



# BECAUSE OF BETHLEHEM

ADVENT GUIDE



## Advent - Introduction

Everything changed on that unexpected first Christmas more than two thousand years ago. The trajectory of history, the future, even eternity, was transformed when God became man. Jesus the Son of God became the Son of Man, fully divine yet fully human. As the prophet Isaiah foretold long before, The Arrival of our Savior, Jesus would come. (Isaiah 7:14).

This was The Arrival of Jesus here on earth.

Not God out of reach, out there *somewhere*, above us and unattainable. Not God cold and aloof, beyond us and distant, unengaged and disinterested. Not angry and condemning, overwhelming and vengeful, eagerly waiting our fall.

This was The Arrival of God's presence.

God come near, where we are, in the here and now, where we breathe and live, laugh and cry, love and hate, hope and despair, hurt and heal, create and destroy.

As we move toward the Christmas celebration of Jesus' momentous arrival, you are invited to join in an Advent journey of discovery – of hope, love, joy, and peace – as we draw near to Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Advent is a season that officially observed in many churches. The four weeks before Christmas are set aside as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Jesus' birth. The term *advent* is a version of the Latin word that means "coming". But Advent is not just an extension of Christmas; it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

People celebrate Advent differently. While the core concept is the same, some traditions and practices vary. This study is based on common practices, and we invite you to add it to the traditions you have at home. One of the main traditions of Advent is the lighting of the candles on an Advent wreath. A circular evergreen wreath represents God's unending love for us. And the lighting of five candles throughout the season represent Jesus' second coming to a world lost in darkness. Isaiah 9:2 says, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone". This can be both a meaningful and fun tradition for kids of all ages, and it can be easily adapted to fit individual group, or family needs.

This guide contains devotions for each of the four weeks before Christmas. Based around the weekly Advent themes of hope, love, joy, and peace. There are seven devotionals for each theme. There is also a devotion for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. These provide practical ideas to help spur us toward ways to share God's love and presence with others. In addition, each of the sections contain an introduction page with a song to sing, verses to memorize, a



question to ponder, and a verse to focus on throughout the week. We encourage you to use these sections as a guide for a weekly lighting of your own Advent wreath.

Whether you do this alone, as a family, with friends, or as a small group, taking the time to practice the tradition of the lighting of the candles will add to the richness of your Advent experience. Singing the songs can make your experience especially fun and meaningful if you have kids. You'll also find a final section called A Celebration of Christmas, which is filled with fun, creative ideas and activities to start some new family traditions or enhance your own celebrations of Jesus' birth.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts. The tradition and the devotions in this book are designed to help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own – the story of God's redeeming love for our world. The story of His presence with us always.

So, no matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder for you. And may the Holy Spirit lead you as you embark in a journey of hope, love, joy, and peace – and ultimately to a deep encounter with The Arrival of Jesus Christ.

*Lord Jesus, dwell with us. Abide with us. We welcome you.*



## **Week One: *Advent Brings Hope***

The first Sunday of Advent signifies the hope people felt in their hearts for the promised Messiah to lead them out of dark and difficult times. As we begin this season of Advent, we will spend the next seven days exploring the hope in our hearts that The Arrival continues to bring into our world. In addition to the daily devotions, take time this week to light the first candle in your Advent wreath. Remember the prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus' coming, express your desires for this season, and place your hope in the Light of the World, who was born a baby in Bethlehem and who is coming again.

### **Scripture Reading:**

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

"But when she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom, there will be no end'" – Luke 1:29-33

### **Memory Verse:**

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." – Isaiah 9:6

### **Answer this question:**

What is your greatest hope this season?

### **Sing Together:**

"Away in a Manger"



## DAY ONE: HOPE ETERNAL

*“Behold I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised” – Genesis 28:15*

Did hope even exist in the beginning of the world? If it did, was it very important...or even necessary? It seems there was little or no need for it. When God created everything, life was fulfilled. Humanity enjoyed wholeness and intimacy with God and with each other in God's perfect creation. Adam and Eve lived in contentment and harmony – until they fell into the temptation of the serpent.

When everything became broken, hope became vital. The trust that God would not leave Adam and Eve and their descendants became a lifeline. And when God established a covenant with Abraham, He cemented the hope of a renewal and restoration that eventually would extend to all the people of the earth. When God encountered Jacob at Bethel, He renewed that covenant and reinforced the hope rooted in His faithfulness: *“I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you”* (Genesis 28:15).

Further along in history, we know the fulfillment of God's promise as Jesus the Messiah. His arrival, life, sacrifice, death, and resurrection reinforce and provide us with a continual resurgence of hope – that there is more than the finality of suffering and death. That God, one day will completely restore life and relationship and all of creation. That God is always at work among us. Because of Jesus, we can hope and hope confidently.

*What do you hope for? How do you think your hope is the same or different from that of the God's Old Testament followers? What encourages you and fuels your hope?*

## DAY TWO: HOPE IN GOD WITH US

*“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” – Psalm 139:7-12*

Have you ever felt like there's no way out? Have your problems seemed too big, too painful, too confusing, too far gone – too whatever? Has it seemed like God was too far away and would never come through? The people of Israel must have felt way before Jesus's arrival on earth. For thousands of years their ancestors had waited and hoped for the coming Messiah, whom God had promised. But for hundreds of years, they had heard nothing from



God through the prophets. Instead, they lived and suffered under harsh oppression of the Romans. They longed for the Messiah they had been promised. They dreamed of the political freedom they thought He would bring. They did all they could to keep hope alive.

Maybe you can relate. We all face darkness in some form or another. But the promise of The Arrival reminds us that no matter how tempting it is to despair, God will never let us go. As the psalmist reminded us, God will never abandon us, no matter where we go. We can't escape His love. We can't outrun His presence. We can't elude His care. The great I AM will always be, and He will always be with us.

*In what ways, no matter how small, can you see and sense God's presence at work around you? What spark of hope can you hold onto and fan into a greater flame?*

### **DAY THREE: HOPE OVERCOMES FEAR**

*"Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you" – Deuteronomy 31:6*

Fear comes in many forms, but it often threatens to overtake us most as uncertainty. Will our plans succeed or fail? Will *(fill in the blank)* happen or not? Will that person come through, or let us down? Worry creeps in like a slow-moving storm, and if we let it, it can build into hurricane force.

God understands this human tendency. It's no coincidence that the Bible is filled with so many versions of this encouragement: Don't be afraid; don't worry. The beauty of these messages is that they are backed by the rock-solid promise of God's presence – and fulfilled through the faithfulness of The Arrival. As God told Joshua back in the Old Testament, *"Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:9).

Mary must have grappled with this kind of fearful uncertainty as she awaited the birth of Jesus. Young, vulnerable, and forced into a long journey away from home as the arrival of her baby drew near, she must have continually faced questions, doubts, and fears. In the midst of it all, she must have constantly remembered the words from angel who visited her: *"Do not be afraid, Mary"* (Luke 1:30). We can find similar hope as we focus – and refocus – on God's similar promises. No matter what tomorrow holds, no matter what fears or worries we face, God will never leave us or let us down. He is with us – always.

*What is troubling you today? What scripture will be your meditation or mantra to focus on in the face of fear and worry?*



## DAY FOUR: HOPE IN CHRIST

*“For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why it is through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory” – 2 Corinthians 1:20*

If you’re going to play the lottery, you’d definitely want to claim your prize, right? But there are billions of dollars unclaimed lottery prizes each year, according to research cited in a 2018 CNNMoney article. Most of them are secondary prizes that people aren’t aware of. Many of them are small, but some are over \$1 million. Even jackpot prizes have gone unclaimed. Someone in Georgia left \$77 million unclaimed. They won the lottery but never collected the money. Their dream of becoming a millionaire stayed unfulfilled.

Thankfully, God’s promises never go unfulfilled. Everything He said He will do, He has done or will still do. The Apostle Paul told us in 2 Corinthians that Jesus, is the yes of all God has promised. He is the fulfillment of life, restoration, and relationship with God. He is the human expression of God’s love and the sacrifice of Himself for us. We get to receive His life and forgiveness, and offer the *amen*, or “so be it”, as we watch and take part in God’s work. These rewards are priceless!

*What promises of God have you seen be fulfilled? How is hope fulfilled in your life this Advent season?*

## DAY FIVE: HOPE FOR LIFE

*“...I am with you always, to the end of the age”. – Matthew 28:20*

*If I can just get close enough to touch His clothes, I’ll be healed*, the woman thought. (Her story is told in Mark 5:31-34.) It was a bold hope she held. For twelve years, she had somehow bled. No one had been able to help her. Doctors had tried, but the woman’s condition had only grown worse. But she had heard about this Jesus – the stories, the miracles, the healings – and she believed. Hope awoke inside of her. The hope of healing, the hope of a new life, drove her to take action.

It may seem like a small action, but it was bold. She did what she could to just get close enough to Jesus and reach out. When she did, it made all the difference in the world. Was it hard? Probably. Jockeying her way through the noisy, clamoring crowd must have been difficult, especially with a long-term illness. Was she afraid? Yes, especially when Jesus began looking for her in the throng of people. But the healing, peace, and freedom He gave her changed her life.



What, or who, we put our hope in makes all the difference. Jesus is worthy. He was and still is God. He fulfilled Israel's hope for the Messiah when He arrived that first Christmas. He fulfilled humanity's hopes for victory over death when He resurrected that first Easter. And one day He will ultimately fulfill all hope and complete God's work of restoration for all creation. This is the promise He left us with to give us a foundation of confidence and boldness: *"I am with you always, to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). This is a promise worthy to fuel our hope.

*How will you put your hope into action this Advent season? Name a time when God fulfilled your hope. How does it fuel you now?*

## **DAY SIX: HELP IN HOPE**

*"And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows Him. You know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. 'I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you'"* – John 14:16-18

Any kids will tell you that gifts are the best part of Christmas – except for the waiting part. Seeing all those pretty packages wrapped beneath the tree is a special kind of torture for the young. Waiting for Christmas Day to arrive can feel like an eternity. Opening a little window on an Advent calendar or breaking a link of construction-paper chain might help give a child a tangible way to track the days, but it can't quite speed up the perceived crawling pace of time.

Waiting for Christ to return and complete His ultimate work can sometimes feel like an eternity to us, especially as we witness or experience suffering, injustice, and evil in the world around us. Fortunately, God has not left us on our own. When Jesus's time on earth ended, God gave His followers an amazing gift: His Spirit. Despite the struggles, challenges, and pains we face, we are not alone. We have the power of God's Spirit within us. This is The Arrival of the Holy Spirit in continual presence – everyday, every minute, every second. The Spirit fills us with power, strength, help, hope, love, joy, peace, and more. The Spirit nurtures us and is constantly doing God's work in and through us. As we wait for God to make all things right, we are never alone!

*What makes you long for Christ's return? What makes you impatient during the Christmas season? What can you do to draw upon the Holy Spirit's strength and patience?*



## DAY SEVEN: ACTIVE HOPE

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” – 1 Peter 1:3-4*

Hope that’s not alive is no hope at all. Hope sparks like a fire. It flows like water. It grows like a seed. Hope grows and spreads like a living thing. It can dwindle and wane, and yes, even die. But with nurture and care, it can revive and flourish and multiply. The history of God’s people is a history of hope – hope birthed and growing, hope ebbing and flowing, hope pursued and neglected, hope abandoned and renewed, hope rising and falling through centuries, and, most of all, hope confirmed and fulfilled in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Apostle Peter wrote that God *“has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”* (1 Peter 1:3-4). This is God’s living hope that we celebrate during the Advent season. It is a thriving, active, expectant hope. It represents the enduring hope through the centuries of those who waited for the promised Messiah. It celebrated the triumphant arrival of Christ the King. And it seals us into the new and continuing living hope for the completion of God’s redemption and restoration.

How is your hope during this season? Focusing on gratitude can renew and grow our hope. Recognizing and appreciating the good that God has shown us in the past can increase our hope for all He will do in the future. Sharing this gratitude and hope with those who love and support us can multiply its effects. As we nurture this living hope, it can sustain us through our darkest days as we wait for God to move. Come, Lord Jesus!

*How is your hope doing? What are you thankful for in this Advent season? What step will you take to foster hope in yourself and others around you?*



## **Week Two: *Advent Brings Love***

The second Sunday of Advent signifies love and reminds us that Jesus was sent to us because of God's great love for us. For the next seven days we will explore and experience God's amazing love. Along with the daily devotions, take time this week to light the second candle in your Advent wreath. Let the reality that God's love came crashing into our world permeate your life this week. Experience the depth of His love and allow that love to overflow to others.

### **Scripture Reading:**

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." – Luke 2:1-7

"so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." – Ephesians 3:17-19

### **Memorize:**

"For God 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

### **Answer this question:**

What does love feel like to you?

### **Sing Together:**

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing"



## DAY EIGHT: LIGHT, LIFE, AND LOVE

*"In him was life, and the life was the light of men." – John 1:4*

Have you ever tried sleeping in a new place and been annoyed by that one little light that seems to illuminate the whole room? Or maybe you've left a phone or tablet plugged in somewhere in your bedroom, and wondered what was causing a bright blue glow. It's amazing how much the smallest point of light can brighten the darkest of spaces.

The life of God that Jesus brought to earth was just such a light – "the light of all man", John called it. It appeared in Bethlehem as a tiny, seemingly insignificant spark of humble baby. It grew into the focus of a laser beam, and it appeared to be snuffed out at Jesus's crucifixion.

Instead, it detonated and spread with the power of a supernatural sun bringing God's life, forgiveness, and love to us. The gift of Jesus, God's only Son, was God's sacrificial and triumphant act of love (John 3:16). During the Advent season, we can look for the Light, we can share His love, and we can celebrate His life, which He offered and shares with us. And even in the hardships we face and witness in the world around us, we can remember this: Light shines brightest in the dark. Love beams brightest among hate. Life stands out most boldly against death.

*Where do you see the sparks of God's love shining around you? How do you most feel God's love during the Christmas season? What small act of love can you choose to shine a spark of "the light of all man" during Advent?*

## DAY NINE: LOVE AMONG US

*"For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." – Matthew 18:20*

Have you ever been in love? The kind where you didn't want to do anything but just spend time with that special someone? Maybe it was back at the beginning of the relationship. When you were together, you could talk for hours or just stare into each other's eyes; that was enough. When you weren't together, you were talking on the phone or texting. You got to know that person in detail: their favorite foods, what made them laugh, that look in their eyes when their feelings got hurt. You savored their presence, and it's how you built that relationship.

Presence allows us to grow in our relationship with God, too. It's His love that compelled Jesus to take on human form – and all the pain and suffering that came with it. Yet it's the very living nature of Jesus to make a way for us to know the Father intimately, His invitation into presence is constant and ongoing. And as we draw near to Him, He draws near to us (James 4:8). When we come to him, He is there. When we gather with His followers, He is with us; His Spirit of love and community is there. The more time we spend with Him, the more we learn His likes and



dislikes, His nature and personality. His love calls to us and draws us in. Love is the motivation of The Arrival, it is the motivation of Christmas.

*How will you step into God's presence in this busy season? How or when do you most feel and receive God's love? How can you pass it on to others as well?*

## **DAY TEN: ABIDING LOVE**

*"So, we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" – 1 John 4:16*

How are your houseplants? Those with a green thumb probably have flourishing green plants providing oxygen, beautiful flowers, and a thriving sense of life to their home. Maybe their Christmas poinsettias will live through the entire year. Others of us may know well the sight of withering leaves and decaying stalks of struggling, dying flowers. We all know that plants need the nourishment of good soil, strong roots, and ample water and light to grow and thrive. To become disconnected from the source of these – or to have an owner who fails to provide them means decline and eventual death.

We're not much different. We must remain rooted in and connected to our source of life and love: God. John wrote that when we live – or abide – in love, we live in God. Jesus said that we are branches, and He is the vine (John 15:5). We need to draw love and life from all that He provides. His supply never runs out. God never neglects His own. He gives His love in abundance to flow through us and sustain us and allow us to flourish. This is the life that Jesus brought at that first Christmas and the life that He continually fills us with, flowing and fueled with love.

*How is your Christmas season marked with love? What will you do to tap into the flow of God's sustaining love?*

## **DAY ELEVEN: FEARLESS LOVE**

*"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." – 1 John 4:18*

There's a story singer-songwriter, David Wilcox. He tells about two old neighboring farmers who had a long-running feud. It had started over a cat they both fed and claimed as their own. The neighbors quit talking, and the grudge escalated into a rerouted creek to divide their properties. So, when a carpenter came through town looking for work, one farmer hired the



main to build a fence so he wouldn't have to look at his neighbor's place. When that farmer returned home, he saw that the carpenter had built a bridge across the creek instead of a barrier. His apologetic neighbor crossed it exclaiming, "You're brave man; I didn't think you'd want to hear the sound of my voice again." Wilcox uses the story as an introduction to his song called "Fearless Love," the kind that makes us cross the borders and barriers that we put up.

The Arrival of love to earth through Jesus is a love that defies and overcomes fear. It's a love not of this world that runs against the grain of how our world operates. It was true in Jesus's day when He taught us to love our enemies, and it continues today. It contradicted the Jews' expectations for a Messiah, and challenged the systems of fearful oppression-instead of overthrowing the Romans. He taught them to carry a soldier's pack twice as far as the Roman law required (Matthew 5:41). Jesus's perfect love fills us and displaces the fear that drives us toward self-centered and hurtful actions. It fills us instead with the strength and compassion to overcome our fear and reach out to others. It is a perfect and powerful love that entered our humanity so humbly on that night in Bethlehem.

*Who or what are you fearful of? What steps of love can you take this season to overcome barriers, divisions, or even past hurts?*

## **DAY TWELVE: LOVE THAT NEVER ENDS**

*"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." – Psalm 136:1*

Eternity blows our minds. The concept of forever defies the constraints of physical world. We have no tangible equivalent to infinity in our finite surroundings. No beginning. No end. No way to fully grasp the immensity. Our concept of time is almost laughable. A grandparent that lives to 100 is merely one penny's worth of a millennium. The United States, which seems so permanent in our thinking, is 242 years old-not even a fifth of the duration of the Roman Empire, which lasted about 1,480 years. The oldest living organism on earth are trees, and the most ancient single tree documented is a Great Basin bristlecone pine California believed to be 5,067 years old. All of those time frames are not even equivalent to a water molecule in the ocean. And the entire ocean is not even equivalent to a molecule of eternity.

God's love, however, is eternal. It's a never-ending as God Himself. It was. It is now. It will be. That was the point the psalmist wanted to make in Psalm 136: His love endures forever. The chorus appears twenty-six times in the twenty-six verses, repeated each time after a list of ways God has shown and continues to show his faithfulness. And He will never stop demonstrating His love in tangible ways that are both daily occurrences and history-changing events like Christ's birth.

All things we know will come to an end at some point: the good, the bad, and life itself. But as Andrew Peterson sings "After the Last Tear Falls": "And in the end, the end is oceans and



oceans of love and love again, then we'll find that all our tears have been caught in hand of the Giver of Love". This is The Arrival, lived out before us, and He will hold us forever and ever and ever.

*What is the longest, oldest concept of time you can imagine? What symbol can you think of and look at to remind yourself in this season that Christ's love is never-ending?*

## **DAY THIRTEEN: LOVE PERFECTED**

*"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8*

What could you accomplish if you harnessed all the energy ever spent on trying to figure out what love is? Can you imagine? The stories, the poems, the plays, the song. Oh, the songs alone! The hours would total ages. The brainpower would overcome even the cloud-creating, Bitcoin-mining supercomputers of the world.

Understanding love is understanding the very nature of God. It's a lifelong process of discovery, transformation, and relationship. Living it out is our greatest quest. When we encounter Christmas, we encounter love at its truest, and it begins to change us. We are swept into its cleansing flood, which begins to break apart the dams of our selfish-ness and fear. If we let it, this love will flow to every dark nook within us, eventually filling us with the traits described by the Apostle Paul in his poignant description of love: patience, kindness, generosity, humility, focus on others, forgiveness, truth, protection, trust, hope, perseverance. Without love, nothing matters, not even our greatest feats and grandest gestures. With love, we have everything. This is how Advent continues to bring love into our world and our lives.

*How can you show love to those closest to you today? Who around you needs a bit of love? How can you show that person a bit of kind and selfless love?*

## **DAY FOURTEEN: UNBREAKABLE LOVE**

*"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:38-39*



Peanut butter and jelly. Romeo and Juliet. Thunder and lightning. Bert and Ernie. Adam and Eve. Mac and cheese. Han and Chewbacca. Shaggy and Scooby. Burgers and fries. Mickey and Minnie. Salt and pepper. Tom and Jerry. Cookies and milk. Bonnie and Clyde. Chips and salsa. Bacon and eggs. Batman and Robin. Some things just go together. They are forever connected in our consciousness. To pull them apart would just be wrong.

The love of God is unfailing and unbreakable. Nothing can separate us from it – no spiritual or earthly power; nothing in all of time past, present, or future; nothing in all of the world or universe; not life or death itself. This is the love embodied in Jesus and unleashed in our world through His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is the healing love that creation longed for. He is the sustaining love that gives source and meaning to life. He is the powerful, unbreakable love that will faithfully restore and re-create all things. And nothing, ever, can or will tear us away from God's love. This is a reason to celebrate with gratitude and joy. Love has come! Love is with us! Love will never leave!

*What threatens to distract you from the sense of God's love and care? What example or metaphor or inseparable connection brings you encouragement about God's unfailing love?*



### ***Week Three: Advent Brings Joy***

The third Sunday of Advent signifies joy and reminds us of the angel's good news told it to the shepherds. These daily devotions will lead you on a journey to joy over the next seven days. Also take time this week to light your third candle in your advent wreath. Imagine yourself on the hillside where the joyous announcement was made by heavenly hosts. As you watch for joy in the world around you during this season, surrender the pain and fear in your life and ask God to fill you with the gift of his joy.

#### **Scripture Reading:**

Luke 2:8-14

Isaiah 12:5-6

#### **Memory Verse:**

Psalm 100:1

#### **Answer this question:**

How do you imagine it might have felt to be at Shepard on that first Christmas?

#### **Sing Together:**

Joy to the world



## DAY FIFTEEN: CHOSEN JOY

*“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed” – Luke 1:46-48*

Remember those cartoons in old movies where an army sergeant or leader asks for a volunteer? The mission is dangerous, sometimes ridiculously so. It will require a brave and true individual willing to put his or her life on the line. Will the brave volunteer please step forward? You know what happens. At the same second, in perfect coordination, the entire line steps backward, leaving the main character standing in front when the leader turns around. Forget volunteering - he is volunteered, whether he likes it or not.

Mary could've looked at her situation a little bit like that. She didn't ask to be the mother of God's son. If she had been asked, she might have stepped backwards. Luke 1:29 must be one of the biggest understatements in the Bible when it describes Mary's reaction to the angel that appears and greet her as a highly favored one: *“Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this may be.”* We may say it a little more like, she was freaking out inside and couldn't move because there was a glowing angel they're suddenly appeared and started talking to her.” Mary had a choice, and she chose to accept God's will and assignment for her. Despite all of the questions and confusion and fear that was inside her, Mary chose to surrender and trust. As she did, Mary chose joy - an active joy that sang and testified to God's goodness and faithfulness.

*What situation are you facing that gives you a choice of fear or joy? And what tangible, active ways will you choose to express joy in this expected season of Advent?*

## DAY SIXTEEN: STRENGTH IN JOY

*“And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule” - Nehemiah 8:18*

Who is the shortest person in the Bible? You might think it was Knee-High-Miah (Nehemiah). But it was really Peter - he was short enough to fall asleep on his watch (Matthew 26:40). Seriously though, Nehemiah is one of those often-overlooked Old Testament guys with the funny name for accomplished some great things are you at back when the Israelites were captives of the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer who asked for and received permission to return to and build Jerusalem, the Jewish capital and home of the temple. The fact that both had been destroyed what is the source of great shame to the Jews. And even know others had returned many years earlier to rebuild the temple, the people in Jerusalem



we're not doing well.

Nehemiah's first task was to rebuild the city walls and gates so the citizens could defend themselves from marauders and enemies. But he also restored justice and lead the people back to following God. When Nehemiah had the Law, the Scriptures, he read and explain to the people. They wept and we're sorry for the ways they had neglected God. But Nehemiah called it a holy day for celebration. *"Do not grieve, For the joy of the LORD is your strength,"* he said (Nehemiah 8:10).

What a great truth! There is strength in the joy that God with us provides. It lifts our hearts and bolsters our courage and brings healing to the heart and strengthens the hands for action, as Nehemiah understood. It often rises in unlikely circumstance when fear, worry, doubt, or pain threatens. That was true in Nehemiah's day. It was true at the time of Jesus' birth. And it remains true for us today.

*What bible verses fill you with joy and strength? How can you meditate on them during this Advent season?*

## **DAY SEVENTEEN: JOY IN PAIN**

*"When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also, you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" - John 16:21-22*

They should celebrate Mother's Day every month, maybe every day. Here's to you women who have allowed your bodies to be invaded and transformed for nine months while you grew and provided life-support for a new human being inside of you. Oh, and not to mention the intense and painful process of birthing that rather large baby out into the world to. And the selfless and sacrificial love that you gave every day after to nurture and raise that human. God knows and understands that this creative process in the deep bond of love, and he sees your efforts even when the rest of us over look or under appreciate them.

Jesus likened the relationship of joy and pain to the experience of childbirth. He knew that His disciples' grief would be intense following His death, but the joy of seeing Him again and understanding His miraculous victory over death would be even greater. He also knew that the pain we face in our lives can be so very real intense but He promises at the joy of our reunion with Him will be even more powerful and intensely joy filled. We don't know when the reunion will come, but we can take heart, we can rejoice, that someday whether to death or Christ's return, all of our suffering, fear, grief, pain, and anguish will pale in comparison to the all-consuming lovely experience in God's presence. For today, we can cling to this promise: *"The*



*LORD is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). He is the God With Us who fills with joy that overcomes all pain.*

*What troubles your heart as you seek and wait for Christ’s Joy? What is it mean for you to rejoice, to actively express joy?*

## **DAY EIGHTEEN: FILLED WITH JOY**

*“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves” - John 17:13*

Have you ever been reunited with a loved one after a long absence? Have you ever come through on certain circumstances to discover that those you love are safe and sound? Have you ever felt the elation, relief, excitement, and hope wash over you? It’s a sense of joy compounded by your connection and communication with them, and they can wash over you like a flood.

Can you imagine the joy that will fill us one day when we are reunited with God? The intensity of this overwhelmingly perfect emotion must the fight anything we can comprehend on earth. As Jesus prayed and communicated with the Father in John 17, He left a message for the world. Why? *“So that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves”*. Jesus’ prayers for his disciples - and for all of us who follow Him afterward - are for protection and unity. They are for connection with each other and with God while we are still in this world. They represent the truth that Advent brings, and they fill us with joy in this lifetime, despite its challenges and hardships. It is a satisfying taste of joy in relationship that one day will flood in satisfy us completely. In the meantime, we can refuel to our connection and communication with the Father through Jesus, and we can experience His joy.

*Who is it you can reach out to and we knew a relationship? How can you carry with you the words of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 during Advent: to experience joy in unity with God and with others?*

## **DAY NINETEEN: JOY IN PRESENCE**

*“You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” - Psalm 16:11*

What is the greatest or most special Christmas gift you have ever received? Maybe it came wrapped with shiny ribbons and bows. Toys and gadgets can light us up with surprise and



happiness, but a surprise visit from a loved one or healed relationship can overwhelm us with gratitude and joy. Thousands of dollars' worth of gifts from a distant, absent guardian are just presents. Small gestures and encouragement from a loving, caring parent are a rich presence. And in presence there is joy.

As David the Psalmist knew, we are filled with God's joy in His presence. It's a byproduct of a relationship. As we spend time connecting with God, aligning our spirits with His, we discover joy filling us from the inside. It is a fruit born from His Spirit, grown within us. It is a response to His perfect love. Our circumstances can swirl in storm around us, but we can experience joy deep within. Because God is with us, we can seek him and find him. Because God is with us, we can know and experience his joy.

*Destroy seem distant this Christmas season? How are you lean into God's presence? How will you share joyful present with others as Christmas nears?*

## **DAY TWENTY: JOY TO THE WORLD**

*"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people'" - Luke 2:9-10*

"Joy to the World" may be the quintessential Christmas and Advent song. It celebrates the arrival of Jesus at His birth, but even more His eventual return in reign. The song was written in 1719 by Isaac Watts. The English clergy man borrowed and adapted the tunes from Handel's "Messiah", and as he wrote, he drew his inspiration from Psalm 98: *"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises...Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for He comes to judge the world and the peoples with equity"*.

The season of Advent helps us capture and experience the expectant waiting for the arrival of our Savior. Joy is our eventual response – at Christmas as we celebrate the gift of Jesus' return as He completes the restorative work he began. One day He will rule the world with truth and grace, and the world will truly reflect the glory of His righteousness and wonders of His love, the wonders of His love.

*What is your favorite Christmas song? Why? At what point on the Bethlehem night do you think joy erupted in the hearts of those shepherds? How can you join and share in a truly global joy this year?*



## DAY TWENTY ONE: INEXPRESSIBLE JOY

*“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” - 1 Peter 1:8-9*

Birthday parties and balloons. Cuddly puppies. Your favorite song on a perfect summer day. Sunshine on your shoulders. An encouraging message from a friend. Winning the big game. A delicious meal. All these things bring happiness. The birth of your child. Your wedding day. Being declared free of cancer for good. Your loved one coming out of a coma with no brain damage. This is the stuff of joy.

We love to be happy. But happiness comes and goes as the circumstances around us change by the hour and the minute. In pursuing happiness for the sake of happiness can be a shallow, self-centered pursuit. “It is a very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness”, wrote Viktor Frankl, the famous Jewish survivor of World War II Nazi concentration camps.

Joy brings happiness, but it runs much deeper. Joy permeates our souls. Joy is rooted in gratitude, meaning gratitude and hope fulfilled, especially when it is based in relationship with our Creator. Joy comes from Advent. Peter called it *“an inexpressible and glorious joy”* that is part of the inheritance we are receiving with Christ. One day we will receive it in full. Yet even now, we find hope and joy in what Jesus has done and what we know he will faithfully do in the future.

*What examples of happiness and joy have you experience in your life? When have you known that joy defied the circumstances you were facing? What most fills you with joy and the Christmas season?*



### ***Week Four: Advent Brings Jesus***

The fourth Sunday of Advent represents Jesus Christ. This Candle signifies the ultimate reason for our Christmas journey – the baby Jesus. God’s only Son, the Savior of the world. Jesus is truly the reason for and the meaning of Christmas, and He is the source of all the gifts we’ve discovered on this Advent journey – hope, love, joy, and peace. Celebrate the birth of Jesus! The waiting is almost over, the Messiah is coming. Even as we celebrate His arrival in our world, our anticipation grows, and we continue to live with longing expectation for His second coming when all His work will be complete and all the world will be reconciled to Him. Yet even now on the eve and day of Christmas, we rejoice. Christ has come! He will come again!

#### **Scripture Reading:**

Matthew 1:21-23

Revelation 4:8

#### **Memory Verse:**

Say all the verses you have memorized during the weeks of Advent.

#### **Answer this question:**

What is one of the greatest gifts you have ever received? What is one of the greatest gifts you have ever given?

#### **Sing Together:**

Silent Night (as well as any of the other carols from each of the weeks in Advent)



## DAY TWENTY-TWO: CHOSEN JOY

*“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” – Numbers 6:24-26*

When God gave the law to Moses and set up the roles and duties of the priests to guide the spiritual life of the ancient Jews, He gave them the ultimate blessing: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you”. The Hebrew word used in that blessing and throughout the Old Testament is *shalom*, and it conveys rich, powerful meaning. So much more than just the absence of fighting, shalom reflects safety, completeness, and wholeness.

This is the type of peace brought to us by Advent. Jesus is the Prince of Shalom foretold by the prophet Isaiah: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forever more. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (Isaiah 9:6-7). The Jews of Jesus’ day wanted a Messiah to establish political justice against their oppressors, but they also understood and longed for shalom. This completeness and wholeness with God is what Jesus brought into and left in our world, and when He returns one day, He will heal all that’s been broken and restore God’s complete kingdom of shalom. In this Advent season, we can remember and celebrate God’s rich blessing of shalom.

*What does peace feel like? How can you incorporate this priestly blessing of shalom into your Advent celebrations? Who can you bless with these life-giving words?*

## DAY TWENTY-THREE: JESUS IS OUR PEACE

*“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” – Ephesians 2:14-16*

A bridge with gaps won’t get us across. A rope that is cut won’t hold together. A cable that’s been severed won’t carry any signal. A train with a broken track won’t get through. Humans without a Savior can’t enjoy a relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul taught that Jesus himself is our peace. The concept he was conveying was that of reconciliation and restoration. Jesus was the perfect human who bridged the gap between



God and humans. Where there was once a barrier of sin, Jesus now stands as a connection. Where there was hostile death, Jesus brought new life. Where there is now a broken world, Jesus will make it perfect again one day. Jesus is peace, and He made peace between us and God. He also enables us to be a source of peace with other people. In this Advent season, let us receive our Savior, who is peace, and let His wholeness flow out of us.

*Where do you feel you need some reconciliation? How can you receive the Savior and His nature of peace this Advent season?*

## **CHRISTMAS EVE: THE GREATEST PRESENCE**

*“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” – Luke 2:8*

There’s always that one package. Maybe it’s gotten lost. Maybe it’s because that big blizzard in the Northeast slow down the delivery chain. Maybe it’s because you waited until the last possible day that even Amazon will guarantee it before Christmas delivery. But I snowflake swirl around the glowing street light on Christmas Eve your hope is fading quickly for having a gift for the kids. Soon Christmas will be here, and that present will not be. But then at the literal 11th hour, there’s a knock on the door, and a persistent FedEx or UPS driver hands over that final item to go under your tree.

For all but Mary and Joseph, the night before the first Christmas seemed like any other. Innkeepers tried to manage their crowded hotels. Shepherds tended to their flocks out in the fields. To everyone in Israel, this was just another day. Messiah? They hoped He would come someday, but there was nothing special about this day to make them even think about him. Until, that instantaneous moment. That split second when Jesus, Immanuel, drew his first breath into our world. God was with us. God was among us. God was one of us...and yet so very much more. Nothing has been the same since. In Advent, we have been waiting and preparing. Now we celebrate as the ordinary gives way to the extraordinary. Christ is coming, then and now!

*What is the attitude of your heart as you prepare to celebrate the arrival of Christ? How will you step out of the mundane and ordinary into the supernatural and miraculous?*

## **CHRISTMAS DAY: BORN TO YOU THIS DAY**

*“And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the*



*Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” – Luke 2:10-14*

What a moment in history! Christ had come! God is with us! The promised Messiah was now fulfilled. God’s one and only son had been sent sacrificially in love. The Prince of Peace was here to begin His kingdom and fill humanity with the wholeness of shalom. New and amazing joy was being unleashed in the world, and the angels of heaven we’re now bringing it to our humans, beginning with the humble and lowly shepherds.

Christ had come, God is with us. Because God is with us, we can know His hope, love, joy, and peace filling us in the present through His Spirit. And because God is with us, we can look confidently into the future when we will be united in the fullness and perfection of His presence, and the completion of His work in our world. This is why we celebrate Advent. Let’s join with the angels on this Christmas Day, proclaiming, “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:14). Let’s join with the shepherds in praising God and worshipping the Savior. And let’s join together to give thanks that our God is truly, faithfully, and always with us.

*How will you continue to live with an awareness and recognition that God is with you in the new year? How will you rejoice and celebrate and worship today?*