



# ADVENT

2025

*As we enter this sacred season of Advent, we invite you to join our church family on a special journey of reflection and preparation. This year, our guides are written by **twenty** members of our church family. We are still framing this season around the four Sundays of Advent: **Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love**. To take this guide one step further, each week's entry will draw from a different biblical genre - **Old Testament Narrative, Poetry, Prophecy, the Gospels, and the Epistles** - offering unique windows into the unfolding story of God's plan to bring salvation through Jesus Christ.*

*Advent is a time to pause, to slow down, and to intentionally prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Savior. It's more than just a countdown to Christmas; it's a spiritual invitation to make room for Him - Emmanuel, God with us - in our daily lives.*

*May this season of anticipation deepen your faith, fill you with hope, and remind you that the greatest gift is the presence of Christ - always with us, always for us.*

*Welcome to the journey.  
Let's prepare our hearts for Him.*



# HOPE

*Narrative | Byron Moore*  
*God's Better Plan | 2 Samuel 7*

Have you ever had a plan, a prayer, an ambition, or an idea that you just knew was perfect? Right in the center of God's will? And then, either through a direct answer or a disappointing circumstance, you find out that God's answer was "no."

King David had just such an idea. In *2 Samuel 7:1-3* we read,

**Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you."**

David was keenly aware of the incalculable blessings God had showered on him in his lifetime. From the pasture to the palace, David had been raised up from a simple shepherd boy to be the King of Israel. God had given him victory over his enemies and a royal **"house of cedar"** in which to live.

In a moment of extreme self-consciousness about his rise to royalty, David compares his own house to God's dwelling place—a tent! The same **"tent of meeting"** the people of Israel had been carrying around since the days of Moses. Back in the day, this **"Tabernacle"** (as the tent was called) seemed entirely sufficient—in fact, its sufficiency was established because that was the place where God met Moses regularly **"face to face!"**

But now, somehow, the tabernacle seemed too little... too lowly... not appropriate for the God of a kingdom that had risen to the level of world standing as had Israel. David intended to change that. That is, until God said, "Not so fast."

**"Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in?'"** (*2 Samuel 7:5*)

God did not fuss at David for his ambition. In fact, He would soon tell David of His own plans to have Solomon, David's son, build Him a house. But, God's message to David was, "I'm not done blessing you, yet."

**Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.** (*2 Samuel 7:11*)

This is not referring to a bigger, better **"house of cedar,"** that would one day rot, burn, or simply fall down. This would be a family. A lineage. A royal succession over the people of God that would never end.

**"And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever."** (*2 Samuel 7:16*)

The first book of the New Testament opens with, **"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."** (*Matthew 1:1*)

Jesus affirmed the same in *Revelation 22:16*, **"I am the root and the descendant of David."**

This promise made to David is a prophecy about Jesus Christ, the descendant of David whose kingdom will never end and never fail. David's response to God's surprising promises gives us a few hints at how we too should respond to God's unreasonable grace towards us.

#### **RESPONSE #1: HUMILITY**

**Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD. You have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come, and this is instruction for mankind, O Lord GOD!"** (*2 Samuel 7:18-19*)

David was all too aware of his lowly beginnings and the distance God had already brought him. And now, God wanted to bless him even more? How could this be? David knew he did not deserve such treatment.

#### **RESPONSE #2: COURAGE**

**"For you, O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house.' Therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant. Now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you. For you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."** (*2 Samuel 7:27-29*)

God's unreasonable grace should leave us not only humbly grateful, but confidently courageous. At the revelation of God's gracious plan for David's line, David "found courage to pray this prayer to You."

During this Advent week of Hope, may we focus on His gracious blessings towards us that we might grow in humble gratitude. And may His history of blessing (culminating in His Incarnation among us) stir up in us a growing courage to ask Him for big things, daring Him to respond with "No... I've got something better... I'm not done blessing you yet!"

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

How can we hold on to hope when God's answer is "no" or "not yet" - especially when we deeply believe our desires are good and godly?

How can we respond with both humility and courage when God says "yes" to our prayers or plans? What does David's reaction in 2 Samuel 7 teach us about receiving God's blessings in a way that honors Him rather than ourselves?

Poetry | Maggie Raab  
Downcast, Yet Hoping | Psalm 42

Life is hard, messy, and broken. We hurt, suffer, and struggle. During Advent, we reflect on Jesus' *first* coming and long for His second coming. For Him to come back and make all things new. For Him to bring us home where there is no more sin, sadness, sickness, or death. For Him to redeem us.

Only because of Jesus' first coming do we have hope in this. God, Himself, came into our broken world, wrapped Himself in flesh as a helpless baby, and made a way of salvation for us sinners.

The Psalmist in *Psalm 42* is one such sinner. He is truly struggling. He is spiritually dry. He thirsts for God. He has no appetite. His tears are his food. He misses his community. Waves and breakers have gone over him. People are asking him, "Where is your God?" And God, indeed, feels so very far away. Yet, his soul longs for Him.

Have you ever felt this way? I know I have, and I will again and again until Christ returns in glory. We can learn so much from the Psalmist when spiritually depressing times come, and they will. I treasure this Psalm and often find myself reading, praying, meditating on, and singing it over and over. The Psalmist teaches us that we can be raw and honest with God, and ourselves, in our lamenting. He asks himself in *verse 5*, **"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?"** Sometimes we feel this way for no reason we can explain, and it is okay to question.

We must run to Jesus...even when we do not feel like it. The Psalmist cries out to God and shows us how to do this. Oftentimes, we just do not know what to pray and do not have the strength to think about it. What is so beautiful about God and His goodness is that He gives us His Word that we can read, pray, and sing to remind ourselves of truth. This is another thing the Psalmist did. He spoke this truth to himself. In *Psalm 42:8*, he says, **"By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night His song is with me."** We must learn Scripture and preach it to our souls over and over as the Psalmist did.

Often my family is in turmoil and nobody wants to be kind, loving, gentle, speak truth, pray, or worship. But by His grace the Holy Spirit helps us, and we will worship together, singing truths and praising God. And as always, God is faithful in meeting us there. It is so crazy what worshiping does for our souls! It's supernatural. What a great example we have of this in *Psalm 42*.

The Psalmist also longs to be in God's sanctuary. In *verse 4*, he remembers how he **"would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival."** There was some sort of disruption in his community, and he longs for corporate worship, to be with other believers, giving praise to God. He knows he needs it, and we do, too. We need both one-on-one time with God, and we need community. Coming together as the body of Christ is such a priceless gift from God!

Lastly, we can learn from the Psalmist what to put our hope in. His soul **"pants"** and **"thirsts"** for God (*v. 1-2*). He is desperate. He knows everything else will let him down, and that nothing in this world will satisfy him.

He knows that his only hope in life and death is that he is not his own but belongs, body and soul, to God.

As *verse 5* says, **"Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."** He does not say, I might praise him again. He has this hopeful expectation. Many years later, Jesus Christ also said, **"I thirst"** as he was hanging on a cross (*John 19:38*), but this was not just for water. Ultimately, he thirsted for God, who satisfies much more deeply than any earthly drink ever could. But for our sake, He was denied, so that we could drink deeply of that living water He so desperately yearned for. In this we find hope.

This Advent, instead of putting our hope in the things of this world that will fade and not satisfy, and in the commercialized version of the season where we imagine the perfect dinner, the perfect gifts, and the perfect pictures that always seem to let us down and leave us feeling empty and sad, may we reorient our hearts to this unshakable HOPE. It will not put us to shame and will not fail us, because this hope is found in Christ.

Let us look to His second coming and hold fast to the hope that we can cling to even after December 25th this year and all the years to come. Christian, not everyone has this great gift. Advent is such a sweet time to share this with those that desperately need light, life and hope. So invite over friends, family, and neighbors. Light the Advent candles and gather around to read, sing, and rejoice in our Great Hope.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When life feels dry, painful, or overwhelming, how can we follow the Psalmist's example in *Psalm 42* to be honest with God while still choosing to hope in Him? What does it practically look like to "preach truth to your soul" in those moments?

Why do you think corporate worship and Christian community are so important during seasons of spiritual dryness or despair? How has gathering with others to worship God helped restore your hope in difficult times? The world offers temporary comforts—especially during the holiday season—but why does Advent call us to a deeper, more lasting hope?



I find the book of Lamentations to honestly be a bit of a downer most of the time. It is filled with deep emotion as the author—thought by many to be the prophet, Jeremiah—cries out to God with honest and raw lament over what he and the people of Judah are enduring. Lamentations was written during the time when Jerusalem had been defeated and the people exiled to Babylon. They felt lost, afflicted, and alone.

The people of Judah had sinned; they had chosen to not follow God's commands and were now experiencing God's just discipline by being exiled. The writer confesses, **“you have dealt with me because of all my transgressions... though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer”** (*Lamentations 1:22, 3:8*). From their limited viewpoint, there is seemingly no hope. They are in a foreign country, suffering physically and emotionally, pouring out their hearts, yet it still seems God is remaining silent.

I think if we are being honest, we can also find ourselves in this same position. Our suffering may not look exactly like the Israelites' suffering—maybe you are struggling to find freedom from addiction or healing from sickness, maybe you are struggling to find a job that meets your needs or to adjust to a new season of life, or maybe you are walking through conflict with a loved one. Regardless of what we struggle with, all of our suffering can quickly feel lonely and hopeless.

In *Lamentations 3:16-20*, the writer laments of his suffering and the loss of peace, happiness, endurance, and hope he feels.

**He has made my teeth grind on gravel,  
and made me cower in ashes;  
my soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
so I say, “My endurance has perished;  
so has my hope from the LORD.”  
Remember my affliction and my wanderings,  
the wormwood and the gall!  
My soul continually remembers it  
and is bowed down within me.**

*(Lamentations 3:16-20)*

He is truly in a devastating place, but in the following verses, things take a turn for the better.

**But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”**

*(Lamentations 3:21-24)*

As we read these verses, the writer turns from lamenting to reminding himself and his audience of the hope we have in the Lord. He tells us of God's steadfast love, his mercy, and His faithfulness. Throughout the entire book of Lamentations, we see that God is consistent to bring justice to human sin, and here in the middle of the book, in chapter three, we are encouraged that we have hope knowing He will be consistent to keep His covenant promise to not allow sin and evil to get the final word.

We celebrate Jesus this Christmas season as the One who brings this unperishable hope. Even in the midst of our struggles and trials, may we know that God is with us. Even though it may feel as though He is remaining silent, may we know that He hears our cries, and in His perfect timing, He will answer our prayers and deliver us from our suffering for His glory and for our good.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Lamentations shows a brutally honest picture of pain and silence from God. What can we learn from the writer's shift in focus from despair (*v. 16-20*) to hope (*v. 21-24*)? How can we practice this kind of faith in seasons where peace and happiness feel far away?

In what ways can the truth of God's steadfast love and daily mercies (*v. 22-23*) reframe how we view our current struggles? How can we remind ourselves and others of this hope during the Advent season?

My first memory of Christmas was not necessarily one that reminds me of warm feelings and great family time. It was the day after Christmas, and my parents informed me that they would be getting a divorce. I was ten years old and was very close to my dad. He was a coach in the local school system, and I was into everything sports-related.

Within days, my dad moved out. A few weeks later, my mom sold the house. A few months later, we had moved six hours away and my dad was no longer a part of my life. To say I had a huge void in my life would be an understatement.

My mom signed me up to play baseball, she started taking us to church for the first time in our lives, and she did all she could to get us to settle into a new life. The void was still there though. In the midst of uncertainty, I was searching for hope.

Hope is something that is frequently needed amid uncertainty.

John tells the account of Jesus addressing the Jewish religious leaders after they question His actions around a healing on the Sabbath. While many would be rejoicing that a life was changed and hope came to life for an individual, the religious leaders were focused elsewhere. The dialogue concludes in *John 5:39-47*. Jesus says,

**You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from people. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (*John 5:39-44*)**

Jesus tells these religious leaders that they are seeking out hope for eternity in the Scriptures. They think knowledge is the answer but fail to recognize the message of hope communicated in these Scriptures.

They are so caught up in glorifying one another and receiving glory from others that they fail to see Jesus for who He is. He has come in the Father's name and all of Scripture bears witness about Him. But the religious readers are consumed with themselves and do not believe. Because of their self-glorifying pursuit, there is no way they can recognize their need for a Savior.

**Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope.**

**For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words? (*John 5:45-47*)**

Jesus points out that they are looking to the past for their hope. They place their hope in Moses, rather than Moses' message. They evidently took great pride in studying Moses' writings but failed to comprehend Moses' teaching. Moses was never meant to be the hope for eternity. Jesus has been and will always be that hope.

It is in the Scriptures that we experience Jesus. It is not until we come face to face with Jesus that we experience real hope. Real hope that matters today as well as for the future.

We can consume our lives with pursuits of achievements and recognition like the Jewish leaders. We can expand our knowledge and seek associations with prominent people also like the Jewish leaders. We can even look at past experiences, stories, or relationships for something to grab hold of for hope.

It is not until we take our focus off self and humbly look toward God for guidance that we experience real hope in Jesus.

It is not until we stop relying on past experiences and seek the God of eternity for our present and future that we experience real hope in Jesus.

It was two years later (I was now twelve years old) when Jesus became real to me. That void was filled, and real, lasting hope was now part of my life. Jesus filled the void that no sports team or activity could fill.

Life is full of ups and downs, but hope remains through the person of Jesus.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Like the religious leaders who searched the Scriptures but missed the Savior, we can often look to achievements, knowledge, people, or the past to fill our deepest needs. What does it look like to shift our hope from those things to Jesus in practical, everyday life?

The story shared in the guide shows how real hope came after deep personal loss. Have you experienced a time when Jesus met you in a place of pain or emptiness? How can these moments help us better understand the hope we celebrate during Advent?

One of my favorite aspects of Christmas and the Advent season is the reminder of the hope found in Jesus Christ. For those who are in Him, our hope is held in the sovereign hand of God! We, the Church, have hope because God incarnate has secured our salvation in the past, He preserves it in the present, and He will complete it in the future. God sovereignly orchestrates the entirety of our salvation—our justification, sanctification, and ultimate glorification. My prayer is that our church would be edified throughout this Advent guide as we are reminded of the truth of God's Word.

The Apostle Paul, in chapters three and four of his letter to the church in Rome, clearly explains how our salvation from the curse of sin is obtained. It is solely by the grace of God working through the faith of man. God has done everything necessary for our salvation; our role is only to respond in faith (*Romans 3:20-25, 4:20-25*).

In chapter five, Paul continues this thought.

**Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.** (*Romans 5:1*)

He states the gospel truth again—that those who are truly in Christ are **justified by faith**. This means that we are counted as righteous before God. We are no longer guilty of sin. The wages of our transgressions no longer apply to us because Jesus took our sin and the wrath of God we earned upon Himself. In exchange, we receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Now, when the Father looks at us, He sees Christ.

Paul reiterates another truth: since we are justified, we are now at **peace with God**. We are no longer enemies of God; we have become citizens, children, and even co-heirs with Christ. This, too, is only obtained **through our Lord Jesus Christ**. He is the one who has provided our reconciliation. Paul shows us here how our salvation has been secured in the past—Jesus Christ has already justified us and brought us peace with the Father.

**Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.** (*Romans 5:2*)

Paul shifts his focus to the believer's current standing. He reminds the Church that **through Him**—Jesus Christ—**we have obtained access by faith**. Another biblical truth for believers is that we have access to our good Father through the great High Priest who intercedes for us! We can draw near to Him because nothing separates us from the throne of God anymore; our separation, which we brought on ourselves because of our sin, is no more. Christ tore the veil! The **grace in which we stand** refers to the saving grace of our Lord. God's grace is permanent. This is great news! This grace

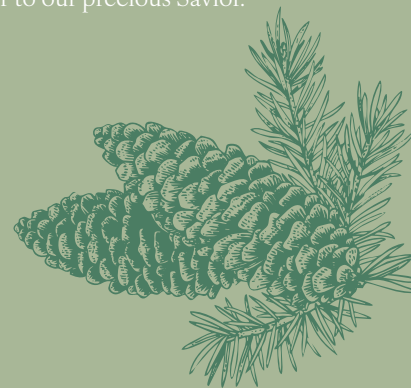
saved us while we were still sinners and will also sustain and sanctify us. We now live in a state of continual forgiveness—God's grace never runs out.

God's Word has shown how our past and present are secured in Christ Jesus—but what about our future? Paul says **we rejoice in hope of the glory of God**. Our future hope is our glorification—when we will be perfectly conformed into the likeness of Christ. As with every other aspect of our salvation, our future hope is divinely secured by Christ Jesus. There will come a day when we will be completely free from sin and brokenness, and we will share in the glory of God. We eagerly wait for our future; this is our hope, and it is secured in Christ.

The great enemy, Satan, tempts us to despair and to doubt the hope that we have—but we must believe God's Word. It is unchanging, and it is true.

Through Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection, He has justified us, restored our peace with the Father, granted us access to the throne of grace, preserved our salvation, continually sanctifies us, and has promised us a share in His eternal glory. My brothers and sisters, we have hope! Our hope is rooted solely in Christ, and it is secured by God's sovereign hand. Walk in the truth of God's Word—know it, believe it, and rejoice in it.

All glory and honor to our precious Savior.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Romans 5:1-2* reminds us that we have been justified, now stand in grace, and rejoice in the hope of future glory. How does this complete view of salvation help us face trials, temptation (like in *Genesis 3* or *Revelation 12*), or seasons of doubt? How can it deepen our joy and purpose during Advent?

Paul says we rejoice in the hope of future glorification (*Romans 5:2; cf. Romans 8:29-30, 1 John 3:2*). In what ways can we actively rejoice in this hope—even when life feels heavy, uncertain, or broken? How can keeping our eyes on eternity change the way we pray, worship, or engage with others during the Christmas season?



*May he be like rain that  
falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water  
the earth!*

*In his days may the  
righteous flourish,  
and peace abound, till  
the moon be no more!*

PSALM 72:6-7



PEACE



*Narrative | Martha Johnson*  
*Peace Through Forgiveness | Genesis 50:20*

What is peace? We talk about peace and sing about peace a lot at Christmas, but have you ever stopped to consider what peace means? Or more specifically, how Jesus coming to earth as a baby brings us peace? When I looked up the definition, I found two that begin to help us answer this question:

- + a state of mutual harmony between people or groups
- + freedom of the mind from annoyance, distraction, anxiety, or an obsession

In short, peace is both the absence of conflict and the absence of anxiety. As someone who dislikes conflict and is prone to anxiety, ‘peace on earth’ sounds like great news to me!

In the very last chapter of the book of Genesis, we find a verse that promises such peace to both the original audience and those who place their trust in Jesus throughout all time, **“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today”** (*Genesis 50:20*). Without even knowing the context of this verse, it is such a comfort to think that God would use men’s evil deeds for good!

But knowing the context is even more awe-inspiring! The speaker in this verse is Joseph, the guy who received the **“robe of many colors”** from his father (*Genesis 37:3*). Joseph was his father’s favorite son (hence, the fancy robe), so his jealous brothers sold him into slavery. Through a series of events, God raised Joseph from slavery to the position of the second most powerful man in Egypt. Pharaoh tells Joseph, **“You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you”** (*Genesis 41:40*).

When a famine hit the region, Joseph was in charge of divvying out resources to people coming to Egypt for food. In the crowd of people coming to Joseph for help were his brothers. They did not even recognize Joseph until he revealed his true identity to them. He forgave them before they even knew who he was! Joseph speaks *Genesis 50:20* to his brothers in a moment where they are questioning the sincerity and depth of his forgiveness, **“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”**

I have three sisters with whom I am incredibly close. I cannot imagine the hurt and betrayal I would feel if they *sold me into slavery*. When Joseph could have used his position of power to get revenge, he instead chose to extend mercy. He forgave them, fed them, and chose to be thankful for how God used their evil intentions for the greater good.

Now what does this passage have to do with Christmas and the peace we sing about? If we look at *Matthew 1:2*, we find a genealogy of Jesus that reveals He is a descendant from one of Joseph’s brothers named Judah.

And when we zoom out and look at the whole story of Scripture, we see that God’s sovereign hand over Joseph’s life ensured the survival of the Messianic line through Judah. When Joseph extended grace to Judah by forgiving him and feeding his family, this got us one generation closer to Jesus! Joseph’s position of power ensured life for many people in Egypt, and Jesus coming to earth ensured eternal life for many people throughout history. Joseph’s act of radical forgiveness points us to the *most* radical act of forgiveness that can only be found in Jesus’ death.

If peace can be defined as the absence of conflict and the absence of anxiety, *Genesis 50:20* certainly brought peace to Joseph’s guilty, desperate brothers. Similarly, but more significantly, Jesus coming to earth as a baby promises such peace to all who put their faith in Him. Because of our sin nature, we enter this world in conflict with God. We are incapable of holiness, and God cannot overlook sin, thus, the conflict. But when Jesus took on flesh and lived a sinless life, His death was sufficient to pay the price for our rebellion.

When we put our trust in Jesus, we are no longer in conflict with God! And because our lives were purchased by Jesus’ perfect blood, we do not have to be anxious about our status before God when we inevitably mess up. We do not have to be like Joseph’s brothers, questioning the forgiveness of the person from whom we have received mercy. This is the peace that we talk about and sing about at Christmas!



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jesus came to bring peace between God and humanity. How does Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers give us a glimpse of the kind of peace Jesus offers us through the cross?

Joseph told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” How might that truth give you peace this Advent season, especially in the midst of hard or painful circumstances?

Many of us struggle to fully accept forgiveness. How does the story of Joseph, and ultimately the coming of Jesus, help you rest in God’s mercy and release anxiety about your standing with Him?

Throughout the Psalms, David and the other writers take us for a ride on their emotional roller coasters. Oftentimes, we feel the highs and lows of our own hypothetical theme park rides being magnified by the pressure or the nostalgia of the Christmas season. We may end up asking ourselves if we have enough time, headspace, and money for all the trips, family gatherings, and presents. We often find ourselves feeling down when we remember the family members we have lost, or we feel angry after seeing the one person we did not want to see this time of year.

In all that David went through in his lifetime as recorded in the Psalms, I cannot help but wonder what kept him moving forward. Then I think the same in regards to my own life. What helps me keep going forward? For me (and David), it is the all-encompassing peace that comes from truly knowing God and wholly trusting in His Word and in His plan.

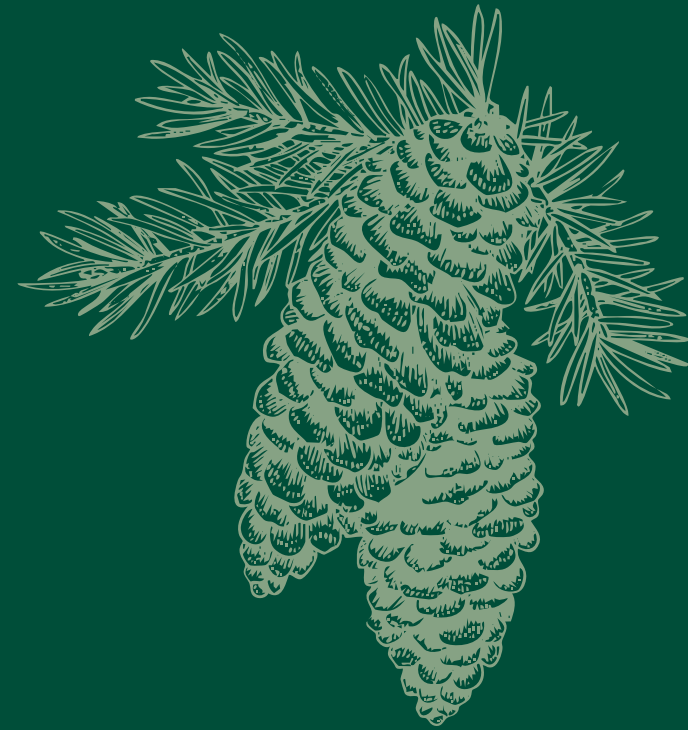
**May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth!  
In his days may the righteous flourish,  
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!**

*(Psalm 72:6-7)*

Like the grass that is freshly cut or the hopeful springtime growth, Solomon uses rain to illustrate God's provision for our needs. It is His provision that will lead us to flourish eternally. In the same way that God provides rain for the grass, we should comfortably rest in His provision for as long as He reigns, which is for eternity. In our hard/low times, God will water the seeds of His Word that have been planted in our hearts. We as believers will feel peace from knowing that when all the suffering we endure on this earth is over, we will have the privilege of entering heaven to eternally worship and glorify the one true God who, despite all our worries and fears, has provided for all of our needs. He is the God of all creation.

That overwhelming peace in knowing our eternal destiny is a special gift of God's grace reserved for those who believe in God's new covenant. We have that promise laid right in front of us in His Word—that Jesus died for our sins. We will find peace abounding for as long as He reigns, and He will reign forever.

Jesus has already defeated death, and He is already seated on his throne to reign eternally. There is so much peace to be found in that knowledge, and that knowledge is only found by placing our faith in Jesus. This Advent season, I pray that you, too, will recognize the peace that is graciously given so that you may flourish in it. We are reminded of this promise of peace as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our King, Jesus—The Prince of Peace.



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Psalm 72* describes peace as something that “abounds” under the reign of the King. In what ways does Jesus, the Prince of Peace, bring peace that causes you to “flourish,” even in difficult seasons?

The image of rain on freshly cut grass suggests both refreshment and restoration. How have you experienced God's peace as refreshing or restorative in a recent season of life?

During Advent, we celebrate the first coming of Christ and await His return. How does the knowledge that Jesus reigns eternally affect your ability to rest in His peace today - even when life feels chaotic?

Prophecy | Gwen Dingler  
Peace Without End | Isaiah 9:6-7

Isaiah 9:6-7 gives us a perfect example of the complexity of understanding prophecy. In these two verses, we see the reality of the ‘near’ and ‘far’ aspects of prophecy. This prophetic announcement of the coming Messiah presents us with a picture of both His first and second Advent. And since Isaiah received these prophecies from God over 700 years before Christ was born, it is easy to see how the Jewish people were looking for a conquering ruler to bring them peace and miss the baby in the manger.

**For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.**

*(Isaiah 9:6-7)*

Although these verses are often quoted and read as a Christmas passage celebrating Advent, *(We can picture a tremendous choir singing Handel’s “Messiah” — “And His name shall be Call-ed, Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”)*, the whole passage gives us a picture of both his first and second coming!

The ‘near,’ the first part of the prophecy passage, was fulfilled at the first Advent of Christ, **“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given.”** (v. 6)

The ‘far’ aspect of the verse is yet to be fulfilled. We live in an ‘already, but not yet’ kingdom. While Jesus reigns, the reality of the here and now reveals that Jesus does not rule and reign throughout the world and in the hearts and lives of all men. And **“the increase of his government and of peace”** is not pervasive in the world (v. 7). All one has to do is to listen to the news to know that wars and rumors of war, fear, hatred and dissension are the rule now. In the words of the Christmas carol “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day,”

*“For hate is strong and mocks the song of Peace on Earth, good will to men.”*

Jesus Christ came the first time to provide peace WITH God through His death on the cross. His second Advent will bring the Kingdom OF Peace to fulfillment as He reigns and rules from the throne of David.

Peace is something the world is seeking. And for those who know Jesus as Lord and Savior, we can experience peace even in the midst of a world that appears to be careening out of control, both personally and worldwide. Another verse in the carol “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” says the following,

*“When men repent and turn from sin  
The Prince of Peace then enters in  
And grace imparts within their hearts  
His peace on earth, good will to men.”*

In my 72 years of life, I have been through many experiences that have sought to wreck the peace of my heart. Worries and anxieties have kept me up at night—struggles with family, finances, illness, the death of my spouse, and caring for my aging parents. There have been **“trials of various kinds,”** as *James 1:2* says. But through them all, God’s peace that transcends all understanding has prevailed. I am not saying I have perfectly felt that peace all the time—but through prayer and God’s Word, HE has brought peace to my troubled soul. His peace has sustained me when I thought I could not go on another day.

That is the peace we can experience this Christmas as we wait for The Day when the Prince of Peace will reign and **“of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”** (v. 7)

We can celebrate Christ’s birth while confidently holding onto the ‘far’ aspect of this prophetic verse because **“the zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”** (v. 7)



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Isaiah’s prophecy points to both Christ’s first coming (as a child) and His future return (as reigning King). How does holding this “already, but not yet” perspective help you live with peace in a world that still feels broken?

The reflection highlights personal experiences that threaten our peace - grief, anxiety, uncertainty. What has helped you hold onto God’s peace in seasons when life felt out of control?

Isaiah says “of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.” How can you participate in spreading Christ’s peace today as we wait for His return and the full establishment of His kingdom?

So often, peace feels like something just out of reach, especially during the Christmas season. I imagine it as the reward for finally getting my life together. I will convince myself that if I can just buy all my gifts ahead of time, organize our family's schedule in December perfectly, and somehow schedule pockets of time for rest, then I will have the reward of peace. This kind of peace is short-lived, and I know it! But I still convince myself it works that way. This 'peace' is not the biblical peace promised in Christ.

Scripture challenges us to see peace differently. It is not something we earn but something Christ Himself gives. In *John 14:27*, Jesus tells His disciples, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you."** His peace this season is not dependent on gaining control of our schedules or eliminating the busyness of Christmas but on His presence.

One of the most memorable pictures of peace is in *Mark 4:35-41*. Jesus and His disciples were travelling across the Sea of Galilee when a big storm overtook their boat. The disciples panicked while Jesus slept soundly on a cushion! So much to unpack there, but let us talk about the irony of Him sleeping in the middle of such chaos. It is almost comical.

Terrified, these disciples asked, **"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"** (v. 38). I empathize with their question. I can remember seasons when I have asked God the same: "Don't you care? Don't you see me struggling?" It can feel as though He is asleep to our struggle.

But Jesus rebuked the storm with a simple command, **"Peace! Be still!"** (v. 39). Instantly, the wind and waves obeyed. Then He asked His disciples, **"Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"** (v. 40). His question is piercing. Fear grows when faith is lacking. But how are we supposed to have faith when we are terrified? The answer is not in seeking control but in leaning into His presence.

My daughter, Elizabeth, has always been afraid of storms. When she sees dark clouds or hears thunder, she has a million questions. I have to be honest with her and admit a storm is coming. But what I can promise her is that God's presence and peace are always with her. **"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age"** (*Matthew 28:20*). Peace is not just the calm after the storm but also the calm that Christ provides in the middle of it.

In my own life, this truth has been tested in the ordinary chaos of motherhood. With three young kids, my house feels like chaos a lot of the time. Voices overlap, the oven beeps, the toddler is crying about how I peeled his banana (*what is it with toddlers and bananas?*), and I am trying to stay sane and present. Yet, in the midst of that noise, when I am looking for it, I

can see the Holy Spirit working.

My own voice softens before a yell in frustration: **"Peace, be still."**

A child's breathing slows after a moment of panic: **"Peace, be still."**

Anger towards my spouse dissolves and turns to understanding: **"Peace, be still."**

These glimpses remind me that peace is not found in controlling every detail of the Christmas season but in depending on the presence of Christ, who is already with us. So when peace feels far away, remember—it is not something you create but something you already possess in Christ.

**For he himself is our peace...** (*Ephesians 2:14*)

He is present in the storm. And the same voice that once calmed the sea still speaks to restless hearts today: **"Peace, be still."**



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Where in your life right now does peace feel out of reach? How might Jesus' words, "Peace, be still," speak directly to that place of fear, chaos, or striving?

Biblical peace doesn't come from control or perfection - it comes from Christ's presence. What are some small but intentional ways you can turn your attention to His presence this Advent season, even in the middle of life's storms?



Anxiety. We probably have all felt it at some point in our lives. It makes you feel hopeless, chaotic, empty, and flustered. Anxiety can creep in when we least expect it, and it can affect our attitudes, our relationships, and our witness to others. The rush of the Christmas season can certainly make one feel anxious: “*Do my children have the best Christmas outfits? Am I serving my community enough during the holidays? Did I pick out the perfect gifts? Is there money to purchase said perfect gifts? Am I preaching the real reason for Christmas to my family enough?*” So many swirling thoughts of anxiousness and worry this season, no matter the stage of life. BUT that is not the end, and there is hope and remedy to our anxiousness—the gift of PEACE.

**Do 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.** (Philippians 4:6-7)

Paul wrote these words in an environment that was not the most ‘peaceful’—prison. Anxiety can often feel like a prison, chained down and trapped. These two verses give us practical steps for a change of perspective. There is a command to combat our anxiety and an alternative for our anxiety.

- + Pray about everything. Go to the Prince of Peace and present your requests and your anxieties to Him.
- + Thanksgiving. Thankfulness can change our perspective and re-align our thoughts.

What is the result of coming to Him with our needs in a posture of thankfulness? PEACE. Not just a quiet moment to yourself, a cup of coffee that is still warm, a perfect job, obedient children, a perfectly planned vacation, a self-help book on anxiety, but **“the PEACE of God which surpasses ALL understanding”** (v. 7). It is more than we can even comprehend. We can dream of peaceful moments and things, but that does not even scratch the surface of this indescribable gift. The word ‘peace’ in this passage translates to shalom in Hebrew, meaning physical, mental, emotional well being and a deep sense of security that is only through the Prince of Peace.

The beautiful part is that Paul tells us that this offering of peace acts as a guard or protection for our hearts and minds. Anxiety can often form in our minds, but retraining our brains to come to Him in prayer and thankfulness results in his PEACE. *Romans 12:2*, tells us, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”** With the protection of peace, we are able to keep our hearts and minds away from worldly desires.

In Isaiah, we are told about the coming of the Prince of Peace (*Isaiah 9:6-7*) and then in the New Testament in *John 14:27*, we read Jesus’ words,

**“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.”**

The tiny baby born into the world as the Prince of Peace sacrificed His life so that you and I could have the chance to receive this incomprehensible gift of peace through His Spirit.

This Christmas season let us bring our worries to Him, thank Him for all He has done, and delight and rest in the gift of peace.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What anxieties or worries tend to weigh heaviest on your heart this Christmas season, and how might bringing them to God with thanksgiving change your perspective?

Paul describes God’s peace as a guard over our hearts and minds. How can you practically invite this “peace which surpasses all understanding” to protect your thoughts and emotions during the busy holiday season?

*I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

PHILIPPIANS 4:10-13



JOY

*Narrative | Layne Davison*  
*The Joy of David | Selected Psalms, 1 Samuel 16 and 18*

It is stated in *Acts 13:22* and often quoted that David was a man after God's own heart. But what exactly does this mean? Is it that David loved God more completely? Was his heart intertwined with God's in a unique way? Simply, I think it means David sought God in all things with joy.

And when we look at the life of David in Scripture, we see this born out. A good portion of the Psalms are a personal journal from the heart and mind of David. We hear his voice seeking God with gladness amidst often unthinkable circumstances. Read Psalm 3:1-3 and hear what David says when he is on the run from a mutiny organized by his own son, Absalom.

It is not only in moments of anxiety and depravity we hear David cry out to God. In *Psalm 18:1-3 and 49*, he gives joyous praise to the Lord following his deliverance from his foe, Saul.

In all these moments—monumental highs and hopeless lows—we hear David seek God with gladness and praise. This undoubtedly is a piece of the puzzle to David being described as a man after God's own heart. But how did David get this unconditional joy?

When Israel declared to Samuel they wanted a king to be like the contemporaries of their day, they were warned of the immense pitfalls against worldly leadership. However, God instructed Samuel to give Israel what they asked for and anoint an earthly king. Saul, a physically-imposing specimen, was chosen because he was head and shoulders (bad pun) above the competition.

However, Saul was quickly rejected by God due to his disobedience, and Samuel was instructed to seek the new king in the house of Jesse. We see this narrative play out in *1 Samuel 16* with Jesse parading his own outwardly impressive sons before Samuel.

**When they came, he looked at Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”** (*1 Samuel 16:6-7*)

In His mysterious and mighty sovereignty, God had been seeking and softening David's heart for this moment his whole life. While his brothers held positions of honor in battle, David literally and symbolically spent his days protecting sheep. A humble trade that, through the omnipotence of God, bred in him a heart of humility, bravery, servitude and unconditional joy. David, being specifically consecrated by God, had this joy in his heart for the rest of his days. But what did life look like for those who did not?

After David's anointing, Saul still remained in place as King of Israel. In chapter 17, the famous Goliath narrative plays out where God, through David's supernatural faith and bravery, delivers Israel from an undeliverable position. Upon returning from battle, in chapter 18, we see the common joy of the Israelite people on display.

**As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing to**

**meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.”**

(*1 Samuel 18:6-7*)

The people, specifically the women who had been left to await either salvation or enslavement, depending on the result of the battle, were filled with immense joy and gratitude at their deliverance. We can assume word had spread about the details of David's great victory because the women specifically directed the majority of their praise toward David. This small blow to the ego of Saul ignites a kindling of sin in his heart.

**And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” And Saul eyed David from that day on.** (*1 Samuel 18:8-9*)

Saul's joy was tied only to his own glory and favorable circumstances. This ultimately led to a pattern of jealousy, hate, and sin that would complete his downfall as the king of Israel and later his life. Saul's condition is no different from ours when we are removed from the supernatural, unconditional joy of God. So, how do we access it?

At the very first Christmas, there would come another David. He would also live a life filled with glory, as well as unthinkable suffering, but He would do it without sin. He would go to a cross to die, surrounded by His enemies, with fear in His heart. He would seek His Father and ask for deliverance, but unlike David, He would get no favor. He would die and rise again three days later, defeating death. Why? Because Jesus was not just a man after God's own heart, He was a man with God's own heart. And the heart of God is joy personified. It is a heart that longed to have you and I restored to its presence for eternity. So, how do we access the unconditional joy we see in the life of David? We go straight to the source.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

David is described as a man after God's own heart, not because of moral perfection, but because of his continual pursuit of God in every circumstance. How does David's example challenge or encourage the way you seek God - in joy, repentance, and worship - in your own highs and lows?

We see the contrast between David's God-centered joy with Saul's self-centered insecurity. In what ways are we tempted to tie our joy to personal success, recognition, or favorable circumstances? What might it look like to shift our joy toward the “source,” as described by Layne?



Have you ever met someone who so radiated the love of Jesus that you could hear Him in their words, you could see Him reflected in the things they do, and you might think to yourself—that's what I want? Well that is exactly how I feel when I read *Psalm 16*. David pulls back the curtain and lets us see his personal relationship with God. A relationship that did not just happen by chance but happened as a result of David making choices to pursue God. David made it a practice to seek Him, to know Him, and to be in His presence. As a result, the Bible refers to David as a man after God's own heart.

As we enter the Christmas season, the word 'Joy' moves into the spotlight. We read it on cards, we sing about it in carols, and we even wear it on our clothes. In *Psalm 16*, David celebrates the joy that results from his relationship with the Lord. In *verses 1-8*, David gives us real life experiences that have taught him to know and trust in God.

We see firstly that David knows God as his protector. In times of danger David has trusted God to be his refuge. He has experienced His protection in the past, so David knows God to be a protector. Secondly, David knows Him as his sovereign Lord—the one who rules over his life and is his greatest treasure. David has chosen to submit his life to the Lordship of Yahweh

Thirdly, David knows God as his source of life. David has discovered that his satisfaction and pleasure in life stem from his relationship with God. He refers to God as his chosen portion, and that the boundary lines had fallen for him in pleasant places—reminding us of the allocation of the Promised Land to the Israelites. Everything pertaining to life was in the land—their portion. David knows that all he needs is found in God. David says, **“You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”** (*Psalm 16:2*)

Lastly, David knows God as his counselor and support. Throughout David's account in the Old Testament, we read of him seeking the Lord, inquiring of the Lord for direction. David knows Him as his Wonderful Counselor, depending on God to lead and guide him. David has made choices to always set the Lord before him, being aware of His presence night and day.

As David trusted that his sovereign Lord would provide what he needed, he could remain calm even when things around him were falling apart. David knows from experience that these things (sovereignty, protection, provision, counsel) were true of God, therefore, he could put his trust in Him.

What was the effect of that on David? He says, **“Therefore my heart is glad (joyful) and my whole being rejoices”** (*Psalm 16:9*). David was filled with joy from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, inside and out. A joy that stems from his intimate and personal relationship with God. David does not even fear death. He trusts in God's provision of life.

The crescendo of *Psalm 16* is in *verse 11*, **“You make known to me the path of life (not death); in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”** The path of life is found in a relationship with Him, fullness of joy is found in a relationship with Him, and you guessed it—pleasures forevermore are found in a relationship with Him.

Maybe you have heard the saying, 'Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship,' and that is exactly what it is! From the very beginning, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, it has always been about a relationship with God. For reasons unknown to us, God loves us and desires intimacy. The lengths that our Lord and Savior went to, to make a way for us, demonstrate how much He loves us.

*If you ever doubt the love of God for you, do not look to your own circumstances that are sometimes good and sometimes bad—go to the cross.* Without the cross, we would be without hope. The blood of Jesus cleanses us of every sin, every single one. It makes us as perfect as He is. Because of the blood of Jesus, we can run to His throne when we have messed up, sinned that familiar sin for the hundredth time, and receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. (*Hebrews 4:16*)

This Christmas, let us do what David did and celebrate the joy that comes from our relationship with Jesus Christ who has swung the doors wide open and beckons all of us to come in.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

During Advent, we prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of Jesus - God with us. Psalm 16 reminds us that **“in [God's] presence there is fullness of joy.”** How can focusing on your relationship with Jesus during this season help you experience deeper joy, even if life feels busy, uncertain, or difficult?

Advent is a time of waiting, longing, and hope. David's joy came from knowing God personally - not just knowing about Him. What would it look like for you to pursue that kind of relationship with Jesus this Advent season? What intentional steps could you take to **“set the Lord always before”** you, like David did (*Psalm 16:8*)?





Habakkuk was a melancholy prophet.

His book is unique among the minor prophets because he never actually addresses Israel directly. He does not attempt to defend them, like Elijah, or rebuke them, like Isaiah. He simply calls it like it is—they are in trouble. **“The law is paralyzed,”** he says, **“and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted”** (Habakkuk 1:4).

No, Habakkuk does not defend or attack his people. What he does is *pray*. He wrestles with God and begs Him to do something—anything—to set things right again.

But at the end, in chapter three, the book takes a strange turn. He writes:

**Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.**

(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

We have to admit that this is pretty strange behavior. **Joy**, in the midst of suffering? It seems like insanity or, at best, wishful thinking.

Joy has always been a fleeting experience. Plato once wrote a little myth about it, which went, more or less, like this:

*Way back in the ancient days when the gods and men walked together, humans used to be much more rotund creatures than we are now. They had spheres for heads, big pot-bellies, and each had four arms and legs a piece. One day, they got to feeling a little proud of themselves. They looked upwards, saw all the stars, and were filled with jealousy. “Why does God get to have the heavens to Himself? Why can’t we live there?” they muttered to themselves.*

*So, in their arrogance, they decided to storm the heavens and take what didn’t belong to them. God quickly put a stop to this, of course. In His anger, He shot a thunderbolt that cut all of the rebels in half.*

*As a result, humans became unbalanced and incomplete. For some reason, even centuries later, we can never seem to shake the nagging feeling that something is missing. We still search the whole earth looking for our better half. We get glimpses occasionally—in our spouses and in our children. On a clear night, if we squint, we can see all the stars dancing and get a vague memory of what once was. But then the clouds roll in, and we are left unsatisfied.*

C.S. Lewis called this feeling *Sehnsucht*—an old Germanic term, best translated as “*holy longing*.” It is elusive, always shifting, but once we taste it

we never want to let it go. The problem, so says Habakkuk, is that we are looking in all the wrong places.

To the prophet, joy was less of a *feeling* and more of a posture. A commitment to place his trust, not in the harvest, but in the Lord of the harvest: the One who makes the figs and olives grow and who takes them away when He pleases. Contrary to what it seems, this is not insanity or wishful thinking. And it is far more than “*turning a frown upside down*.” It is a steadfast resolution to look all of our suffering square in the face and to know that Christ has conquered it all. It is not naive; in fact, it is the only view that is grounded in reality. If we believe that Christ has defeated death, then we not only *can* say, but we *ought* to say with the old English poet:

*“One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.”  
(John Donne, Death, be not proud)*

Habakkuk’s assertion is that joy is not just a thing God likes, but that it is what He *is*—God is the very *source* of joy. To look for it anywhere besides Him is like trying to quench your thirst with sand. All the while, we ignore that God is offering us a well that never runs dry: Himself.

But there is hope for Habakkuk, for Plato, for you, and for me. It was never the intention of Heaven to let us stay incomplete, like rebels cut in half, forever. Some two-thousand years ago, in the middle of the desert, a new invasion was launched—God came down to us.

It was a clear night and all the stars were dancing, but this time the clouds did not dare to interrupt. Then, like thunder, the voice of a messenger spoke to some poor and lonesome shepherds—it met them in the midst of their suffering. There was no mistaking what it said; it rang out like a trumpet and was as sweet as the fresh autumn harvest:

**Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy...**  
(Luke 2:10)

Joy, Himself, had arrived.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Advent is a season of both longing and hope - a time of waiting in the “already but not yet.” Habakkuk chooses to rejoice not in his circumstances, but in the God of his salvation. How can you practice that kind of joy this Advent season, even in the midst of personal hardship, uncertainty, or unmet expectations?

The guide says joy is “less of a feeling and more of a posture” - a choice to trust in the Lord of the harvest. What might it look like for you to adopt that posture of joy this Christmas? How does the coming of Christ - Joy Himself - give you hope, even when life doesn’t feel joyful?

I recall a time as a kid playing hide-and-seek with my sister and some family friends at our house. I was feeling really good about my hiding spot in my sister's room, at the bottom of her laundry hamper and covered with clothes. But after 15 minutes or so of sweating it out at the bottom of that hamper, I was growing impatient. It was just me and my sister's Corey Hart and Wham! posters on the wall. After another 15 minutes, I realized that everyone else had moved on to another fun activity and left me for dead. My brilliant spot had backfired.

As you may know, the joy of hide-and-seek is the moment of reunion. It is fun to *find* someone, and it is a thrill to be *found*. And there is great joy at that exact moment.

In *Luke 15*, Jesus gives the religious 'grumps' three parables to drive home a point: **lost people, sinners, are not to be disdained but to be sought after like a treasure.** You see, the Pharisees and scribes, the religious 'experts,' were grumbling that Jesus was spending time with the sick, the lost, the sinners. He wanted them to see differently. So, He gave them three pictures of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. In each scenario, the owner urgently desires reunion and there is a big-time celebration when it happens.

First, there is a shepherd who finds his one lost sheep. He straight up leaves the other 99 in the open country. You might say this seems irresponsible. That thought crosses my mind. But, I think it depicts the heart of our Father toward the lost. Desperate. Passionate. And there is rejoicing as he carries that one sheep back on his shoulders.

Then, there is the woman with her lost coin. 'I know there were 10. I just know there's one missing.' She does three things in her passionate search. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and seeks diligently. After all, this coin is worth a day's wages which would be about \$300 for the average American. Once again, a reunion! Rejoicing. A spontaneous party with her friends and neighbors.

Finally, there is the infamous prodigal son who squanders his inheritance. He returns to his Father, only hoping to become a lowly servant, but his Father runs to him with open arms. He declares, **"For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to celebrate."** (*Luke 15:24*)

Here's a few thoughts I think we can walk away with. First, you and I were once that lost treasure. We were sick. Lost. Dead. Sinners. That is what we *were*. And, in His own way, in His timing, he sought after you and me and found us... and there was a crazy wild party in heaven!

**Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance... Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.** (*Luke 15:7, 10*)

Have you ever thought about that—that you were and are SO very valuable to the King of the universe that there was a party in heaven in your honor? He valued you so much He pursued you with great urgency. He did not see you or me with disdain or disgust, but with desperation and delight. And praise God we are now well. Found. Alive. Saints.

Another thought, or perhaps a question—how do we see the lost? Are we like the Pharisees and scribes and look at those who do not know Christ with disdain instead of compassion? You could almost make the case from these parables that Jesus cares more about the lost than the found. Heck, the shepherd left 99 dumb sheep to their own devices to chase after the one! I would like to propose that we see those who do not know Christ as buried treasure. Valuable and worth pursuing.

Another idea here is the 'value of one.' As believers, we have the danger of not only growing disdainful toward the lost but also insulating ourselves from them. I would like to challenge you: who is ONE nonbeliever you can pray for and pursue a genuine friendship with in 2026? Can you picture the party in heaven for this person as they surrender their life to Jesus one day? Can you imagine the thrill of being a part of their story of how they came to Christ?

Jesus showing up on our planet is a big deal. The biggest! It was the necessary first step on His rescue mission. He had to show up here as a human. You could say that He was playing the most important game of hide-and-seek ever. You see, ever since Adam and Eve and their hiding from each other (fig leaves) and hiding from God (jumping in the bushes), we have all buried ourselves under laundry in our own way. And God passionately seeks after us until we are found.

You could say that if Jesus has a mission statement it is *Luke 19:10*, **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."** So, now that we are found, let us join Him in seeking out all the other lost treasures, rejoicing alongside the host of heaven. Let us not leave them for dead, buried in their hiding spot!

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jesus came on a rescue mission **"to seek and to save the lost"** (*Luke 19:10*). How does it change your understanding of Christmas to think of yourself as someone God urgently sought after, not with disdain, but with joy and delight?

Each of the parables in *Luke 15* ends with a celebration when the lost is found. This Advent, who is one person in your life that might feel far from God? How can you reflect Jesus' heart by praying for, pursuing, and valuing them the way He values you?

This past summer, our community group studied Philippians using Warren Wiersbe's book, *Be Joyful*. Philippians has often been referred to as 'the book of joy' due to its many references to "joy" and "rejoice." I have read and studied Philippians many times over the years and have found that God almost always reveals something new when I repeat the study of any book of the Bible.

Paul starts the referenced passage in chapter four with the statement, **"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly"** (*Philippians 4:10*). 'Rejoice' is a verb, while 'Joy' is a noun. They are considered cognates since they come from the same Greek root word, *char-*. I was surprised to learn that 'Grace' has the same root and is also a cognate of these two words. We know that salvation comes through God's grace (*Ephesians 2:5*) and that this grace is sufficient for us (*2 Corinthians 12:9*).

Paul continues in this passage,

**Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I am, to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.** (*Philippians 4:11-12*)

He has **"learned"** to be content in whatever situation that he is in, whether he has plenty to eat or is hungry, whether he has abundance or need. The Greek root word for 'learn' is *math-*, which is the same root word for 'disciple.' If we are followers of Jesus Christ and are truly His disciples, we should strive to be lifelong learners through reading, studying, and meditating on God's Word, spending time in prayer, and being disciplined by someone who is more mature in their walk with the Lord. That is how Paul maintained contentment and joy, and that is how we can, too.

While I have always been good at math, I struggle to **"count it all joy"** in the face of trials (*James 1:2*). I have lived through the grief of my parents' deaths, but for me, that grief does not compare to the loss of someone you loved completely and with whom you have shared the majority of your life.

Many of you knew my wife, Rebecca, but some of you did not. We met on a blind date in college and were blessed with 52+ years of marriage. She was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis and graciously dealt with that disease the last 12 years of her life. When she went home to be with Jesus, it left a huge hole in my heart. She was my best friend, lover, encourager, and completer.

Somedays the grief comes like a tsunami, but other days it is like a ripple in a pond. I have always pursued being a learner, but like Paul, I have had to **"learn"** to be content. Unfortunately, I seem to be a slow learner in this area.

My joy has never left me, but I have suppressed it many times. It happens when I take my eyes off of Jesus and focus too much on myself and my circumstances. But my joy is in my Savior.

In this passage, the Philippian church's gift ignites Paul's heartfelt joy, but he clearly states that his rejoicing is in the Lord, the ultimate provider for all his needs. We should follow Paul's example in whatever situation that we find ourselves in. We should rejoice in the Lord for His grace and for giving us the faith to believe. That does not mean we ignore the struggles or needs that exist in our life at that time, but we process those things through the knowledge that God is sovereign in our life and that the blessing of our salvation is from Him. That will allow true joy to permeate our life and keep our heart aligned with His and not just on our circumstances. We can declare alongside Paul, **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."** (*Philippians 4:13*)

Paul in his writings has always seemed to me to be very firm and straightforward in communicating God's words. He wrote about love, caring, responsibility, etc., but to me he often comes across more factual than with a sense of emotional connection. However, here in the midst of a letter focused on joy and rejoicing, Paul pulls back the curtain on himself. In *Philippians 2*, he makes a revealing statement that if his friend, Epaphroditus, had died, he would have had **"sorrow upon sorrow"** (v. 27). The Discovery Bible defines this phrase as "distress, emotional pain, and heartfelt grief." This sounds more like a tsunami than a ripple in a pond. However, there is no indication from Paul that his joy would have been less, even if that great grief had occurred.


As we celebrate Christ's first coming this Advent season and look towards His second coming, let us follow the example of the prophet Habakkuk and say, **"I will take joy in the God of my salvation."** (*Habakkuk 3:18*).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

During this season, we remember that joy doesn't come from having an easy or comfortable life - but from knowing Christ, who came to be with us in both abundance and suffering. Like Paul, what is something you are learning (or re-learning) about joy in your current season of life?

Advent reminds us that Jesus came once - and will come again - to make all things new. How does that future hope help you "learn contentment" and hold on to joy, even when grief, loss, or unmet desires feel overwhelming?





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

ROMANS 8:38-39

LOVE



*Narrative | Randy Braddock*  
*Love's Too Familiar a Word | Ruth*

*Note: I recommend reading the short book of Ruth just prior to reading this entry. If you can possibly manage your attention, try to read Ruth and this entry in one sitting.*

The book of Ruth is part of the historical narrative genre in biblical literature. I think of history as 'His-Story'—understanding God's sovereignty over all events in human history.

The setting for this book is a dark time in Israel's history in the midst of the Judges era. The common theme of this time is characterized by the last verse in *Judges 21:25*, **"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."**

Rather than retelling the story, we will look closely at three characters and how their stories fit into God's Story. Remember, it is a story of Love, more than a romantic tale. With eyes of faith, we will see how God works in and through the lives of these ordinary people to carry out His Redemptive Plan.

**Naomi – But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons... and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1:3, 5)**

What kind of story opens with the death of nearly everyone in the family? Naomi buried her husband and *both* her sons, leaving her with only their (foreign) wives. Elimelech's family left Bethlehem in search of life and within ten short years found death. Yet Naomi, a vulnerable widow, *chose* to return to Bethlehem.

**She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21)**

This woman knows how to lament! She recognized the source of affliction and redemption. Naomi did not deny reality nor did she blame God for it. Rather than turning away from God in her loss, she turned toward Him.

**Ruth – But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)**

This was Ruth's declaration of loyal love to Naomi. How? Remember, Ruth is from Moab, a foreigner to the Israelites. Throughout most of the book, Ruth is referred to as, **"Ruth the Moabite,"** as if the author wants us to remember that about her. Even so, she displayed her character and depth of loyal love to

Naomi. What is the source of these character traits? She must have experienced it from... her husband and his family? Perhaps Naomi's family functioned as early 'missionaries' in Moab, living the Law and Love of God with their attitudes and generosity toward the Moabites? Ruth's statement of **"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God"** in *1:16b* seems to support this. Ruth's reputation for loyalty preceded her arrival.

**But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:11-12)**

**Boaz** – He is a relative of Elimelech (Naomi's husband) and a businessman of great wealth, owning vineyards and creating good jobs for many, including Ruth. Boaz showed generosity and practiced 'gleaning,' intentionally leaving grain for the poor in obedience to *Leviticus 19* and *23*.

Boaz's ultimate act of kindness is his decision to serve as 'kinsman redeemer' by marrying Ruth, the Moabite and widow of Mahlon, so that his name would not be cut off. **"So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son... They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of (King) David"** (*Ruth 4:13, 17*). The family line of the Messiah, the 'expectant One' of Advent, surfaces here.

Naomi and Ruth experienced tremendous vulnerability and loss, yet they remained faithful to God. Ruth, a foreign widow, trusted God through Naomi's life of love for others, namely her. Boaz was a man of integrity, kindness, and generosity—selflessly doing 'the next right thing' for others.

Good people? Yes. Are they heroes? No. Heroes do not need help.

Instead, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz experienced *hesed*. This is the Hebrew word for God's covenantal, redeeming loving-kindness that caused them to flourish in the face of loss. *Hesed* is the source and force that brings the Messiah to the lost, last, and least, transforming them from the inside out.

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz looked forward to the arrival of the Messiah. During this Advent season, may we look back in gratitude for the birth of Jesus and also look forward to Jesus' return. He is *hesed*; the only One to calm and comfort the rage of the nations.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do Naomi's responses to loss and hardship challenge or encourage your own faith when facing difficult seasons?

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and Boaz's kindness reflect God's covenantal love (*hesed*). In what ways can you show this kind of faithful love and generosity in your own relationships this Christmas?

Poetry | Micah Handley  
*From Everlasting to Everlasting | Psalm 103:8-17*

This week, we are focusing on God's love as we count down the final days of the Advent season.

**The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

*(Psalm 103:8)*

I cannot think of a more comforting way to describe the God of the universe. Our God is full of compassion and steadfast love, the kind that cannot quite be summed up in just one word. In Hebrew, the word given for God's love in *verse 8* is *hesed*, which can be translated to mercy, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and loving-kindness. The rest of our passage today provides a poetic explanation of the enduring, loving-kindness of God. Knowing our human limitations, God has graciously given us psalms like this to describe himself in ways we can understand—by using comparisons to things we already relate to.

David writes that God is **“slow to anger”** (*v. 8*). God is patient with us, even in the midst of our sin and wrongdoing against Him. When God does **“chide”** or rebuke us (*v. 9*), He does not indefinitely hold that sin against us nor repay us for our sins. If we are in Christ, then we are forgiven. We are no longer subject to the payment our sins deserve, which *Romans 6:23* tells us is death.

**For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.**

*(Psalm 103:8-9)*

These verses lay out beautiful similes to describe the way God responds to His children when we sin. We deserve death, but God shows us an unknowable, unfathomable amount of love—a love that is **“as high as the heavens are above the earth”** (*v. 8*). This love reaches farther than our understanding of the universe. God has every right to hold our sins against us and judge us accordingly, but instead, He chooses to remove our transgressions from us **“as far as the east is from the west”** (*v. 9*). The beautiful thing about this image is that the east and the west will never meet!

In *verse 13*, David goes on to compare God's love for **“those who fear him”** to the way a father loves his children. As someone with two wonderful parents, I am grateful for the picture of love they have given me that helps me to see God as a loving father. Even still, parental love took on a whole new meaning when I had my daughter, Stela, over a year and a half ago. This type of love is unconditional. Parental love is one that sacrifices for the sake of another and provides. This is exactly what the Lord does for us.

In the next three verses, David shifts from describing God to describing humankind in general. We read, **“we are dust”** (*v. 14*). If you were here at The Bridge over the summer, think back to our Ecclesiastes series for a moment. As a church, we learned about how fleeting and finite this life truly is. **“All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return”** (*Ecclesiastes 3:20*). Our lives are like the grass and flowers of the field—they are here until the next breeze whisks them away, until the evening comes and they wither, only to be forgotten (*Psalm 90*).

The very next verse, our final verse for today, provides a stark contrast of our reality and that of God's love. Our days may be numbered from birth to death, but **“the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him”** (*v. 17*). God's love for us does not change with the wind, and it does not end when we come to the end of ourselves. His loving-kindness and righteousness extend through generations, and when we know Christ as our Savior, we are the blessed heirs of that love and righteousness.

God, being the loving and merciful Father that He is, sent His own Son to live a perfect life and die an atoning death for those who would come to Him. As we reflect this Advent season and anxiously await the return of Christ, may we be reminded that God's love for us has always been and always will be—it is from everlasting to everlasting. His mercies for us are new every morning, and His patience knows no end.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do the descriptions of God's steadfast love and mercy in *Psalm 103* shape the way you understand His patience with your own shortcomings and sins?

David compares God's love to the unconditional love of a father for his children. How can this picture of God's love encourage you during times when you feel distant, unworthy, or forgotten?

Isaiah 63:7-9 brings us to the beginning of a prayer of repentance. The prophet Isaiah spends most of the first half of the book proclaiming a warning to the people of Jerusalem that, if they do not repent, the Lord's righteous wrath will fall upon them. In the latter part of his message, Isaiah shifts towards proclaiming a message of hope, of coming salvation, which we know to be through Jesus.

The only way that the people of Jerusalem could have hope after the message Isaiah just delivered is because of God's steadfast love. And how does this prayer of repentance open? Isaiah says, **"I will recount the steadfast love of the LORD, the praises of the LORD"** (v. 7). This love mentioned here is *hesed*, or, as we have seen, it is God's loving-kindness and faithfulness to keep His covenant. One of my favorite descriptions of this love comes from Sally Lloyd-Jones of the Jesus Storybook Bible. She writes that *hesed* is God's "Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love."

Because of this truth, Isaiah sets aside time to reflect on and recount this love, and we see these examples as we continue reading. He remembers the Lord's **"great goodness to the house of Israel"** and reflects on **"the abundance of his steadfast love"** (v. 7). Before moving on, I feel it is important to note the name that Isaiah uses for God in this opening line. He calls Him **"LORD,"** and in Scripture, when we see the name 'LORD' in all-caps, it represents the personal name for God. Transliterated, it is *YHWH*, which we often pronounce as 'Yahweh.' Isaiah is not a stranger to God, and his first words in a prayer of repentance are to **"recount the steadfast love of the LORD"** (v. 7). This Love must be a pretty big deal. May this be our posture as we approach prayer—having a heart full of gratitude for the Lord's loving-kindness.

*Verse 8* continues to display *hesed*. God now speaking says, **"Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely"** (v. 8). This points to the fact that the people of Israel need a Savior, hence this prayer of repentance. Countless times, the Israelites have turned their backs on the Lord. Countless times, they have killed off the prophets the Lord has sent. And countless times, the Lord keeps giving them chances. *Verse 8* concludes with, **"And he became their Savior."** What a beautiful display of steadfast love—that He would love the unlovable. We can reflect on the truth that we have been given a Savior, and His name is Jesus Christ.

In the third verse of this passage, Isaiah starts by saying, **"In all their affliction he was afflicted"** (v. 9). How comforting is it to know that when we suffer, the Lord suffers alongside us! We have a Savior who weeps when we weep and rejoices when we rejoice.

The closing lines in this passage of Scripture end just as it began—Isaiah recounting of the Lord's steadfast love. He remembers that the Lord **"lifted them up and carried them all the days of old"** (v. 9). In order for Him to lift His people up, He had to come down to meet them.

Not only did Jesus come to lift us up, but He came to carry us and bear the cost of our rebellion. Just as Isaiah recounts the Lord's loving-kindness, let us approach the end of this Advent season with a heart overflowing in thanks to the Lord for His "Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love."



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Isaiah highlights that God became their Savior despite their repeated failures and unfaithfulness. How does this unconditional, steadfast love impact your view of grace and forgiveness in your own life?

*Verse 9* tells us that God was "afflicted" in our affliction and that He lifts and carries His people. How does this truth shape your understanding of God's presence during difficult seasons?

Of all the villain-turned-hero stories out there, Ebenezer Scrooge's transformation in *A Christmas Carol* has to be one of the best.

After a Christmas Eve of terror where multiple spirits reveal just how selfish and miserable he is, Scrooge awakes on Christmas Day with the relief of a drowning man pulled into a rescue boat. Searching for some way to express his gratitude, he suddenly decides to send the giant prize turkey to his employee's poor family: *"I'll send it to Bob Cratchit's!" whispered Scrooge, rubbing his hands, and splitting with a laugh. 'He sha'n't know who sends it. It's twice the size of Tiny Tim.'"*

We see this same kind of bursting gratitude on a much larger scale in *Luke 7*. A **"woman of the city"** approaches Jesus, where he is reclining at a Pharisee's table with his feet tucked behind him (v. 37). In a shocking display of adoration, this woman crouches behind Jesus and covers his feet in tears, kisses, and ointment.

And like the despised miser Scrooge, this 'woman of the city' has a reputation that precedes her. The Pharisee inwardly scoffs at Jesus's acceptance of the event, thinking that if Jesus **"were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."** (v. 39)

Jesus, knowing the Pharisee's thoughts, then shares a brief parable to illustrate the fruit of a repentant, grateful heart.

**"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"** (v. 41-42)

When the Pharisee answers that the debtor who has been forgiven a larger amount will love the moneylender more, Jesus tells him he has judged correctly. Jesus then rebukes the Pharisee for not lavishing Him with loving honor like the woman did.

Jesus declares at the end of the chapter that **"her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little"** (v. 47). I love the way the New Living Translation puts it: **"I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love."**

As is always the case with Jesus, He is not forgiving her *because* of her efforts to love Him well. As the parable illustrates, God does all the work of canceling our debt; our only job is to respond to His grace. For all of the Pharisee's knowledge and training, he is unable to recognize the Savior of the world sitting at the table with him. Yet the woman, aware of the depth of her sin, kneels behind Jesus and anoints His feet, her tears undoubtedly ones of

repentance *and* celebration.

There is a reason our hearts soar when Scrooge jolts awake with joy and sends the prize turkey to the Cratchit home; there is a reason our spirits soften when the woman breaks the alabaster jar over the feet of Jesus. It is because these are not stories of working hard and earning favor—they are stories of unmerited redemption, of hopelessly sinful people basking in and responding to grace they did nothing to deserve.

Our souls long to be reminded that we, too, are always offered a fresh start, a clean slate, new mercies. We do not have to work our fingers to the bone to earn God's love—we simply accept His grace and get to respond with grateful hearts.

But during the Christmas season, *responding* feels counterintuitive. After all, there is just so much to *do*: there are gifts to purchase, presents to wrap, stockings to stuff, cookies to bake, rooms to clean, and meals to prepare.

But may we remember that the ultimate work has already been done. God has already sent Jesus—Love Incarnate—to die for the sins of the world and offer new life to all who follow Him.

If you feel a bit like the Pharisee at the table today—you have prepared a great feast, your home is almost clean, but your heart is distracted from the wonder of the Savior who sits with you—take heart. We can, at any moment, take a page from Scrooge's book and throw open the window, laugh, and celebrate with generosity and joy. We can immediately join the woman on the floor, even if it is for just a minute, and thank God for the gift of Jesus.

There is much to be done at Christmas time, but there is much, much more to respond to. May we take time in this moment to pause and respond to the love and grace God has lavished upon us through Jesus.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does recognizing the depth of God's grace - and our own need for forgiveness - change the way we respond to Him in love and gratitude?

In what ways can busyness during the Christmas season distract us from truly responding to God's love, and how might we create intentional space to focus on Him?

Like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, how can we express our gratitude and love for God in practical, meaningful ways in our daily lives?



*Epistles | Magan Causey*  
*Nothing Can Separate | Romans 8:31-39*

Many theologians consider the book of Romans to be the highest mountain range of Scripture, with the last paragraph of chapter eight being its peak. Turn to these passages and let us enjoy the view from the top as we bask in the security they *provide for those who are in Christ.*

**What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)**

This certainly does not mean we will not face opposition; it means that opposition will not succeed against our sovereign Lord, who is always and forever for us. When we look out from this mountaintop onto the landscape of life, we see many things that quickly cause us to fear and doubt. *Verse 32* reminds us, **“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”** Our loving Father graciously gives us everything we need to do whatever He is calling us to do. He proved this by giving his only Son up for us—the ultimate demonstration of love.

What happens when we inevitably fall short and our enemy, the accuser, assails us with condemnation? Paul reminds us that we stand justified because we stand *in Christ.*

**Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (v. 33-34)**

We are declared righteous because of Jesus’ atoning work on the cross, not because of anything we have done. And on top of that, Jesus himself is continuously interceding on our behalf! Stop and let that sink in: Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, intercedes for us, personally and individually.

Chapter eight ends with what might be the most glorious truth in all of Scripture.

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

*Nothing* could ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. Not even our sins. As we reflect on Jesus’ birth this Christmas season, may the reality of His undeserved, sacrificial, all-encompassing, never-ending love for us flood our hearts and minds. And may the awareness of His love propel us to love Him more, trust Him more, and obey Him more as we seek to fulfill our mission of glorifying God by becoming and making disciples of Jesus Christ.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How does the assurance that “nothing can separate us from the love of God” affect the way we face fears, doubts, or opposition in our daily lives?

What does it mean to you personally that Jesus is interceding for you right now, and how might this truth change the way you approach prayer and your relationship with God?

In what ways can reflecting on God’s sacrificial love during the Christmas season inspire us to deepen our trust, love, and obedience to Him?