregnant woman in her ninth month to end the wait and move through the labor in anticipation of the promised child, the Son of the Most High.

So too, we live in days of anticipation. We look forward to the return of Jesus and, like Mary, feeling the tension, pray to be relieved of the burden and realize the glory and wonder of Christ. We work towards His return, much as an expectant woman goes about her tasks, not knowing a definitive day for the arrival but pregnant with anticipation.

The apostle Paul urged believers in Philippians 4:6-7 to submit all to prayer without anxiety. But pause with me to look at the preceding verse: “The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:5). Ah, the glory! Just as Mary knew the promised Christ child was at hand, we too know that the Lord is at hand. As we live within this dissonance of the now and not yet, we are told to submit, and God’s peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). Mary had been afraid when the angel appeared, yet she responded, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). I would dare say that both in the moment of questioning the angel and as she submitted to the will of God, that the peace of God guarded her heart and mind.

Lord, thank you for the glorious encounter You made with us in that pivotal moment when You put on flesh and came and lived on earth. What a marvel and wonder! As we journey today, we ask for a fresh vision of the glory of Your return and the peace to live and labor in anticipation yet without anxiety, knowing that You are at hand. We look forward to Your arrival! Amen.

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Live in Peace

“Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.”

2 CORINTHIANS 13:11

The Apostle Paul ends his second letter to the church at Corinth, strongly urging believers to live in unity, rejoicing as they encourage one another. He desires for them to live in peace, that spirit of *shalom*, defined first in the Old Testament and meaning wholeness, completeness, tranquility, spiritual prosperity, and harmonious relationships. Paul refers not merely to peace and unity as freedom from disruption and disharmony but as living in reconciliation with both God and others.

Paul's relationship with this church, situated in the wealthy environment of Corinth, the city known for athletic games and moral turmoil, was very challenging as the apostle dealt with serious issues involving the need to address sinful practices within the church. Repentance was needed, and Paul dedicated his efforts in communication and prayer to end the divisions existing in the church. His final letter to the Corinthian believers expresses his heartfelt appeals for restoration of the relationship between Paul and the church. He writes of his love for the members of this community and his commitment to mending the torn fabric of the relationship between Paul and Corinthian believers.

Writing with words filled with praise, hope, and love for his brothers and sisters, Paul emphasizes the importance of encouraging one another as they commit to unity in Christ. Loving them, he understands that God desires this once deeply troubled community, whose members had been at odds with the apostle, to abide in abundant peace as they repent from the past and move forward to live in the spiritual unity and harmony of relationships achievable only in Jesus Christ.

Paul's ending sentence in his letter remains as important for every Christian today as it was to those living in that ancient time in Corinth. We are called to abundant love as we willingly forgive others and recognize our own needs for forgiveness from God and others. It is in the spirit of repentance, with a willingness to love and forgive, that Christians find the unity, and the purity of character, that allows each believer and their faith communities, to dwell in the beautiful *shalom* of Jesus Christ.

Father, in Jesus' name, we desire to walk in the purity of love and forgiveness, striving to restore broken relationships as we encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ. We commit to walking in the spirit of unity in Christ as we give ourselves fully to living in the spirit of true peace that You desire for us as we consecrate each day of our lives for Your holy purposes. Amen.

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The Reason for Peace

“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

PSALM 4:8

The reason for the psalmist's peace is at least as important as the peace itself, or else King David could easily rest under false pretenses, having deluded himself into thinking that peace exists where there really is no peace. Accordingly, he gives the reason: “For You alone, O LORD, make me dwell securely.” The term “alone” is crucial for understanding this verse. After all, the King could call upon his many armies to defend him. He could amass horses, chariots, siege machines, and every kind of weapon. Doing so, however, may betray that his hope is not in God but in the false gods of mortal weaponry (see Psalm 20:7; 1 Samuel 17:45; Habakkuk 1:16).

David can know that his peace is legitimate because it is not sourced in the superficial vanities of the world, saviors who always promise more than they can deliver; rather, his peace is sourced in the most real thing of all—the God of Israel. Yet, it is not merely that God is real that affords David such peace, but that God is the active Agent in history who will “make me dwell securely.” This precise phrase is very important in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is used repeatedly in reference to God's promise to make the nation of Israel “dwell in safety” (e.g., Leviticus 25:18-19; Deuteronomy 12:10; Isaiah 11:12; Jeremiah 23:3; 29:13; 30:10; 31:8-14; 32:37; Ezekiel 11:17; 28:26; 34:25, 28; 36:24). In the mind of the ancient Israelite, the broader concept of national safe-dwelling extended downward to the individual, as here in Psalm 4:8. David's peace was not only in the real God of Israel but in a God Whose past heroic acts of national rescue had proven He can and does “make” His people “dwell in safety.”

Too often, a believer's sense of peace is artificially sourced and, as such, proves inadequate to face the trouble of the day. But even if we were to graduate to a nominal trust in God's sovereign control, we would still not reach the level of faith expressed in Psalm 4:8. We must come before the Father with confidence in His saving power, a power He has proven historically through Jesus. In as much as the salvation of Israel served as David's historical reference point for God's ability and desire to save, so it is in the incarnation and gospel of Christ that we find God's sufficiency to serve as our rightful source of peace.

God, All-Knowing, All-Present, All-Wise, All-Patient, and All-Powerful, grant us the genuine peace that You alone can give. Let it be founded not in the weak, ephemeral trappings of wealth and high walls, but in the knowledge of the Holy One, the God of Heaven, who would not even spare His own Son, but instead gave Him up for us, and in so doing proved that, in Christ, He would also grant us the peace of His Holy Spirit.

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Let God's Peace Saturate

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,
since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

COLOSSIANS 3:15

What rules our hearts? During this busy season of Advent, many things vie for our attention. Our “to-do” list grows longer each day. Lights need to be untangled and hung, trees assembled and decorated, Christmas cards addressed and mailed, gifts purchased and wrapped, parties planned and attended, cookies baked and distributed, sermons prepared and delivered, and church programs rehearsed and performed. Unaware, our peace can be easily replaced with hurry and worry!

Paul reminds the church at Colossae to let the peace of Christ rule our hearts, not the responsibilities we carry or the stress we feel to get it all done. This peace is the same “peace on earth” announced to the shepherds the night Jesus was born. The Prince of Peace entered the world to be the Ruler of our hearts, to establish His Kingdom on earth (Isaiah 9:6,7). His peace overshadows our anxiety. Isn't it ironic that the season where we are to reflect on peace is frequently the season when we lose it?

The word for rule in this verse is used only once in the New Testament. The secular context refers to a referee in sporting games. The call of the referee stands—there is no discussion! You can see why Paul chose this word to explain to his readers how Christ is to rule in our hearts. His Word stands, and it's not open to negotiation. When the Prince of Peace governs us, His peace fills our hearts and overflows onto others around us. Peace does not take away the “to-do” list, but the Ruler of our hearts surrounds us with His presence to be with us in all we do.

We should be encouraged that we can walk through this season, no matter how long the list of things to do is, with the peace that was announced to the world, “Glory to God, in the highest, and peace on earth to those on whom His favor rests” (Luke 2:14). The Prince of Peace has come to rule our hearts and that makes all the difference. Advent reminds us to let God's peace saturate us so we can go through life with a thankful heart!

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending the Prince of Peace to restore our relationship with You and to help us live in peace with others. Forgive us for allowing expectations, people, and activities to crowd out the peace You have given us. We ask that You rule our hearts with Your peace and that it overflows into thanksgiving. We set You on the throne of heart this Advent season and always. Amen!

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The War Has Ended

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

LUKE 2:14

“Peace on earth, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14). This is one of the most famous Christmas lines. But there are lots of different kinds of peace. What specifically did the angels mean when they declared “peace?”? Did they mean peace of mind? Peace in our hearts? Peace as an antidote to the anxiety or unfulfillment we may feel? Is that what Jesus came to save us from? Did He come to rescue us from enslaving habits? Compulsive eating disorders? Bondage to pornography? Uncontrollable anger? Fear (of all sorts)? Perhaps the peace was the cessation of hostilities between countries or peace between family members that have an adversarial relationship. Are these the types of things that Jesus rescue us from?

According to the New Testament, the peace that comes with Christmas is peace between God and us. But someone may say, what are you talking about? I believe in God. I was never at odds with Him. That may be true, but according to the Bible, God interprets our sin as an act of aggression. Put simply, our fallen, sinful minds are “hostile to God” (Rom 8:7). The apostle tells us that “by nature” we are objects of wrath” (Eph 2:3). Similarly, Col 1:21 states that in our fallen condition we were “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds ...” Whether we knew it or not, we were at war with the God of the universe. But the good news of Christmas is not, in the first instance, a report of a baby in a feeding trough (manger). Rather, the good news of Christmas is that God unilaterally ended the hostilities between Himself and us. He stepped into history and declared a ceasefire. Jesus Christ brought peace to a world at war—at war with God. That is the good news of great joy that is Christmas! The war has ended, and Jesus has come to save us from the penalty of our sins.

Oh, God of all the universe, You did for us what we could not do for ourselves. You sent Your Son into history to rescue us before we even knew there was a problem. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Make Your glory known to us this Advent season. Let us see the beauty and wonder of Jesus Christ. Allow us to see the magnificence of the peace that he brings—peace that ended the war between us. Thank you for showing us such lavish mercy. We pray this with gratitude, amen.

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Peace Is a Person

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace ...”

EPHESIANS 2:14-15

I remember vividly back in the 1960s and 70s when it was popular to flash the two-fingered peace sign to friends—coopted from the “V” for victory sign popularized during the days of World War II. The 1960s and 70s were a quest for peace, freedom from war and oppression, and the betterment of the human condition. If only we could “give peace a chance.” We did. The problem is we did, but things don’t seem a lot more peaceful than they were back then. I would hazard to say the opposite is true. What did we get wrong? What is peace, and how can we have what the world wants so badly? Advent gives us a chance to not only know what peace really is but actually experience it.

The problem is the world does not understand what peace really is. Peace is not the absence of wars, conflict, or disputes. It is not having enough money, a great job, or a perfect marriage. Those things can produce good feelings for a time, but peace is a person. To experience true peace, you must have an encounter with that Person—Jesus Christ. The Scriptures say in Eph. 2:14, 15, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace ...” Peace is a person, and his name is Jesus Christ. For that reason, he is called the “Prince of Peace”:

“For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah 9:6.

One fruit of the Holy Spirit is peace—it flows from the presence of God because it is who He is and, therefore, what He does. God—a person—is the only true source of peace. The saints of old proved that over and over again as they faced crucifixion, lions and torture, yet stood singing hymns and giving glory to God. This Advent season is a time to reconnect with peace, Himself. It is time to lay down to the pursuit of what the world calls peace and embrace the only true source of peace—the child spoke of in Isaiah: the Prince of Peace.

Lord, thank you for this time to refocus. I lay down my pursuit of peace as the world does. And, in this tender moment, embrace You as my peace. Come, Holy Spirit, and bring your peace. Come Prince of Peace and comfort my restless soul. Amen.

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The Advent of Peace

“For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulder. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

ISAIAH 9:6

How amazing to consider that the Advent of our Savior was so beautifully and accurately described by the prophet Isaiah centuries before the birth of Christ. Unto us would be born a Child with a body of flesh and blood that would one day be broken and poured out for us. The only begotten and beloved Son of God was given to us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8). And the government would be upon His shoulder, which once carried a cross to pay the terrible price for our sin.

His name is truly Wonderful, for when we believe in Jesus, we have life in His name (John 20:31). We can trust Him as our Counselor, for as 1 Corinthians 1:24 tells us, Christ is the very wisdom of God. As our Counselor and Good Shepherd, the Lord leads us to green pastures and still waters, guiding us in the paths of righteousness, as David wrote in Psalm 23. We stand in awe of our Mighty God, who spoke the universe into being as the Word of God. And how incredible to realize that He empowers us with His Word and His Spirit today! He is One with the Everlasting Father, who welcomes us into His eternal presence because of the grace and mercy Christ has freely bestowed upon us. Indeed, He is the Prince of Peace—the mediator between God and humankind. He is both the High Priest and sacrificial Lamb of God, who willingly offered His life out of love for us. Isaiah 53:5 says, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him.”

So, if you’re fearful or anxious, turn to Jesus, for Philippians 4:7 promises, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”. As our Great High Priest, Jesus pronounces the blessing of God upon us: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).

Jesus, in this Advent, come to our hearts and be born anew. Be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Lead us beside still waters, make us lie down in Your green pastures, and restore our souls. Be our High Priest and bless us and keep us. Lift Your countenance upon us and be gracious toward us. Cause Your face to shine upon us and give us Your peace.

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An Eternal, Firm & Secured Hope

“For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulder. And He will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

ISAIAH 9:6

Today is Christmas! Today our four-week prayerful anticipation culminates in the celebration of His first coming and the eager anticipation of His final appearance. Today, our hearts are enlarged to receive Him anew, and our hope is firmly established that He will come again. He is our eternal hope, consistent joy, never-ending love, and peace without end.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied about the coming of the Messiah (the anointed One of God) and said that He would be born as a child and Son and that the government would be on His shoulders. Later Isaiah would clarify that He would lead as a little child (Isaiah 11:6). This prophecy foreshadowed that the coming Messiah would not be like the conquering tyrants the people of Judea suffered under; He would come as a humble and lowly baby in a manger. Isaiah further describes the nature of His rule—He will be called a wonderful counselor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

Christmas can be a difficult and painful time for many people. This time of year can highlight personal loss, broken relationships, and unbearable mistakes. However, the Holy Scriptures declare that this Child was born for us, this Son is given to us, and that He is a Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. The eternal hope we celebrate today is that Christ, who is all wisdom, brings light, deliverance, and hope to the darkest areas of our lives. He is the mighty God for whom nothing is too hard or difficult (Luke 1:37).

This Child, born for us, and this Son, who was given to us, is also called Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. Like His everlasting Father, Christ loves us with eternal love. Like His Father, Christ has promised that He would never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). In the midst of a world at war with itself, Christ comes as the Prince of Peace. He is the only One that can bring lasting peace to our hearts, in our families, and between nations. We ardently long for His final coming, where He will bring His peace to rule for all eternity.

Today, we celebrate our Prince of Peace’s first and final coming. We open our hearts to receive Him anew and cry out for His return. We rest in joyous peace, knowing that our hope is eternally secured and firm in Him. Christ was born, and Christ will come again! Come, Lord Jesus!

Lord Jesus Christ, we celebrate Your coming into our dark world and broken lives. You are our “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, [and] Prince of Peace.” You are our eternal hope, consistent joy, never-ending love, and peace without end. Come into our world. We eagerly await Your final coming. Come, Lord Jesus, come!

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