

REDEEMER CITY TO CITY



**Advent 2023**

The CTC ecosystem encompasses leaders from many denominations who prioritize similar and diverse spiritual traditions. Celebrating Advent is one such tradition to which some denominations hold fast, and others don't. Our own staff represent a variety of experiences when it comes to the season of Advent. What an opportunity and honor this season presents to connect you with 28 leaders from around the world and their Advent reflections written for your consideration. You'll surely notice the different writing and communication styles. We give thanks and glory to the Great Creator for the diversity in his kingdom and the CTC world.

There are four weeks of Advent marked by the four Sundays directly preceding Christmas Day. Each week focuses on one of the Advent themes: hope, peace, joy and love. You'll find a Scripture passage, reflection, question and prayer for each day of the four weeks.

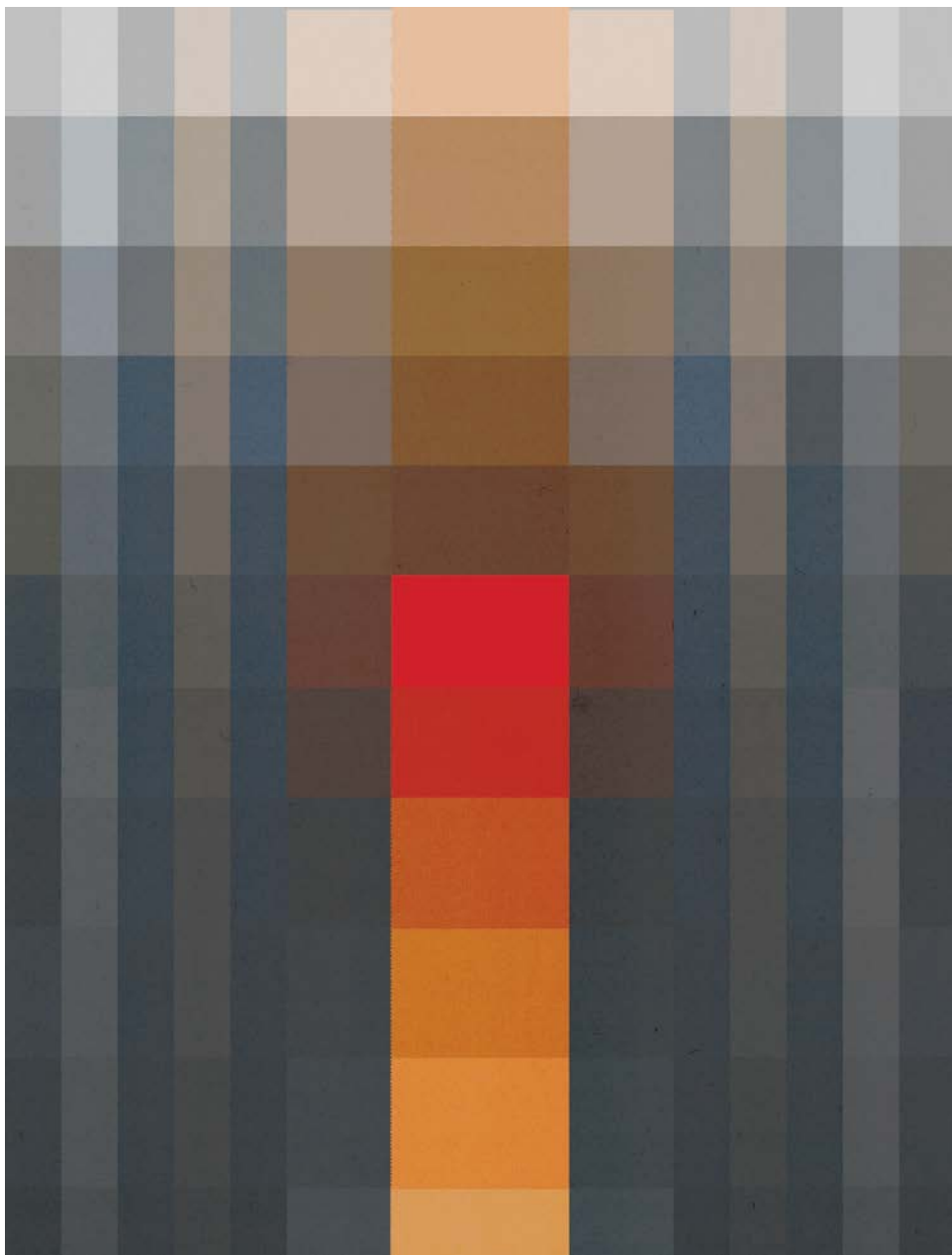
Advent is a time of anticipation and longing. We experience a yearning for deliverance from the evils of the world. There is also great hope as we anticipate a King who will rule with truth, justice and righteousness over his people and in his creation. By looking into the past, we're reminded of all Christ has done. By looking into the future, we're expectant of all Christ will do. Christ has come. Christ is risen. Christ is coming again.

**May you find great hope, peace,  
joy and love during this season  
and through this devotional.**

**IMMANUEL — GOD WITH US.**

**NOTE** All Scripture references are from the NIV translation unless otherwise noted.

# Hope



DAY 1 - 7

DAY

1

**1 PETER 1:3, 21** 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 21 Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

By **TIM KELLER**

One of the reasons for the remarkable rise of Christianity in its earliest centuries was that it offered resources for hope in the face of the numerous urban pandemics that were devastating the Roman world. Kyle Harper, a historian who has written on ancient pandemics, was interviewed and asked about how Christianity kept thriving and growing in the bleakness of those times. He said:

“[For Christians], this life was always meant to be transitory, and just part of a larger story. What was important to the Christians was to orient one’s life towards the larger story, the cosmic story, the story of eternity ... [They] were called to see the story of this life as just one of the stories in which they lived. The hidden map was this larger picture.” (1)

The Christian “hidden map” went far beyond ordinary religious constellations. For example, other religions spoke of the uncertain possibility of a better hereafter if our moral performance was sufficient. The Christian hope exceeded such quavering wishful thinking in every way. The biblical word *elpida*, translated as the weaker English word *hope*, means profound certainty. Christians view even the hardest circumstances as part of a history guided by God at every turn toward not merely some kind of afterlife but toward the resurrection of our bodies and souls into new, remade heavens and earth.

And all this hope centers on one explosive event—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what Christianity offers a world that has lost hope.

The Christians to whom Peter wrote had already “suffered grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6) and were now in the midst of a “fiery ordeal” (1 Peter 4:1). But Peter reminds them of this: “He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... so your faith and hope are in God” (1 Peter 1:3,21). The fact of the resurrection means we have a hope for the future not based on scientific advance or social progress but on God himself (1 Peter 1:21). And this is not simply an intellectual belief but, as Peter says, it is a “living hope,” a vital part of the new spiritual life that comes into Christians by the Holy Spirit through what the New Testament calls “the new birth.” Faith in the resurrection implants that hope into the root of our souls. It becomes such a part of who we are that we can face anything.

1 From an article by Rod Dreher titled, “The Germs That Destroyed an Empire” in *The American Conservative*, April 24, 2020.

**QUESTION** What trial are you experiencing right now that is causing you to lose hope? How can meditating on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ fill you with fresh hope?

**PRAYER** Lord, when we lose heart and are discouraged, when we “suffer grief in all kinds of trials,” remind us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ means we have a hope for the future based on you. Fill us afresh with your living hope.

*Taken from Hope in Times of Fear by Timothy Keller*

DAY

2

**LUKE 21:25-28** 25 There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. 27 At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

By **JULES MARTINEZ-OLIVIERI**

The season of Advent is a time of expectation, marked by the arrival of hope amid darkness and suffering. In the Gospel of

Luke, we see this hope embodied in the arrival of Jesus Christ who offers—in speech and acts—lasting peace and healing to a world plagued by fear and violence. The imagery in this passage reminds us that even during great chaos and upheaval, we can find unassailable hope in the promise of God’s rescuing love.

We may find ourselves wrestling with our fears and uncertainties. It can be difficult to trust in God’s promises when the world seems to be falling apart. Yet even in our doubts and struggles, we can take comfort in knowing God is with us in Christ through the Spirit. The Son of God is the light that shines in the darkness and the source of hope that sustains us through every trial.

The Gospel of Luke reminds us of the unique role promises play in our understanding of God’s acts. We come to know the living God through Christ’s historic faithfulness and future promises that sustain the longing for a new world. This is good news, especially for the impoverished, sufferers, victims, and the most vulnerable.

To cultivate a more profound trust in God’s guidance, we can turn to prayer, Scripture, and the wisdom of others who have walked a similar path. We can ask God to help us discern his will and presence more clearly. We can also seek out the community of believers who can encourage us as we navigate life.

While looking forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, let us remember that he embodies the hope that is militant in the strength of his love against hopelessness. Let us speak this message of hope to others, offering them what we have received from our heavenly Father.

**QUESTION** How can we trust Christ’s promises and faithfulness to guide us through difficult times? What practices should we embody to be faithful witnesses?

**PRAYER**

*Holy God, we pray, “Your kingdom come!” Come claim creation wide; then shall the power of evil break, and sin no more divide. Your love shall launch a lasting reign as earth’s old ills are healed; by mercy, justice, peace anew, in perfect joy revealed! Amen*  
(Prayer source: *The Worship Sourcebook*)

DAY

3

**1 PETER 1:3-7 (CSB)** 3 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 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. 5 You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if

necessary, you suffer grief in various trials 7 so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

By **MUSAWENKOSI NTINGA**

In my context, the word hope is often prompted by a scenario that is filled with distress, pain and uncertainty—and then

something good happens which promises a positive change in the future. A criminal who terrorises a community gets arrested by the police. A corrupt or incompetent politician is voted out of power, or a student graduates from college bringing hope to the family that their poverty might soon end.

The problem with this hope is that often it remains unfulfilled and the suffering we go through, rather than it be a steppingstone to something better, just becomes a present reality that we cannot escape. In 1 Peter 1:3 we are introduced to a different hope, a hope that is alive, that is certain, a hope that makes sense of our current distress.

First the basis of our hope is not our effort or manifesto that has no track record. It is the mercy of God in Christ. The baby we see on Christmas decorations becomes a man, and he dies in our place so that we are given a new birth. This new birth gives us a living hope and a certain inheritance premised on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead (v. 3). The resurrected Christ is the basis of the certainty of our hope! The other certainty is that our inheritance is guarded by God's power. God who is the author of both the old and the new creation guards us by "his power through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5).

This hope, unlike the other hopes, makes sense of our present distress which is why we can rejoice even "when we suffer grief in various trials" (v. 6). Why? Because God uses our trials to prove to us that our faith in him is the real deal. In most cases, fire is something to be avoided at all costs. For a jeweller working with gold, heat doesn't destroy but purifies. This is what trials do for a Christian. God uses them to expose the impurities of the idols in which we put our confidence so that all that is left is our faith in Jesus (v. 7). That faith in Jesus that brings salvation is worth more than gold. Even angels long to see our salvation (v. 12). Is it any wonder we are called to rejoice in the Lord!

**QUESTION** What idols are being exposed in your life as the intense heat of suffering burns momentarily? How are these trials strengthening the character of your faith in Jesus?

**PRAYER** Father, thank you that our hope in you is not the false hopes of this world, which are uncertain and disappointing. Help us to trust in Jesus who guards our inheritance by the power of God and gives us certainty of our faith through suffering. Amen.

DAY

4

**ISAIAH 8:22** Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

**ISAIAH 9:2** The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

By A. P.

Some time ago, my wife, Erica, and I were doing a fourteen-hour drive through the Himalayas, and the place we were staying for the night was about an hour's hike into the forest. The manager of the hotel made sure to tell us, "Please, don't come late or it'll get difficult to walk." And in our culture's true fashion, we arrived late. The hotel manager was not picking up her calls. The cab driver dropped us unceremoniously by the side of the road and drove off. We were left—to stand in the growing darkness.

The kind of frustration and anxiety we felt that night is echoed in Isaiah. We read in Isaiah 8:22: "Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom..." For King Ahaz and the Israelites who faced the prospect of Assyrian invasion, deep distress was their reality. As it is for so many of us today. Sometimes, it feels like we're stuck in thick darkness.

Now, as we stood waiting by the road, Erica and I saw a small light heading quickly toward us. The guide had come—running toward us in the darkness! Apparently, the hotel manager had seen our frantic missed calls.

The promise of Isaiah is this: "On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned." Isaiah says—for the farmer afraid of losing their livelihood, the soldier afraid of the battle, the professionals afraid of losing their job, the parents afraid for their children in an increasingly uncertain world, a guide has come! And that guide is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—Jesus. Jesus is the guide who comes running to us in the darkness.

Of course, it wouldn't do for Erica and me to stand there and sing the guide's praises (as much as he deserved it). We still had to follow him into the forest—into the darkness.

So, as we do our best to follow the guide through thick darkness, take heart! As Samwise Gamgee conveys to a despairing Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*: "In the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass." This is hope—that even though it sometimes feels like it, darkness will not have the final word over your life. Only Jesus gets that.

**QUESTION** What is making you anxious or uncertain today? What happens when you remind yourself that the Guide has come and that only Jesus gets the final word?

**PRAYER** Father, for those of us who feel the sting of anxiety and uncertainty, we pray for release and peace. But even when we still feel overwhelmed, keep our eyes fixed on the Guide—Jesus, our Light in the darkness.

DAY

5

**LUKE 2:25-38** 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 ... When the parents brought in the child Jesus ... 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." ... 36 There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four ... 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

**By NILZA I. OYOLA** | According to Webster's dictionary, hope is "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or to be true." But there is another definition of hope that can be useful to us. Hope is wanting what God has already promised us: the Messiah, our hope for the future. Luke 2 tells us what the true hope for the future is. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple to present him for dedication in obedience to Jewish law. Here we are introduced to Simeon and Anna. Both showed hope amid uncertainty. They longed to hope for a better future. But it was almost impossible to find hope because these were difficult times and dark days in Israel as it was a defeated nation under the control of the Roman Empire. Simeon and Anna, despite the circumstances that surrounded them and their advanced age, never lost hope in God and his promises. They waited patiently for the Messiah, "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (v. 25), "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38). Anna, whose name means "grace," was a widow, and widows did not have it easy. She had been searching for the true source of comfort and hope by spending time in the temple. Simeon did not want to arrive at his deathbed without having seen the face of the promised Messiah. Unexpectedly, the desires of their hearts were granted when Mary and Joseph entered the temple with their child—Jesus. No doubt this filled them with hope. When Simeon looked at the child, he knew that God fulfilled the promise he had made to him. Anna also contemplated the hope of Israel, and she did not stop talking about the child to all those who expected the redemption of Israel (v. 38).

We all long for something that will give us ultimate meaning and purpose. Although we may not realize it, in a sense, we all long for a messiah. However, the only hope that can bring true comfort in life and true peace in the world comes from one person—Jesus. The good news is that the person we are looking for has arrived! This Messiah will never fail us. He became a man to bring true hope to the world. This hope does not depend on our circumstances; even in our brokenness and sinfulness, we can have hope. This hope is Jesus, the Messiah, our true hope for the future.

**QUESTION** Have you lost hope?

**PRAYER** Dear God, thank you for making all things new. Thank you for everything you have allowed in our lives, the good along with the difficult, which reminds us how much we need you. God, I'm sure you understand our discomfort in living in a world without hope. Help us to remain steadfast, deepening in your love and grace. Thank you, Lord, because in you we can find the true source of hope. In the name of Jesus, Amen.



DAY

6

**JOB 10:3-7** 3 Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked? 4 Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees? 5 Are your days like those of a mortal or your years like those of a strong man, 6 that you must search out my faults and probe after my sin— 7 though you know that I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from your hand?

By **LUIZ SANTANA**

Do you ever wonder why life seems unfair? Is there a reason “good” people suffer? It’s natural to ask questions. Theodicy describes the struggle to reconcile the existence of a good and all-powerful God with evil. Despite the mystery surrounding suffering, many believe that hardship deepens our understanding of God’s love and puts us closer to him.

Job’s story reflects this journey. His faith and reliance on God were tested by intense suffering without a clear reason. At first, he questioned God’s justice and mercy, but eventually, he proclaimed his limitless power. Even so, Job felt abandoned and unheard, struggling to trust in an unknown and incomprehensible plan.

As Job struggled, so do we. It is difficult to accept that suffering and trials may be part of God’s plan. God promises to come through for us, but we fear our pain will persist. Our temporary suffering might even make us wonder if God sees us. As Joan Osbourn says in “One of us”:

*What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Tryin’ to make his way home?*

Moments like these require a shift in perspective. There is solace in knowing that this life is temporary and a better place awaits us without suffering. We may also find comfort in comparing our struggles with those who suffer even more. We can find relief by praying more and sharing our burdens with others, but is there a deeper solution?

We have hope not in the immediate overcoming of suffering, but in the fact that God himself suffered. During Jesus’ earthly life, he cried out to the one who could save him from death and earnestly prayed and pleaded with tears. Jesus learned obedience through suffering despite being God’s Son.

Our hope is in Jesus, God with eyes of flesh, who will end suffering once and for all when he returns.

**QUESTION** How does the understanding that Jesus suffered for us impact your perspective on your own suffering?

**PRAYER** Abba Father, when I’m hopeless and afraid, help me see through your eyes. Remind me that the cross that pierced your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, was created before the foundation of the world. And restore my hope in the gospel: that Jesus, God with eyes of flesh, suffered and wept so I would not. Amen.



**PSALM 74:12-14** 12 But God is my King from long ago; he brings salvation on the earth. 13 It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. 14 It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave it as food to the creatures of the desert.

**By F. D.**

Ancient Eastern cultures saw large bodies of water as terrifying, chaotic, and even life-threatening, and, consequently, saw large sea creatures as unpredictable and life-threatening too. In Scripture, Leviathan is symbolic of Israel's enemies, supernatural chaos and forces of evil, and even the devil himself. These forces are strong, even impenetrable and wreak unimaginable havoc and terror upon whole civilizations, countries, and even upon our own lives.

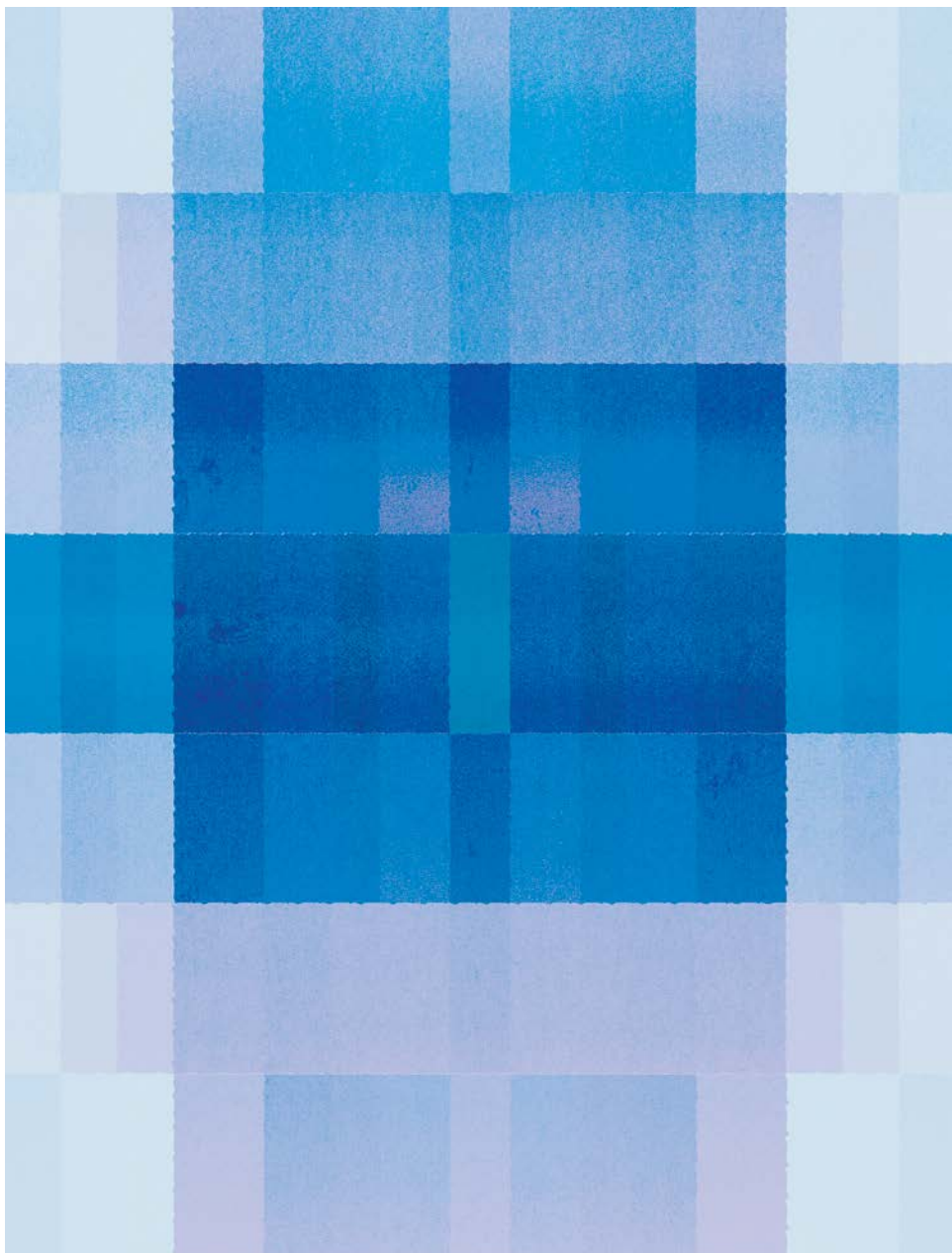
Unlike mythologies of the ancient East where gods like Marduk and Baal had to battle the chaotic sea monsters to establish their supremacy, the God of the Bible doesn't have to fight against anything to establish his position. He created the great creatures of the sea (Genesis 1:21) and holds all of creation in check. Scripture acknowledges the reality of the supernatural world of evil. But, it also emphasizes that God's sovereignty over all the powers of this world, including supernatural evil and chaos, is unmatched.

We can rest in this truth. We have hope because of the assurance that he brings salvation on the earth. He has Leviathan on a leash. No mortal man can save himself in the face of all that Leviathan represents. However, Jesus came face-to-face with all the supernatural evil and chaos that Leviathan represents. He alone fully understood the weight of what he was experiencing on the cross. He alone could save himself from Leviathan. Nevertheless, he allowed himself to become powerless in the face of evil. He willingly entered into the darkest, deepest recesses of where evil dwells. And in enduring the full onslaught of the forces of evil, he disarmed them (Colossians 2:15). He crushed the head of evil, and now stands before God the Father on our behalf. He knows what the blows of Leviathan feel like, and he has the ultimate authority over how far Leviathan can go in our lives and in this world. All power and all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. Supernatural chaos will not have the last word over your life because it did not have the last word over Jesus' life and death.

**QUESTION** For that area in your life where supernatural chaos has taken over, what does it do for you to know that God has evil and chaos on a leash?

**PRAYER** Jesus, when facing supernatural forces of evil, help us remember that you have dominion over them. You set boundaries for them in our lives, in our countries. You disarmed them. Help us remember that your authority over them is unmatched. Amen.

# Peace



DAY 8 - 14



**LUKE 23:34A** Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

By **GEORGES AMOAKO-PREMPEH**

Despite the excruciating and horrible suffering that Jesus went through at the hands of the Roman soldiers, he pleaded on their behalf by praying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He did not say, "Father, return all these atrocities I suffered upon them." Neither did he say, "Father, avenge me for what they do to me." He rather pleaded: "Father, forgive them." The question is, what did they do to merit God's grace and forgiveness? The answer is NOTHING! Jesus is teaching us that true forgiveness is not based on what we have done. Rather, it is based on what God did for us on the cross.

Father, forgive them, means (Romans 3:24-25):

- Father, be gracious unto them through the merits of the atoning blood which I shared on their behalf.
- Father, ignore what they are doing against me, and instead, look at what I did for them.

Under the old covenant, it was the offender who offered a lamb for the remission of his own sins. Under the new covenant, it is rather the offended who offered himself as a Lamb for the remission of the sins of those who offended him (John 1:29). When you suffer an offense, an injustice, a humiliation, do you yell for vengeance or plead for mercy on behalf of those who hurt you? Do you say, "Father, return this evil back to the sender," or like Jesus, graciously plead, "Father, forgive them!" The beauty of redemption does not only lie in being graciously forgiven by God. It also lies in extending this unmerited and unlimited favor of God to those who have offended us. By so doing, we are responding horizontally to the vertical grace freely bestowed on us through Christ. Simply put, we are not only the objects of God's grace and mercy, we are also the agents of the manifold grace of God. We are pardoned offenders called to graciously and horizontally extend the same grace to those who do not deserve our pardon.

Listen, blessed child of God. Do you know what happens when you turn away people who have offended you? You deprive them of the grace and mercy they should have received from God through your human channel. Oh how great it is to be an extension of God's grace and mercy! What a privilege for the almighty God to touch others through these hands of clay!

**QUESTION** Do you know what happens when you turn away people who have offended you?

**PRAYER** Thank you, Heavenly Father, for making me a beneficiary of your grace and mercy. Kindly lead and guide me, by your Holy Spirit, to extend this same favor to someone who does not merit nor deserve it. Please help me to be an extension of your grace and a visible expression of your love today. Thanks for making me a channel of blessing. Amen.



**ISAIAH 43:2 (NLT)** When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you.

*By S. R.*

Not if, when. We know this, don't we? But we often forget that on this side of eternity we will go through deep waters, rivers of difficulty, and fires of oppression.

Last year when my husband and I moved to the mountains, we were delighted to have found a truly peaceful environment, and then we fell off the proverbial cliff. We experienced pain and loss, unlike anything we'd ever experienced before, which flung me down the spiral of shame, anger, discouragement, disappointment, guilt, and deep sadness. In the absence of a miracle that I was so desperate for, God did show up but only with peace. It felt like I was at war—body, mind, and soul. I was battling death, depression, and disappointment with God—the Old Testament style. But God's only offered defense against everything was peace. Again and again, day after day, as fresh pain and hurt came up in waves, I found myself anchored by this unfathomable peace.

Finally, the journey toward healing on all fronts began, and today as I am coming up on the anniversary of my loss, I stand witness to just how powerful this peace has been. It's been my bedrock, my shield, and my defense every time guilt and shame tried to initiate self-sabotage and self-hatred. This providence of peace was Jesus—the Prince of Peace. I experienced him as a person of peace who sat with me and held me close as I mourned my loss. Not the story I wanted, but a testimony that will forever set me free. He led me through my own deep waters and peace is a promise he kept.

So take courage, my friend. God is speaking peace over you. Even when you walk through the shadow of death. Peace. Even when you face your giants. Peace. Even as you mourn your loss. Peace. Even as your mind is under siege. Peace. He will answer all your prayers in his perfect time, but in that moment he will always give you Jesus: the keeper of perfect peace.

**QUESTION** How can God's peace be the answer to your prayers?

**PRAYER** Father, I acknowledge that you are who you say you are: faithful and perfect Father. As you see me through and through, I ask that you give me peace in the corners of my mind and heart that are carrying hurt, pain and cynicism. Thank you for giving me Jesus. Thank you for his life and for the peace through him. Help me carry this peace well. Help me share it with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY

10

**PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7** 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*By* **DERRICK PUCKETT**

When you hear the word peace, what do you think of? Peace can be a means of saying goodbye, or “go in peace” can mean have a peaceful day. Like Miss America, we can desire peace on earth because of violence and corruption. We can desire peace within ourselves as a way for life to feel a little more normal. As you can see, we can and have used the word peace in many different ways.

But because of all of the pain and suffering in the world combined with the individualism of America, there is a lack of true peacemaking in society and a lack of true peace in our personal lives. Peace becomes about self love and finding inner peace, making it about the individual. This is a sorry substitute for true peace or peacemaking because while the individual may have peace or the façade of peace, there is a hurting and dying world right outside their front door. The hard truth that people in this world don’t want to face is that everything is not going to be okay. Things won’t get better until the new heaven and the new earth arrive when Jesus comes back.

Finding inner peace and loving yourself is not a bad thing, but the question to ask is: what is your source of peace? True peace has to come from someone who is greater than us, who’s not fickle in their feelings, who is stable and does not change, and the only person like that is Jesus. The Bible says in Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” True peace comes from God, and if we love God then we will not only understand how to love ourselves, but this Scripture lets us know that in him we will find our peace. We find our peace believing in the sovereignty of God where, as a son or daughter of the Most High, we are in the palm of his hands. The question of peace centers around our belief, so we have to answer once more: from where or whom do we find our peace?

**QUESTION** What is your source of peace?

**PRAYER** Father, in a world that is inundated with noise and distractions it can be hard to know where to find peace. Allow me to experience a peace in my heart that goes beyond my understanding knowing that as your son or daughter, you love me and care for me.



**ISAIAH 9:6** For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

**By RUTH GARZA** | And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, PRINCE OF PEACE. There was a time where peace reigned completely, but man, trying to be God, caused chaos. However, God did not abandon us. He promised us that a baby would be born at Christmas—the Prince of Peace who would redeem our sins. And he fulfilled that promise! The Prince has come to this world! And the world witnessed it. And he will return for us to take us to dwell with him for eternity.

This is our story, but we have not reached eternity yet. God continues to write the story of redemption in a world fraught with chaos, in a world that invites and tempts us to see our reality with despair, in the face of so much pain and illness, shootings in schools, racial differences, countries at war, drug trafficking, massive migration. It makes us feel afraid, uncertain and anguished about the future of the following generations. Sometimes it paralyzes us.

That is why it is necessary to remind ourselves of the Christmas message that the Prince of Peace has already come into this world, and there is hope. As long as we are alive, the story continues! And although we will have afflictions, he has overcome the world with great power. There is hope because his church continues to grow and will never be defeated. The gospel continues to be proclaimed and lives are transformed. New churches are planted throughout the world, and God's people are coming together to transform cities. As long as we have life, there is hope.

Let's not get discouraged. Let's take heart! And may God find us investing our lives in eternity, being an instrument of transformation in his hands, while we wait for his return. Because the Prince of Peace has already come and dwells in us! "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

**QUESTION** What part of the gospel are you failing to believe when you feel pessimistic or hopeless?

**PRAYER** Lord, I admit that my natural tendency is to see the world through my fears and insecurities, and I lose sight of your promises, your wonderful work. I ask you to increase my faith, my ability to see you in the midst of this world in chaos and live with the assurance that nothing escapes your plan and control. I want to be an instrument in your hands while I wait for the end of the redemption story. In Christ Jesus. Amen.

DAY

12

**MARK 4:35-41 (ESV)** 35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” 39 And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. 40 He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” 41 And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”

By **TEZAR PUTRA**

There are many truths that we can glean from the story of Jesus calming the storm. But perhaps the most striking one for me is the fact that, after Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples were still afraid (v. 41). This is counterintuitive because here we see that peace is found not by the absence of fear but by having our hearts fear the right thing. The disciples’ fear didn’t disappear with the storm, but it was rather transferred over to the one who calmed the storm: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” they asked. Jesus performed this miracle (as he does all of his other miracles) not just to protect the recipient’s worldly comforts. He was making a claim about who he is. I am the one who commanded the water to swallow up Pharaoh’s army—Jesus said with this miracle. I am the one who told the water to relieve Noah’s generation from unthinkable violence and sin—Jesus claimed in this miracle. The disciples saw this and trembled. For before them stands Yhwh, the one who controls the water.

But surely, fear cannot be the only emotion they felt here. See in the Old Testament, Yhwh would often control water and utilize it as a purifying sin agent, swallowing sinful man whole. But here, Jesus calms the water, soothes the water, subdues the water. He didn’t tell the water to consume but to “Be still!” Upon his command, this rough ocean mirrored the calm water surrounding the throne of God described in Revelation 4:6: “as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.” But why was it so calm? Where did the flood of God’s judgment go all of a sudden? Did we appease it? Did we soothe the waters? No. For on the throne amidst this calm heavenly sea sits a Lamb, Revelation 5:6 says, as though it had been slain. Do you see? Jesus wasn’t only telling us who he is through this miracle but also what he will do.

May your heart find peace amidst the storm, not because it’s grown fearless. But because it’s in awe of him who drunk the full cup of God’s wrath so that you may not drown in it. Behold the Lamb who sits amidst the calm sea, and may your heart remember that death has no sting before Christ our King.

**QUESTION** What are some disciplines you could instill in your life now to condition your heart to fear Christ more than the storm?

**PRAYER** Father, peace is a spiritual fruit that can not be mustered up by the grit of flesh alone. May you give us the tenacity to seek it and the mercy to attain it.



DAY

13

**DANIEL 6:10-23** 10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. 11 Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. 12 So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 13 Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to

the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." 14 When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. 15 Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." 16 So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" 17 A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. 18 Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. 19 At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. 20 When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" 21 Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! 22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." 23 The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

By **TIAGO CAVACO**

The Bible has 1,189 chapters and only in the very beginning, in the first two of them, we find some harmony between us and the world. Enter

Genesis Chapter 3 and everything goes wrong. End of peace. There evil gets inside man's heart, and it seems that it is never going away. It is true that the last chapters of Revelation tease us with the prospect of a new world, where, finally, evil will get its due. But we have to face the fact that the pages of the Bible have not a great deal of peace with our surrounding world.

Some opponents of Christianity say that our belief in the universal consequences of sin can be a way of not caring for nature. I am not sure, but I do acknowledge that we, Christians, do not romanticize our relationship with the environment. We believe that the bad that happens inside us also makes bad things happen outside of ourselves. Therefore, peace is something that usually is at odds with our external circumstances.

Remember Daniel in Babylon? What a story! And it is more than one story—it's half a dozen. Daniel was a very wise foreign man in a very oppressive and imperialistic system. Babylon being Babylon had one eye to spot smart people even in the midst of its conquered enemies. Daniel just had to conform to experience peace in this system—had to stay out of touch with his God by stopping his devotions. Peace with circumstances or peace with God?

He chose the second and that meant the environment came for him ... in the shape of roaring lions. Nature can get really dangerous when God is your priority. But an angel made the beasts behave like cats, and Daniel was spared. Everyone was overwhelmed. God can make lions purr in your lap—and it's great when it happens. But peace is also what can happen when beasts just behave like beasts and you get eaten by them. That's what Jesus experienced. On the cross, he was eaten alive so we can trust that, even when external circumstances rob us of peace, a time of peace will come. That's what's at stake in the death and resurrection of Christ.

The price of peace is expensive—paid for us—so we can confidently expect its perfect coming. Christ is our eternal peace.

**QUESTION** Does peace mean that all the lions in your life have to behave like cats?

**PRAYER** Dear Heavenly Father, open my eyes for your peace, a thing much bigger than external harmony or absence of hardships. Through your Holy Spirit, give me courage like Daniel had, so that I can experience what Christ did when dying and living again. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.



**JONAH 2:8-9 (NIV, 1984)** 8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. 9 But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, “Salvation comes from the Lord.”

By **LAUREN GILL**

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was working at home, with my toddler underfoot, in a New York City apartment. My husband was also trying to work from home, and I was pregnant with our second child. My days were filled with Zoom calls interrupted by requests for snacks, all while trying to find a cartoon to keep my daughter occupied so I could get work done. I missed my in-person work, and I felt physically strained because I couldn’t freely move outside like I had with my previous pregnancy.

Shortly after the pandemic, someone asked me what it was like to live in New York City and have a second baby during that season. I, with no hesitation, said, “It was awful actually.” But as I thought later about my response, something became clear to me. During that season, I had clung to a worthless idol: the idol of comfort. The Holy Spirit began to reveal to me how much grace I had forfeited by clinging to this idol. I had a healthy baby with no issues, a job that I kept through the pandemic, a loving partner, and I worked for an organization that provided me with maternity leave. There were many blessings surrounding me during that season. But instead of singing a song of thanksgiving, I forfeited the peace that could have been mine because of the idols I clung to.

Jonah 2:8-9 tells us that when we cling to things that are not Jesus, they do not deliver. *They are worthless.* We forfeit the grace that Jesus offers us when we cling to anything that is not him. When the grace of our salvation and the grace he offers us with each new day is not enough, we lose our sense of peace.

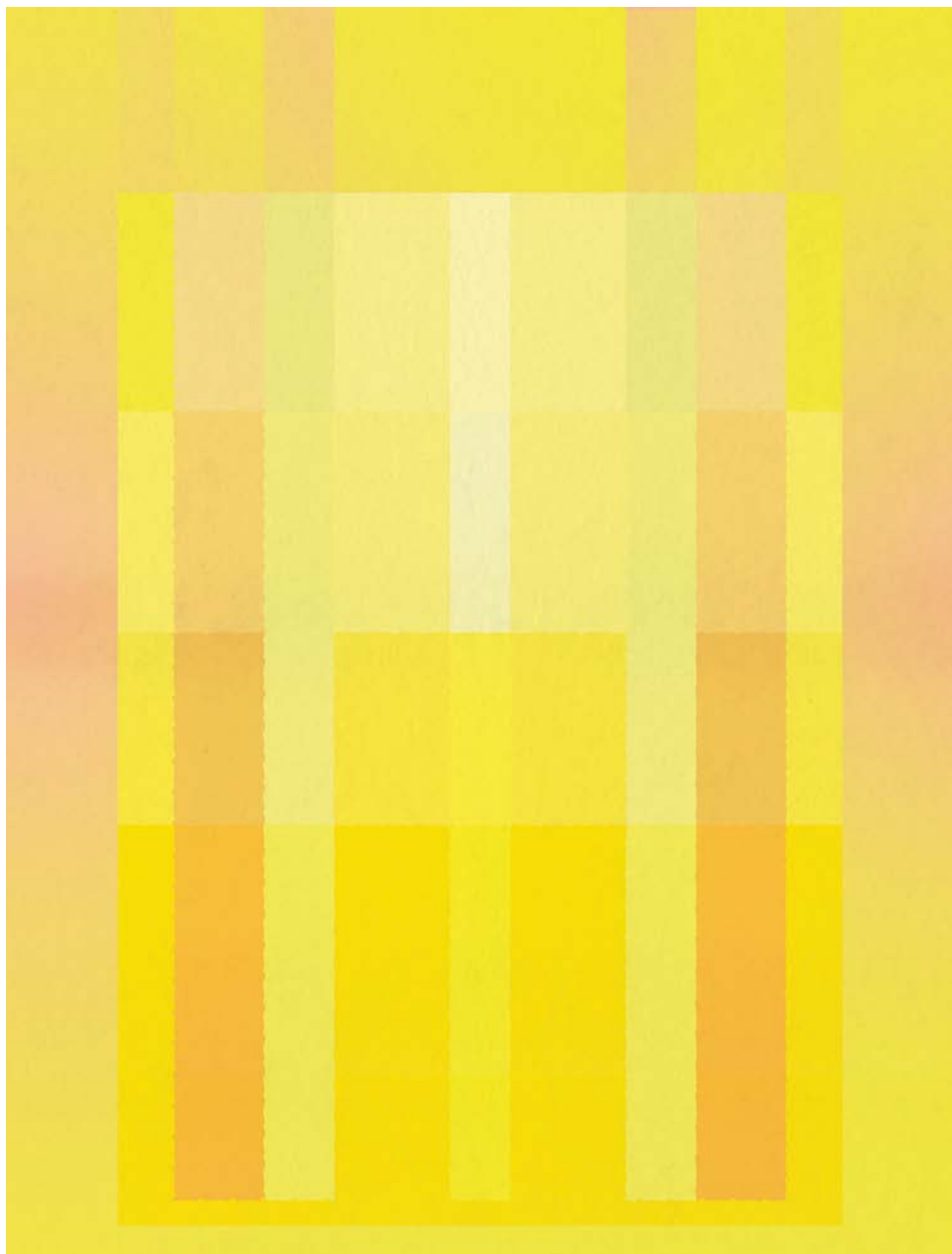
It was God’s grace toward me that helped me recognize my idol of comfort and its worthlessness. I could then drive myself deeper into Jesus and his Word and ask him to become more beautiful to me than the comforts of this world.

**QUESTION** What idols have I been clinging to instead of Jesus in this season? What grace have I forfeited because I’ve been clinging to this idol? How does the salvation that comes from the Lord speak to what I need?

**PRAYER** Father God, in a world that tells us we should have all of our comforts at hand, you call us to love you more than the idols that captivate our hearts. Align our affections to you. Make yourself beautiful to us so that “the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of your glory and grace.”

*Song lyrics, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus” by Helen Howarth Lemmel*

# Joy



DAY 15 - 21

DAY

15

**MATHEW 2:1-18** 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to

Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. 13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18 "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

By **ANDRES GARZA**

Advent announces a great season for a lot of people. It represents a season of joy, celebration and food; however, even among many

Christians, there is not a real understanding of this season. Advent is about joy and celebration, yes, but also about the real problem of humanity. We can see this problem in the story about the Advent of Christ found in Matthew 2. Mathew mentions three things to reflect on.

- The problem of humanity, which is pride
- How we react to this problem
- The hope for humanity

First, when Herod heard about the coming of the King through the wise men, his heart shook. Why? Because Herod did not think Jerusalem needed a new king. Herod was the king, and Jerusalem was in relative peace. We are like Herod. Many times, we think everything is in our control. We often don't realize we are rejecting the real King as we try to be king.

Secondly, remember that Herod was powerful. He was accustomed to having his will obeyed. He needed to stop the coming of this new King. Herod asked the wise men to inform him about the location of this new King. He then lied to them when he told them he wanted to worship the new King too. But the Holy Spirit advised the wise men not to tell Herod where Jesus was born. Herod reacted by killing all the children under two. Pride in our life is unstoppable. Sooner or later we lie, or we hurt others because we want to be the king. We want to be right all the time. We want to be in control.

Thirdly, that is why we need Christmas. We need to see the King of Kings coming as a humble baby before whom the kings of this world will kneel. The wise men (kings) knelt before the baby Jesus when they saw him. They surely saw the real King of Israel leaving behind everything, his throne, and his glory, to become a humble baby to save his people. We all are prideful people that need help. It is impossible for us to help ourselves. It is necessary to see the humbleness of Christ as he came as a baby just to give us hope for a new life and the joy that brings.

**QUESTION** Can you identify some pride in your life that takes you away from Jesus and robs you of joy?

**PRAYER** Father, please help us see the prideful life we are often living. Please help us see Jesus as our real King and depend on him once for all. We want to be our own kings. Forgive us for not seeing the real King. In Jesus Christ, Amen.



**PSALM 30:5** For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

By **DONECIA NORWOOD-SMITH**

As we approach the season of Advent, we are reminded of the joy that comes from the birth of Jesus Christ. The birth

of Jesus brought joy to the world, and as we reflect on this season, we also examine joy in our own lives. This can be challenging as it seems that no matter where we turn, we face difficulties that lead us to despair and sadness.

The events of the past couple of years have hit many of us. We have experienced loss of life, employment, homes, friendships, even our ability to be vulnerable in community. Basic activities like going to the grocery store, school or church are now approached with caution tape around our hearts and minds. If you are like me, finding joy amid suffering and confusion can be trying and can leave us with impossible feelings.

I am reminded that Mary, the mother of our Savior, had to navigate an uncertain time in her life also. Less than two years after the birth of their son, Joseph and Mary were fleeing their home and seeking refuge in foreign territory filled with danger and uncertainty. Herod sought the death of their child—the one the angel had promised would be called the “Son of the Most High” and whose “kingdom will never end.” I can only imagine their conversations and swapping of stories around what the angel of the Lord shared with each of them and how this turn of events fit into it all. Talk about joylessness. However, God’s promises are trustworthy and none of this changed the fact that our Lord and Savior had been born— joy had indeed come into the world.

Let us remember that God sent his only Son into a broken, sinful world to bring us joy, hope and peace. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, let us embrace the joy that comes from knowing that God is with us. Remember that God is with you in your suffering and that he can use even the most difficult experiences for good. Advent is a season of joy. Joy is not just for this season, but for every season. May the joy of the season fill our hearts and overflow into the lives of those around us.

**QUESTION** Have you ever experienced a painful or difficult situation that led you to discover a deeper sense of purpose in life? What was that experience like, and how did you find purpose in the midst of it?

**PRAYER** Gracious God, fill us with your joy. Help us to see the beauty in each moment and to find happiness in the simple things. May we radiate joy to those around us and always remember that you are the source of all true joy. Amen.

DAY

17

**JOHN 15:1-5** 1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

By **SAMUEL BOATENG**

Nothing compares to the Christian life. On the one hand the Christian life is normal—life in a beautiful but broken world. We

experience everything that non-Christians experience. On the other hand it is an extraordinary life because of the Lord's words in John 15 (vv.1-5). True Christian life is Christ's life in his people. It is life in union with our Lord. As the branch derives sap and therefore life from the vine, the Christian community and Christian individuals have true life because they are vitally united to Christ. The Christian's whole life is lived out by abiding in Christ. In fact the Christian life, the mundane and the extraordinary, is in essence life in Christ. We live the Christian life by abiding in Christ daily in every aspect of our thinking, affections and actions.

What then does it mean to abide in Christ? John provides the answer in verse 10. "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love ..." That means letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly. As Tim Keller puts it, it means, "You must have your inner being and character shaped by the gospel [the Word/commandments of Christ]. Everything you do must be in line with the truth of the gospel." So to abide in Christ is taking refuge in what God has done for you in and through him (the cross and the resurrection), and begging the Spirit to shape all your outlook on life and death through your union with Christ. To abide in Christ is to look intently into God's Word and prayerfully appropriating the power of the finished work of Christ and all its implications for all of life, into your affections, actions and thoughts.

This makes the ordinary Christian life not ordinary at all. It is the life of Christ, the True Vine, lived out in and by the branches by faith in the Vine. All that is in Christ becomes ours. All that we are is from him. Christ in the Christian community and the Christian community in Christ is what makes the Christian community a people of certain hope. Whether by life or death their lives will not fail. It is life in Christ. Life lived by abiding in Christ everyday, everywhere and every time. That is true for you if you are in Christ by faith.

**QUESTION** Considering John 15:11: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete," what assurance can you have for lasting joy because you abide in Christ?

**PRAYER** Loving Heavenly Father, thank for Jesus, for life lived in union with him. Thank you that our lives have meaning because it is his life in us and life with him. May I find great joy in this. Amen.

DAY

18

**JOHN 16:16-24 (ESV)** 16 “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” 17 So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?” 18 So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” 19 Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him,

so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’?” 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. 21 When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 22 So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. 23 In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. 24 Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

By **ALASTAIR STERNE**

Jesus says, “Your sorrow will turn into joy.” How do you feel about that? You might respond like the eternal optimist who says: Yes, yes, yes! Life is all about joy, and faith is all about victory. If we’re not perpetually joyful and healthy and wealthy, then something is amiss with our faith. Or perhaps you are more the pessimist: suffering now—glory later. You may even hold deep suspicion or at least reservations toward joy, as it is too cheery for the challenges of faith in this world. We are to grit our teeth and endure. And at the end of the age, when Christ returns, we will have our reward and bliss.

If a motto could be derived from the passage we just read, one pastor says it like this: “Suffering now. Joy now. Glory later.” There is trouble in this life. Joy exists within this trouble. And the greatest joy is yet to come, the day when Christ inaugurates his perfect kingdom at his return. As we wait for this second Advent, we do so with the promise that sorrow can turn into joy.

Joy is not a state of mind. It is a bright emotion that arises in us when our lives are apprehended by goodness. It can be quiet or loud, gentle or intense. It can be an inner experience, a quiet laughter of the heart. A subtle joy. Or it can be an outer experience, visible to others, a joyful presence. An overt joy. We can be open to joy, even cultivate it, but joy is often something that takes ahold of us more than it is something we take ahold of. But the desire for joy usually arises due to an awareness of its absence—a joylessness. Sorrow often precedes joy. This isn’t a rule, but it’s not uncommon either. And so, if you’re thinking about the sorrow and difficulties of your life, perhaps in sharp contrast to the lights and cheer of this season, I want to gently say, “Perhaps.” Perhaps joy may still apprehend you in this place and not some place else—in these conditions and not some ideal ones. Perhaps your sorrow can turn into joy. Because Jesus promised his disciples that their sorrow over his death would turn into joy through his resurrection—a confounding joy— but also a joy that no one can take away.

**QUESTION** What sorrowful areas in your life are opportunities for Christ to transform into joy?

**PRAYER** May joy apprehend our hearts—this great joy of Jesus Christ that no one can take from us. May this joy take ahold of you. A joy not just for our sake, but for the world. May we know the joy of more people discovering the confounding and unshakeable joy of his death and resurrection.

DAY
<b>19</b>

**ISAIAH 9:3** You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

By **GUNA RAMAN**

There are not many occasions in this world filled only with celebrations and rejoicing. In life, every joy is somehow tempered by at least a measure of grief. Though life brings many pleasures, it also brings many pains. I remember the Christmas of 2018. It was my last Christmas service with the church I had planted and pastored for 30 years. It was a day of celebration and joy. But at the end of the service, as the crowd thinned out, the unexpected happened. Our married daughter, who was at the service, collapsed to the floor with a seizure. Our joy turned into fear. The next thing we knew, we were in the emergency ward of the hospital, fighting anxiety and grief. Our joy turned into mourning. It is in moments like these that we see ourselves pleading for God to give us the faith to trust, faith to believe, faith to endure.

In the life of an agricultural people, as we see referenced in Isaiah 9:3, there are two great moments of joy. One is at harvest and the other is when your enemy has been defeated and you are splitting up the plunder. The coming of Jesus Christ achieved both for us. Instead of reaping God's wrath and judgment, we now reap his grace and mercy, something we couldn't have earned by ourselves even if we had tried, because Christ came and he took on himself God's wrath and judgment. You reflect deeply on this and what you get in return is simply joy. The coming of Jesus also defeated the enemy. Satan loses his hold on us. He cannot any longer drag us with him into hell or hold us to our sins for they have been paid for.

So that Christmas in 2018 that turned so dark for us was still filled with hope. Jesus came so that my family would not be left without hope even through those trying months of struggle my daughter had to endure, as she fought to recover. The gospel gives us the hope that even death is not the end. There is still eternity. And yes, all mourning will one day be turned into dancing. Sorrow will last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

**QUESTION** How would you handle pain and sorrow in a joyful, festive season?

**PRAYER** Father, we thank you that the coming of your Son gives us the hope that one day you will wipe away all our tears, and our mourning will be turned into dancing. In the meantime, help us to rejoice in you in every circumstance that we are in and trust you that even in our darkest moments, you are with us and for us. Amen.





**JOHN 16:22** So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

By **FRANCISCO CALDERÓN**

We are living under constant threat that the things we cherish the most will be taken from us. In fact, life itself and the difficulties of this world remind us that the threat is real. We are not as young as we used to be and we don't have the energy we once had, and our bodies cry out, letting us know that they are not like they used to be. Also, our relationships change; they can get damaged or come to an end. Continual crises, injustices, politics, difficulties and so many other things remind us of this. And as if that weren't enough, the pandemic and its repercussions that continue to affect us remind us that the world can literally change in a moment's notice, robbing us of our joy.

But there is something special that I like about Christmas. It reminds us with bold letters on our calendars that one day there will be no more difficulty thanks to the coming of the baby in the manger. There will be no more pain, no more tears, and nothing more from that long list of things that people suffer from... not even death... even death will die.

And that new era will be characterized by joy and peace. That joy is only possible because of the baby that was born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. He came and lived the perfect life of obedience because of his love for his Father and he brought with him glimpses of the coming feast that will be held for all the redeemed. This was made possible because of his sacrifice and work of justification on the cross.

We are now waiting to celebrate the beginning of the feast. And those who believe that the baby in the manger is their Savior can live with confidence in the here and now, believing Jesus' words when he said, "... but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." When you understand this, you will begin to hear the far away strains of the music of the feast; the feast of the redeemed; the magnificent and eternal feast where joy will be the main ingredient. We will celebrate our King and Savior and no one and nothing will be able to take that joy away!

**QUESTION** Where do you find joy in the midst of the circumstances of your life?

**PRAYER** Father, thank you that even though our lives have been characterized by fears, doubts and insecurities, we can find certainty in you that you offer us not only salvation but also eternal life in your presence that will be characterized by joy.

DAY
<b>21</b>

**LUKE 2:10-11** 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

By **RENÉ BREUEL** | I spend most of the year planning and striving and getting things done. They are good things, no qualms here.

But I often end up feeling stretched. And I arrive at the end of the year anxious for the future and resentful for what I couldn't yet accomplish.

Do you too?

Here's a bit of news that doesn't depend on your efforts: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” (Luke 2:10-11)

Isn't that great? Advent is the irruption of God's joy on earth. Festive angels sing before shepherds who struggle to realize the magnitude of what they see. So do we, accustomed as we may be to the Christmas season and its recent commodification and banalization. Expectant children may have become hardened adults who know the drill and hum the carols while checking the ups and downs of the stock market.

The birth of the Savior is good news for you. Right now. Receive it in faith. Overcome the cynicism that might sneer on the angelic announcement. Jesus was born, and that changes everything.

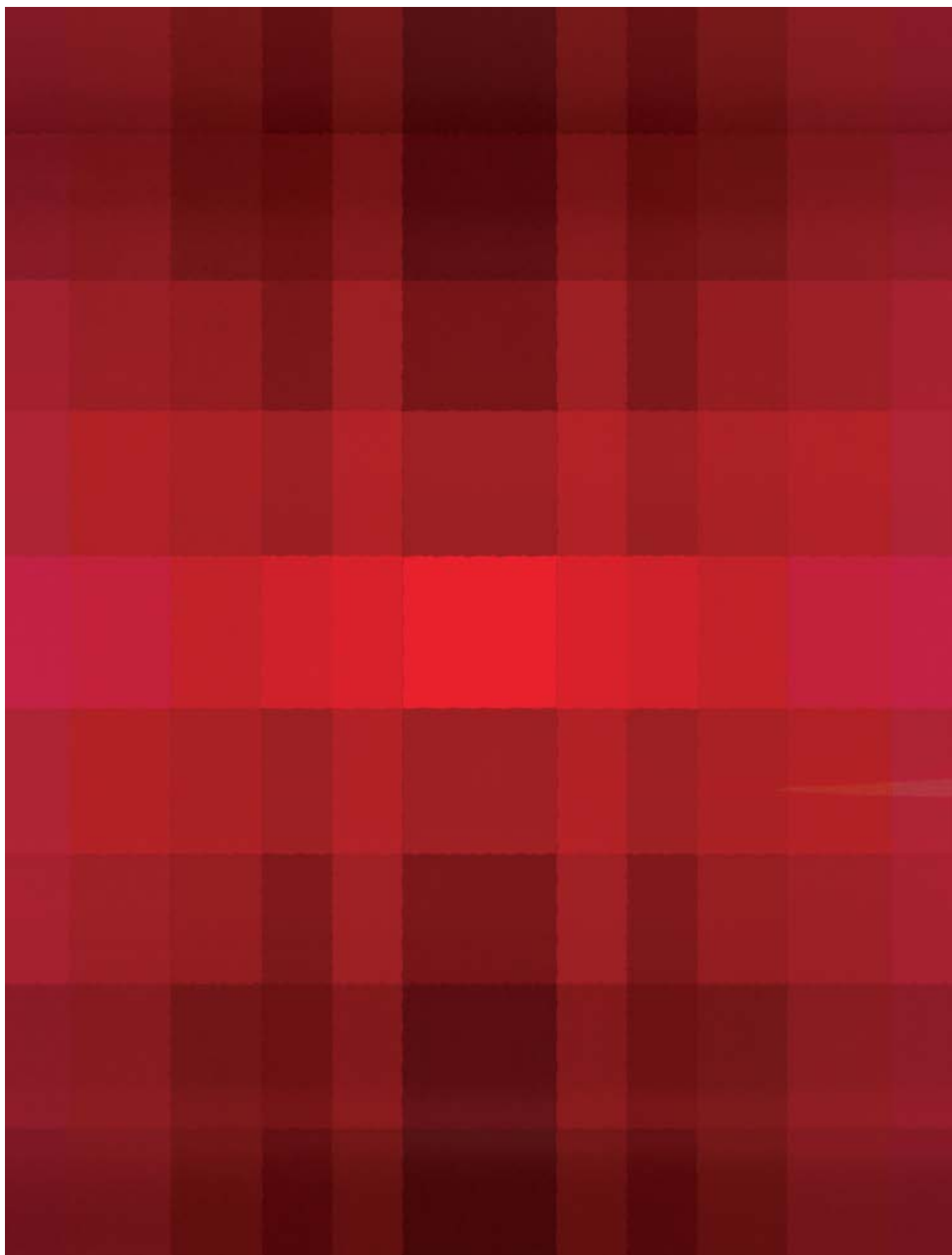
Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, “Happiness is a butterfly, which, when pursued, is always beyond our grasp, but which, if you sit down quietly, may alight upon you.” It's a secular truth that becomes even more poignant in the spiritual realm. Salvation is God's initiative, not ours.

At Advent, God invites us to exchange striving for hope and grasping for receptivity. The greatest news of all time broke into history independent of our effort. And it breaks into our hearts when we stop our exertion and lift our gaze to the Lord. All we need to be joyous is to quiet our souls and turn them to God.

**QUESTION** How has your posture toward Advent and Christmas changed over the years? How does the announcement of “great joy” make you feel today?

**PRAYER** You are welcome, Lord Jesus. Take your rightful place in my heart. You are worthy of honor, glory and praise. Restore in me the joy of my salvation. My spirit joins the heavenly choir by faith. The joy of the Lord will be my strength today.

# Love



DAY 22 - 28

DAY

22

**MATTHEW 2:13-15** 13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

By **GIOTIS KANTARTZIS**

An episode in the birth narrative of our Saviour in Matthew 2 is his flight to Egypt. This flight “fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’” This phrase is from Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” There the context refers to the people of Israel and their exodus from Egypt. Quoting it with reference to Jesus implies that Israel fulfills its history, call, institutions and destiny through Jesus’ life and work. Here Matthew helps us understand Jesus’s birth as an act of deliverance from bondage, as a new exodus. Jesus is not only the true Israel but also the new Moses.

There are many “Egyptys,” many “lands of bondage,” that enslave us even today. Matthew invites us to approach Christmas not as a warm fuzzy time of comfort but as the ultimate conflict, the ultimate confrontation between God and the evil one who enslaves us. Christmas is a celebration of not only God the deliverer but also the God of design and eternal purposes.

History is not a series of random events. It has a shape. In this context, past events correspond to and point out future ones. The exodus of Israel from Egypt points forward and, in a way, is being fulfilled in the future event of Christmas. This can happen in the context of a history guided by a wise and sovereign God—a God who comes and meets us where we are. In a way Israel never left Egypt. Even after the return from exile in Babylon, Israel feels enslaved (Nehemiah 9:36-37). When Jesus goes down to Egypt, he goes, in a symbolic way, to meet Israel where he is—in the land of bondage. The whole event of Christmas reveals our God as exactly that: the God who loves us and comes where we are to meet us and identify with us. In the prophecy of Hosea we learn God’s motivation for this act of deliverance: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). For the first exodus to happen, the firstborn son of Pharaoh had to die as God reveals his holy unbridled sovereignty. For this new exodus to happen, the only begotten Son of God had to die as God reveals how he “so loved the world” (John 3:16).

**QUESTION** What is your “Egypt” that you need to be delivered from?

**PRAYER** God of deliverance come and meet us in our “Egyptys” and lead us out in an exodus to life and beauty and purpose.

DAY

23

**MATTHEW 2:1-2** 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

By **VICTOR CRUZ**

The wise men that came to meet Jesus are not the typical characters in the Bible or in the Christmas story. In the first place they are described as Magi, which is a Greek word to describe one that practices astrology and enchantments. It is the equivalent word used in Daniel 2 to describe the men that were called by Nebuchadnezzar to interpret his dream. The wise men were a different kind of people. We do not know the color of their skin. What we do know is that they came from the East and that they identified the star of the King of the Jews. This star was prophesized in the Old Testament in Numbers 24:17: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.” What is the star that the wise men mentioned? We also do not know this, but we know that the star was announcing the birth of a king. Who would not be excited to hear about the birth of a new king? The Jewish people had long expected the rule of a new king, a king that would bring justice and peace. A king that would bring victory over the enemies of his people. But the wise men were not Jewish.

The wise men remind us that we have a King that we can approach with our strange stories, with our pain, with our shame, with our fear, with our misery and that we will be accepted by his grace and love. The wise men were not the expected candidates to worship Jesus, but God chose them to come and find hope in the just rule of the only King that truly loves his people. This King is Jesus. This is the King that we trust, that we follow and that we announce to the world on Christmas—a loving King that will welcome the lost strangers.

**QUESTION** Are you grateful to know that you are a stranger accepted by the grace of Jesus our King?

**PRAYER** Dear Father, we thank you that although we were lost and far away from you, through Jesus, you have called us to come close to you, even when we were your enemies. Thank you for loving the strangers.

DAY
<b>24</b>

**1 JOHN 4:7-8** 7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

By **PATRICIO OYARZÚN**

In general, Latin American culture tends to place a high value on loving relationships and community. Family, friends and social connections are often considered to be more important than individualism and independence. Love in Latin American culture often involves a strong sense of commitment, loyalty and support for one's family and community. However, 1 John reminds us in this time of celebrating the birth of Jesus that real love doesn't come from communities or individuals, but it is born from God himself. Those who have been born of God and know him, will also know and demonstrate love. The absence of love in a person's life may indicate a lack of knowledge of the Son of God who was born in Bethlehem. As followers of Christ, we are called to love one another, not just with words, but with actions. Our love for others should be a reflection of God's love for us. When we love others in this way, we demonstrate to the world the transformative power of God's love. We can do this, particularly in this time of the year when we remember God's love becoming a little baby in Jesus.

**QUESTION** As you celebrate the birth of Jesus, how can you share the message of God's love with those who may not yet know him, in a way that is loving, meaningful and relevant to them? What are some creative ways that you can embody the love of Christ and demonstrate his love to those who are still searching for meaning and purpose in their lives?

**PRAYER** Dear God, as we celebrate the birth of your Son, we are reminded of the incredible love that you have for us. Give us wisdom and creativity to find ways to reach out to unbelievers and demonstrate your love to them in a way that speaks to their unique needs and experiences. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

DAY

25

**EPHESIANS 3:17-19** 17 ... And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

By **ANDREW KATAY**

Why does it take power to know someone's love for you? That's Paul's assumption in this prayer; he knows that we are empty without God, and so he wants the believers at Ephesus to be filled up with all the fullness of God. And what that means is being filled in their souls, their hearts, with the limitless, dimensionally unconstrained love of God in Christ.

Two crucial things about this love. First, it is infinite. It surpasses knowledge, not only in the sense that it can't and mustn't be reduced to an idea, but that it must also and always be experienced, known in that first hand sense. And second, God's love for us in Christ takes specific form, the form of grace. Love can be love for the lovely, and so much of our own love is like this. But not God's. His love is for the unlovely—as Paul puts it elsewhere, for enemies, while we were still sinners. And that kind of love is called grace, which is perhaps a clue as to why we need power to comprehend God's love for us.

We know ourselves to be unlovely, to be compromised and contaminated at the centre of our being. Almost all that we say, do, think or feel bears something of this stain, and in some ways, the more you progress in the Christian life, the more this realisation presses upon you.

And so to know God's love takes power—the power to rest in how God is toward you in grace more than how you experience yourself. In other words, what it takes to really know, soul-knowing, God's infinitely holy love for you right in the midst of this unloveliness is the power of God's Spirit dwelling in us (v. 16), overcoming all the accusations of the evil one that our unloveliness makes us impossible to love. But that is the great announcement of Advent—"For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

**QUESTION** Where, specifically, in your life, do you need power to know that God loves you?

**PRAYER** Loving Heavenly Father, fill us with all your fullness. Cover each corner and crevice of our lives in your grace-colored love, that we can live to the praise of your glory, overflowing in love to you and to our neighbours. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

DAY
<b>26</b>

**LUKE 2:10-11** 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

By **YUCAN CHIU**

Christmas day in my family is a day of radical inclusion. Siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, and additional friends who have no place to stay—over seventy people with a wide variety of religious beliefs (Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Atheist and more), sexual orientations, political views, ages (at least seven decades are represented), and family values gather in three different cities over the span of 24 hours for a time of food, laughter, catching up, Christmas carols, gifts and more. Whew! We may not get along at other times of the year. And we may struggle to come to the Christmas gatherings because of our differences. But we try.

I’m not sure where you may be coming from, but I venture to guess that some reading about my family may feel a little “uncomfortable” with some of the family members I have. And perhaps, if you were in my family, you might struggle to show up as well. I bear no judgment; I get it. I’m living it!

It’s a good reminder of the radical gospel invitation that Christmas is all about. From questionable bloodlines (Matthew’s genealogy), to Persian astrologers (of a former oppressor’s bloodline), to unknown extended family in Bethlehem (I’m of the persuasion that the holy family stayed in the guest room at an extended family member’s home—see recent research on this), to stranger shepherds knocking on the door... what a Christmas party invite list! Praise God that the gospel invitation through Jesus is truly wide enough for all people. May we, who are in Christ, “being rooted and established in love.. have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:17-18) this Christmas season.

**QUESTION** Who would I feel uncomfortable with inviting to a Christmas party in my home? How is God inviting me to include them this Christmas season? What is my first step today in making this a reality?

**PRAYER** God, help me see afresh this Christmas season how wonderfully wide your gospel invitation is. Help me see the people I’m around—family, coworkers, neighbors, and friends—through the lens of your wide-open gospel love. Give me a chance to share with each of them about you. Amen.



DAY

27

**ACTS 4:32-35** 32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

By **MATTHEW HOSKINSON**

| If you want to know what a person really believes, look at what they do. Whether we're aware of it or not, our actions give a more accurate account of our faith than do our words.

The first believers in the risen Messiah gave frequent and powerful testimony to their faith (v. 33). But the way they lived, and especially the community they formed, validated what they said about Jesus. Their generosity transcended charitable giving or a benevolence fund. Moved by the Holy Spirit, early followers of Jesus liquidated property to take care of the less fortunate. Their communal care actually eradicated poverty (v. 34). What love!

Generosity like this is hard to imagine. Yet Luke presses the point further. Consider this assertion: "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own" (v. 32). People voluntarily liquidated property because they fundamentally relinquished ownership. "It's no longer mine," they reasoned. "It's ours."

It's easy to read about the unity of the early church and wonder how we can recreate it. But oneness is not the result of our effort. Oneness is the gift Jesus gave us by his Spirit. "We were all baptized by one Spirit," Paul writes, "so as to form one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). That's why he exhorts the Ephesians to "keep"—not create—"the unity of the Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3).

Most significantly, however, our oneness with one another is itself a byproduct. "I have made you known to them," Jesus prays to the Father, "that I myself may be in them" (John 17:26). The Spirit makes us one with one another by first making us one with Jesus. Christian community is a byproduct of our union with Christ.

Do you see what Jesus has done? He laid aside his privileges as the Son of God, became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and welcomed us back into the life of God. To that end he gave his very life away. Even after the resurrection, his life was not his own. He became "a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). "My life is no longer mine," he reasons. "It's ours."

We are one with Jesus, and therefore one with each other. My life is not my own. It's his. And therefore it is ours. Only the good news of our union with Christ can begin to stimulate the love for others that we long for our churches to embody.

**QUESTION** To whom is God calling you to show generosity this week with your time, skill, or money?

**PRAYER** Thank you, Lord Jesus, for uniting us to yourself by your Spirit, and for every blessing we receive in you. Teach us to love our brothers and sisters, and make our churches a visible testimony of your transforming grace. Amen.

DAY

28

**ROMANS 5:1-8 (ESV)** 1 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 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. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. 6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

By **MASSIMO GEI**

We have been reflecting on hope, peace, love and joy during this Advent season. In Romans 5:1-8, Paul masterfully weaves all these elements into a few verses. First, he shows us that our faith in Jesus brings us peace with God, which fills us with hope. This hope is a future assurance of standing in God's glory that enables us to have joy in the present, even amidst our sufferings. Through trials, we develop endurance, character, and ultimately, hope—"hope [that] does not put us to shame, because it comes to us through his love being poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (v. 5). Therefore, peace, joy, and hope through faith flow from the wellspring of God's love. His love affects everything. Everywhere, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). God's love is sacrificial.

The concept of sacrificial love being the greatest kind is not disputed. Bob Marley said, "The truth is, everyone is going to hurt you. You just gotta find the ones worth suffering for." Marlene Dietrich echoed the same sentiment: "If it isn't pain, it isn't love." Bruno Mars sings of being willing to "take a grenade for you." Many of us are willing to do many things for many people, but we are only willing to suffer for the few we genuinely love. Suffering for another is our greatest expression of love.

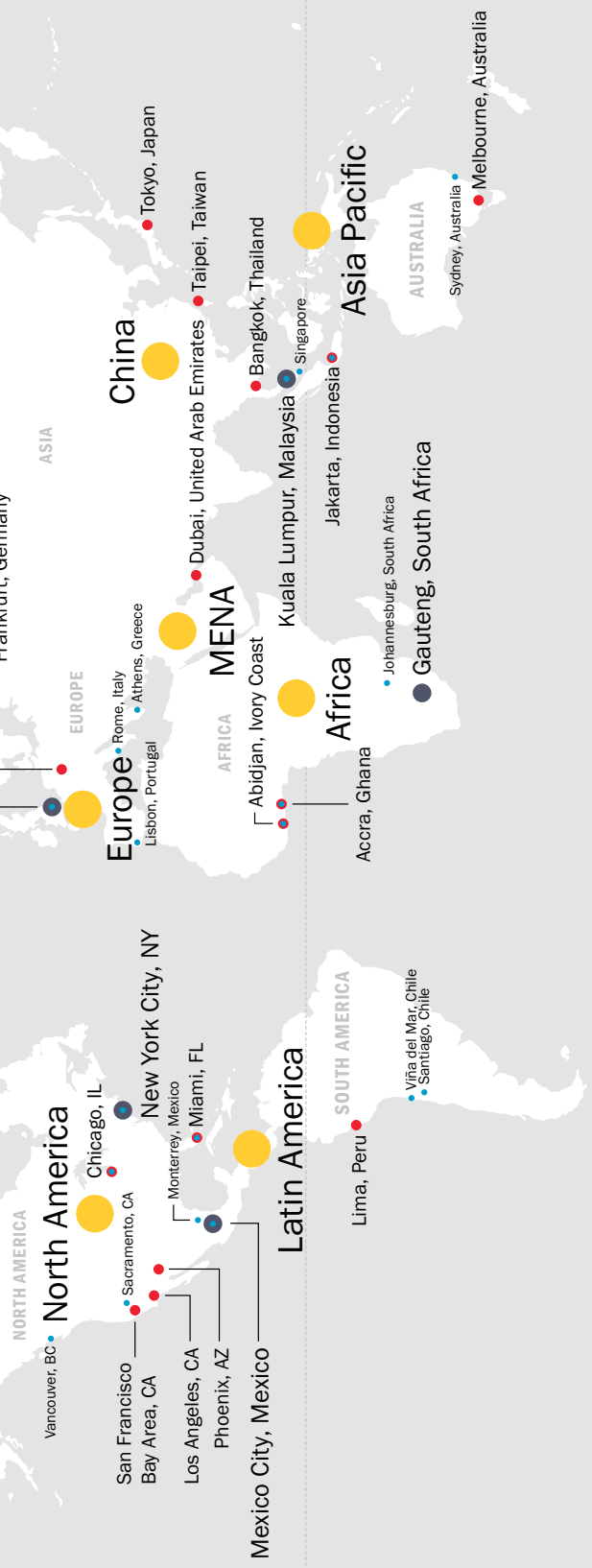
Though portions of our songs, culture and innate inclinations align with Scripture, they still pale compared to the boundless depths of God's love. We confine our sacrificial love merely to those who we believe are deserving. God's love, however, transcends worthiness and extends infinitely beyond the boundaries of what is deserved. His love is for everyone—all the time. "For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly" (v. 6). Jesus' death on the cross demonstrated God's love, a love freely given, not because we deserved it, but because of his grace. Sacrificial love for the weak, the ungodly and the unworthy is the ultimate expression of love. Therefore, God's unmerited sacrificial love does not measure your present circumstance, past failures or future trials. Through Jesus, everyone, by faith, has access to God's everlasting love. His love is for you – today.

**QUESTION** How does understanding and experiencing God's sacrificial love for you today affect everything, everywhere, all the time, and transform the way you show love to others?

**PRAYER** Heavenly Father, thank you for your sacrificial love that knows no bounds and extends to all by faith, regardless of our worthiness. Help us to experience and understand your love today and let it transform how we love others. Amen.

# God calls us to be for the city.

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- Regional Hub Cities
- Global Hub Cities
- Regional Affiliates



**NOTE** For security reasons, the South Asia affiliate is not shown.

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# CTC exists to multiply churches and Christian leaders committed to a shared vision for gospel movements in the great cities of the world.

Each of these contributing leaders are connected to the CTC ecosystem that spreads across the globe. As you look at the map, you'll not only see where these leaders are from, but you'll also see what we call regional affiliates and hub cities. Our work around the world is largely accomplished through regional affiliates, organized by geographical regions. The affiliates oversee church planting training and coaching focused on church multiplication, gospel renewal and city impact. We strategically partner with the affiliates at varying levels financially, operationally and relationally. The work is prioritized in key cities called hub cities through an initiative called the Hub City Strategy. These cities are the focus of the deepest work and intended to resource other cities in the region. God is on the move, and we are humbled to be called to participate with him in this great work.



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