

A red-tinted image of a nativity scene, featuring Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus in a manger, and several shepherds. The scene is overlaid with a pattern of thin, radiating red lines that create a starburst effect behind the central figures.

the
wonder
of all
wonders

2017 Advent Devotional



Kiokee Baptist Church

The wonder of wonders, that God loves the lowly.

*“God travels wonderful ways with human beings, but He does not comply with the views and opinions of people. God does not go the way that people want to prescribe for Him; rather, His way is beyond all comprehension, free and self-determined beyond all proof. Where reason is indignant, where our nature rebels, where our piety anxiously keeps us away: that is precisely where God loves to be. There He confounds the reason of the reasonable; there He aggravates our nature, our piety—that is where He wants to be, and no one can keep Him from it. Only the humble believe Him and rejoice that God is so free and so marvelous that He does wonders where people despair, that He takes what is little and lowly and makes it marvelous. **And that is the wonder of all wonders, that God loves the lowly... God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as His instruments and performs His wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; He loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken.**”* Dietrich Bonhoeffer

These words should stir in us fascination and awe of God. God marches right in, toward all of our brokenness.

I often wonder how we can finish a day and realize, “I don’t think I’ve thought about God at all. Did I even form a prayer today?”

The Creator of the Universe calls us His own. In His Son Jesus we have all the riches and wonder and resources of this God as our Father. Because of Jesus, we have hope and joy that withstands any circumstance. Because of Jesus, we are loved and sustained by God Almighty. In Him is our eternal home.

Still, we so often find ourselves forgetting Him in our day-to-day living. And yet, He is present, in all His power and grace, looking at us with loving eyes, waiting for us to turn and face Him again.

Enter Advent.

Advent is a season of refocusing. It’s a time for us to refresh and reignite our passion and adoration of God. It is an intentional choice to keep our hearts and minds fixed on the Lord, while the world claws for our attention. No matter how successful, beautiful, confident, or humble, we can never be worthy of God on our own. Jesus is our Way, our Truth, and our Life, and He came as a human baby.

Before you jump into this devotional, take a few minutes to thank God for rescuing you, when you could do nothing to impress or earn His love. Take some time to praise this Wonder of all wonders, Jesus Christ, the miracle of Christmas, who came for **you**.

"Love is a gift of God." Dr. Jack Hyles

What is love? Scripture tells us that love comes from God. Love is difficult to define. Love can have many earthly meanings and contexts. Perhaps by describing the feeling of love, we can better grasp the meaning of love. Love often brings about positive emotional feelings such as happiness, contentment, caring, passion and forgiveness.

God's love is greater. Love comes from God. God's love is an awesome concept that is far too great for us to truly comprehend. God is Love. God demonstrated His love by sending His one and only Son into the World so that He could die for our sins. No other love compares to this.

Christmas is a time of giving and a time to show our love to others. During this giving time of year, make sure to take time to remember the greatest gift of love that God gave to us. He loved us and sent His one and only Son into this world, as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

As God's children, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us. Even though we have not seen God, we still feel His love. As His children, we should strive to love one another by showing caring, compassion, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. The greatest gift we can give to others is to share the good news and demonstrate His love with others.

Consider This:

- As you prepare for Christmas, take time to "unwrap" the gift of love that God has given us. What does love mean to you?
- God's love is unconditional and He made the ultimate sacrifice for us! How can we shine God's love on others?
- God lives in us and His love is made complete in us. Share the fantastic news with lovable actions, words, kindness, and compassion.

Gather Your Family Together To Focus On Love

John 3:16, Luke 2:7

What you'll need: A Bible, a gift box wrapped in pretty Christmas paper with a bow, and a Baby Jesus in the manger ornament or nativity piece.

What you'll do: Gather your children in a comfortable place in your home. Place the gift in front of them and ask a series of questions about gifts such as:

1. Who likes to get pretty gifts like this one?
2. How do you feel when you get a really cool gift?
3. What are some of the best gifts you have ever gotten before?

Open your Bible to John 3:16 and say, "The Bible tells us about the greatest gift that has ever been given. Do you know what that gift was? It was God's gift of Jesus. That's what we are about to celebrate on Christmas Day, the birth of Baby Jesus. Listen to what this verse from the Bible tells us about God's gift of Jesus."

Read John 3:16 aloud to your children.

Now ask, "Did you hear me say anything when I read that verse that would tell us why God sent His only Son, Jesus to us? That's right, God loved the world so much that He wanted to make a way for us to be with Him forever one day. So God sent Jesus."

As you show your Baby Jesus in a manger say, "God's gift of love did not come in a pretty package like this one (*refer to your wrapped gift*). Let's see what the Bible tells us about how God sent His Son, Jesus.

Open your Bible to Luke 2:7 and read the verse aloud to your children.

End by saying, "This verse tells us that God's gift didn't come in a pretty package at all. Jesus was born in a manger. A manger was used to feed the animals. That was Baby Jesus' bed because there was no room for them in the inn."

Let's pray and thank God for the best gift ever given – the gift of Jesus. (*If your children are old enough to say a short prayer, you could pass the Baby Jesus around and let each family member say a short prayer of thanks for Jesus and God's love before placing it back on your tree or in your nativity set.*)

Joy is defined by Webster as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness."

Rick Warren describes joy: Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.

The world today delights in trials and failures. The media is constantly focusing on the bad and negative. As Christians, we have to share our joy with the world around us. Spiritual joy is more than just happiness. It is a feeling within our hearts that God is in control. We have to let Christ shine through us. We have to begin each morning with a prayer for guidance that during the day we will be positive and have great pleasure and happiness in what we have to face. We have to take the negative and turn it into joy by turning it over to the Lord and letting Him handle the situation. Yes, this is hard but through practice of diligently praying and turning situations over to God this can be accomplished.

Joy is more than happiness. Joy is a "gift of the Spirit." It is constant whereas happiness comes and goes. When we turn our trials and tribulations over to God and rejoice that they are now His, we experience the real joy of believing that all things are possible with Christ. Again, it is a daily commitment to turn our difficulties over to God and experience the joy that we have given God control.

Finally, we have to give God the glory and praise for His guidance and the joy within our hearts. It is only through His grace that we can experience joy. We have the assurance that God handles all things. Furthermore, we have the inward joy and outward happiness that we are free from these difficulties.

It is with great joy that we have a God that provides and comforts. We consider it pure joy when we face trials of various kinds because as James 1:2-4 states, "testing our faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

Consider This:

- Pray that you will turn your trials and tribulations totally over to God. Pray that you will experience full joy by knowing that God is in control of all the details of your life.
- Do you truly believe that God will handle every trial in your life? Can you let go and let God have total control? Do you have joy in your heart?
- Start each day by putting God first and trusting Him with our trials.

Before the Christmas season 5 years ago, I was in a valley. I didn't know the purpose for it, but I learned quickly that to come out the other side of it, I needed Christ to be with me through the whole ordeal. He had been with me since childhood, and I knew He would not desert me. We all have valleys to go through. Some are pot holes, others ravines, and then there is the crater that appears one day. Mine was the latter. I knew I was in the valley when around the end of July I had trouble blowing my short crop of hair dry. My arms couldn't hold the hair dryer up for the five minute routine.

By the end of August, I was concerned because other symptoms appeared. I began to pray about it and sought medical advice. I continued to deteriorate more with each passing month, going to several more doctors. I was put on prednisone and several high powered vitamins. By Thanksgiving, I was sleeping 12 hours a day and aching all over. I was still undiagnosed but was told I had an autoimmune disease. Through this period of time, I clung to my Bible searching for Scriptures to claim and give me the courage and strength to live with what I had.

I was trusting God, and over the months His peace and hope settled into my heart. He sent several Scriptures to me as I searched. In Romans 15:13, we know that "God" is the supreme word that all the other words derive their meaning from. But what word is pivotal to receiving joy, peace, and hope? The very first thing we must do is trust Him, and with that trust we receive all that God has to offer to the point of "overflowing." The joy, peace, and hope sustained me, built me up, and gave me courage to continue my journey through the valley. At the time, I didn't know what would be on the other side of the valley, but "my heart trusts in Him and I am helped. Therefore my heart exults and with my song I shall thank Him" (Ps 28:7).

After living with this for 6 months, I wanted to know what disease I had. To do that, I had to wean myself off of the prednisone before I could get a muscle biopsy. I was told that this would be a difficult thing to do, but I wanted to try. As I began to wean myself from the drug, my symptoms began to lessen instead of increasing. The Lord was taking away the disease as I came off of the prednisone. I have been in remission for 5 years now. What I learned has changed my perspective on life from one of pettiness and judgement to one of focusing on the blessings and the relationships God entrusts to me as I share Him with others. I have read and been told this wisdom, but it is all together different when experiencing it first hand with the Lord right there with you.

Trusting God is vital in our lives and gives us the perspective (God's) we need as we go through life here. He prepares a place for us with Him in eternity, as He also prepares each of us for His home. And that preparation will involve some valleys along the way. Isaiah 43:2 was another verse I claimed. Read it sometime; it will give you His perspective!

Consider This:

- What valleys in your life are you trusting to God?
- Are you experiencing joy, peace, and hope through them? Why or why not?

Kim Brown

Today's Scripture: Philippians 3:7-11

"The difficulties of life do not have to be unbearable. It is the way we look at them - through faith or unbelief - that makes them seem so. We must be convinced that our Father is full of love for us and that He only permits trials to come our way for our own good. Let us occupy ourselves entirely in knowing God. The more we know Him, the more we will desire to know Him. As love increases with knowledge, the more we know God, the more we will truly love Him. We will learn to love Him equally in times of distress or in times of great joy." Brother Lawrence

When you read this passage, you may be thinking "how does this relate to love?" In my younger years, I would have asked the same thing. One great thing about growing older is hopefully you are growing in spiritual maturity as well. I grew up going to church, asked Jesus to come live in my heart at age 11, but did not fully understand a true relationship with Christ until I started attending Kiokee at the age of 18 and have been discipled by a few godly women through the years. I have attended many Bible studies, but Bible Study Fellowship gave me a push to study the Bible in depth. As I have studied over the years, I began to realize that when I was younger, I obeyed Christ and His teachings out of fear, not love. I learned that obedience out of love was so much better and satisfying than out of fear. As I loved Jesus more, I was quicker to obey and with a much better attitude than if I obeyed out of fear. I also used this principle in teaching my two girls about obedience as they were growing up. I would always tell them, "If you love me, you will obey me. That is how you show me you love me." I began to teach them that this also applied to God and Jesus.

When we love someone, we want to know everything about them. In this, I also realized that to truly love God and love Him well, I needed to know everything I could about Him. As much as I love my husband and children, I need to love God more than anything or anyone else I love. I need to know more about God than I know about anything else. My determined purpose is that I may know Him. I want to progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving, recognizing, and understanding the wonders of Him more strongly and clearly. I want to know the power of His Resurrection over my life and share in His suffering that I may be continually transformed in my spirit into His likeness. I know now with certainty that all else is worthless when life gets messy except knowing Christ as my Lord and Saviour.

Consider This:

- Slow obedience is still disobedience. In what ways are you slow to obey the Lord in your everyday life? What areas of obedience do you need to work on?
- Do you have a desire to study God's word to know and love Him more? As you know Him and love Him more, will you find that you obey Him faster and trust Him more fully with the outcome?
- Will you know and love Him more so your faith and belief can be strengthened? As you fall more in love with Christ, how will your life reflect this and be contagious to those you come in contact with everyday?

"I can not think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection." Sigmund Freud

One of my most favorite times of year just happens to take place in the month of November. Deer season. There is something special about being out in the woods when the leaves are changing and that crisp scent starts to linger in the air as the temperature begins to drop. Some of my most fondest memories I have with my dad are walking behind him to the deer stand on those cool mornings with just the sound of the crunching of brush underneath his feet and the dark silhouette that I made sure to stay close behind as I followed him to where I would be hunting. What he didn't know was that secretly I would have never walked to that deer stand on my own had it not been for him going before me. I am quite afraid of the dark, especially in the woods! I always believed nothing in the world could have harmed me because my dad was going in first. If there was anything in the woods, he would take care of me, most importantly because he was my dad, but the fact that he always carries a gun helped too!

In the same way that I so willingly followed my dad into the woods, I believe that it is our Heavenly Father's desire for us to trust Him in those dark and scary moments and to choose to continue to follow Him no matter our circumstances. As seasons change, and I head into a new unknown or unfamiliar territory, sometimes I forget I have a Father in heaven who gives me peace to walk in and to trust in as He has already gone before me to prepare the way. Colossians 3:1 says to "Let peace rule in our heart." I'll be the first to admit that I don't always let peace rule my heart. I will let any and everything rule in my heart but peace. I let worry or fear rule my heart, however, I know that when I choose to pray and intentionally allow God to rule in my situation, that peace overpowers that fear and worry. I am reminded of this kind of peace as I think about those mornings with my dad as I trusted him to take care of me. If I trust him to take care of me then how much more should I trust in my Heavenly Father?

As Christmas is nearing, you may be dealing with a new season of life... A sick parent, a difficult job, a rocky marriage and the list goes on. I pray that we can all be reminded of the peace that God gave us by sending His Son to be born and to die on a cross and pay the ultimate price so that we can have peace and hope in trusting in the fact that one day we will be reunited with Him. Christ offers us peace in all situations, we may not feel it in the very moment or even for a while. But when we surrender our lives to Him, He promises to give us His peace, whether that be here on earth or in heaven with Him.

Consider This:

- What are some ways that you can give up control over your situation today and let the peace of Christ rule in your heart?
- How would your life be different if you stopped and took some time, just you and God, and told Him about your difficult season?
- Remember that Christ wants us to choose Him and allow His peace to rule over our lives in all seasons, good and bad.

"Be assured, if you walk with Him and expect help from Him, He will never fail you." George Mueller

How do you have hope when in an instant, your world is devastatingly changed forever? I found out on August 14, 2010 at 6:56pm when I received a phone call while at work from my 15 year old son, telling me that his Dad was not breathing. First, I was thankful that I had been able to answer that call, that was a gift from God, as being able to answer the phone as a nurse in a critical care unit is not always a given.

Then all the questions came. Why was my son the one to be there alone to deal with this, why did this happen, what do I DO!!!??? My husband of almost 20 years, gone unexpectedly, of a heart attack. Went to work a wife, came home a widow. How do I go on, how will this affect my son? Fear, loneliness and grief enveloped me. So, I did the only thing I could, I prayed, I cried out to God and He gave me a *"peace which surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7)"*. Isaiah 41:13 says *"Do not fear, I will help you."* And the verse from Jeremiah 29:1, *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not harm you plans to give you hope and a future."* These verses gave me the assurance to go on.

God has provided for myself and my family in so many ways in the years since. I know that I am never alone, He is ever present, His compassions never fail and great is His faithfulness.

Consider This:

- If you feel hopeless, remember that you get what you focus on, Colossians 3:2 tells us to "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." Begin by refocusing, look to God for your hope, He will never forsake you.
- How does the scripture above give you hope? Make time to be in God's Word on a daily basis, to stay hope filled.
- Look for opportunities to show kindness to others. When you give of yourself, you receive far more in return, What are some ways for you to give of yourself?

"I kept looking for a traditional Jewish explanation that would satisfy, but found none. The only plausible explanation seemed to be Jesus... As I read (the Bible), my suspicion that Jesus might really be the Messiah was confirmed." Jay Alan Sekulow

As a Messianic or Completed Jew, I know Jesus is the Messiah and I know that I am redeemed through His blood. He is my Lord and Savior!

Christians and Jews alike await the Messiah. For Jews, it is the first coming; for Gentiles, the second. The Bible clearly states that G-d desires the preservation of the Jewish people. There is a Jewish prayer called Kaddish. It is recited mostly as a mourner's prayer at the end of each prayer service. Yet, there is no mention of death in the prayer. It simply praises G-d. The Jewish Kaddish and The Lord's Prayer, that we Christians say, both express "Thy kingdom come!" We are all awaiting the Messiah.

Unfortunately, the identity of Jewish people involves 'not believing in Jesus'. The event that advent season celebrates... G-d choosing to become flesh and dwell among us dismays Jews. This disapproval should never make Christians ashamed. As believers, denials must never halt us from declaring that the Messiah has come, His name is YESHUA and He will come again! I am so fortunate to have been plucked from my tribe of Levi into His family. For all the Jewish non-believers, please pray for their salvation, for their eyes to be opened, for their hearts to be softened, and for their ears to be made to hear. May we be great witnesses to these people.

When the Lord returns, "In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll... the eyes of the blind will see..." (Isaiah 29:18)

Consider This:

- Growing up in a Jewish household, I knew of the prophecies about the Messiah, but struggled to believe that Jesus was indeed the Promised One. What truths about Jesus are you pretending not to know?
- Does your heart yearn for the return of our Lord?
- Please continue to pray that God would open the eyes of those who do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

Melissa grew up in a Jewish home, and found Jesus after marrying her husband Curt. As part of her Jewish roots, from a place of respect, she never writes out the Lord's name G-d including the "o." To learn more about Melissa's story, visit kiokee.org/october-testimonies.

"Hope is the confidence that what God has done for us in the past guarantees our participation in what God will do in the future." Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary

My family has often accused me of being a pessimist. Noah Webster defines pessimism as "an inclination to emphasize adverse aspects, conditions, and possibilities or to expect the worst possible outcome." I would argue working in the explosive and nuclear industries for 38 years resulted in my having a work ethic of plan for the worst and hope for the best and this same attitude carried over into my personal life. This word "hope" carries a lot of weight in my attitude. It means I expect to obtain the desired outcome with no or minimal problems.

But one thing I discovered with this type of hope is that inevitably I do have outcomes plagued with problems. What it has taught me is to not place my hope in the material things of this world, but to place my hope in the Creator. The lyrics to the song, "In Christ Alone," starts off with a great reminder of where to place one's hope - *"In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song."* Hope grounded in the promises of God are certain and Titus 1:2 gives an excellent example of that hope when Paul said, *"in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began."*

God's Word has a lot more to say about hope. A few more examples in the New Testament include: Romans 15:13, Paul calls God, "the God of hope;" 1 Timothy 1:1, Christ is called "our hope;" and in 1 Peter 1:21, Peter reminds us, "that our faith and hope are in God."

As Christmas approaches and the celebrations begin, I pray my hope will rest in the confidence of knowing God did send His Son in the flesh to die for my sins and not in the hope of the material things of this world. Advent season is a reminder for us to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. But Advent also reminds us of another hope found in Titus 2:13. In this verse Paul describes Christ's second coming when he said, "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

As you prepare for Christmas, use the observance of Advent to prepare your heart to celebrate Jesus' birth and remember what Matthew said in Matthew 24:44 regarding Christ's second coming, "Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Consider This:

- Is your hope grounded in the promises of God or in the world?
- Are you ready for Christ's second coming?
- How will you prepare your heart for Christmas?

Gather Your Family Together To Focus on Joy

Luke 2:8-11

What you'll need: A Bible, plain sheet of paper and a pen or pencil, shepherd ornament or nativity piece

What you'll do: Gather your children in a comfortable place in your home. Explain that you are going to say one word and then you want them to say all the words they think of when they hear your word.

Now, your word is "Christmas" - let your children respond with what they think about when they hear the word Christmas. Write your children's responses on your piece of paper. You will most likely hear words such as Christmas tree, lights, snow, presents, Christmas cookies, Santa and maybe even Baby Jesus. (If your children do not say Baby Jesus you could ask, "What about Baby Jesus? When you hear the word Christmas do you think about Him? Great, let's add Baby Jesus to our list.)

Show the list to your children and say, "Wow, look at all the things we think about when we hear the word Christmas. There are many things on our list that would bring us a lot of joy at Christmas time. Do you know what joy is? Joy is a word that means we are really happy."

Ask the following questions:

1. Are you really happy when we put up our Christmas tree?
2. Do pretty Christmas lights make you feel happy?
3. Does eating Christmas cookies make you happy?
4. What about opening presents, does that make you happy on Christmas morning?

Now take your Bible and say, "The Bible tells us about some people who had great joy at the first Christmas, but their joy did not come from having a Christmas tree, eating Christmas cookies or even from opening presents. Their joy came from some great news they heard. Let's read about that news now."

Open your Bible to Luke 2:8-11 and read the verse aloud to your children.

Ask, "Who was in the fields watching the sheep? (Show your shepherd ornament or nativity piece.) Who came to give the shepherds good news? The angels told the shepherds they had good news of great what? Great joy! And what was this good news of great joy? Today a Savior has been born and He is Christ the Lord."

Alex O'Neill

Today's Scripture: Ephesians 2:12-22

"Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on His own terms, regardless of the personal cost."

Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew

The title of this devotional, *The Wonder of all Wonders*, speaks to the majesty of the incarnation. It encourages us to ponder and marvel at the incredible mystery of God in flesh and reminds us of the good news of great joy that will be for all people.

But some folks may be dealing with another type of wonder this holiday season. Wonder can also be another way to express our questioning or uncertainty. We wonder if God hears our prayers, wonder if He cares about our hurts, or wonder if He will be with us in sorrow.

I know that wonder, too.

On December 13, 2007, my wife and mother of our seven children, Dana, was no longer on among the living here on earth. Her death had come rather quickly as the result of a brain aneurysm. It was two weeks before Christmas, the house was already decorated and in this season of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, it seemed that my whole world had fallen apart with God's 'ok'. I felt lost and hopeless. I watched my family as they struggled to cope with every day life. I was assured by friends and counselors that healing would come in time. Healing did come in time — more time than I had expected. It was a slow recovery.

During this time I asked God many questions and he brought me along giving me assurances that He loved me and my family. His assurance didn't take away the pain. It didn't answer all my questions, but it was divine assurance all the same. In time we would enjoy the Christmas season, we would have Hope, Love, Joy and Peace throughout the family again. Not all my Christmas memories have been fun and exciting, but I know God gave up His Son to be born as a baby and live on His earth. He would be misunderstood, He would be hated and finally He would be killed because of my sins. Not fun for Him either. But He brought Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace into this world for me and we celebrate this at this time of year as we should. Thank you LORD for loving me.

Consider This:

- What does Paul mean when he says in verse 14 that "He Himself is our peace"?
- Which definition of wonder is more present in your heart this season?
- As you go throughout your day today, will you open up His word and allow the Holy Spirit to show you a truth of God you can stand on that will give you the peace offered by Jesus?

Are you good at loving people? How about friends? Or should I dare ask, your family? I may be speaking for myself, but the one person I'm good at loving is ME. How did God love us? God gave us His Son! Before I became a Christian, I didn't fully understand how much I "needed" a Savior. And, for your "lost" friends, they probably don't realize that need either. God showed us love by giving us what we needed before we ever knew we needed it. Just like a parent caring for a young child, He helped us in our weakness.

Earlier this year my mother-in-law passed away and my wife has had to get passed a lot of "firsts," including the most recent holiday of Thanksgiving, which happened to be my mother-in-law's birthday, and now Christmas. For my wife, losing her mom to a massive heart attack, was a little surprising to say the least. But, because of her sudden passing, it caused my wife to think about where their relationship had been during the recent past.

About 4-5 years ago, God really changed that relationship. Until we started to truly "love" her, were we able to see walls come down. When we were able to love her the way she needed to be loved, rather than love her like we wanted or in a way that was easy for us, needs were met and the relationship began to grow. So, here's your challenge this Christmas season, to truly LOVE somebody!! Do what it takes and don't stop until it's complete. Go that extra mile. Sacrifice your time and money. Don't keep looking over your shoulder for some form of repayment. If you do, you'll receive the blessing.

Consider This:

- Has God's love shown towards you changed the way you treat others? If so, how?
- Love is an investment. In whose life have you been investing? If you can't put a name in that blank, then pray for that void.
- Do you have a love account/piggy bank? If not, create one so you can bless others.

Jon Puckett

Today's Scripture: Isaiah 55:12

I love this verse. I love it because God has given me such a passion for the outdoors, especially the mountains and the forests. My favorite place to be on earth is in the high country where the forest ends and the high alpine meadows and rock outcrops begin. During the brief summer at this altitude, I am always amazed at the plant and wildlife diversity. The wildflowers are “bursting” into bloom. The marmots and the ptarmigans are busy looking for food. Sheep, elk and mule deer are all up high grazing on the soon to be frozen again tundra. It is magnificent here. I have worshipped here. Not the creation, but the Creator who crafted it. The beauty of this place is only a glimpse of what Eden once was, and will be again. There is no other physical place on earth that I “feel” more at “peace.”

But what does the Bible really say about peace?

In the English language, the word “peace” usually means freedom from disturbance or freedom from war or violence. I am learning that the biblical concept of peace is much different. Peace or “shalom” as stated in the Bible is a Hebrew word meaning harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare and tranquility.

God alone is the source of peace and His peace is offered to us through His son Jesus Christ through His birth, death and resurrection. The great Christmas hymn “Hark the Heralds Angel Sing” goes “peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled... mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.” This “peace” is referring to the peace that Christ brought to us through reconciliation with God for those who claim Him as their Lord and Savior. Isaiah 26:12 states, “Lord, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us”.

Looking forward, one day the Christ followers of the nations will all come under the dominion of the “Prince of Peace” and we “shall go out with joy and be lead forth in peace” and “of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end” as stated in Isaiah. That is the peace we can look forward to on the other side of glory.

Consider This:

- Meditate on how Jesus is the Prince of Peace because He reconciled God to a fallen world.
- How does Christ's example of pursuing peace with you give you the encouragement to pursue reconciliation with someone that you think may not deserve your forgiveness?
- Pray for and seek opportunities today to tell someone about the gospel of peace.

"Those who are 'beloved of the Lord' must be the most happy and joyful people to be found upon the face of the earth." Charles Spurgeon

Mary exclaims in verses 46 and 47, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour..." The key to Mary's joy is its source, which is the Lord.

In the continuing verses of today's scripture, Mary proclaims God's character through His actions. She has seen his holiness, greatness, mercy and faithfulness, recognizing that God is acting on His plan and promise to Abraham and his offspring forever (Genesis 17:7,19), including David (Psalm 89:3-4). Overwhelmed with God's grace to choose her to bear a son, Jesus, the Son of The Most High (Luke 1:31-33), she rejoiced that the Lord God was bringing about His promise made to Abraham and His offspring.

Just as Mary was filled with joy, we can be filled with joy that God made a way through Jesus for us to come into relationship with Him. Because of Christ's birth, death and resurrection and our faith placed in Him, not only we, but also our children and generations to come can experience this wonderful joy of belonging to Him.

We can look back with joy and wonder that God would come into the world, and we can look forward to His return, expecting unceasing joy that He has promised us.

Consider This:

- Where does our true joy come?
- As we go through the day, are we willing to express this joy with believers and unbelievers?
- Since our true joy comes from knowing and loving Jesus, will we take time to read His Word in a deeper way?

"Hope is called the anchor of the soul (Hebrews 6:19), because it gives stability to the Christian life. But hope is not simply a 'wish' (I wish that such-and-such would take place); rather, it is that which latches on to the certainty of the promises of the future that God has made." RC Sproul

My wife and I just experienced the birth of our first grandchild, a baby boy named Jax. It was a different experience seeing our youngest son and his wife bring another life into the world. As I looked at him after he was born, I couldn't help but think about Christmas and how Jesus came into this world in the very same way, but under very different circumstances. As my son and daughter-in-law held their baby I wondered how Mary and Joseph must have felt when baby Jesus arrived. A fragile little baby but yet God in human flesh, a little bundle of hope for mankind.

In our Scripture passage we see a man named Simeon who was a righteous and devout man and the Spirit of God was upon him. He was full of hope and was looking for the Lord's Christ because it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen him. In verses 29 and 30 Simeon says that he is ready to depart (die) in peace according to the word he had received. He had seen the Lord's salvation. The Holy Spirit had led him to the temple when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there. God's timing is always perfect, and He always keeps His word. We have a lot of hope in those promises.

Consider This:

- In verse 26 we see that Simeon had hope of seeing Jesus because it had been revealed to him. What has God shown you recently that gives you Hope this Christmas?
- In verse 25 we see that Simeon had the Holy Spirit upon him. As Christians we have the person of the Holy Spirit living in us. Are you experiencing the Hope of Christmas?
- In verses 27 and 28 we see that Simeon was led by the Spirit to the temple where baby Jesus was going to be and he held Him in his arms and blessed God. Who are you going to touch this Christmas with the Hope that is within you?

Tamara McNair

Today's Scripture: Luke 2:10-11

"You are most prepared for Christmas when you are done trying to make your performance into the gift and instead revel in His presence as the gift." Ann Voskamp

In this passage the angels instruct the shepherds to "fear not" and to "behold." Those commanding words are often overlooked in this passage, but I find them intriguing as we do not "fear not" and "behold" enough during the busy holiday season. Too often we are consumed with the worries of the world and holiday activities that barrier us away from what our heart focus should be during this time of year.

As we ponder and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, our minds should show no fear and observe how amazing the gift God gave to reproduce joy in every believer's life. Marshal Segal writes, "The story of the world meeting Jesus in the flesh is a story of the world finding their full joy in God."

The joy we have because of Jesus Christ is one that can withstand life's disappointments. Seek God first this Christmas season, and discover the pure and strong joy to be found in Scripture and in prayer.

May God's greatest gift be our greatest JOY!

Consider This:

- Think of all of the joy your life contains because of the birth of Christ.
- Pray that your mind will "fear not" and "behold" the wonderful joys of the season to draw you closer to the Lord.
- Show and share with others your life joys so that they might also come to know Christ and experience the sincere relationship with Him.

"The main thing is to keep the main thing, the main thing." Unknown

Just a few days ago I was backing out of my driveway; something that I had done hundreds of times before. I was thinking about some plants that I had lying in my front yard and how they needed to be planted. Work issues and household chores were also on my mind as there were many things that I needed to accomplish that day. My mind was already full, when out of nowhere, my daughter whined that she needed a new dog! I don't know what happened from there except the fact I yelled, "You don't need another dog!" and then BAM was all I heard. I hit a tree so hard that when I looked back, I saw the red plastic taillight shatter and diffuse. As I exited the car to assess the damage, I thought about how I let all these little distractors prevent me from focusing on my driving and where I was headed. Now, a huge dent in the bumper reminds me that I didn't keep the main thing, the main thing!

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Colossians 3:2)

As Christmas is quickly approaching I am reminded daily of this same lesson. I need to keep the main thing, the main thing! Distractions are all around us this time of year. Parties, decorations, presents, shopping, and family gatherings can quickly fill our calendars and thoughts. It's so easy to fill the mind with these distractions that we forget to fill the heart with the true reason for the season. We need to take time to truly focus on Jesus each and every day. God loved us so much, that He sent his son to live on this earth. What a reason to celebrate!

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. (1 John 4:9)

During the Christmas season and always, let's pray for one another to keep the main thing, the main thing. We must truly focus on Jesus in every aspect of our lives as He came to save us from our sins. He is worthy to be praised!

Consider This:

- What common distractions keep you from setting your mind on Christ this season?
- How much of these distractions are simply due to this time of year and how many are due to my heart chasing after things that do not satisfy?
- Ask the Lord to help you set your mind on things above today.

Gather Your Family Together To Focus On Hope

Genesis 2:16-17
Genesis 3:15

What you'll need: A Bible, picture of the Garden of Eden from the Bible or a book, a nativity set or picture of a nativity scene, 4 small strips of paper with one letter of the word HOPE on each strip of paper.

Before you begin: Insert one letter of the word HOPE in each balloon, then blow up and tie the balloons.

What you'll do: Gather your children in a comfortable place in your home.

Place your nativity set in front of your children or show them a picture of a nativity scene from a Bible or book. Say, "Many people think that the story of Jesus began when He was born in a manger. But the story of Jesus actually began in the Garden of Eden. (If you have Bible or a book with a picture of Adam and Eve in the Garden, show it here.)

Do you remember the first two people that God created and placed in the Garden of Eden? That's right, God created Adam and Eve. And God gave them one rule to follow. Listen as I read Genesis 2:16-17. What was the rule God gave Adam and Eve? Yes, they were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Bible goes on to tell us that Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent to eat from the tree and they gave in to that temptation. What happened when Adam and Eve broke God's rule? That's right, sin entered the world.

God knew sin had entered the world and He knew we would need someone to save us from our sin. So right then, God spoke a word of _____. I need you to help me fill in the word that should go in that blank. I have some balloons here that have letters inside of them that will help us spell the word we need for our blank. Let's pop the balloons and use the letters to spell our word. (Pop all 4 balloons and help your children spell the word HOPE.)

God spoke a word of HOPE – One day He would send a Savior into the world." Jesus would be our hope; our only way to be forgiven of our sin. (Depending on the age of your child you could read and discuss Genesis 3:15). Throughout the Old Testament, God spoke to His people about this promise of a Savior and He gave them things to watch for in order to recognize the Savior's coming. (Depending on the age of your child, here are some OT prophecies about the coming of Jesus that you could read: Isa. 9:2, Gen. 49:10, Mic. 5:2, Isa. 9:6-7).

God promised HOPE and God always keeps His promises. Jesus was born to be our HOPE; the Savior of the world. Let's pray and thank God for the HOPE we have in Jesus."

"A great many people are trying to make peace, but that has already been done. God has not left it for us to do; all we have to do is to enter into it." Dwight L. Moody

When I think of images of peace, I think of an infant or small child sleeping – innocent, with no anger or anxiety, just contentment. I then contrast that with the recent mass shootings, threats of missiles, economic chaos, sickness... Stop! How can we live in peace with all this around us? No matter where you turn, people have been wronged and seek justice... or, rather, vengeance. Our secular world, with its focus on success on the job, the fat 401K for retirement or getting all the marbles, has distracted us and focused our attention on things that will not satisfy. Isaiah (26:3) said it perfectly when he said, "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." This trust is not in the temporary but rather in the eternal, the unchanging, the loving God that provides.

Thus, over 2000 years ago, a birth occurred that even the angels and heavenly hosts joined in praise to God saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." This peace would ask us to enter in in faith, would require us to submit our past faults/sins by repenting, then yield our todays to Him and trust Him with our tomorrows. The birth of the Christ child gave us a Savior who alone could give peace, would die an unpeaceful, violent death. Think of the irony.

Jesus is born. The angels and heavenly host proclaim peace and good will. Jesus grows and matures and stays focused on what He is here to do. He heals, teaches, and is confronted by those that seek power, betrayers... "Peace on earth, good will to men"... Jesus shows us the peace of God which passes all understanding, that keeps our hearts and minds.

In John 14, Jesus then assures us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." This peace that Jesus leaves, that the angels sang about, equips the believer to trust in God when a family member dies, a house burns down, or you are "between jobs." It gives confidence because we know Who is in charge; and we glorify God because we are calm when there is confusion, we sing when there is sadness, and we worship regardless of the circumstance.

Consider This:

- How are you doing in the worry department?
- Do you start your day planning, worrying about what the day holds, stressing? Or do you receive God's gift through Jesus, peace?

Lisa Harvey

Today's Scripture: Romans 12:12

Here we are, in the midst of our season of Advent once again. Our celebration of the arrival of our Christ at his birth; our hope in his arrival again one day. This hope that is “a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19).”

The 1828 Webster's Dictionary defines hope as confidence in a future event with the highest degree of well-founded expectation of good. This dictionary goes on to say that a well-founded, scriptural hope is the source of ineffable (inexpressible) happiness. I did not realize the comfort and inner joy produced by this hope until I tried to deny it.

Four years ago, within a 5-week period, I lost both my father and my husband. At some point after this, maybe a month, I specifically remember standing in the middle of my bedroom one day, in tears, and saying out loud, “there can't be a God, if there was, this wouldn't have happened to me; what is the point in having this faith?” In that instant, as I said those words, I distinctly remember—maybe for the first time in my recollection—having a feeling that I can only describe now as utter hopelessness... really an emptiness that I can't even put into words.

In that instant, as I was allowed to experience, just for a moment, what hopelessness felt like, I remember thinking, “how can people live like this?” I knew at that moment that there definitely was hope and in whom my hope lay!

As I prepared to pen this devotional thought about hope, I decided to see which book in the Bible talks about hope the greatest number of times. Of course, there's Psalms, but let's attribute that to the overall length of the book itself. Second to Psalms in talking about hope is the book of Job. I should have known! Who needed to be more hopeful than Job? What else was there for Job other than his hope planted firmly in his Lord God?

It has been written that hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear because, believing that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today. For us, as believers in Christ and the promise of His return — our Advent — could there be any greater hope for a better tomorrow?

Consider This:

- In your opinion, why is choosing hope challenging?
- How does our eternal hope being Jesus change your outlook on your circumstances?
- Think of a few ways you can encourage those around you to choose hope.

"Each of us is an innkeeper who decides if there is room for Jesus." Neil A. Maxwell

"Into this world, this demented inn in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited." Thomas Merton

Unexpected opportunities are often missed. The inn in Bethlehem missed the opportunity to receive and shelter the Christ child. Why? Perhaps because they had no idea He was coming. There was no expectation. There was no hope for His arrival. Sure, the city was crowded, but was there truly no room left? The innkeeper (who is never mentioned in scripture, by the way; we are told simply that "there was no room for them in the inn." Luke 2:7), had he known that such an important guest was due, surely would have had a place prepared. And perhaps there really was a room available, but the innkeeper was holding out for a more "deserving" guest than the weary, nondescript young couple, expecting a child.

Contrast that situation with that of the wise men. Their hearts were filled with hope and expectation. They had read all the prophecies; observed all the signs. Their gifts were wrapped and ready. Camels loaded for travel. Nothing was more important than the arrival of the infant King, and they would do whatever it took to be present and to receive Him.

The advent of Christ was the pivotal event in all of history. God became man and came to earth. Some were ready to receive Him; most were not. And each Christmas, Christ comes afresh and anew to those whose hearts are filled with hope, longing and expectation; whose eyes are toward the heavens.

Where do you find yourself this Christmas? Are you with the innkeeper or with the wise men? Are you prepared to receive the gift of the Christ, with heart and eyes filled with hope and expectation? Do you recognize your need for Him?

Consider This:

- Make room for Him this season. Think of the wonders of His coming.
- Prepare your heart to receive His presence, and prepare your gifts for Him.
- Go to Him, as He seeks you out. Do whatever it takes.

Todd Jenkins

Today's Scripture: John 16:33

My schedule is busy. Between working at the school and the church, teaching lessons, and keeping up with my equally busy wife and active son, it is easy to get overwhelmed. This is especially true around the Christmas season, when my wife, Kate, and I are gearing up for Holiday concerts and helping our students prepare for important auditions.

I know we are not alone in our busy-ness. There are many people working in stressful or multiple jobs, many folks who are taking care of large families or family members who need extra care. Combine all that frantic activity with the military, political and racial conflict we see played out twenty-four hours per day on the news, and true peace can seem hard to find.

People seek peace in many ways - in distraction, or leisure or self-help books, or meditation and exercise. Christians can find relaxation in those things as well, but the Bible tells us that true peace comes from our faith. There are plenty of people who will scoff at that notion; people who believe that there is no God, and that humans are simply the product of luck and time (those same people would laugh if you suggested you had a pencil or a fork or a Matchbox Car that was not created, but instead was the product of chance and evolution). Then there are those folks who will admit there might be a god, but that he simply put everything into motion at creation then stepped away to watch the show.

Christians' peace comes from the hope we have in Jesus, and from the belief that not only is there a Creator God, but that He takes an interest in the welfare of His creation. As John 16:33 tells us, Christians are not immune from hardship (just the opposite in fact), but we can be at peace knowing God is never caught off guard and that He has a plan for us. This month we celebrate not just the joy of that first Christmas morning, but also the peace that is available to us because Jesus, by His birth, death and resurrection, fulfilled God's plan and overcame the world.

Consider This:

- In what ways are you seeking true peace from temporal sources?
- How does knowing that Christ has come into (and overcome) the world give us peace?
- Read Isaiah 26: 3 throughout your day. Heed its admonition to keep your mind stayed on the Lord in the midst of all the distractions of the day.

*"Find out where your joy resides, and give it a voice far beyond singing.
For to miss the joy is to miss all." Robert Louis Stevenson*

GREAT JOY ... at Christmas?

shopping traffic ✓ angry, impatient people ✓
vaporized checking account ✓ 75 degree days ✓

How did things get so complicated, cluttered, and crazy... is this how Christmas is supposed to be? Can we step aside - step into a quieter moment, and read angel's words that came on that night that changed the world?

Luke 2:10 says, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." Great joy... real joy is never something that originates from within. It has to come from without. Trying to find joy by getting it out of yourself is like trying to find blood by squeezing a turnip. Maybe that's why so many people have such a hard time finding joy at Christmas - too many turnip huggers! You bite into a Christmas cookie and delight in the taste. It brings happiness to open a bright, shiny gift. But joy itself - in it's true, pure form - is so much more than enjoyment. Joy is the startling realization that God really has claimed territory in this world. He took up residence, and has taken back what belongs to him. Amazing love reached past our wretched predicament and... Emmanuel! Because of Jesus, we can overcome any circumstance. We have the hope of heaven and the promise of peace while we live here on earth. I cannot think of a better reason to be filled with joy! And we get to tell others! It's not normal to be filled with this joy and keep it to ourselves. God made us for community. We have opportunities now and all throughout the year to show Christmas kindness and love. Besides, God's Word implores us to tell others about real joy.

Joy came to us. His name is Jesus. He left heaven for earth, to be born of a virgin. He breathed and walked and lived a sinless life. He died a cruel death to take away all our sin. He gloriously rose from the grave and returned to heaven to be with the Father. And Christ will return again - you can count on it - to take home all who are saved by grace to live forever, together with Him, in heaven. No more tears, sickness, pain, or death... an everlasting life, unlike and far better than anything we've every known, of doing exactly what we're meant to do - worship and praise Jesus... GREAT JOY!

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee, Op'ning to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; Drive the dark of doubt away; Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day! -Joyful Joyful (Ode to Joy)

Consider This:

- What makes you happy? What brings you joy? Ask God to give you the wisdom to know the difference.
- Would the person who knows you the very best describe you as someone who lives joyfully? If the answer is less than you hoped for, ask the Lord and that person to help you to know how to practice joy.
- Count your blessings - gratitude precedes joy. Another sure fire way to find joy is to serve others. Get out of your comfort zone, do something messy, and give someone else the gift of seeing and knowing great joy.
- Extra Credit: Look up lyrics to "Joyful Joyful (Ode to Joy)" and sing contemplatively, at least once this Christmas.

It is not always easy to be anxious for nothing is it? It seems that in today's world we are always anxiously awaiting what is next. God's Word tells us in Philippians 4:6-7 to "not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Nothing tells this story better than my last 6 months. God is capable of giving a peace that we cannot even begin to understand. A peace that can only be from Him.

For those who do not know my story, in July of 2017 I was diagnosed with leiomyosarcoma of the mesentery. This is a type of cancer that can only be cured by complete removal. The doctors at Emory did not have high hopes that this was possible due to the location of the cancer. All this time in the doctor's office I prayed for peace. All hope had to be given to God. I recieved a peace that is unexplainable. Still not knowing the outcome, I had peace. The Scripture says to let our requests be known to God.

Space and time are precious, so long story short = through God's grace, I am now cancer free!

As you prepare for this Advent season please let your requests be known to God. Spend time in prayer and supplication. God is bigger than any worldly tribulation. Find peace in who we celebrate this season. Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior not only created the world, He overcame the world.

Consider This:

- There are many other places in the Bible we're told not to fear. Can you find some and jot them down? One is John 14:27, where we're told not to be troubled. It's clearly important to God we don't live in fear!
- Is there a situation or area of your life that makes you anxious or fearful? Ask God to help you pinpoint the root of your fear, and to remind you of His presence with you.
- Spend some time thanking God and meditating on all He is for you. Also, jot down a few names of others you know going through a difficult time, and pray for them.

"It is ironic that the world needs more than anything is something the world knows little about. And that is true love-the biblical kind of love. While modern love in the world is "me" centered, biblical love is "other" centered.

We are to love others the way Jesus Christ loves us." Dr. David Jeremiah

It has taken me, with God's help, all 52 years to get my brain near the right area to even grasp this biblical concept of love. For years, I have heard 'God wants you to love your enemies.' I thought, yeah, I love them so much I pray for them each day. I pray God removes them from me and everyone else and even from this world. I honestly thought this was OK and part of being a Christian. But this was coming from that modern concept of 'me centered' love. This is and was wrong!

The Lord not only tells us to love, but gives this as a directive or a command 55 times in the New Testament. Of those 55 times, at least 21 of them are to love others, meaning your neighbor and the people you do not know. Today I can take comfort in knowing even if I do not know someone's heart, my God does. I do not have to worry if this love is reciprocated, because I am not doing it for them. I am doing this for God. I don't have to agree with someone to love them.

Jesus shows us this love many times in the New Testament. His entire presence throughout the 4 gospels is about loving and teaching others: His disciples, His followers, other believers, and those who didn't understand. The lady at the well is one great example, the people He healed are more examples. For me, the best examples are when Jesus showed love to those who despised Him, like the Pharisees and the Romans. We must learn to love outside of our box, outside of our comfort zone. And how do we measure if we are getting this right? Meditate on this for a while.

Consider This:

- Grasping and understanding God's love for you is the foundation in growing your love for others. Ephesians 4:32 tells us to love one another as God loves us. Be forgiving just as God in Christ (who did for you) forgave you.
- Praying for others is a way of showing God you understand His message and are trying to follow his example of Love. 1 John 3:16 tell us "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."
- Practice love each day. Ephesians 5:1-2 "Therefor be imitators of God as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."