



ADVENT

RECOVERING
STOLEN GIFTS



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Imagine that you're a poor college student. Your parents don't have much money, so you are supporting yourself through school. You're living in a one-bedroom apartment, you're eating mac n' cheese each night unless you're eating ramen, and you take public transportation to school in the morning and to work in the evening.

Then something amazing happens. You start receiving anonymous gifts.

The first gift is a washer and dryer. No longer will you have to spend money going to the laundromat, and no longer will you have to leave your house for hours while doing your laundry. Now you can do it for free at home while you study or rest.

The second gift is a voucher for the local grocery store. It is good for up to \$500 a month. This means that you can save money, while also getting nutritious food. In fact, you even have enough to get some fun food for when you have friends over.

The third gift is a whole new set of clothes. You now can replace your old clothes. You can look presentable (which may lead to new job opportunities), and you no longer have to feel embarrassed about how you look when you leave the house.

Finally, the fourth gift is a car. Now you can drive yourself to school and work, which saves you a ton of time. That is more time for study and also for recreation.

These gifts enrich your life and bring great relief. You are incredibly grateful for them, and you start to enjoy your new life with these new gifts.

Then something terrible happens. You wake up one morning, go to your closet and you see that that whole new wardrobe is gone. Then, on your way to the kitchen, you notice that your washer and dryer have disappeared. You look on your counter and your grocery voucher is gone too. Fearing the worst, you run to the parking garage and, sure enough, the car is not there. You've been robbed! All those wonderful gifts have been stolen.

For the next month you are back to ramen and mac n' cheese. You're back to riding the bus. You're back to your old clothes. And you're back to the laundromat. One evening after work, as you're doing homework at the laundromat, you daydream about what your life would be if you could get those gifts back. Wouldn't it be wonderful to recover those stolen gifts that had once enriched your life. If only there was a way . . .

At Christmas we celebrate four wonderful gifts that we received (not anonymously) from God. Those gifts are hope, peace, joy and love. For any of us who have placed our faith in Jesus, these gifts are ours. But, for many of us, the world and the flesh and the devil seem to have stolen these gifts. Instead of being hopeful, we are depressed. Instead of being at peace, we are anxious. Instead of being joyful, we are in grief. And instead of experiencing love, we experience loneliness.

This devotional is an attempt to help us to recover those gifts. While we might feel like they have been stolen, they are still ours. And during this Advent season, we want to recover them.

This devotional can be used by individuals, couples, families, or small groups. For each day there is a Scripture passage, a devotional thought, a prayer, and two discussion questions. If you are using this in a group setting, you might choose to have each person read different parts. Then you can discuss the questions together.

If you miss a day, don't feel the need to catch up. Just go through the entry for that day.

My prayer is that you have a wonderful Advent season. And my prayer is that we all recover more of the hope, the peace, the joy, and the love that God gave to us when he sent his Son at Christmas.



HOPE

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, flowing lines that curve upwards and outwards from the base of the word 'HOPE', with three small dots in the center.

November 27 | Hope around the Corner

Written by Troy Spilman

Scripture: Isaiah 40:28-31

28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
31 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.

Devotional:

After graduating college, I was involved in a year-long ministry that was committed to working with at-risk teens near Denver, Colorado. We six leaders ventured into the Rocky Mountains on a four-day backpacking trip along with twelve teenage boys. To say that we were out of our league in regard to both the scope and difficulty of the hike before us was a huge understatement.

By day four, as we were making our way down the mountain, we began to doubt that we would get to the bottom before it got dark. As you could imagine, we started to lose hope; we were exhausted, out of food, and with no end in sight. Murmurings began to spread among the teens, and then it began to consume us leaders also . . . until the river suddenly came into view. Seeing this river gave us renewed hope because we knew that the river was located close to where we had originally started.

When we lose sight of what is really important, we can begin to despair just like I and others did on this hike. In a similar way to us realizing that we were close to our final destination, we have the promises of God that serve as an eternal compass. These promises direct our hearts to that which is true and secure. Are you in a season of feeling worn out, weak, or tired? Isaiah reminds us that renewed strength awaits those that place their hope in the Lord. On our hike, in reality we were near the end of the trail. However, we had lost perspective, and discouragement began to take over. It is good and healthy to remind ourselves that “the Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”

We have the God of all the universe on our side! I am convinced that retaining hope is a choice, it cannot be taken from us, but we often willingly give it away. Regarding the Lord's followers, Isaiah states that “They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Friends, if you have found that the trail that you are on has started to grow dark, regain your perspective and choose to place your hope in the Lord afresh. The story is not over, He is not done working in you and through you – the river is around the corner!

Prayer:

Lord, please give us strength to press on and to not lose heart. Help us to keep our eyes upon you no matter what the future may hold. As we choose to place our hope in you, may you renew our strength today as we say “Yes” to your plans for our lives. Thank you for the hope you give us to walk, run, and even to soar. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions:

In what ways have you taken your eyes off the hope that is only found in Jesus?

What might need to change in your weekly routine to help keep Jesus and his promises at the center of your life?

November 28 | A Hope that Doesn't Disappoint

Written by Phil Shahbaz

Scripture: Psalm 33:16-19

16 No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.
17 A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.
18 But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,
19 to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.

Devotional

In 1998, one of my college friends and I backpacked through the Middle East for 2 months. After starting in Cairo, Egypt, we went to Israel for several weeks before crossing into Jordan. We made our way into Jordan, crossed the Red Sea into Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, and then headed back to Cairo to fly home.

The college friend that went with me on the trip was a former quadriplegic. At age 18, he broke his neck due to an accident that happened during his birthday party and he became paralyzed from the neck down. The doctors said he had a 1 in 10,000 chance of healing. After a few weeks and several surgeries, one morning he said to a nurse, "Look what I can do." He was wiggling his toes! Some weeks later, he was able to walk and was eventually discharged from the hospital. It's a miraculous story!

While my friend has had challenges since then, he was delivered from a great tragedy, and he had enough strength to travel the Middle East with me.

Of all the memories of that trip, one is particularly important. We visited the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem where Jesus healed the paralytic in John chapter 5. Can you imagine what visiting that spot would mean to you if you were a former paralytic yourself? It was emotional for both me and my friend.

The story of the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda has stuck with me ever since. It's the story of a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. He stayed by the pool with the hope that its waters could heal him if he could just get in. When Jesus encounters him, he asks, "Do you want to become well?" The paralytic responds by saying he has no one to put him in the pool.

Even in the presence of Jesus, the paralytic's hope was in the pool.

Can you relate?

There are so many moments in our lives where we put our hope in anything but Jesus. And yet, as believers, Jesus is right there. The Holy Spirit lives in us! As a result, we are always in the presence of Jesus. Our hope is in Him.

Psalm 33:16-19 is a heavy reminder that even a king cannot put his hope in his horse, his strength, or even the size of his army. When we put our hope elsewhere, Scripture tells us it is in vain.

It is only the unfailing love of Jesus that can bring us hope. If you haven't accepted Jesus as your Lord, pray for Him to come into your life. He will bring you the hope when you cannot find in a job, in a relationship, in money, or even at a pool in Jerusalem.

Prayer

Father, forgive us for putting our hope in so many other things but you. We know that the trappings of this world can be distracting. Help us to not be distracted. Help us to focus on your unfailing love. Help us to feel that hope that only your Son Jesus can bring. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

If you take a hard look in the mirror, in what inferior places have you put your hope?

How can your hope in Jesus grow this Christmas season?

November 29 | When Sadness Meets Hope

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Devotional

One of the saddest events that any of us can go to is a funeral. No one looks forward to a funeral because you're only going to a funeral if someone you care about had died. And just about everyone who attends a funeral is looking for just one thing: Hope.

We're all sad, and so we're searching for a reason to be happy. This is hard because we know that for the rest of our lives we won't be able to spend time with the person we lost. It seems like a hopeless situation, but we're looking for hope.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the Apostle Paul is writing to Christians who have lost loved ones. They are feeling sad and hopeless. Paul does not tell them that they shouldn't be sad. He doesn't tell them that they are wrong to grieve. But he does tell them that, for Christians, grief is different. The reason is that our grief is always hopeful grief.

In other words, we are sad, but we know that the future is bright. We know that the story does not end with tears, but with every tear being wiped

away (Revelation 21:3-4). Because the risen Jesus is coming back one day, we have hope—confident expectation—that those who belong to him by faith will also be raised up for eternal life.

Our hope is based on Jesus. Without Jesus we have no hope.

And without Christmas, we have no Jesus! During the Christmas season we celebrate the first coming of the Son of God, remembering that he came to a broken world so that he could bring us hope. And because of his life, his death, and his resurrection, we have hope that not only helps us when things are going well. We have a hope that strengthens us when we are most sad.

If you're sad about something during this Christmas season, God is not telling you not to be sad. When we get sad, we are showing that we care about the good gifts—and people—God has given us. But, in our sadness, we are invited to find hope in Jesus. And when we celebrate the baby in the manger, we celebrate that we have a hope that nothing can steal away from us.

Prayer

Father, thank you for giving us a hope that is strong enough to overcome even the deepest sadness. We bring our grief to you, and we pray that you fill our hearts with hope. We thank you for the Christmas gift of Jesus, and that he came to bring hope to every heart that trusts in him. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

Name something that you feel sad about right now. It can be something very personal to you, or something going on more widely in the world.

How does Jesus bring hope into the specific situation that you feel sad about?

MONKEY BREAD

Recipe by Laurie Baiz, Pastor of LIFEkids

Monkey Bread

4 cans of biscuit dough

1/2 tsp cinnamon

2/3 c sugar

Glaze

1 1/2 sticks margarine

1 c sugar

1 tsp cinnamon

Cut biscuits into quarters and drop into a plastic bag containing 2/3 cup sugar and 1/2 tsp cinnamon. Shake hard until biscuits are coated with sugar. Place the biscuits in a greased 10-in bundt pan.

Glaze: Boil margarine, sugar and cinnamon 2-3 min. Pour over biscuits. Bake at 350 for 30 min. Cool 10 min. Turn onto rack and serve.



cut & color!





COME, THOU LONG EXPECTED JESUS
BORN TO SET THY PEOPLE FREE;

FROM OUR FEARS AND SINS RELEASE US,
LET US FIND OUR REST IN THEE.

ISRAEL'S STRENGTH AND CONSOLATION,

HOPE OF ALL THE
EARTH THOU ART.

A decorative white flourish consisting of a central oval shape with two symmetrical, swirling lines extending outwards to the left and right, ending in small loops.

DEAR DESIRE OF EVERY NATION,
JOY OF EVERY LONGING HEART.

November 30 | How Long is the Arm of Hope?

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-4

1 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

Devotional

It can be helpful to have long arms. They can help you reach items that are on high shelves. They can help in sports when you want to catch a ball that is over your head. They can even be great for giving hugs or handshakes to people who you want to welcome to your house.

Today we ask the question, How long is the arm of hope? In other words, is the hope that Jesus brought able to reach just a few, or is it able to reach many?

Isaiah 42:1-4 is a prophecy about Jesus that was given about 700 years before he was born. In this prophecy, Jesus is referred to as God’s servant. This goes right along with what Jesus said about himself in Matthew 20:28: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” The prophecy also says that God delights in his servant. This goes right along with the Father’s words at Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:17: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The prophecy then goes on to talk about how Jesus will bring justice, and how he will especially bring gentle help to those who are struggling (the

bruised reed and the smoldering wick in verse 3).

Then the passage ends with a statement about hope. But the statement is strange. It says, “In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” Why the islands? Why not just say instead that everyone will put their hope in him? Well . . . in a way this is exactly what the prophecy says.

Referring to the islands, this is a way of talking about the far-off places that are a great distance from where most people live. When Isaiah wrote this prophecy, people who lived on islands were much harder to reach than they are today. When people spoke about the islands, they were talking about the people very far away and hard to reach.

But there is good news: Hope has a very long arm. And the arm of hope stretches not only to people who live in cities and villages, but even to people who live in far-off islands. This means that no one is too far away for the hope of Jesus to reach them.

So, think of people who are far off. Maybe they're not literally far away. Maybe they are just far from God and totally disinterested in him right now. Remember that no one is so far away that the Christmas gift of hope in Jesus cannot reach them. They only need to choose to receive the gift.

Prayer

Father, thank you that the hope of Jesus has reached me, even though I was once far from you because of my sin. Please strengthen me to shine your light to those who are near and to those who are far off. And may many people, during this Christmas season, find hope in Jesus for the first time. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What are some different reasons why certain people are far away from God?

Think of someone you know who is currently far from Jesus. What do you think God is calling you to do to show them the hope that Jesus brings?

December 1 | Our Hope All Day Long

Written by Summer Brown

Scripture: Psalm 25:4-5

4 Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.

5 Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.

Devotional

Happy first day of December! Here we are with the entire month stretched out in front of us, a month that is sure to be chalked full of performances, parties, shopping and family gatherings. Take a moment to think about this month that lies ahead of you. What is something you are looking forward to? Is there anything that you are worried about getting done? Is there anything you are dreading? What is your plan to be sustained all the way through Christmas?

As you read the verses above, did you notice the verbs that David used in this Psalm? “Show me,” “teach me,” “guide me.” David is seeking to know which way to go and what path to take; he is looking for God to be the one to direct him.

At the end of verse five he states “my hope is in you.” But the verse doesn’t just end there now, does it? No! He states that his hope is in God all day long. This means David was continually looking to God as his source of hope. All. Day. Long.

It is easy to find ourselves getting caught up in the hustle and bustle of doing all the things that we begin to lose sight of what matters. We start to rely on that extra cup of coffee to get us through the day. We begin to cut into our sleep or time with the Lord because we need to squeeze something else in and our schedules are too full. Or we might spend more money than we actually have in attempt to just keep up.

I think there is something we can learn from David in this passage that can be applied in this busy time of year. First, invite the Lord into your plans for the month, ask Him to “show you, teach you, guide you” in this season. Perhaps there is something else that he would have for you other than what you planned. Be open to that. Next, put your hope in the Lord all day long. Be reminded of who sustains you. When you are tempted to take on your day in your own strength, be intentional to turn your eyes and hope back to the One who is our source of strength. Where will you find your hope this Christmas season?

Prayer

Father, may we find hope in you this Christmas season. We want you to show us, teach us, guide us with our plans, time and energy this Christmas. Thank you for being our source of hope. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Questions

Is there something in your schedule of events this Christmas season that the Lord may be asking you to put aside?

What is one way you can be intentional to put your hope in God all day long? (A verse on the fridge, praying as a family in the morning, checking in with a friend or mentor...)

December 2 | Our Hope, Our Anchor

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Hebrews 6:18-20

18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, 20 where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Devotional

As a kid, I loved watching adventure movies. Many of these movies involved pirates or sailors because the high seas provided a great setting for danger, and fighting, and heroic acts. And so as a young boy I learned the absolute importance of an anchor. When a ship is on the sea, vulnerable to being tossed around by the waves and the wind, the anchor weighs it down and keeps it in place.

Sometimes we can feel like we are a ship being battered back and forth by the challenges around us. We have sickness and anxiety and relationship problems and battles with temptations and false teachers. We can go from feeling stable one day to feeling totally out of control the next. You know what we need? We need an anchor.

In Hebrews 6, the author says that our hope in God's promises is like an anchor for our soul. In other words, our hope keeps us stable and secure in a world that frequently feels uncertain and unpredictable. And our hope in God is solid because it is impossible for him to lie. This makes his promises certain, and that makes us secure.

And how did we come to have this hope? The author of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus went "behind the curtain . . . on our behalf." This is an illustration. He is saying that Jesus, through his sacrifice for our sins, made it possible for us to be brought close to God. In Jesus' day, the Jews had a curtain in the temple that kept people from being in the part of the temple

where God's presence was said to dwell most powerfully. Now we, through Jesus, are behind that curtain and we have a full and free relationship with God.

And what kind of hope does this give us? It gives us the hope—the confident expectation—that God is our Father and that he will keep every promise he has made to us. He will forgive every sin. He will work all things together for our good. He will raise up our bodies for eternal life. He will never leave us or forsake us.

When times are tough, those promises stabilize us. They help us to know that we don't have to be afraid. Our hope in God is the anchor for our souls.

At Christmas time we get to remember that the birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of many promises from God. Jesus was the promised Savior of the world. And if God kept that promise, we can trust him to keep every promise he has made.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you kept your promise by sending Jesus to save us. Please help us to find the kind of hope in you that stabilizes us and anchors our souls, even when things seem chaotic around us. And please empower us to trust you for all that you have promised us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What is a promise from God that brings you great comfort and calm?

What kinds of things threaten your experience of stability in God's promises?

December 3 | Hope Is a Choice

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Psalm 43:1-5

1 Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.
Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked.

2 You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

3 Send me your light and your faithful care, let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

4 Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God.

5 Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Devotional

Can you choose hope? We often think of hope as something that just happens to us. When we say that we're hopeless, we don't see that as a choice. We see that as a result of problems in our lives. On the flip side, we often see hope as something that is the result of good things that have happened to us.

But what if hope is a choice?

In Psalm 43 we read about a person who is begging God to help him. He sees himself as the victim of injustice, and he sees God as the only one who can rescue him. But he is frustrated because God doesn't seem to be fixing his problems.

We've all felt this way before. We pray to God, but then it seems like nothing happens. It can be frustrating and confusing. And it can lead to us feeling hopeless.

In verses 3-4, the psalmist goes on to ask God to send his goodness, and he says that, as a result, he will bring praise and worship to God. He envisions a time when God has answered his prayer and things are more joyful.

Then, the psalmist ends in verse 5 by talking to his own soul. He is talking to himself! And he asks himself why he is downcast and disturbed. Then his response is to tell himself what to do. He says, “Put your hope in God.” Instead of seeing himself as a victim to his emotions and circumstances, he tells himself to decide to hope in God.

To decide to put your hope in God is not to pretend that you feel better. And it is not to pretend that you don’t have problems. Hope is about the confident expectation that better days are ahead. So, putting our hope in God means that we are trusting that he will bring about better days because of the promises that he has made to us. It is not a feeling that comes to us, but a choice that we make despite the fact that we sometimes feel deeply discouraged. And when we focus on the Christmas story, we remember that God loves to bring his light into dark places. He is truly a God of hope.

So, think of a problem that you’re facing right now. Maybe this problem is making you feel hopeless. You have an opportunity now to put your hope in God. You can choose to trust that he will keep his promises to work everything together for the good of those who love him. And you can choose to walk with him obediently as you wait patiently for him to bring about those better days.

Prayer

Father, today we choose to put our hope in you. Please keep us from being blinded by our trials and discouragements, and help us instead to remember that you always keep your promises. Bless us with glimpses of the good work that you are doing, even while we sometimes feel discouraged. And lead us to choose confident expectation that you will bring about our best days in the future. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Questions

What kinds of situations make you feel hopeless?

If you choose to put your hope in God, what actions will typically go along with this choice?

REFLECTION

A decorative flourish consisting of a central horizontal scroll with several loops and curls, ending in small circles with dots inside.

How have you found hope in Jesus this week?
Record each family members' response below.

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FAMILY ACTIVITY

Advent daily prayer prompts

What you will need:

Scissors, jar or box

Instructions:

Cut out all the prayer prompts and put them in a jar or box. Each day of Advent pick out a paper and pray through the prompt as a family.





cut along the line

Ask God to help you share the hope of Christ with someone this week.

Thank God for the hope we have in Christ, and pray for those who feel hopeless.

Pray for those who are searching for hope and purpose. Ask that they find it in Jesus.

Pray for peace and love to prevail in your community.

Thank God for the joys and blessings you've experienced this year.

Ask God to help you let go of worries and trust Him more.

Pray for teachers and students as they navigate education in these challenging times.

Pray for missionaries around the world, asking for strength and safety as they share the Gospel.

Ask God to help you become more like Jesus in your thoughts, words, and actions.

Thank God for His promise to be with us always, and ask for a deeper awareness of His presence in your life.

Pray for those who work during the holiday season, like healthcare workers and law enforcement officers.

Pray for a friend or family member who does not know Jesus.

Pray for those who feel alone during this holiday season. Ask for comfort to fill their hearts.	Pray for the homeless and the hungry. Ask for provision and protection over them.
Thank God for the gift of Jesus, and reflect on what His birth means to you.	Ask God to help you forgive someone who has hurt you.
Pray for those who are ill or suffering. Ask for healing and peace to come into their lives.	Pray for the elderly in your community. Ask for joy and comfort to fill their days.
Ask God to help you show kindness to someone in need this week.	Thank God for the gift of life, and pray for those who are grieving the loss of a loved one.
Thank God for your family, and pray for love and unity to strengthen your bonds.	Pray for those struggling with addiction. Ask for healing and freedom to come into their lives.
Pray for the leaders of our world. Ask for wisdom and compassion to guide their decisions.	Ask God to help you be more patient and understanding with others.
Reflect on a personal challenge you're facing. Ask God for guidance and strength.	Pray for the Church worldwide, that it may shine the light of Christ brightly.
Pray for children around the world, especially those who are in vulnerable situations.	Thank God for His daily provision and care.
Thank God for His unconditional love and ask Him to help you extend that love to others.	Pray for peace in areas of the world affected by conflict and war.



PEACE

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, flowing lines that curve upwards and outwards from the base of the word 'PEACE'. In the center of the flourish, there are three small dots arranged horizontally.

December 4 | A Peace of Your Mind

Written by Jeff Taylor

Scripture: Romans 8:5-6

5 Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Devotional

The king announced a contest to see who could paint him a portrait of peace. Many submissions came in, and the king narrowed it down to three.

The first was a beautiful painting of a lake in the middle of a meadow surrounded by trees, a clear blue sky overhead, and snow-capped mountains reflected on the water.

The second was a painting of a family gathered around a thanksgiving table, all with smiles on their faces, obviously enjoying their family tradition together.

The third seemed quite out of place. It was a painting of a waterfall crashing over jagged rocks, with the sky above dark, as lightning flashed across the sky.

Everyone was excited to see which he would choose, and were shocked when he chose the third painting, which seemed to be the very opposite of “peace”. But as the king stood before his people he explained why he chose this painting. He first pointed out a baby bird and its mother in a nest, nestled in the cleft of a rock behind and slightly to the side of the waterfall. With its mother sheltering it beneath her wings, the baby bird sat in complete peace.

Most in attendance hadn’t even noticed this small detail, as they were overwhelmed by the harshness of the rest of the painting, but this is what the king explained: Peace is not the absence of trouble and difficulty, nor is

it the presence of tranquility. Peace comes when the focus of our trust is capable of being our shelter in the storm.

As Paul wrote in Romans 8:5-6, where we set our minds will greatly impact how we experience our storms, and how we experience peace. When we depend on ourselves, or on circumstances to be peaceful, it is likely to be overwhelming, scary, and lead to death. But as we set our minds not on our flesh and what we're experiencing and can make sense of, instead allowing the Holy Spirit to reign over our thoughts, we can experience peace beyond our understanding. This will also be something the world around us will watch and see, and God can use to draw them to Himself.

Prayer

Father, we pray that we will receive your peace. That our minds would not be controlled by the fleshly experiences and encounters of our day-to-day, but we would passionately pursue you, allowing YOU to bring us true peace beyond our understanding of the storms of life. We believe this and ask for this in the almighty name of Jesus, Amen.

Questions

When Paul says that the mind “governed by the flesh is death”, what are some personal examples that you can identify as being true in your own life?

What is a storm in your life that you need to trust God to be (and bring) your peace?

December 5 | Peace to You

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:3

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Devotional

The Apostle Paul wrote 13 of the New Testament letters. And he begins each letter with some version of what he says in 1 Corinthians 1:3. He blesses the churches with “Grace and peace” “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” While there are slight variations in how he uses this blessing in his letters, every time he blesses them with grace and peace.

In short, Paul wants those to whom he’s writing to have grace and peace. And Paul has a clear idea of how his hearers will get grace and peace. It is through God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. God himself is the one we look to for peace.

And this tells us something else that is really important: Not only does Paul want us to have peace, but God wants us to have peace. We know that we want peace. We long for it, and we pray for it, and we try to find ways to get it. But God is not our opponent in our quest for peace. He loves us so much that he wants to give us peace!

Just think for a moment about the fact that God truly wants to give peace to you. This means that his heart toward you is good. And it also means that when we don’t have peace, it isn’t because of any reluctance on God’s part. Our lack of peace is only because of choices that we make to try to find peace outside of God.

Now take a moment to think about what God was willing to do in order to give us access to the peace that he wants us to have. He sent his beloved Son to be born in a lowly manger. That same Son was then insult-

ed, rejected, abandoned, condemned, and crucified. And all of this was because of God's deep desire that, through Jesus' sacrifice for us, we would find true peace.

So, every time we read one of Paul's New Testament letters and we read the words, "Grace and peace to you," we not only get a reminder of God's gift of peace, we also get a reminder of God's heart toward us. He has peace to give, and he is anxious that we receive it.

Prayer

Father, thank you so much for wanting us to have the peace that you offer through Jesus. We confess that we are often our own worst enemy, and that we make choices that rob ourselves of the peace that is available to us. Please lead us to receive the peace that Jesus came to bring, and to live in the rest that is possible through this peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

In what area of your life do you need to receive peace from God?

What are some ways that you are keeping yourself from experiencing the peace that God so badly wants to give you?

December 6 | Reclaiming Peace

Written by Summer Brown

Scripture: Isaiah 9:6-7

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Devotional

Christmas break is coming! Kids and teachers will be out of school, college students return home and, in some careers, there are a few extra days off. However, politics, bad news and natural disasters do not take a Christmas break. With the internet being available in our homes, on our watches and phones and our cars and televisions, we have the latest information and breaking news available to us at all times. Our phones chime to let us know of storms hitting different parts of the country; our watches vibrate to inform us of unrest around the world; and when have you last scrolled through your social media without being barraged by so many political opinions you want to scream?

In that flurry of data, we can get swept up into a panic thinking the world is falling apart around us. We end up becoming a whole lot like Chicken Little yelling "The sky is falling!" To be very honest, that is the

point of this stream of information—to distract, deter and dominate your thought process. It is an anxiety-ridden feeling when it always seems like you are waiting for the other shoe to drop.

But this Christmas you have an opportunity to take back the peace that the world strives to rob from us. The first step is to look at God's word. Look at Isaiah 9:6: Whose shoulders does it say the government will be on? On the shoulders of Jesus! And did you see what Jesus will be called? "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Those are powerful names that absolutely describe Jesus. As you look at Isaiah 9:7, do you notice who is responsible for establishing and upholding his kingdom? Jesus is! When we know who sits on the throne, it is freeing and life-giving. It is something that should bring peace.

The next step in reclaiming that peace is to not allow it to be stolen back. One way to achieve that is to consider what information we allow to influence us. Do you need to check your notifications less? Can you reduce the time you spend on social media? Can you switch your morning news for some time in God's word?

Finally, if you find yourself having a Chicken Little moment, stop and remind yourself of who really sits on the throne and rest in the arms of that Prince of Peace. His birth, death, resurrection, and future rule reclaim peace for all who trust in him!

Prayer

Mighty Father, we thank you for being our Prince of Peace. Would you help us to keep our eyes fixed on you? When we begin to worry, please remind us of your truth. Help us guard our hearts against things that are designed to distract us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What or who are some of the biggest influences in your life?

What is one thing you can do to guard the peace of Christ in your life?

APPLE DUMPLINGS

LBF Mom-to-Mom Recipe

1 large Granny Smith apple
(peeled and cut into 8 wedges)
1 can of crescent dough
1/2 c butter

3/4 c sugar, half brown, half white
1 tsp cinnamon
6 oz Mountain Dew

Preheat oven to 350. Grease an 8x8 dish. Separate dough into triangles, roll apple inside and pinch closed. Place dumplings into dish. Melt the butter in a sauce pan. Stir in the sugar and cinnamon until sugar is melted and blended. Pour mixture over dumplings. Pour Mountain Dew over dumplings. Bake for 30-40 minutes until dumplings are golden and crisp.



cut & color!





HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING
“GLORY TO THE NEW-BORN KING

PEACE ON EARTH

A decorative flourish consisting of a central horizontal line with three small dots above it, flanked by symmetrical, flowing scroll-like curves that end in small loops.

AND MERCY MILD
GOD AND SINNERS RECONCILED”

December 7 | A Peace that Opens Doors

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Romans 5:1-2

1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Devotional

Conflict closes doors. When two people are in a conflict with each other, the door to friendship is closed. The door to partnership is closed. The doors to the two of them sharing in fun activities and conversations and opportunities are all closed. And those doors will remain closed unless the two of them make peace.

If they find peace, all sort of doors will suddenly be open to them.

In Romans 5:1-2, Paul writes about the peace that we can have with God. While we were once enemies because of our sin and rebellion, we can have peace and reconciliation. And how do we go from conflict to peace? Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Of all the different kinds of peace that Jesus has brought us, the greatest is peace with God. Because of Jesus' death for our sins, the conflict between us and God is ended, and we are at peace.

And what does this peace do? It opens doors. We now have access to God. The door is open for us to pray and to be heard. The door is open for us to bring our burdens to God and to have him carry them for us. The door is open for friendship with God as we walk with him daily. And the door is open for hope in God because he has promised us eternal life. The peace of Jesus has opened doors.

And so Paul says that we boast in the glory of God. In other words, we celebrate all that God has done and we gladly give him all the credit for all that he has done for us through Jesus.

When we think of Jesus in that manger on Christmas day, we get to celebrate the one who sacrificed so much to bring us peace with God. And while the cross is Jesus' ultimate sacrifice for us, his humble birth was also a massive sacrifice for us. His discomfort has brought us peace.

With all these doors open, here is the question for us: Are we walking through those open doors? While the doors are open, we can still sadly choose to remain distant from God. Are you enjoying an open-door relationship with God, or are you still living as if the two of you need to stay in separate rooms. This Christmas—and always—let's walk through the doors that peace has opened.

Prayer

Father, thank you for opening the door for us to be your friends. We made ourselves your enemies through our sin, and yet you sent your Son to bring us access to you. Lead us by your Spirit to a deeper, closer, and more peace-filled connection with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What makes you excited about the idea that believers in Jesus have access to God?

What door has peace opened, and yet you are not really enjoying what that open door has to offer you?

December 8 | Peace that Produces Peacemakers

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: James 3:17-18

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Devotional

Imagine that a young girl wants to learn to play the piano. Her parents decide to put her into piano lessons. The girl has a knack for learning and she picks things up quickly. She learns, she diligently practices, and she genuinely enjoys playing the songs her teacher shows her. Then her teacher informs her that she will be expected to participate in a piano recital. The girl is troubled by this. Why should she have to play in front of others? Can't she just continue to enjoy the music on her own? Her parents sit down with her and they say this: "We love that you are enjoying all the great things that your teacher is showing you. But one of the reasons we put you in these lessons was so that others could enjoy hearing you play. You have a gift, and that gift is not meant to be kept to yourself, but to be shared with others."

The Son of God came to this earth to bring us peace. And how wonderful for us to have peace! But how sad if we were satisfied to keep this peace to ourselves instead of sharing it with others.

In James 3:17-18, James is contrasting worldly wisdom (wisdom from below) with God's wisdom (wisdom from heaven). In earlier verses James depicted worldly wisdom as the kind of thinking and behaving that leads to conflicts. But Godly wisdom is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. In other words, if we are listening to God and trusting him, we will live the kinds of lives that will spread peace instead of spreading conflict.

Then James finishes the passage by saying that peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. He relates believers to farmers who are sowing seeds. But instead of sowing seeds of fruits and vegetables, we are sowing the seeds of peace. We are living in a way that will bring peace to others. We are those who received peace from God through Jesus, and now we spread that peace wherever we go.

Those of us who are believers have received an amazing gift. We have peace with God because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. But that peace was not meant to be secret. We are meant to have a recital so that others can share in that peace. And we do this through treating others in a way that invited them into peaceful relationships.

So, where can you spread peace? In your family? With your siblings? At school? At work? In the neighborhood? How can the peace you've received inspire you to be a peacemaker?

Prayer

Father, we want to be peacemakers. Please open our eyes to the ways that we can show others the peace that you've given us, so that they can receive the benefit of harmony, and then, ultimately, they can receive the benefit of peace with you through Jesus. Empower us to respond to your peace by becoming peacemakers. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

In what kinds of situations do you find yourself having conflicts with others?

When you see conflict around you, how can you help to bring peace?

December 9 | Peace Will Come!

Written by Phil Shahbaz

Scripture: Psalm 37:10-11

10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.

11 But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.

Devotional

Have you ever had a day when it feels like the entire world is against you? The kind of day that started by spilling your morning coffee on your clothes. You got the kids ready as fast as possible, but they're still a mess. They have to eat in the car while you rush them to school. You take a turn too sharply and one of the kids spills cereal all over themselves. You drop the kids off (5 minutes late and covered in milk).

You arrive late to work; it's chaos from the start. Phones, meetings, emails! You forgot your lunch and so you're eating trail-mix and a stale bag of chips from the office snack counter. A coworker passes by and asks if you can cover a meeting for them just as your boss sees you and gives you a new assignment that's due by the end of the day.

You power-walk to the bathroom and straight to the furthest stall. You slam the door, lock it, and take a seat just so you can hide from the madness of life. These moments are your first quiet moments of the day.

You say one small prayer: "Lord, I just want peace."

For some of us, these kinds of days happen from time to time. The trap-pings of daily life can feel so intense that the idea of peace seems impossible. We want peace in our lives but we see no way out of the endless responsibilities that seem to create perpetual chaos. And now Christmas is around the corner! We add in the stress of decorating,

presents, big meals, and family from out of town.

Psalm 37:10-11 gives us a few things to remember as we begin the Advent season. Verse 10 reminds us that our enemies (whether that's people, our schedule, or the madness of life) are in the hands of our heavenly Father. He will be victorious and there will come a time when the chaos, pain, or worry will disappear. Verse 11 reminds us that He is the author of peace, and our access to that peace is a humble heart before the him. Meekness is an act of submission and reliance before the Lord. It's an attitude that lays out our lives before Him, knowing that apart from Him, we cannot make it through the day. The result of this attitude is both peace and prosperity. That's a promise from scripture.

This Advent season, let your reliance on Jesus grow. You still might spill your coffee and be late getting the kids to school, but you may find the stress or panic is harder to find.

Prayer

Dear Father, we lay our worries, concerns, and responsibilities before you. We know that we can't do it on our own. Help our hearts to be humble. Help us remember that you are in control at every turn of our lives. Let your peace wash over us. Father, help us feel the peace that only you can bring through your Son Jesus. In his name, Amen.

Questions

In what areas of your life do you feel most out of control?

In what ways can you grow in your dependence and reliance on Jesus this Advent season?

December 10 | Peace as a Bodyguard

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Philippians 4:6-7

6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Devotional

If you visit Buckingham Palace in England, you will see the King's Guard. The King's Guard is made up of soldiers who stand guard around the king's residence. They wear red shirts and tall black hats. They are famous for their focus. In fact, there are frequently videos of people trying to distract them or get their attention, but nothing distracts a member of the King's Guard. They take their job of protecting the king so seriously that they never waver from their focus of protection.

Wouldn't you love to have a guard that devoted to you? If you had a bodyguard like that, you wouldn't be worried at all whether you were at home or on the move. You would have peace, knowing that you were protected at all times.

Now imagine that your bodyguard is not simply protecting you from physical dangers, but from invisible dangers. That would bring a whole different level of peace.

In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells believers not to be anxious (worried) about anything. He invites us instead to bring our prayers to God. He says that when we feel like we should worry about our health, about our family, about our future, or about our country, we can instead pray to the one who has all power and majesty.

Then, in Philippians 4:7, Paul tells what will happen if we choose prayer over worry. He says that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. God's peace will stand guard to protect our hearts and minds from all the worries and burdens that so often steal our peace and joy.

What an amazing gift! Imagine that outside your house stands a team of guards in red shirts and tall black hats. They are immovable and they will not allow any threat in. And now imagine that they are not outside of your house, but outside of your heart and your mind. And they will not allow any threat to get through to you. They are the peace of God, protecting you. And you get them as soon as you choose to pray instead of choosing to worry.

And don't miss that Paul says that this peace will guard us in Christ Jesus. It is only because of our connection with Jesus that we can access to this peace that guards us. No wonder the angel announced at Jesus' birth that he would bring "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14). At Christmas we get to celebrate that Jesus came to bring us a peace with God that will protect us from every threat that endangers our hearts and our minds.

Prayer

Father, we confess that we too often turn to worry instead of turning to you in prayer. We come to you now with our fears, our worries, our burdens, and our struggles. We bring them to you, and we ask that you bring your peace to guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What is a worry that you find yourself consistently dealing with?

If God was going to give you a specific message about how he wanted you to think about your biggest area of worry, what do you think he would say?

REFLECTION

A decorative flourish consisting of a central horizontal scroll with symmetrical, swirling lines extending outwards, ending in small circular motifs.

How have you found peace in Jesus this week?
Record each family members' response below.

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FAMILY ACTIVITY



Cards for Outreach Partners

Instructions:

Make a Christmas card for one of our LBF local and global outreach partners. Bring the finished cards to the LBF office, or drop them off on a Sunday at Guest Services. Please leave cards unsealed and unaddressed.

The outreach ministry will send the card where it is most needed.

Examples of things to write in the card:

Encouragement that they have a blessed Christmas this year.

A Bible verse or word of encouragement from the Bible.

A prayer for them and their loved ones.





JOY
∞

December 11 | Joy in God's Promised Future

Written by Troy Spilman

Scripture: Ezra 3:12-13

“But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.”

Devotional:

This passage drops us into the historical account of the children of Israel (about 500 years before Jesus was born) returning to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. The region of Judah was mostly deserted for seventy years before the direction was given to allow the people to return to their homeland. The Israelite leader Zerubbabel led over 50,000 people to begin the reconstruction of the temple.

A flood of emotions came upon the older men who knew that this newer temple could never really live up to the glory of the first one. At the same time, they had memories of the terrible demise of the first temple and rejoiced in the beginning signs of its restoration.

This all created mixed emotions among the older generation. However, the younger people felt pure joy in seeing this vital step in the replacement of the temple and its worship services that would eventually follow. This was about a lot more than just a building project – the start of construction gave birth to a renewed hope of once again being a free people.

Just as the children of Israel had joy in the renewed hope of a fresh start, we as followers of Jesus can have genuine joy in the promises and hope that we have in Jesus. It is easy for challenging circumstances to

dim our view of the joy we have in being called His children. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Circumstances that this world throws at us are temporary, but our hope in Him is for now and for all eternity. Take a moment to meditate upon this list of what the Bible says about our identity as His followers:

We have been adopted as God's children – Ephesians 1:5

We are complete in Christ – Colossians 2:10

We are God's workmanship – Ephesians 2:10

We are free from condemnation – Romans 8:1,2

We cannot be separated from the love of God – Romans 8:35-39

We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us – Ephesians 4:13

The children of Israel had great joy when they saw the foundations of the temple being built. The difficulties of their past and present circumstances diminished as they took in the great promises of the future that the Lord had for them. May the joy of the Lord also be our strength as we cling to our identity in Christ and as we look ahead to the promises yet to be fulfilled.

Prayer:

Father, help us to hold onto the joy of our salvation and to not be blinded by present circumstances that come our way. May we be aware of your guiding and loving presence, even as we venture into unknown seasons. We do not know what tomorrow holds, but we are assured that you hold tomorrow and will sustain us through whatever lies ahead. Continue to refresh us with your joy as we walk with you today and in the days to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions:

Is there something that might be hampering your joy today that you need to commit to the Lord?

Which one of the above "Identities in Christ" particularly speak to you today?

December 12 | When We Lose Joy

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Job 20:4-5

4 “Surely you know how it has been from of old,
ever since mankind was placed on the earth,
5 that the mirth of the wicked is brief,
the joy of the godless lasts but a moment.

Devotional

In a 2002 football game, the LSU Tigers were playing the Kentucky Wildcats. Despite the fact that Kentucky was a massive underdog in the game, they were on the verge of winning. They were up 30-27 with only 2 seconds left, and LSU was on their own 26-yard line. That meant that LSU needed to score a touchdown from 74 yards away or they would lose the game. So, on the final play, the LSU quarterback threw the ball as far as he could. The ball came down at around the 25-yard line of Kentucky—well short of the endzone. When Kentucky fans saw this, they joyfully stormed the field to celebrate. But their celebration was cut short.

The ball came down near the 25-yard line. It was tipped up in the air and caught by an LSU player at the 15-yard line. He then broke a tackle and ran the ball into the endzone, winning the game for LSU.

The Kentucky fans had a moment of deep and pure joy. But that joy was only for a moment. When they realized that they had lost the game, their joy was turned to grief.

Sometimes this can happen outside the football field. Someone can have great and genuine joy, but then have the joy quickly taken away.

In Job 20:4-5, Job’s friend Zophar says something about the job of wicked people. He says that their “mirth is brief” and their joy “lasts but a

moment.” Now, Zophar is misdirected because he is trying to convince Job that he must have sinned in order to bring on his misery. But his overall point is true. In fact, the same point is made by Asaph in Psalm 73:19 when he speaks of rich wicked people by saying, “How suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.” People who are living godless lives may have moments of genuine joy, but their joy will be short-lived because God will bring ultimate judgment to all.

But let’s be honest: Many of us are tempted to believe that we can find true and lasting joy through ignoring God and by doing what feels good in the moment. Sin offers us joy, and we are tempted to accept the offer. But that joy that sin offers lasts only a moment.

Jesus, on the other hand, offers us eternal joy. And his appearance on Christmas brings us all the possibility of true and lasting joy.

The world can only offer us short-term joy. If we want joy that lasts, we turn our hearts to Jesus.

Prayer

Father, keep us from the lie that we can get joy by disobeying you and by fulfilling our own short-term desires. Help us to be wise enough to pursue the lasting joy that you offer instead of the temporary joy that sin offers. Please satisfy us with your joy so that we keep coming back for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Questions

Share an example of something that you thought would bring you lasting joy, and yet the joy ended up being very short-lived.

What would help you more consistently choose obedience to Jesus over giving in to sinful temptations?

December 13 | From Tears to Joy

Written by Phil Shahbaz

Scripture: Psalm 126:5-6

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
6 Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

Devotional

There are times in our lives when the idea celebrating Christmas feels out of reach. Often times, it's because our lives prior to the Christmas season has simply been too difficult. There are times in our lives when our suffering, our hurt, or our pain feels like it will have no end. It's in these times that we often feel most distant from God. As a result, the joy, comfort, and peace that Jesus brings seems like it's not truly an option for us.

Life brings with it different seasons. Sometimes, those seasons grind us down, and test us in ways that make us feel like we are drowning. The loss of a loved one, illness or injury, broken relationships, financial difficulties—these are examples of the kind of suffering that takes over our lives. As believers in Jesus we are not promised easy lives. Scripture reminds us repeatedly that because of our faith in Jesus, suffering will be part of lives. But as people who put our faith in Jesus, it's natural to hope that he will protect us and keep us safe. And yet, he feels absent and replaced by the pain or hurt that life has brought to us.

For some of us, it's hard to remember a time in our lives that we weren't suffering. For you, hurt and pain may be a daily part of life because of the choices other people have made, or maybe a choice you made early

in your life. As a result, you are numb to God's goodness because the suffering is too severe to feel any happiness, much less the joy he can bring.

If you are in a moment of suffering, or possibly a decade-long season of suffering, God sees you. In fact, through your vulnerability and frailty, he not only sees you, he also walks with you. And by your side, he carries a promise that the end result of your suffering is joy.

Psalms 126 is a song of deliverance. It looks back to when the captives returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. They had suffered so much and for so long, yet God had not forsaken them. He delivered them back to their homeland. In verses 5 and 6, God's promise of deliverance to both you and me soars! He promises that a life of tears and tragedy leads only to his joy. He promises that a life of suffering and hardship leads only to his joy. If you are hurting or in pain right now, remember that God sees you and is near to you. He will deliver you from your hardship, and it will be replaced with joy.

Prayer

Father, help us feel your presence. Help us feel the joy that only comes from you. Father, we give you our pain, our worries, and our fears. We know that without you we cannot continue on our own. But our faithfulness and trust are in you. We know that you will deliver us. And that through your Son Jesus, we will feel joy that can only come from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

Share a way that you are praying for your tears to be turned into joy.

During this Christmas season, can you think of a way you can serve or comfort someone, that they may feel God's joy through you?

ZUPPA TOSCANA

LBF Mom-to-Mom Recipe

4 Strips of chopped bacon
1 lb Italian sausage, casing removed
2-2 1/2 lb chopped potatoes
3 cloves minced garlic
1 large chopped onion
Italian seasoning, to taste
6 c chicken broth
6 c chopped, steamed kale

3/4 c heavy cream
3 tbsp pesto
ground nutmeg, to taste
1 tsp balsamic vinegar
3-4 handfuls parmesan cheese
Salt/pepper, to taste
optional: red pepper flakes

Cook bacon and sausage. Add potatoes, garlic, onion, and Italian seasoning to slow cooker, stir. Add chicken broth, cook on high for 3-4 hours or on low for 7-8 hours till the potatoes are tender.

Add kale, heavy cream, pesto, nutmeg. Cover and cook 5 more minutes. Add balsamic vinegar and grated parmesan cheese.



cut & color!





JOY TO THE WORLD!

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, flowing scrollwork and loops, centered below the title.

THE SAVIOUR REIGNS;
LET MEN THEIR SONGS EMPLOY;

WHILE FIELDS AND FLOODS, ROCKS,
HILLS, AND PLAINS

REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY,
REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY,
REPEAT, REPEAT THE SOUNDING JOY.

December 14 | Joy in What Our Trials Produced

Written by Laurie Baiz

Scripture: James 1:2-4

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Devotional

Have you ever started a new workout routine after a season of taking a break? It usually feels very hard. You hurt, your lungs feel like they are burning, and you can't believe how quickly you are out of breath. After the work is done, though, you have a sense of accomplishment and are glad that you are putting in the work. With each additional workout that is completed, you can see that it gets a little easier. You are not winded quite as fast as before, and you can do a little bit more than when you started. The repeated short-term struggles build our stamina and over time our perseverance pays off with a strong, healthier body.

In the same way, in James's letter, he is talking about our trials and hardships. These can be small trials or large ones, since he simply calls them "trials of many kinds." Throughout life we all face hardships of all sizes. When those hardships arise James reminds us that with the help, strength and guidance of our Lord and Savior we can find pure joy in Him.

It seems like a stretch to think about having joy while we are facing trials. But this joy is not a denial of reality. It is based on our conviction that there is more going on beneath the surface. While the workout is painful, we know that we are being refined into who God is calling us to be. We can acknowledge the real pain and loss, and yet still have joy in the good that God is producing.

As we abide in the Lord our faith grows and builds a perseverance that will endure through to the end of the hardship. Closing these verses James reassures us that this perseverance will mature our faith and we will not lack in anything because we are being filled with all that we need from God.

Even though Christmas is meant to be a joyful season, some of us are experiencing hardship right now. It can feel doubly painful because we really want to be happy during this season, but we are burdened with our trials. But we can trust that the one who has given us these trials is the same one who sent his beloved Son to become a human being in order to save us from our sins.

If you are in a season of hardship, take a moment and ask God to fill you with his love and joy so that you can find the strength to continue to persevere with His strength.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love, your strength, and your wisdom. We ask for your help to see you during our trials and allow us to be filled with joy for the work and care that you do in our lives. Please continue to guide us, love us, and grow us so that our faith can be built on your strength. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What trials are in your life right now?

Reflect on a trial in the past. Now that it is over, what good things did you see God do through this trial?

December 15 | News that Brings Joy

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Luke 2:8-12

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Devotional

Think for a moment about how many times a person’s joy is a response to news. News that they are going to be having a baby. News that they’ve been accepted into college. News that their preferred political candidate (or favorite sports team) won. News that they’ve just received a promotion at work. News like this brings about joy. In fact, a huge amount of the joy we experience in life is in response to news.

In the Christmas story, we see a strong connection between joy and news. An angel announces the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds. In his speech he talks about joy. Specifically, he says that he is bringing good news that will cause great joy. And inner response—joy—will come as the result of an outside event—the good news about the arrival of the Son of God as a human being. The joy in Christmas comes from the news that we receive at Christmas.

And this is not just one instance of good news. This is news that puts all other news in a different light. Those of us who put our faith in Jesus now live in a world where our sins are forgiven and where God is working all things together for our good.

We're not in control of what kind of news we will get. Sometimes we get bad news about a disease or a lost job or a bad grade on the test? This news doesn't bring joy. But even when we are experiencing heartbreaking news, we still have the steady joy of knowing that nothing can separate us from God's love. No matter what news we receive, we still have Jesus as a Savior, we still have heaven as our final home, and we still have God as a good Father working all things together for our good.

Think for a moment about how much time you spend chasing joy. We don't have to do that anymore. We don't have to exhaust ourselves looking for joy in things that let us down. Instead, we can keep at the forefront of our hearts the reality that we are loved by a God who would rather send his Son to be sacrificed for us than to leave us out of his family.

Joy is right there for us. We've received the news. Now let's live each day in the joy that this news brings.

Prayer

Father, we confess that we often try to make ourselves find joy apart from you. This is empty, and we are sorry. Help us to keep our eyes fixed on the good news of Jesus' arrival for us and his death in our place. Help us to respond to this good news with joy that will honor you and will enliven us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What part of the good news we receive in the Christmas story especially brings joy to your heart?

How does the good news about Jesus help you think differently about some bad news you've experienced lately?

December 16 | Temporary Pain

Written by Summer Brown

Scripture: 1 Peter 1:6-9

6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Devotional

Christmas is typically associated with great joy! We see kiddos of all ages bouncing with excitement in the anticipation of this wonderful season's celebration. There are gatherings of friends and loved ones where we laugh, sing and eat delicious treats. We hold traditions like sipping on peppermint cocoa while walking the Thoroughbred lights, decorating while wearing funny pajamas, or hosting a ridiculous gift exchange.

Stop and think about some of your favorite and most anticipated traditions. What ones bring an immediate smile to your face? What makes it so special?

Even when we are doing fun and special activities, there are times we are reminded of something that makes us sad. Maybe a dear friend moved away and you find yourself missing them this year. Perhaps you are in a new season of life that has brought changes that seem to steal our joy. Whatever it might be, what do we do when in the midst of these celebrations we feel overwhelmed by the grief of our circumstances, hardships and losses? And how is it that we can feel so heavy during a

time that celebrates our Savior's birth?

When sin entered the world so too did the pain and hurt that accompanies sin and death. But there is good news! Take a look at 1 Peter 1:6: Do you see where Peter tells us in this scripture that the circumstances we are suffering are for a little while. Our hurts, while painful, are temporary! We have the opportunity to see how good God has been to us even through the hurt.

If you are having a hard time seeing where God is at work now, look back! That's right, look at some of the big events that have taken place in your life and see all the moments that God has shown up for you. Then praise him for what he's done! And then slowly begin to look around you at your current situation, start to list out loud reasons for which you are grateful.

As we look at circumstances knowing that they are temporary and shift our hearts towards gratitude for the promise of forever with Jesus, watch the joy begin to bubble up in your soul.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that this hurt—these hardships and this grief we feel—is temporary. Would you please help us to see how you are at work in our lives, and to see the many ways that you have shown up for us? Help us to see you as the Joy of our salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What is something that is causing you sadness or grief today? Be intentional to surrender that to the Lord throughout your day and every time you find your mind coming back to it.

What are three things that you can praise God for today?

December 17 | Joy that Is Unsteal-able

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: John 16:16-22

16 Jesus went on to say, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”

17 At this, some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,’ and ‘Because I am going to the Father’?” 18 They kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.”

19 Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, “Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’?”

20 Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. 21 A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. 22 So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

Devotional

Some of the most popular and celebrated movies are heist movies. These are movies about a team of criminals who work together to steal something. Typically they are working against an incredibly difficult security system in order to pull off the heist. They have to defy incredible odds and flawlessly execute their role on the team. And, in the end, heist movies convince us that no security system—no matter how sophisticated—is steal-proof. At the end of the day anything can be stolen.

What about joy? Can joy be stolen? It certainly can! The joy of a good test score can be stolen if the next test doesn’t go so well. The joy of a vacation can be stolen by a canceled flight. The joy of relationship can be stolen by a break-up. The joy of health can be stolen by a cancer diagnosis. We have all kinds of opportunities for joy in life, but they are always vulnerable to being stolen from us.

This is why it is so amazing that Jesus says in John 16:22, “No one will take away your joy.” What a statement! Joy that no one can steal! So, what is this joy that Jesus is talking about?

Jesus has just been giving some hard news to his disciples. He has told them that pretty soon he will be going away. He is a bit cryptic and his disciples don’t understand that he is talking about his upcoming death. Finally, he becomes a bit more straightforward and he tells them that they will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. Great sadness and grief is coming for them. But their grief will turn to joy, just like a woman in labor goes from the pain of childbirth to the joy of motherhood. And Jesus tells them that when they are done with grief and back to joy, that no one will take away their joy.

Does this mean that they will never be sad again? Certainly not. There will still be difficulties in life. But all of their difficulties will be under the banner of joy that cannot be stolen. The resurrection of Jesus means that death has been conquered, and so even death cannot steal our joy. Nor can disease or divorce or war or failure or mistreatment. Because Jesus came (Christmas), and because he died (Good Friday), and because he was raised (Easter), no one can steal the joy of his victory and of our eternal life.

The devil wants to lead a heist to steal your joy. And you’ll be tempted to believe that this is possible. But the victory of Jesus seals our joy forever. It is unstealable. And this allows us great peace and rest and we walk in faith.

Prayer

Father, thank you that, through Jesus, you have given us a joy that no one can take away from us. Help us to believe this, especially when times are tough. Open our eyes to the joy that we can have in all that you have given us in your Son. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Questions

What are some things that typically steal your joy?

Share one way that you can find joy in Jesus even while you’re dealing with trials and difficulties.

REFLECTION

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with several loops and swirls, ending in small circles.

How have you found joy in Jesus this week?
Record each family members' response below.

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FAMILY ACTIVITY



Giant Snowflakes Craft

What you will need:

6 Square sheets of paper, scissors, glue

Instructions:

Fold one square diagonally in half to make a triangle, fold diagonally again.

Cut 3 vertical slits on one short side, stop before reaching the opposite side. Unfold the paper.

Glue the innermost pair of flaps together by the tips. Flip the square over. Glue the second pair of flaps together by the tips. Turn the paper over again. Glue the third pair of flaps by the tips. Turn the paper over for the last time. Glue the outermost pair of flaps by the tips.

Repeat this process with the remaining 5 sheets of paper. Start assembling the snowflake by gluing two snowflake arms together. Glue them at the bottom and at the middle where the two arms touch. Punch a hole through the tip and tie a string on it to hang.



LOVE

A decorative flourish consisting of symmetrical, swirling lines that curve upwards and outwards from the base of the word 'LOVE', ending in small circular motifs.

December 18 | Resting in God's Love

Written by Troy Spilman

Scripture: Romans 8:38-39

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Devotional

There were times when my kids were really young that they thought that I had abandoned them. I remember this happening at a park when I went to my car that was nearby to retrieve the ice chest. A few moments later a sense of panic suddenly washed over them. They were under the impression that they had been abandoned. I had full visual of them the entire time, yet due to some obstruction or maybe by them just looking in the wrong place, they could not easily see me. Nothing had really changed. I was still within view and closely present, but their perspective had shifted.

Sometimes we might be tempted to fear that God could abandon us. But Romans 8:38-39 tells us differently.

It's possible to be separated from our money, our possessions, our job, our home, our friends, and even family members – however, nothing separates us from God's never-failing love. Yes, we live in a fallen world that comes with its share of hardships. Yet, this does not thwart us from having full access to his love. As children of God, it's a promise that we can bank on!

Satan would like to use shame and guilt as a way to keep us from experiencing the love of God in our daily lives. Yes, it's true that we do not deserve his love, but that's the whole point of the cross – it's a gift that we are to receive. It is not a reward that we earn through our best ef-

forts and good works. It is insulting to try to offer to pay someone for a gift that you receive on your birthday, anniversary, or even Christmas. It was given because of their relationship with you and due to the appreciation and love they have for you. The love we have in Jesus is a gift that we simply must receive wholeheartedly.

For us as followers of Jesus, we can lose perspective due to some sort of circumstance, trial, or hardship that had clouded over our view of God. In reality, the Lord had not changed at all and had not left us in the slightest. As an act of faith in the midst of these moments, we need to hold tightly to promises like this one – that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of Christ. Brothers and sisters, hold firmly onto this truth even if, especially if, your view has grown dim. I encourage you to reread the above passage and make it your prayer.

Prayer

Father, thank you for the promise that you will never leave us nor forsake us. Help us to take this guarantee that nothing – absolutely nothing – can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ. Please remind us of Your abiding love and may we go about our day with the full assurance of your presence. We choose to walk in your love today and to be ready to share this love with those that You place in our path. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

How does it make you feel that nothing can separate you from the love that is found in Jesus?

What is a tangible way that you could remind yourself of this truth as you go about your day, week, month? (i.e., write this passage on your mirror with a dry erase marker, put a reminder on your phone, write it on a post-it note for your car, etc.)

December 19 | Keep Yourself in God's Love

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Jude 20-21

20 But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

Devotional

People often talk about falling in love and falling out of love. We use those phrases to describe what it feels like when our emotions get attached to a certain person, or to describe what it feels like to stop having those emotions toward someone. But these phrases also leave us with the idea that love is fickle. One day someone might love us, but then the next they might stop. It makes love seem very uncertain.

In the small New Testament book of Jude, we get a surprising command about love. Jude tells us to “keep yourselves in God's love.” The idea is not that we need to behave really well so that God will keep loving us. His love is constant. The idea is that it is up to us how much we experience the love that God has given us. His love is there; will we keep ourselves in his love?

But what does this mean? How would we keep ourselves in God's love? Jude says that we do this by building ourselves up in our most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit. In other words, as we spend time in prayer, and as we strengthen our faith in God's person and his promises, we keep ourselves in God's love. The more time that we spend learning and trusting God's Word, and the more time we spend in joyful Spirit-led prayer, the more we will experience the reality of God's love.

Jude also says that we do this as we wait for the mercy of Jesus to bring

us to eternal life. We live in the anticipation of Jesus coming again to bring about our final reward. And this reminds us that Jesus is coming a second time because he already came a first time. That is what we celebrate at Christmas. We celebrate that Jesus showed up to save us and to promise eternal life to everyone who puts their faith in him.

God's love is real. And his love never changes. And we've received that love through Jesus. God will not remove his love for us. The only question is whether we will keep ourselves in a place where we are experiencing God's great love for us.

Prayer

Father, thank you that you never take your love away from us. Please help us to keep ourselves in your life by trusting you and by leaning on your promises. And thank you that you have proven your love by sending Jesus for us. Lead us to grow in faith and in peace as we lean on your great love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What might make you doubt God's love for you?

Share about a specific way that the Christmas story helps you feel more secure in God's love.

December 20 | Love that Empowers Love

Written by Andy Watson

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-10

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Devotional

When are the times that you feel most loved? Is it when someone has forgiven you when you have messed up? Is it when someone gives you an amazing gift that you weren't expecting? Is it when someone lists off all of the things that they appreciate about you? Or maybe it is when someone you care about spends some quality time doing something you love? Each of us comes alive when we are sacrificially loved—God made us this way!

There have been many people in my life that have loved sacrificially, but one of the people that stands out is Lewie Clark. Lewie is a spiritual father to me. He has modeled supernatural and sacrificial love that this passage speaks to throughout my life. I first met Lewie when I was 17 and he and my Dad became friends. Lewie has been someone over the years that I have looked up to because of the way that he has loved me and loved other people. He has spent his whole ministry life trying to live out the verses in 1 John 4:7-10. One of the main ways that Lewie has shown love to me is by asking questions and taking a real interest in my life.

I love that in 1 John 4:7 John shows us how we can love each other with a supernatural love that comes from God. This passage sums up the

whole Christian life. Step 1: God loves us. Step 2: We love God and are transformed by his love. Step 3: God's love empowers us to love other people in the way that he has called us to.

Love is not always flowers and chocolates. Our world tries to paint a picture of what love is that is counter to the gospel. Much of the world's version of love is ultimately selfish. True love requires sacrifice just like our Savior showed us. He humbled himself by being born as a baby in the most humble conditions. Then he lived a perfect life and laid down his life as a sacrifice so that we could be born again into the family of God. We then experience this life-changing love that God has gifted to us. Hallelujah! Thank you, Jesus. Oh what a Savior and friend we have in Jesus!

Prayer

Father, help us to experience your love today. Thank you for humbly coming to this earth and dying a brutal death so that we can experience new life. Thank you for welcoming us into your family, knowing that we can never be alone because, Father God, you're always there beside us. Help us to love those around us in a sacrificial way that you are leading us to. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

When is a time in your life that you have felt sacrificially loved?

Where is God leading you to die to yourself and sacrificially love someone during this season?

PUMPKIN CHIFFON PIE

LBF Mom-to-Mom Recipe

graham cracker crust
1 envelope gelatin
1/4 c packed brown
sugar
1/2 tsp salt

1/4 tsp nutmeg
1/4 tsp ginger
1/2 tsp cinnamon
1 1/4 c evaporated milk
2 eggs, split yolk/whites

1 1/2 c pumpkin puree
1/4 tsp cream of tartar
1/4 c sugar
8 oz tub Cool Whip

Mix gelatin, brown sugar, salt, nutmeg, ginger and cinnamon in a sauce pan. Stir in evaporated milk and egg yolks. Cook on med-low heat, stirring occasionally until gelatin dissolves and mixture thickens. Remove from heat. Stir in pumpkin and chill. Stir occasionally until it mounds when dropped from a spoon. In a bowl, beat egg whites until foamy. Add cream of tartar and beat until stiff, but not dry. Add sugar and beat until very stiff. Fold in pumpkin mixture. Pour into pie shell and chill until firm. Garnish with cool whip and nutmeg.



cut & color!





DOWN IN A LOWLY MANGER
THE HUMBLE CHRIST WAS BORN,
AND GOD SENT US SALVATION
THAT BLESSED CHRISTMAS MORN.

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN,
OVER THE HILLS, AND EV'RYWHERE;
GO, TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN THAT

JESUS CHRIST IS BORN!



December 21 | Love: The Greatest Command

Written by Laurie Baiz

Scripture: John 13:34-35

34 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Devotional

Love has many different aspects to it. The dictionary defines love as: “feel deep affection for or to enjoy very much.” This definition really falls short when comparing that to the love that is talked about in John 13:34-35. In this passage Jesus gives a new command to the disciples before he sacrifices his life by dying on the cross for them and for us. And this new command is to love one another.

These 3 simple words “Love one another” are difficult to live out. To love others is to put their needs before our own. To love others is to consider their feelings, their preferences, and their desires, when most of us are used to prioritizing ourselves. It is no wonder that Jesus focuses on this command. It is an incredibly high calling. It is the most difficult command to follow, and it is the command that has the greatest impact if we follow it.

After giving the command to love one another, Jesus says the next five words: “as I have loved you.” The type of love that Jesus is talking about is so deep and so sacrificial that our earthly flesh and minds struggle to truly understand the depth of what He is asking of us. Jesus demonstrated his love by taking on human flesh, by living a life marked by love and holiness, by sacrificing his life on the cross for our sins, and by inviting us to share in the triumph of his resurrection. Jesus loved us in a way that is ultimately self-giving and self-sacrificial.

And it is with that kind of love that he calls us to love one another.

And then Jesus lets us in on an important reason to love one another. He says that the way people will know that we are Jesus' disciples is through our love for one another. We are not identified primarily through church attendance, through the clothing we wear, or even through miraculous works. We are identified because the love that Jesus gave to us has empowered us to love others freely.

Through this Christmas season take a moment to first reflect on how much God loves you. Let the weight of his goodness and sacrificial love settle on you and thank him for that. Then, reflect on the people in your life that need to receive this kind of sacrificial love from you. Through these actions the world will be able to see the light of Jesus shine bright just as it says at the end of this verse, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Prayer

Father, thank you for your personal, deep sacrificial love that you give us each and every day. Please fill us with this kind of love, that we may go out and love others in the same way. Please place on our hearts the people that are hurting and truly need us to shine your light on them through our love for them. May your will be done through us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

Who do you find difficult to love, and why?

How does Jesus' great love for you impact the way that you think about people who are difficult to love?

December 22 | Love that Wakes the Dead

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-5

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Devotional

In the Disney film *Sleeping Beauty*, Princess Aurora pricks her finger and falls into a deep sleep (hence the title “sleeping beauty”). And, because of a curse, she will stay in this slumber until she is reached by “true love’s kiss.” And she is awakened in the end when Prince Philip is able to come and give her true love’s kiss. True love brings her out of her death-like slumber and restores life.

Now, we all believe that love is powerful. But can love really go as far as that? Can love really bring a dead person back to life? According to Ephesians 2:4-5, it can.

In Ephesians 2:4-5, Paul says that we were dead in our transgressions. This means that we were spiritually dead. We had no life and no hope and we all awaited eternal destruction instead of eternal life. And no one could do anything to wake us up from this spiritual deadness.

But Paul tells us that God did something to wake us up. God “made us alive with Christ.” And how did this happen? It happened “because of his great love for us.” The literal Greek would say something more like this: “Because of the great love with which he loved us.” It is not just that God had love for us; it is that God loved us. And this love brought us from death to life.

It is pretty humbling to think about ourselves as being spiritually dead apart from what God has done for us. We would rather think of our-

selves as flawed or as victims. This is not how we are portrayed in the Bible. And while it might be humbling to accept that we were spiritually dead, it doesn't do us much good to resist this truth. It wouldn't do Sleeping Beauty much good if she tried to claim that she was fine when she was in a death-like sleep. And when we pretend that we are okay without God, we miss out on realizing that he loved us when he saw us at our worst.

And how did God show his love for us? John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. This sending of his Son is what we celebrate at Christmas. God did not send his Son simply to show us a good way to live. He sent his Son in order to bring us from death to life through his love. And every time we think about the baby in the manger, we get to remember that he is God's love gift to us, sent to bring us from death to life.

Prayer

Father, thank you for loving us when we were so unworthy. And thank you that your love is powerful enough to bring us from death to life. Lead us to receive your love with humble joy, and to celebrate your love gift of Jesus during this Christmas season. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

When do you find it hard to believe that God loves you?

In what ways has God's love brought new life and joy into your life?

December 23 | Love that Keeps on Coming

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Lamentations 3:22-24

22 Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.

23 They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

24 I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."

Devotional

In my family, we all love croissants. We don't get them from the grocery store all the time, but when we do, we have a process for how we handle their presence in our home. We count the number of croissants in the package, and we divide them evenly between the members of the family because none of us want to miss out on our fair share. But the reason we have to do this is because we all know that there is a morning coming (soon!) when there will be no more croissants in the house. They will have run out.

But how wonderful would it be if we weren't worried about this. How glorious would it be if every morning we looked to find a fresh new set of croissants! How much joy would we have if we could count on the idea that the croissants would always keep coming.

The book of Lamentations is filled with tears and sadness because it tells the story of Israel being taken out of their land and driven into exile by a foreign nation. But in the middle of this grief, Jeremiah writes a beautiful statement in Lamentations 3:22-24. First, he reminds Israel that they are not totally consumed (destroyed) because of God's great love for them. And despite their painful situation, God's compassions will not fail them.

Jeremiah then says that God's love and his compassions are "new every morning." And because of this, Jeremiah celebrates God's faithfulness, and he also celebrates that God will always be enough for him. Every morning the Israelites can wake up to find that God's love and compassion is still there. It hasn't run out. Because when God loves, he loves without limit.

What about you? Are you ever afraid that you will wake up one day and find that God has run out of patience with you? Have you ever worried that God's love will suddenly run out and that he will be finished with you? These are normal fears that many of us have because we know our own sins and failures. What if we wake up and God's love is all used up?

Thankfully, we are assured that this will never happen! Every morning we wake up to new love and new compassions from God. The smell of fresh love fills our senses and we know that we never have to worry that God's love will run out.

And if we need reassurance, all we have to remember is that if God didn't withhold his beloved Son from us, but sent him (at Christmas!), then God will never hold out on us for any good thing that we need.

Prayer

Father, we sometimes wonder if your patience and love will run out. Thank you for the promise that every morning we awake to new love and new compassions. Help us to trust you that your love will never run out, and that you will always be with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

Name something that you wish you could have an endless supply of?

How does it impact your heart when you think of the idea of God's love never running out?

December 24 | Love on Display

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Romans 5:6-8

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Devotional

Imagine a young girl who works really hard to be well-behaved. She obeys her parents, shows politeness to others, shares her toys, and does her chores without complaining. And imagine that the parents constantly compliment her, telling her how much they love her. And while she is glad to be told that she is loved, she has to wonder . . . what would happen if she stopped being so well-behaved? Would she still be loved?

Some of you were this little girl. Some of you currently relate to this little girl. You work hard to be good, and you get a positive response from others when you are good. But you wonder if you will still be loved if you mess up.

In Romans 5:6-8 we get amazing news about God's love. We are told that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And Paul writes that this act by God demonstrates his own love for us. If God only loved us while we were well-behaved, that would not be amazing love. That would be the normal love that we're used to. But if God loved us when we were at our worst—ungodly, powerless sinners—then that is truly amazing love.

Sometimes it is unpleasant to think of ourselves as sinners. We get concerned that thinking about this will leave us with low self-esteem.

But it is only when we embrace our failures and sins that we can truly understand and experience God's love. We get to discover a God who loves us when we are miserable failures. If he loves us then, we can count on him always loving us.

God put his love on display through Jesus' death on the cross. And this was only possible because God put his love on display through sending his Son on Christmas. So today, on Christmas Eve, we get to celebrate Jesus as the demonstration of God's love. He will not change his mind because he loved us when we were at our lowest point. He will not suddenly discover something bad about us because we already knew us inside and out when he sent Jesus. God has put his love on display, and we know that he will never take this love away.

Praise God! Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Father, thank you that you love us not because you are blind to our sins and failures, but that you love us even when you fully see those sins and failures. Thank you for proving your love to us by sending Jesus. And thank you that we get to celebrate him as your love gift this Christmas Eve. Please help us to trust you and follow you, knowing that every command you give us is your loving guidance for our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What are some ways that people demonstrate their love for others?

What practical impact does it have on your life if God really did love you while you were still a sinner?

December 25 | The Birth of Jesus

Written by Dan Franklin

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her first-born, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Devotional

Merry Christmas!

Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God. We celebrate that he came to be our Savior and to open up the gate for us to be welcomed into God's family.

Luke 2:1-7 tells the story of Jesus' birth. First of all, his birth seemed to take place at a very inconvenient time. Jesus' mother Mary and her husband Joseph had to leave their home and register for a census in Bethlehem. This is very inconvenient for a pregnant woman. And yet this seemingly random requirement ended up fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). It's a reminder that even when the world seems random, God is always in control.

Second of all, we read that Jesus was placed in a manger because there was no guest room available for him and his family. This shows us the

humility that the Son of God took on for us. He was not born surrounded by rejoicing family members. He didn't go viral with a video of his first moments on earth. He was not even born in a normal home. He was born in a barn and placed in a feeding trough. It is a preview of the fact that Jesus would be willing to suffer on behalf of all of us. We know that the manger was not the most uncomfortable accommodations that he experienced. Thirty-three years later he would be placed on a cross and would die for all of our sins. His suffering ended with his death on a cross, but it began with his very birth and placement in a manger.

This humble birth ended up changing the world. Billions of people all over the world are celebrating Christmas right now. Some of them are simply exchanging gifts and singing fun songs. But many of them have had their lives transformed by the love that Jesus poured out through his life, his death and his resurrection.

So today—as you open presents, enjoy a meal, and listen to great music—remember the one who is at the center of this celebration. Thank him for his sacrifice for all of us. And remember that he is worthy of your trust, your obedience, and your worship.
Merry Christmas!

Prayer

Father, thank you that we get to celebrate Christmas today. Thank you that Jesus was willing to humble himself to take on a human body so that he could be our Savior. And thank you that even his birth reminds us of the great sacrifice he made for us. Lead us to live each and every day in response to this great gift, and lead us to trust and follow you always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions

What is your favorite part of the Christmas story? Why?
In what way do you sense that Jesus is calling you to trust and follow him during this season of your life?

REFLECTION

A decorative horizontal flourish consisting of symmetrical, flowing scrollwork and loops, positioned below the title.

How have you experienced Jesus' love this week?

Record each family members' response below.

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FAMILY ACTIVITY



Family Christmas Caroling

Instructions:

Gather the family together, and sing some Christmas carols!

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature
sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills,
and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings
flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and
grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of His righteousness
and wonders of His love,
and wonders of His love,
and wonders, wonders of His love.

