



The

Advent Devotional

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A Letter From Pastor Kirk

I distinctly remember the pure, unadulterated anticipation I felt as a boy on Christmas Eve. Growing up in the 90s, we would spend hours poring over Christmas catalogs and devouring toy commercials during Saturday morning cartoons, carefully curating the perfect wish list. Once complete, we wrote humble—yet passionate—letters to Santa and handed the list to Mom and Dad for further distribution to extended family and friends. Over time you learn that there's an art to gift-getting: if you fail to make a thoughtful list or don't communicate it clearly, you'll wind up with socks and underwear (which is really just your aunt giving your parents a gift so they don't have to buy them for you). Once the list was delivered, all that was left was the anxious waiting to see what would come of all that hard work.

As a pastor, I often wonder why Advent—the liturgical season of waiting for the arrival of Jesus—doesn't stir in me the same anticipation I felt as a boy on Christmas Eve. Is it because, as adults, we lose the childlike wonder that once defined the holidays? Perhaps. Is it because we forget that Christ is the true point of Christmas? Maybe so. But if I'm honest, I think part of the issue is that I already know Christ has come. I've already received that gift. And sometimes it feels almost performative to wait for what I've already had for nearly forty years. I know that Jesus is better than a PS5 or a Barbie Dream House—and I already have Jesus.

But that doesn't mean there's nothing left to wait for; that there's no gift on the horizon. Advent reminds us that, like old Simeon, we are still waiting for the coming of Christ. We are waiting for the day when God will set everything right, when death and disease will be defeated, and when sorrow and sadness will be no more. Too often we Protestants miss the full meaning of Advent.

Yes, we remember the days leading up to Christ's birth. But if we want to grasp it fully, we must also learn to wait with the eager anticipation of children on Christmas morning—longing for the day when Christ will come and make all things new. Furthermore, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, as His ambassadors in this world, we remember, even as we wait, that the gifts we receive in Christ are the same gifts we give the world. So may we be givers of love, joy, peace, hope, and Christ himself this Advent season.

—*Pastor Kirk Gentzel*





THE GIFT OF

hope

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day One

*“Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for,
the proof of what is not seen.”*

HEBREWS 11:1 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Rohan Mundle

Advent can be described as a season of waiting for the birth of Jesus, our Messiah, and as a season celebrating our expectancy that He will return one day. Simply put, Advent is inherently about hope. The people of Israel hoped for a king and savior who would be the fulfillment of the prophecies, and we have hope that that same king will return and make all things right. It may not feel similar to what the Israelites were hoping for, but our hope is just a continuation of the same story that God has been writing since the beginning of time.

We see in Hebrews 11:1 that our faith solidifies our hope into more than just wishful thinking. As we root ourselves in and apply our faith to the promises of God, we find that hope becomes something sure and steady. That in the midst of a shaky and volatile world, we can anchor ourselves to a trustworthy God who remains above all circumstances and situations no matter what they look like.

REFLECTION

Are there ways in which you have turned to despair before reminding yourself of the hope we have in Jesus? Consider how the news cycle, politics, family stress, financial burden, etc. influence your hope for the future. Are you quick to take those things to the Lord to allow Him to speak into them or do you leave Him out?

PRAYER

Lord, help me to see you more clearly. Help me see the brokenness of the world and my heart but not succumb to grief and despair. May the hope of Jesus' return spur me on to be a light in the darkness here on Earth. When the waiting seems unbearable, remind me that you are more than worth it and that all things will be made new when you come back. Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Two

“Now in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? Now if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.”

ROMANS 8:24-25 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Rohan Mundle

Something that immediately comes to mind when talking about both Christmas and hope is the tradition of Christmas gifts. There is something so nostalgic to many of us about seeing the presents wrapped up yet having to wait for weeks until Christmas morning to see what was inside. We might have spotted some hints left around the house about what could be in the boxes, but the surprise made it all the more fun. There was an assumption of something good (if your friends and family were skilled gift-givers), but until December 25th, there was no telling what those packages held.

This example might not carry the same weight as the words of Paul in Romans 8, but the sentiment is very similar. He asks the rhetorical question, “...who hopes for what he sees?” If we, as children, already saw the presents unwrapped and out under the Christmas tree, our excitement would be something entirely different. I’m sure many of us would still be very excited, but the “hoping” would have been removed from the equation. Faith is no longer required. Paul writes about creation with many of the same ideas. He says that the Holy Spirit given to us after receiving Christ moves us to hope for the redemption that is coming with Jesus’ return.

We know that the world is not as it should be and that things have been twisted By sin, but even as this world has the markings of evil and death, creation has also been marked By our God and longs to be redeemed. God has promised us redemption and restoration, yet we cannot fathom how incredible that will be. All we can do is wait patiently with a childlike eagerness for His return.

REFLECTION

Where do you see God moving in your life and in the world? Take time to express your gratitude to Him for those things. Can you think of any circumstances or situations that feel stuck or frozen as if God isn't accomplishing what you'd hoped for? Try and surrender those to Him as you ask for patience in the waiting.

PRAYER

God, we know that you are a giver of good gifts. We know that what you have planned is far better than anything we could dream up on our own. Teach us to lean into our assured hope that all of creation will be exactly as it should be when you return. Teach us to be patient as we wait yet not lose our excitement for the glory that is going to be revealed to us. Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Three

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth
into a living hope through the resurrection of
Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

1 PETER 1:3 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Rohan Mundle

As Christians, we may have heard the term “living hope” without having truly understood what it means. 1 Peter 1:3 gives us a poignant look into what this “living hope” really is.

First, we learn almost immediately that it is a gift from God. Only By His mercy, not our own work, did He give us new life and hope through Jesus’ resurrection. Nothing we could have done By our own strength would have enabled us to be righteous and worthy of salvation. God had mercy upon us and gave it freely.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus didn’t just give us “hope,” it gave us a living hope. It is not dead, but continues to work in, sustain, and participate in the heart of the believer. The world hopes for fleeting things that only exist in this time. We, as Christians, hope in Jesus, who is presently alive and working. We hope in Jesus, whose power will not be diluted as we pass from age to age! Jesus is the only safe place to put our hope.

REFLECTION

Take a second to thank God for the living hope we have that was given as a gift of His mercy. Ask yourself if there are any people in your life who need this hope. Try and see that person as an image-bearer of God who is deeply loved. Do not let your politics, your hurts, or your personal opinions about them affect how worthy you think they are of Jesus' living hope.

PRAYER

God, give us opportunities to love people who are far from you. We have been given a hope that cannot fade, and we ask that you give us the courage to share it with others. As we reunite with friends and family this Advent season, allow us to see all people as your children. We recognize that we are only able to share hope because it was first given to us By you. Thank you. Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Four

*"I wait for the Lord; I wait
And put my hope in his word.
I wait for the Lord
More than the watchmen for the morning—
More than the watchmen for the morning."*

PSALM 130:5–6 ESV

DEVOTIONAL

By Audrey Williams

Tragedy will touch all of us in this life, some devastatingly so. I have been encouraged, personally, time and again, by how people in our own congregation respond in circumstances that would take most people out of the fight completely.

I have seen them wait. They wait for the Lord. They find their comfort in Him. They hope in His promises and trust that the Lord is still in control of today, tomorrow and all the days to follow. They know He will reunite them with their loved ones again. We can have hope in the most dire circumstances when we place our faith and hope in Jesus.

We wait and hope because it is well with our souls. The story of Horatio Spafford has encouraged millions to keep going when they feel like they can't. In 1871, Horatio lost most of his life's financial investment in the Great Fire of Chicago. Soon after that, he sent his wife and four daughters on a ship to England while he remained behind for work.

Their ship was struck By another, and many lives were lost, including all four of his young girls. When he heard of the tragedy, he jumped on a ship and headed to England to meet his wife who survived. While passing near the spot where his daughters died, Horatio wrote the song “It is Well with My Soul.” Horatio would also lose a son later in life due to illness, but his faith remained strong to the end.

REFLECTION

How does hope of eternity with the Lord help you as we wait for the morning together?

PRAYER

Father God, let us be a people who turn to you first when life is difficult. Help us to encourage one another as we face loss and trials. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Five

“We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

HEBREWS 6:19–20 ESV

DEVOTIONAL

By Audrey Williams

Please read those verses until they hit every part of who you are. We were once separated from God. We were doomed to darkness. We had no hope. But then God sent his Son, Jesus, to do the impossible for us. He tore the dividing curtain and made a way to get to the inner place—The place where we find relationship with the Lord Almighty.

If you have placed your faith in Jesus, but are struggling to find joy and peace, please let this encourage you. Take time to look back on the moments in your life when God drew you closer to Him—The times when you thought God no longer saw you, nor cared about the calamity that surrounded you. Remember that He didn’t leave you then, and He won’t leave you now. What was true when you initially placed your trust in Jesus, is still true today. You have a great hope in Him. You have access to God through prayer and the study of His word.

You have an anchor for your soul. You don’t have to be tossed By the wind and the waves. You can stand tall when life goes crazy. You can be sure of your future.

You don't have to fear what's around the corner. Jesus is our hope, and Jesus has already won the war on our behalf. You can stop fighting and start sharing this hope with others.

REFLECTION

Will you embrace the hope that is Jesus and lay down your fears? And if you've already done this, will you share with others so they can do the same?

PRAYER

Father God, help us to trust the work that Jesus already accomplished. He was the forerunner on our behalf. He continues to intercede for us daily. Jesus, you are our hope. In your name we pray, Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Six

“For all who are led By the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, By whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”

ROMANS 8:14–19 ESV

DEVOTIONAL

By Audrey Williams

What a great hope we have in Jesus! Our hope is certain. It's real. We are children of the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. There is nothing that can take away eternal glory with our Lord and Savior.

Please don't doubt the Father's love for you this Christmas season. He longs to give you good gifts (Matthew 7). He wants to fill you with hope, joy, peace, and love. He wants to make you stand out from the rest of society, shining brightly in dark places. You are His precious child.

I have always loved watching my children open their presents on Christmas morning. It's the moment they've anticipated for weeks. Their joy is contagious as they begin to unwrap their gifts.

But in recent years, as they've gotten a little older, they've naturally added a new component to Christmas morning. They've started giving gifts on Christmas as well. And it's even better. When they give to others, their joy is bigger and it lasts longer. They are experiencing what it feels like to sacrifice time and effort for the benefit of another.

REFLECTION

Our Father in heaven wants to watch us give good gifts to others as well. He designed us to experience even more joy in our own lives when we share our hope with the world.

PRAYER

Father God, we want to share our hope with the world. Please provide the courage required to share who you are to the world without hesitation. In your name we pray, Amen.

THE WEEK OF HOPE

Day Seven

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish
but have eternal life.”*

JOHN 3:16 ESV

DEVOTIONAL

By Audrey Williams

We should always be ready to share our faith. Peter wrote that we ought to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15, ESV) John 3:16 is a beautiful, powerful summation of the hope that we have in Jesus.

God commands all of us to share the good news. Whether you’ve been given five talents, two talents, or one, God expects us to use the gifts given to us in order to grow the Kingdom of God (The Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30).

In 2009, Tim Tebow wrote “John 3:16” under his eyes during the BCS National Championship football game. Tim Tebow was the quarterback for the University of Florida at that time. During that game, because of Tim Tebow’s witness, ninety-four million football fans googled the meaning of John 3:16. Ninety-four million people did not know what John 3:16 says—that fact alone should compel every Bible-believing Christian to spread the good news like wildfire.

The miracle continued. In 2012, exactly three years to the day after the national championship game, Tim Tebow took the field again, this time in the NFL playoffs. He wore the same eye-black message, “John 3:16”. The statistics from that game were jaw-dropping.

Tebow passed for 316 yards that game. His yards per completion were 31.6. Yards per rush were 3.16. Time of possession was 31.06. And the game's ratings on television peaked at 31.6. And again, ninety million people googled "John 3:16."

Being prepared to make a defense of your faith doesn't have to be eloquent or long-winded. You don't have to be a lifelong believer or Bible scholar. You can memorize this one verse. One verse that tells the world our *who* and our *why*.

God gives us hope, so we can give hope to the world.

REFLECTION

You may not have the influence that Tim Tebow has, but you do serve the same God who expects all of us to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Who will you share the good news with today?

PRAYER

Father God, we ask that you accept our offerings and multiply the effect they have for your glory and for your Kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Christmas Countdown Chain

SUPPLIES

Colorful paper

Scissors

Glue or tape

Markers or pens

DIRECTIONS

1. Cut paper into strips.
Make them wide enough to write verses and the daily countdown number.
2. Number your strips 1 to 25.
3. Add scripture, or fun daily activities to each strip of paper. For example:
 - A. Verses from:
 - I. Matthew 1:18 - 2:12
(Read together and let kids pick what stands out to them.)
 - II. Luke 2
 - B. Wear your Christmas socks
 - C. Go look at Christmas lights
4. Assemble the chain By looping each strip of paper into the one after it and securing with tape or glue.
5. On December 1st, have fun removing one per day, starting with number 25!

Spicy Pretzels

INGREDIENTS

1 - 15 oz bag of pretzels (twists or sticks, your choice)

1/2 cup of vegetable oil

1 packet of ranch seasoning

1-2 tsp of cayenne pepper (more or less depending on how spicy you want them to be)

DIRECTIONS

Put pretzels in a gallon Ziploc bag. In a measuring cup add oil, ranch seasoning, and cayenne pepper. Stir until well mixed. Pour oil mixture over pretzels, close bag, and give it a good shake. Shake every 15 minutes for the next hour, until pretzels are covered and oil is dry. Enjoy!



week two



THE GIFT OF

peace

advent

2025

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day One

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace...”

LUKE 19:42 NIV

“For he himself is our peace...”

EPHESIANS 2:14 NIV

DEVOTIONAL

By Bethany Scott

As Jesus approached Jerusalem days before His death, He wept, saying: *“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.”* (Luke 19:42, NIV) The very city whose name means “City of Peace” had missed the arrival of the Prince of Peace. They wanted a Messiah who would overthrow Rome and bring victory By force. But Jesus came in humility, riding a donkey, bringing a peace far deeper than politics or power.

We often pursue counterfeit peace. We work harder, earn more, achieve more, hoping for rest. We try to conquer our fears, hide our emotions, and control our lives. But promotions don’t bring peace. Possessions don’t bring peace. No war in history has brought more peace than destruction. Like Jerusalem, we so often miss the true gift.

Ephesians 2:14 tells us, *“He himself is our peace.”* Peace is not found in success, strength, or control—it is found in Christ alone. His triumph came not through a throne but through a cross, not through crushing enemies but By laying down His life.

This Advent, we remember that peace is both a gift to receive and a gift to give. As Isaiah foresaw, the nations will “*beat their swords into plowshares.*” (Isaiah 2:4) When Christ reigns in us, we, too, become people who sow peace—in our homes, our workplaces, and our world.

REFLECTION

Don't miss Him. Don't miss peace. The King has come, and He is the peace for whom your soul longs.

PRAYER

Prince of Peace, we confess how easily we chase after lesser things, hoping they will quiet our souls. Help us to see you clearly and not miss your presence among us. Reign in our hearts and teach us to walk in your peace—receiving it deeply and sharing it freely. May your peace rule in our homes, our church, and our world. Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Two

“He will crush your head...”

GENESIS 3:15 NIV

“And he will be called... Prince of Peace.”

ISAIAH 9:6 CSB

“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”

ROMANS 16:20 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Bethany Scott

From the very beginning, humanity was meant to live at peace—with God, with one another, and with creation. But in Eden, sin and evil slithered into the story, and shalom was shattered. Genesis 3:15 records God’s first promise of redemption: one day the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent’s head.

We feel that fracture every day. We crave inner peace because we were created for it, but anxiety, conflict, and brokenness remind us things are not as they should be. Even when life looks outwardly successful, we sense deep within that our souls are restless. The peace we long for is not simply the absence of conflict, but the wholeness of creation being fully right with God and restored to His design.

That is why Isaiah foretold a child who would be born to us, a Son who would be called *Prince of Peace*. (Isaiah 9:6) His reign would bring not only personal healing but cosmic renewal. And Paul echoes the promise in Romans 16:20: *“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”* One day, every trace of evil will be undone, and true shalom will cover the earth forever.

Until that day, we live as citizens of the Peaceful Kingdom. Through Christ's Spirit, we taste peace now—in reconciliation with God, in relationships marked By grace, in courage to face life's wounds with hope. Advent reminds us that peace is both already here in Jesus and not yet complete until He comes again.

REFLECTION

Hold fast: the Prince of Peace has come, and He is coming again.

PRAYER

Prince of Peace, we praise you for the promise that evil's reign is ending and your Kingdom is drawing near. Forgive us for the ways we settle for comfort instead of courage, for quiet instead of true peace. Teach us to live as people of your victory—crushing chaos with kindness, meeting hostility with grace, and sowing peace where the world sows fear. Until you come again, make us faithful citizens of your Peaceful Kingdom. Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Three

“Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

ROMANS 5:1 CSB

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

MATTHEW 5:9 CSB

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope By the power of the Holy Spirit.”

ROMANS 15:13 CSB

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

LUKE 2:14 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Bethany Scott

Because of Jesus, we are invited into a peace that never runs dry. Paul writes in Romans 5:1, *“Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* The war between us and God is over—not because we fixed ourselves, but because Christ has reconciled us to the Father. This is the foundation of every other kind of peace we could ever long for.

And peace does not end with us. Jesus said, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* (Matthew 5:9) To be His child is to reflect His heart. Our Father is the God of peace, and when we live as peacemakers, we image Him to the world.

The peace we receive in Christ is never meant to be hoarded—it is meant to be shared.

Paul prays in Romans 15:13, *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope By the power of the Holy Spirit.”* Peace is not something we manufacture; it is poured into us By God’s Spirit until it overflows to others. When we live at peace with God, we become instruments of His peace in the world.

At Advent, we hear the angels’ song: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”* (Luke 2:14) That peace is both our inheritance and our calling. We receive it as a gift—and we give it as a gift, bearing witness to the Prince of Peace until

REFLECTION

In what area of your life have you settled for simply *experiencing* peace, when God might be calling you to *extend* it—especially toward someone who feels undeserving of it?

PRAYER

God of Peace, thank you for reconciling us to yourself through Jesus. You have stilled the war within our hearts and called us your children. Now teach us to live as peacemakers in a restless world. When conflict tempts us to withdraw or retaliate, fill us instead with your Spirit, that we might overflow with hope and gentleness. Make our lives a witness to the peace the angels proclaimed—the peace that only Christ can give. Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Four

*“Suddenly there was a multitude
of the heavenly host with the angel,
praising God and saying:*

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and peace on earth to
people he favors!”*

LUKE 2:13-14 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Adrian Cazares

I don't know about you, but what I appreciate most about a gift is that it comes from the heart of someone who loves us, without us having to pay for it or earn it. The peace that God gives us in Jesus is so beautiful because it is exactly that kind of gift.

When the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they didn't just talk about glory in heaven. They also proclaimed, “Peace on earth.” This baby born in Bethlehem brought with Him the most beautiful gift humanity could receive—true peace with God.

It was into a violent and divided world that Jesus came to bring hope of reconciliation between God and mankind.

In a world where worries and conflicts are constant, where anxiety and depression rates are higher than ever, and where we have plenty of reasons to worry, the birth of Jesus offers us what we could never achieve on our own: deep, lasting, and real peace.

Best of all, this gift of peace does not depend on our circumstances. We can have it amid life's storms. It is peace that calms our hearts when everything around us is in chaos.

During this Advent season, every time we open a gift, hear Christmas carols, or see a nativity scene, let us remember the gift of peace that God gave us at Christmas.

REFLECTION

Do you need this gift today? Is there something stealing your peace of mind? God invites you to receive His gift of peace: Jesus. You don't have to earn it or deserve it. It is His gift to you.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you so much for the gift of your peace that the angels announced on the night of Jesus' birth. Help me to open my heart to receive this gift today. When fear or anxiety comes, help me to remember that Jesus was born to bring peace to the earth. I ask that this gift fills every area of my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Five

*“For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders.*

*He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.”*

ISAIAH 9:6 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Adrian Cazares

When we receive a beautiful gift that deeply touches our hearts, it is impossible to keep it just for ourselves. I remember when, after two miscarriages and many medical opinions that had taken away our hope, my wife and I received the news that our first daughter’s pregnancy would be carried to term. That joy was so great that we wanted to shout to the world, “Look what God has given us!” It is that same joy that compels us to share the good things we have received.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God has given us the best gift—the gift of peace through the Prince of Peace. This means that Jesus not only brings peace, but He is the source of all true peace. When we receive Him, we receive His peace. And when we experience that peace that calms our storms and heals our hearts, it is natural to want to share this beautiful gift with others.

Imagine holding in your hands the perfect gift for someone who is suffering. Wouldn’t you do everything possible to give it to them? Well, that is exactly what we have in Jesus: a gift of peace that can transform hearts, calm anxieties, and bring hope to those who are lost.

How can we share this gift? I'm glad you asked! Sometimes it's as simple as giving a smile to someone who is sad, offering a word of encouragement when someone is discouraged, or simply being there for someone who feels lonely. It means listening patiently or responding kindly even when others respond with anger. And most importantly, when people ask where the peace they see in us comes from, let's take the opportunity to share about Jesus, the Prince of Peace and the source of all the good they see in us.

In our families, workplaces, schools, and communities, let us be people who bless others with this gift of peace. Not because we are perfect, but because we have experienced the perfect peace of the Prince of Peace and know how beautiful it is.

REFLECTION

Who can you bless with this gift today? Is there someone in your life who needs to experience this peace that only Christ can give?

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending us the Prince of Peace and for the gift of peace you have given us through Him. Help me not to keep this gift to myself, but to share it with others. Give me wisdom and courage to do so. Use me as an instrument of your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Six

“I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.”

JOHN 16:33 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Adrian Cazares

If anything is certain in this world, it is that we will face difficult times. Illness, loss, pain, disappointment. Jesus does not hide this reality from us, but He offers us something beautiful—His gift of peace in the midst of it all. He tells us, *“In the world you will have suffering, but in me you have peace.”*

This gift of peace does not eliminate the storms, but it completely changes how we face them. It is a gift that sustains us when everything seems to be falling apart.

The key is where we place our trust. When our trust is in circumstances, we soon discover that this “peace” is fragile and fleeting. But when our trust is in Jesus and His promises, our hearts can experience true peace even when life gets difficult.

We can trust in Jesus because He has already won the victory. He says, “I have overcome the world.” It is not a future promise; it is a present reality. The battle has been won, and the gift of victory includes peace for our hearts.

When we cling to Jesus and His promises, something wonderful happens—even when storms are raging, our hearts can be at peace. Not because we are strong, but because we are anchored to the One who has already overcome.

This is a beautiful gift we can share with others. To that loved one who is going through difficulties, we can point them to Jesus today and remind them that there is a gift of peace available, a peace that does not depend on everything being okay, but on Jesus having already won the battle.

REFLECTION

If you are facing a storm today, Jesus' gift of peace is available to you. Trust in Him, hold on to His words, and discover that it is possible to have peace even in the midst of affliction.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, thank you that your gift of peace does not depend on my circumstances. When trials come into my life, help me to remember your words and trust in you. May your peace be my anchor in difficult times. Help me also to share this gift with others and may my life always be a reflection of your love and grace. Amen.

THE WEEK OF PEACE

Day Seven

*"If possible, as far as it depends on you,
live at peace with everyone."*

ROMANS 12:18 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Adrian Cazares

Let's be honest: family gatherings at Christmas can be... interesting. There is something magical about this season: it is a time when the family gets together in one place... and we remember exactly why we don't get together more often. There's the uncle who always brings up controversial topics, the family member with whom there's still tension over something that happened, or that relative who still asks you when you're going to get married (even though you are already married).

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. But it is precisely in those moments, when tensions are running high, that Paul's words make the most sense: *"If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* Notice how Paul acknowledges that there will be difficult situations and that we cannot control others, but we can control our response.

As children of God, who have received the gift of peace, we are called to be agents of peace in a world that desperately needs it. And this season is the perfect opportunity to live this out.

Being agents of peace means giving the gift, even if some don't want to receive it. It means forgiving those who have offended us, even if they don't ask for forgiveness. It means speaking lovingly to those who speak harshly. It means reaching out to those who turn their backs on us. It means taking the first step.

And let's be realistic, this is not easy. It hurts to offer peace and be rejected. Jesus knew this well. He offered us his peace knowing that it would cost Him His life on the cross. Let His example and His love inspire us to take the first step. In our jobs, in our churches, in our communities, and yes, in our family gatherings, we can choose to be the person who responds differently, who breaks the cycle of tension, who brings the gift of peace to the table. Not because we are perfect, but because we have experienced the peace of Jesus.

REFLECTION

Is there someone in your life with whom you need to seek peace this season? Is there a broken relationship that needs you to take the first step? Don't wait. As a child of God who has received the gift of peace, you can be the agent of peace who takes the first step.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of peace you have given us through your Son Jesus. Help me to be a person who shares this gift with others, especially those who are different from me. Give me grace to live in peace with my family, my friends, my coworkers, and even those who have hurt me. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Salt Dough Ornaments

INGREDIENTS & SUPPLIES

1 cup table salt

4 cups all-purpose flour

1 1/2 cups warm water

Parchment paper

Paint

Mod Podge (optional)

Ribbon

Straw or toothpick

DIRECTIONS

Dough:

1. Whisk together the flour and salt in a large bowl. Slowly add warm water while stirring. Finish mixing By kneading with hands until dough is soft.
3. Using your straw or toothpick, poke a hole in the top of each ornament so that you can string the ribbon through later. Bake ornaments in the oven until hard. Can take 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Baking:

1. Preheat oven to 200° F. Place dough between two sheets of parchment paper. Roll out to 1/4 inch thick. Remove top parchment sheet.
2. Use cookie cutters to cut shapes into your dough. Peel away excess dough when done. Transfer entire parchment paper onto baking sheet.
4. Let cool for an hour. Then have fun decorating them with your paint! If you want them to last longer, let them dry, then use your Mod Podge to add a protective covering. Thread a ribbon through them and hang on your Christmas tree!

Chocolate Peanut Chusters

INGREDIENTS

2 lbs white almond bark (also known as candy coating), broken or chopped into smaller pieces

12 oz bag semisweet chocolate chips

4 oz bar German sweet chocolate, broken or chopped into smaller pieces

32 oz dry roasted or cocktail peanuts

Christmas sprinkles (optional)

DIRECTIONS

1. Add chopped almond bark, chocolate chips, and German chocolate to slow cooker. You can lightly spray the pot if desired.
2. Place a clean, dry kitchen towel over the top of the slow cooker, then place the lid on top of that. Cook on HIGH for 1 hour. Reduce heat to LOW, and cook for 1 more hour (or until fully melted).
3. Remove lid and towel (be careful not to let any condensation drip into the melted chocolate), add peanuts, stirring well to combine.

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4. Line several baking sheets (or your counter) with wax paper. Drop candy mixture by spoonfuls onto wax paper (or use a small cookie scoop). If using sprinkles, sprinkle before clusters harden.
 5. Refrigerate (if possible) 30 minutes to 1 hour, until set. If unable to refrigerate, let stand on counter at room temperature until set. Store in a cool place in an airtight container.

week three



THE GIFT OF

joy

advent

2025

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day One

*“The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
a light has dawned
on those living in the land of darkness.*

*You have enlarged the nation
and increased its joy.
The people have rejoiced before you
as they rejoice at harvest time
and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.”*

ISAIAH 9:2-3 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Jared McGuire

This week, we are reminded that joy is a gift. The prophet Isaiah lived through a tragic era of Israel's history. He saw the Northern Kingdom of Israel fall to the Assyrians, and it was he who played no small part in aiding the Southern Kingdom of Judah in narrowly escaping a similar fate. It was on account of Israel's sins that God's people found themselves in exile. Isaiah knew Judah would soon share a similar fate. Isaiah foretold the coming Babylonian destruction and exile that awaited Judah, but he also foretold the coming day of the Lord's salvation.

We are accustomed to reading the poem of Isaiah 9 around Christmas. The prophet foretells the birth of a child who will sit on David's throne forever, rule with righteousness and justice, and bear the titles of Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. In verse 2, Isaiah describes the birth of this Son as a light dawning over those who have been lost in darkness. And how are those people to respond? Verse 3 says it repeatedly, with joy!

Living in a time of strife, accustomed to wicked kings and attacking armies, Isaiah makes it clear that the joy one might experience from a fruitful harvest or from collecting the spoils of war don't come anywhere close to the joy we will experience when God works salvation in our midst! For Isaiah, joy is a gift from God which accompanies His saving work. When this Son is born, it will be an occasion for joy!

REFLECTION

Consider your own life apart from God. We were those who wandered in darkness, lost in sin. But then came the Son! Reflect on the joy that comes with salvation in Jesus Christ. How might you be an agent of God's joy, made available through Jesus Christ, to those who still wander in darkness? *God gave us joy so we can give the world joy!*

PRAYER

Father, we thank you for the gift of joy. You did not promise us fleeting moments of happiness, but a steady supply of deep joy. Remind us that joy is not rooted in our circumstances but in your character. When life is in turmoil, joy has not run dry. When we find ourselves in darkness, remind us that joy comes in the morning. Father, we thank you for the gift of your Son, whom you sent in the fullness of time, that we might have joy. It is in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Two

*“And Mary said:
My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
because he has looked with favor
on the humble condition of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed,
because the Mighty One
has done great things for me,
and his name is holy.”*

LUKE 1:46-49 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Jared McGuire

Imagine what Mary must have been thinking. The angel Gabriel appears to her and tells her that she, a virgin, would give birth to a son. But not just any son, the Son of God, the one who would sit on David's throne and have an everlasting kingdom, the one who would accomplish the Lord's salvation for His people, the Son of Isaiah 9! Mary's cousin Elizabeth confirms the angel's message, Mary is to be the blessed mother of the Lord. And how does Mary respond? With joy!

Luke 1:46-49 are just the first few verses of the Magnificat, Mary's famous song of praise. It is a beautiful declaration of God's goodness and a prophetic utterance of what the Lord will accomplish. Verse 47 captures the heart of the song, "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Why does Mary rejoice? Because God is fulfilling His promises. He is toppling the proud and exalting the lowly, He is satisfying the empty and remembering His mercy. This is an occasion for joy!

Mary saw joy in the fact that God's unique act of kindness towards her was just the beginning of His redemptive purposes for all people. When the Holy and Mighty God looks upon us, His humble servants, with favor and blessing, we are filled with the type of joy that can only be expressed through praise!

REFLECTION

How has God shown His favor and mercy towards you? When was the last time your spirit rejoiced to the point of praise? Joy is infectious, it is meant to fill up and flow out of us. *God gave us joy so we can give the world joy!*

PRAYER

Father, I choose to rejoice in you alone. I rejoice because, like Mary, you have looked upon me with favor. I rejoice because you have seen me in my lowly stature and have decided in your mercy to exalt me. I rejoice because in your loving kindness you have poured out blessings upon me. This you have done By sending your Son, born of a virgin, who would grow to be the Savior of the world, and specifically my Savior. And it is in the Savior's name, Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Three

“In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger.’”

LUKE 2:8-12 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Jared McGuire

A light shines in darkness, the humble are looked upon with favor, and what do they hear? Good news of great joy! In the city of David, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the World has been born. The lowly shepherds tending their sheep are the first to hear the good news that the Good Shepherd has come to reclaim His lost sheep!

The good news of Jesus Christ bringing God’s salvation to the world is indeed a reason to rejoice. It is unlikely that the shepherds fully grasped the depths of the message they had just heard. However, they trusted enough to go and see things for themselves. After seeing the baby Jesus in a manger, they returned glorifying and praising God.

The shepherds couldn't have known what Jesus would grow up to do, but they did understand that things were about to change. God had shown up and was doing something in their midst. Not only that, but God **himself** was in their midst! Jesus, Immanuel, God With Us, had arrived, and that was enough for them to be filled with joy!

REFLECTION

The incarnation was good news of great joy. The Son of God taking on flesh and stepping into history should be cause for us to rejoice without end! Sometimes our joy comes from the material things God provides, but in Jesus, we are reminded that the greatest gift God gave us was His very Presence. Choose to rejoice in His Presence today and consider sharing the gift of your presence with someone else. *God gave us joy so we can give the world joy!*

PRAYER

Jesus Messiah, I rejoice in you today. Jesus, you are my Savior and Lord, and the coming of your Kingdom is good news of great joy to me. In obedience to the Father, and out of your great love for the world, you left heaven's glory to be swaddled in a manger. I rejoice because there is no God like you, Jesus, willing to take on flesh to save me from the sins of my own. You are Immanuel, God with us, and your nearness gives me great joy. Holy Spirit, draw near to me today, draw me to the Father, and show me the Son. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Four

"I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."

JOHN 16:22 CSB

"So you also have sorrow now. But I will see you again. Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy from you."

JOHN 15:11 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Jared McGuire

The Son born of a virgin, foretold By prophets, predicted By angels, and praised By the lowly came with a purpose on His heart, to seek and to save the lost. However, this Son of Isaiah 9 was also the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Jesus knew what the redemption of humanity would cost Him, but "For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross." (Heb. 12:2) In His final moments with His disciples, Jesus made abundantly clear who He was, why He had come, and what He was about to do. Why? So that they might have joy!

As we celebrate Christmas, we also are reminded to look ahead to Easter. In reflecting on the Incarnation, we are called to reflect on the crucifixion. God took on flesh for a purpose; our salvation required it. The gift of joy that the shepherds received at Jesus' miraculous birth was brought to completion in His atoning death.

In a world of sin and hurt, we are reminded By Jesus Himself that the joy He gives us cannot be taken away, no matter the sorrows we face.

When we have experienced the gift of salvation for ourselves, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God bears the fruit of joy in our life, which becomes our strength until the day we see our Lord Jesus face to face. Joy itself is a gift, produced not By our circumstances but By the Spirit of Jesus.

REFLECTION

We are invited to view joy not so much as an emotion produced but as a gift received. Joy is found in God's presence, and for those who know Jesus as Lord, the very Spirit of God has taken up residence in our lives. Ask the Spirit for joy today. Jesus wants you to have His joy!

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I rejoice in the new life you give me. You have promised me the fullness of joy, a joy that cannot be taken from me, and today I choose to walk in that joy. Jesus, you have given me your Spirit as promised to bear fruit in my life. Holy Spirit, bear the fruit of joy within me! Continually point me to Jesus, Holy Spirit, that my joy may be found in Him alone. May the joy of the Lord be my strength today, no matter what I face. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Five

“Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

LUKE 2:7 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Mindy O'Bannon

Sometimes the best gifts are the ones you never thought you wanted.

When I was about nine years old, the Cabbage Patch Kids were the hottest toy on Christmas lists. They were so popular, the nightly news ran stories of shoppers trampled at the mall as they fought over the limited-supply doll, which featured a plastic, bulbous head and soft, squeezable body. They also came with a hefty price tag.

In an effort to gleefully surprise their two daughters, my parents reached out to a local church member who made an imitation version custom-tailored to me and my sister for a fraction of the cost—with no plastic head. When I woke up on Christmas morning and found the handcrafted doll waiting for me by the tree, my heart sank. I was expecting the Cabbage Patch Kid, but got what I considered a “knock-off.” I felt robbed of joy.

God’s gift of Jesus wasn’t what the Jews—or the rest of humanity—expected either. We thought (and maybe even still think) we wanted a king of worldly splendor, born into a palace of power and robed in glory. But the Triune God knew that was the real knock-off.

We needed a baby of meager earthly means who could lay all celestial pageantry aside to wriggle in helpless flesh with us, cry like us, grow up like us, hurt like us... and then die for us.

That handmade doll, fittingly named Mary Elizabeth By its creator, became one of my most precious treasures—an emblem of my parents' love. (I still have it to this day.)

Jesus Christ came as the Gift in unexpected packaging. He may not have been the Savior King we thought we wanted, but He was (and is!) exactly what we needed. And in that, we are filled with true, inexpressible joy borne out of God's love for us to share with a weary world.

REFLECTION

What unexpected gifts of joy can we offer to those around us?

PRAYER

Father God, thank you that you made us in your image and that our souls long for you. Thank you for giving us Jesus exactly as you did. We love you and we trust you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Six

*“... and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,
‘Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you
good news of great joy...’”*

LUKE 2:9–10 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Mindy O’Bannon

When it comes to the nature of God, the Scriptures teach us that He is holy, or utterly otherly—set apart and inherently pure. The term also carries the concepts of reverence, awe, and even fear as responses to His Being.

The shepherds keeping watch over their flocks By night in the story of Christ’s birth knew something about holy fear when the heralding angels made their heavenly birth announcement. In fact, in just about every biblical instance of an angel visitation, the first words declared are, “Don’t be afraid.”

With all that good news of great joy, why would the shepherds be terrified?

The glory of the Lord comes with holiness, so it makes sense that we sinful humans would shrink back in terror. But if we stop there, we can come away with the idea that God’s holiness is rooted in making us afraid so we keep clear of Him. That He’s out to terrorize us because we’re creatures of dirt and muck.

It took the Bible Project’s illustration of the sun to help me make sense of holy fear and great joy coexisting in the same space. The sun gives beautiful light that provides warmth and life to everything on earth. Without it, we’d die. But if too close to it, we’d also die.

In a similar way, God's holiness is exactly what we need to survive. But such infinite light is so intensely good and pure, we can't stand it without a protective covering (see Psalm 84:11). The fear comes not because the light is sent in the name of death, but because it is terrifyingly life-giving.

God wrapped His glory in the human flesh of Jesus so we could come close to the intense goodness and holiness of the Light of the World (see Colossians 1:15-20 and Hebrews 1:3). In His loving kindness, God made a way for us through the blood-covering of Christ to come to Him for eternal life without fear.

No more do we have to shrink back in the terror of our sin. Just like those lowly shepherds, we are given the invitation to experience a joy so achingly beautiful, it's frightening.

REFLECTION

Where can you bring joy that's so good and beautiful, people might actually think it's a bit terrifying?

PRAYER

Father God, you inspire awe, and you are worthy of it all. Please help us to walk out our days in both fear and gratitude of who you are. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF JOY

Day Seven

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

ROMANS 5:8 NIV

DEVOTIONAL

By Mindy O'Bannon

One of the hardest distinctions to make at Christmas is the unmerited generosity of God alongside the message that Santa gives good little girls and boys the gifts they deserve.

No child wants a lump of coal in their stocking, and no adult wants to think they're on a cosmic naughty list. So, to collect all the good gifts—whether it's that brand new toy or eternal blessings—many of us grow up believing we have to perform for or earn from a tightfisted God. It's an inescapable idea not only built into Christmas, but into our American way of life, too.

All that earning can get exhausting and steal the joy of simply receiving a gift given out of sheer love.

In a world driven by competition and performance, it's so important to remember that God doesn't play by the same rules. The Christmas story proves that God didn't wait until we racked up enough good deeds to make it onto any honors list, as if we could ever really earn enough.

Instead, He lavished His generosity on us through the gift of the Savior when we least deserved it—because He so loved the world. (John 3:16-17) And while we were sinners, Jesus went on to give His life in exchange for all that would condemn us so we could have access to goodness that goes far beyond anything we could imagine.

Take joy in knowing—and then sharing—that Santa’s message can’t even begin to compete with the one the angelic host proclaimed on that night Christ was born: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”* (Luke 2:14 NIV)

REFLECTION

Make a point this Advent season to be generous to someone (even a stranger!) for the sheer joy of it, and then embrace the act of unashamedly receiving with grateful joy a gift given to you.

PRAYER

Father God, grant us immeasurable joy in this season. Let us start each day with gratitude and a longing to share our joy with those around us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Paper Snowflakes

SUPPLIES

Lightweight paper
(copy paper is great)

Scissors

DIRECTIONS

1. Start with a square piece of paper. You can turn computer paper into a square by simply folding one corner up to make a triangle. Cut off the remaining rectangular strip.
2. Then with the square, fold it to make a triangle. Take that triangle and fold in half to create another triangle. (You can repeat this step to make the snowflake even more ornate.)
3. Take your scissors and begin cutting designs into the edges of the triangle. Do not cut all the way across. It's important to leave sections of the folded side remaining so that your snowflake does not fall apart.
4. Unfold carefully and use your snowflake as decoration or add some string and hang them on the tree!

Christmas Puppy Chow

INGREDIENTS

9 cups Chex cereal

1 cup semisweet
chocolate chips

1/2 cup peanut butter

1/4 cup butter

1 tsp vanilla

2 cups powdered sugar

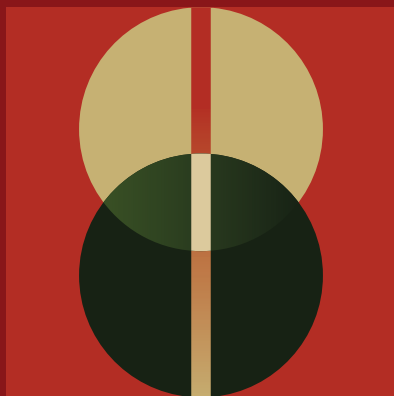
Christmas sprinkles

DIRECTIONS

1. Measure cereal and place in a very large mixing bowl. Set aside.
2. Over medium heat, melt and combine butter, chocolate chips, and peanut butter, stirring constantly.
3. When fully melted, stir in vanilla.
4. Pour chocolate mixture over Chex cereal in 3 stages, folding as you go.
5. Toss gently to coat all pieces.
6. Place powdered sugar and festive sprinkles in a large, airtight plastic bag, shake to combine.
7. Add Chex cereal in stages, tossing to cover and then removing to a wax paper lined rimmed baking sheet.
8. Spread in a single layer and chill for an hour to set.
9. Remove. Keep at room temperature or chilled.



week four



THE GIFT OF

love

advent

2025

THE WEEK OF LOVE

Day One

*“For God loved the world in this way:
He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone
who believes in him will not perish
but have eternal life.”*

JOHN 3:16 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Sarah Delp

John 3:16, perhaps the most well-known Bible verse, gives us a picture of the perfect and holy love of God. This is where the gospel begins: that God loved us so much that He sent his Son to die on our behalf. Our sin against a Holy God required a sacrifice, yet the one who required the sacrifice also provided it. Our God is perfectly loving and perfectly just. Because He desired to be known by us, He did everything necessary for us to approach his throne of grace. He acted out of love for us.

His love is a verb. It isn't just a feeling, but something that requires action. Those of us who have been called into a relationship with Him are now enabled to show the same kind of love to others. And the most loving thing that we can do for another person is to introduce them to our perfectly loving and perfectly just God. When we encounter the one true God, we are given a new heart that beats for Him and for the things that He loves. As John 3:16 tells us, He loves people. So, we are also called to love people. Do we love them enough to tell them that Jesus Christ died for them?

REFLECTION

The following is from the hymn,
The Love of God.

The love of God is greater far
than tongue or pen can ever tell;
it goes beyond the highest star,
and reaches to the lowest hell;
the guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled,
and pardoned from his sin

PRAYER

Thank you, Lord, for the gift of Jesus.
You are full of grace and mercy, and we
love you. We long for the day when we
meet you face to face, but until then,
help us to be salt and light in this world,
sharing the good news with those we love.
In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF LOVE

Day Two

“We love because he first loved us.”

1 JOHN 4:19 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Sarah Delp

This is usually among the first verses that come to mind when people think about the love of God. It is an interesting and necessary element of what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus. The call of Jesus on our lives is not just one that bids us come, but one that calls for a response.

John is communicating that we are not only called to love others, but we are enabled to love others in a new way. It's not to say that people who do not know and love Jesus cannot love, but that as believers, we are empowered By the Holy Spirit to love others in the same way Jesus loved us.

We are empowered By the Spirit to lay down our lives for others in the way that Christ laid down His life for us. This isn't always done in a literal, physical way, but in how we daily take up our cross and serve others to His glory.

REFLECTION

Hymn, *The Love of God*

O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure:
The saints' and angels' song!

PRAYER

Lord, thank you for showing us what love is. Thank you for encouraging and equipping us to love others well. Help us to share the truth of who you are as we go about our daily lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF LOVE

Day Three

*"I give you a new command: Love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you love one another."*

JOHN 13:34-35 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Sarah Delp

As we read yesterday, God's love is what compelled Him to act on our behalf. Therefore, we are empowered to act because of his Spirit alive and working in us. But we are not just empowered to love others, we are commanded to do so.

Jesus tells us that the way that we love other people will be the way that others know we are His children. The love of God that compelled Him to act on our behalf, not only compels us to act as well, it also defines us. This love is one that has a calling. We are called to love others as God has loved us. His love meant that He died for us. Our love for others may not demand that we physically die for another person, but it does demand that we put to death our own desires and agendas.

Are you willing to put to death your own ideas of the world and how things should be in order to love others? Are you seeing the world through the lens of God's love? If we are to love others, we have to see them as God sees them—people made in his image and worthy of love. Do you start from a place of love? And what does that love compel you to do?

REFLECTION

Hymn, *The Love of God*

Could we with ink the ocean fill
and were the skies of parchment made,
were every stalk on earth a quill
and every man a scribe By trade,
to write the love of God above
would drain the ocean dry;
nor could the scroll contain the whole,
though stretched from sky to sky.

PRAYER

Lord, thank you that you've called us to be disciples.
Thank you that you allow us to take part in growing the
Kingdom. Help us to be obedient to the call to serve and
love others well and in truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF LOVE

Day Four

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your mind.*

*This is the greatest and most important
command. The second is like it: Love your
neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the
Prophets depend on these two commands.”*

MATTHEW 22:37-40 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Sarah Delp

This was Jesus’ response when asked which is the greatest commandment. Jesus is giving us the exact formula that we are to follow. Loving God with all of our heart, soul, and mind comes first. Then we are to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As you have read over the last few days, those who are in Christ are empowered By the Holy Spirit within us to love others as we love ourselves. Are our lives characterized By the love of God? If love is indeed a verb, in what ways are we showing others that we love them?

REFLECTION

Hymn, *The Love of God*

O love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure:
the saints’ and angels’ song!

PRAYER

Lord, we love you. We want to live our lives in a way that brings honor and glory to you. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Thank you for this time of year when we get to gather and celebrate with family and friends. You are so good to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE WEEK OF LOVE

Christmas Day

“See, the virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will name him Immanuel, which is translated ‘God is with us’”

MATTHEW 1:23 CSB

DEVOTIONAL

By Steve Bezner

I still remember the very first Christmas gift I really wanted—the GI Joe Headquarters. For the uninitiated: GI Joe was a military play set loosely based on the American armed forces that was extremely popular during my childhood. My brother and I loved most everything GI Joe in those days—from the action figures to the cartoon to the comic books. We would regularly set up elaborate imaginary battles with our action figures in our rooms and yard, building a world of make believe that was everything a young boy could hope.

When I walked out on Christmas morning and saw the GI Joe Headquarters—complete with a cell to hold prisoners—I was over the moon. If memory serves correctly, my brother got a different GI Joe item (I think it was the hovercraft, for those interested) that morning. We spent days basking in the glow of GI Joe greatness.

Soon thereafter, however, something interesting happened. After just a few days, the initial rush of joy that I had felt when I first saw the GI Joe Headquarters began to dissolve. I was still glad I had the toy, but I no longer felt excited. Just a few days later, I felt almost nothing.

Over a very short amount of time, the thing I thought I couldn't live without became just another item in my room.

The thrill was gone.

It doesn't take long before you realize that almost every single gift (or purchase) has a similar effect. The emotional returns diminish.

As I've gotten older, I've realized that my favorite Christmas gift to receive is simply time with my family. When both of my sons are under our roof, I feel a happiness that is almost incomparable. When that's coupled with a visit from extended family, I find a contentment that is far more precious to me than any present I could ever open.

There is something special about presence.

Which, I suppose, is why that's the ultimate gift that God wants to give us.

To be sure, God is certainly our Provider—our Jehovah Jireh—who meets our needs and gives us what we need in the moment.

But more than any physical need He might meet, He wants to give us Himself.

You've made it to Christmas Day. Odds are that it feels like a bit of a finish line for you. You've probably had a number of parties, obligations, and get-togethers to navigate in order to make it to this moment. Even as you're reading this, you might be exhaling, finally ready to take in this truth:

Christmas Day is the celebration of God giving Himself.

Any other gift we might receive would eventually lose its luster, but the grace and love of God meet us with new mercies each morning.

Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. No matter what you need, He is with you.

If you feel alone? God is with you.

If you are sick? God is with you.

If you are overwhelmed? God is with you.

If you feel directionless? God is with you.

If you are exhausted? God is with you.

If you are struggling? God is with you.

This Christmas, the Lord wants to give you the gift you really want.

No matter the size of your tree or bank account, no matter how many presents you open, there is something waiting on you today that will never lose its Light—the God who never leaves. Jesus is God's pursuit of us personified. He loves you enough to leave Heaven. He draws near to you.

And He invites you to do the same.

Merry Christmas!

Snowman Snowball Launchers

SUPPLIES

White paper cups

Balloons

Scissors

Markers, black and orange

Cotton balls or
marshmallows

DIRECTIONS

1. Carefully poke a hole in the bottom of the cup and cut the entire bottom of the cup out.
2. Tie the balloon. Cut the top $\frac{1}{3}$ (side without the tie) off the balloon. Stretch the part of the balloon with the tie over the bottom of the cup. Now your cup should look like it's wearing a hat!
3. Use your black and orange markers to decorate the face of your snowman on the cup.
4. Put the cotton ball or marshmallow in the cup and pull the balloon tie back. Then aim and let go!

Christmas Crack

INGREDIENTS

40 saltine crackers
1 cup unsalted butter
1 cup brown sugar

1 tsp vanilla extract
2 cups semisweet chocolate chips

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a 9x13 baking sheet with parchment paper or foil. Spray the paper and sides of the pan with non-stick cooking spray.
2. Add the saltine crackers in a single layer to the baking sheet. Break in half if needed so that crackers fill the whole space.
3. Melt 1 cup unsalted butter in a small pot over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally.
4. Add 1 cup brown sugar and stir in. Bring the mixture to a boil and let it cook for 3 minutes, try not to stir during this time (only if you absolutely have to if you think it's going to burn). Set a timer for this step. At the end, the caramel sauce will be bubbly and thick with all the sugar dissolved.
5. Remove the pot from heat and stir in 1 tsp vanilla extract.
6. Use a large spatula to pour the caramel sauce over top of the crackers. Spread it as evenly over each one as you can.
7. Place the baking sheet in the oven to bake for 5–7 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool 1–2 minutes.
8. Sprinkle 2 cups chocolate chips over the baking sheet. Place in the oven for 30–60 seconds. No need for the oven to be on; it will still be warm enough to melt the chocolate.
9. Remove the pan from the oven and use a spatula to spread the chocolate over the entire baking sheet, covering all the cracker edges. Let this cool for 20 minutes then place the baking sheet in the fridge. Let chill for 3–4 hours.
10. Once chilled, remove the cracker candy carefully from the baking sheet and parchment paper. This may not come off in one piece because the toffee is quite sticky. Place on a cutting board and use a knife to slice into squares or break into pieces. Serve and enjoy!



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