



GROWING  
IN FAITH

The title 'GROWING IN FAITH' is rendered in a playful, rounded font. The letters are filled with a mix of teal, light blue, and orange-red colors. Several letters are decorated with small white icons: a tree on top of the 'O' in 'GROWING', a compass rose in the center of the 'O', and trees on top of the 'A' and 'I' in 'FAITH'. The background is a dark teal color with a subtle pattern of small white dots.

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

# GROWING IN FAITH

*AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL*





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# INTRODUCTION

When I ran cross country in middle school, one of the basic lessons I learned from my coach was not to spend too much time looking over my shoulder to see where I was in relation to who was behind me. Instead, my coach wanted me to strain forward, pursuing the runners ahead of me. It's a lesson that can be good for our lives in other ways, too. We can at times become so preoccupied with what has happened in the past that we can struggle to live in the present or the future. Some have said, it's difficult to walk forward when you live facing backward.

Advent is an interesting season in the Christian year. We most often associate it with looking backward. We look back to the time when Jesus' was born as God incarnate, our Savior and Messiah. We look back even further to the prophets in Israel's story who tell of the Messiah's coming. It is good to look back to these historic words and actions that determine our faith.

But within the history of the church, Advent is intended to be a forward-looking season for God's people. Rooted in the grand work of God in the past, we are propelled forward in anticipation of an epic future day when God will fully usher in a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus' first coming was somewhat hidden, but we anticipate the day when "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him" (Revelation 1:7)<sup>1</sup>. St. Augustine of Hippo (4th-5th century) described it this way:

*The first coming of Christ the Lord, God's son and our God, was in obscurity; the second will be in the sight of the whole world. When he came in obscurity no one recognized him but his own servants; when he comes openly he will be known by both good people and bad. When he came in obscurity, it was to be judged; when he comes openly it will be to judge.*

Advent, from the Latin word *adventus* ("appearing"), is a four-week preparatory season building toward celebration of Jesus' nativity at Christmas but also anticipatory celebration of Jesus' future return at the end of human history. Our Advent devotional this year connects mid-stream with our preaching series on 2 Peter as we enter into chapter 3. This mid-stream connection matches where we find ourselves in human history. We are mid-stream in God's story between Christ's first coming and his second coming. But it also matches where the letter of 2 Peter begins to turn as chapter 3 opens themes of the future return of Christ and what that means for our lives as a disciple-community now.

In your hands is a devotional written to help us engage with Advent and Christmas centered in Christ. We look back to Jesus' first incarnation and look forward to His final return. This devotional can be used individually, but is also intended for use in groups, such as church small groups, housemates, or families.

May God give us grace to run the race of our faith, rooted in the past and propelled into the future...until that day comes when we will know Him fully, even as we are fully known.



Matt Erickson  
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church

#### **HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL:**

Each week of this devotional begins with a Sunday reading written by our Pastoral staff for older students and adults. There is also a version called "Family Talk" written by a member of our NextGen team, intended for families with young children. Each day of the remaining week (Monday-Saturday) has a passage for you to read, followed by a short devotional thought written by one of our Eastbrookers with questions at the end for deeper reflection.

As a family, you may want to join in on our Nativity Building activity. Use your own Nativity figures or the Nativity Story Stones made during Family Advent Night for this activity that allows for slow, progressive building of the nativity scene. Look for this symbol (\*) throughout the devotional to find each step. The gradual nature of this activity and the periods of waiting remind us of how God's people waited years for the promised Savior to be born! "*When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son...*" (Galatians 4:4).

Finally, you can also interact with the digital version of this devotional in a variety of ways: on the Eastbrook App, on Instagram, via daily emails, blog, or PDF. Find these options and links on our website at [eastbrook.org/devotionals](http://eastbrook.org/devotionals).



**HOPE**

**WEEK 1**



# LOOKING FOR THE DAY

READ 2 PETER 3:1-9

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 3

One of my strongest memories as a child was the Christmas after my first nephew was born. My brother was in the Air Force and he and his wife had been stationed in the Philippines and Europe for about 10 years, meaning Bill had not been home since I was two! But this year, he and his wife were coming home to Indiana for Christmas.

I don't know that I've ever been as excited for a Christmas as I was that year. We decided we wanted my sister-in-law, who was from the Philippines, to experience a real old fashioned, Indiana Christmas. We bought a real tree, and strung strands of cranberries and popcorn to put on it. The day after Thanksgiving, I made gigantic banners that hung in our front room windows—nearly blocking the view—that said “Welcome Home Bill, Corita, and Christopher.”

Each day after school I would run into the house, tear a ring off the paper chain indicating how many days were left until Christmas and then take my station on the couch, watching eagerly for them to arrive...on December 20th. But each day I would faithfully, hopefully, sit there watching until it was time for bed. I did not grow weary of waiting, instead each day it felt like my anticipation grew. My mom would say, “You know they're not coming for another week, right?” But I remember thinking, “What if they arrive early? I need to be here to greet them first!”

The early believers Peter was writing to knew Jesus was coming back. I am sure that at first, they were eagerly anticipating that moment (it could be any day after all!). But over time, doubts, aided by the scoffers around them, may have wearied their ability to live with that anticipation. It's only natural when you expect something to happen in a week, a month, or a year that you would begin to question whether it was really going to happen at all. However, Peter is adamant that we need to remember that time from God's perspective is very different than ours, and that we should not grow weary in our anticipation. Each year, as we celebrate Jesus' first arrival to the Earth, we have an opportunity to renew our hope in His return. Whether that is today, tomorrow or a thousand years from now, may we live a life anticipating that truth.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *How differently do you think your life would look if you lived as if you truly believed Jesus could return any moment?*
- *How can we try to live more in line with that hope?*
- \* *Set up the stable, but leave it empty for now. Long before Jesus was born on earth, God was getting everything ready. God's people waited for a Savior for hundreds of years. The prophets called them to wait with HOPE.*

## FAMILY TALK

# HOPE

### READ 2 PETER 3:8-9

Can you create a list together of events or things you hope for?

Did your list include birthdays, a special family trip, losing a tooth, competing in soccer season, performing in a concert or seeing a friend or grandparent? Your hope is the feeling of expectation that these events will happen. God's people had a great hope, too—the Messiah! They wanted to be rescued and God's words over many years had told them that this Savior would indeed come. This Messiah would be from the line of Jacob (Numbers 24:17). He would be born from the family of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). He would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). He would be worshiped and given gifts at His birth (Psalm 72:10). He would even be crucified (Psalm 22: 16-18). All of these events came true.

Our Bible reading for this week talks about another hopeful event—the return of Jesus Christ. We are reminded that God does not view time the same as we do. Peter reminded the readers of his letter that God is not 'slow' to return but patient; Jesus will return right on schedule. God does not want anyone to miss the opportunity to learn about Jesus, to trust Him as Savior and gain eternal life. And just as God fulfilled all His promises about the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can be sure of His promise that Jesus will return.

So, as we share our excitement about Christmas events this year, let's also share our hope in Jesus with those around us. Jesus wants ALL to come to him, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

How about considering another list, one naming those that you want to tell about our Hope, our Jesus?

#### LET'S TALK:

- *What are you hoping for? Why are you so excited about it?*
- *Today's reading is about waiting for God to keep His promises. What are some of God's promises that you remember?*
- *How is our hope for Jesus' return better than anything else we hope for?*

# OUR HOPE IS CREATION'S HOPE

READ ROMANS 8:18-25

Have you ever been without hope? It's a scary and dark place to be. In 2013, after a bad bout of SAD (seasonal affective disorder) and the death of my brother-in-law far away, I experienced a time without hope. I felt like I was walking around in thick darkness. A dear friend told me she would hope for me because I could not muster up any. For those of you who are grasping for hope, here is a word for you: *"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned"* (Isaiah 9:2).

There are many challenges facing our world today including habitat destruction; species extinction; biodiversity loss; air, water, and soil pollution; desertification; cruelty to animals; warming oceans; and so on. We know that when Adam and Eve sinned, creation was impacted by their choice. Over the centuries, humankind has continued to make choices detrimental to creation. And so, creation is waiting for its ultimate redemption as well.

As we celebrate Advent, a reminder that Christ came once and is coming back again, we look forward eagerly to when all will be made new. Creation longs for that day, too. But just as we don't have to wait until heaven to start experiencing the new life ushered in by our second birth, even so we can liberate part of creation by what we do and do not do. Thoughtful, responsible actions that show we care for and value what God has made help bring hope to our world. As believers, we can lead the way by conserving, preserving, protecting, and nurturing creation.

God has not left us without hope. The Bible is replete with reminders, encouragement and promises that point to our ultimate redemption. As Hebrews 11 shares, we wait for a heavenly city that God has prepared for us. Christmas is a time to remember that this too will be fulfilled. In the same way that God's Son came to earth and won our salvation, so will He come again and take us with Him, so that where He is there we will be also. Maranatha!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you think of animals, rivers, plants, and mountains as things that God made? In what practical ways can you care for creation? Please do so.*
- *Hope exists because we long for something we don't have. List some of the glorious things waiting for us in heaven. Share your list (and hope) with someone who needs encouragement.*

BY KATHERINE RIEBE

# PRAISE GOD!

READ 1 PETER 1:3-7

I love to praise God. I love to praise Him with fellow believers. Seeing saints praise our Lord, whom I love, with all their heart brings me great joy. God is worthy to be praised for who He is and what He has done.

The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:3-7 specifically mentions why our God is worthy to be praised. He mentions in verse 3 that God's mercy is great—that alone is enough to praise the Lord. God does not give us what we deserve. We are sinners who deserve death and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The Apostle Peter goes on to note that God has given us new birth. We have hope because of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Hallelujah! Yes, our God is worthy to be praised.

The passage ends by affirming the promise that Jesus is coming back again in verse 5—this is the second advent. We wait in anticipation for the salvation that will be revealed by faith.

Some doubt that Jesus is coming back. Peter enjoins us to not lose heart and that with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day (2 Peter 3:8).

Jesus will come back again. He came the first time (Advent) according to Scripture that was foretold by the prophets of old (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7, Micah 5:2). Jesus will come back again according to Scripture (John 14:2-3, Acts 1:11, 2 Peter 3:10). Therefore, my dear sisters and brothers in Christ, do not fret, do not be discouraged. Instead, remember the precious promises of His second Advent in Scripture. Watch and pray (Luke 21:36, Colossians 4:2), hold unto Jesus as our living hope (1 Peter 1:3), and praise God!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Make a list of all the reasons why you, specifically, should praise God.*
- *Where does His return fall on your list? As you pray through your list of reasons, be sure to consider why His 2nd coming should be as worthy of our praise as His 1st.*
- \* *Place Mary, Joseph and an angel figure across the room from the stable. God sent an angel to tell Mary and Joseph that Jesus would be born to Mary.*

# THE DESIRE TO BE HOLY

READ 1 PETER 1:13-16

Evil seems like such a strong word. Are my desires profoundly immoral when, in a moment of boredom or loneliness, I click through ads on-line and buy things I don't need with money I don't have? Am I wicked when I spend the last hour of my day scrolling Instagram reels of sourdough, homeschooling and flower farmers, rather than connecting with my husband? Is it sinful for me to spend more time listening to podcasts and reading news articles than I spend reading the Word of God and in prayer? If I am comparing myself to the rest of the world, these seem like pretty tame ways to spend my time. My desires can't be called evil.

But are they holy? Peter is reminding me that I am not to compare myself to those living in ignorance: *"But just as he who has called you is holy, so be holy in all you do: for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"* Peter is exhorting me to be holy. I am to be dedicated or consecrated to God, sacred. What if I run my daily hours of Internet use through that scriptural filter. Am I holy in all I do?

Thankfully, Peter shares how we can prepare our minds for action and be holy: by being self-controlled. The great news is that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a gift. Unfortunately, it is a constant struggle for me with my phone. For me today, self-control looks like taking a total phone sabbath. I power down on Saturday before bed and I don't power up again until Monday morning. It was painful at first but now I crave my tech-free day. The quiet is blissful and I speak with God so much more without the constant distraction. Sunday also gives me space to believe that I can change. I can be an obedient child of God. My true desire is not for more deliveries of things to clutter my house, or hours of content showing me how I don't measure up, or an endless audio barrage of information and opinions. My true desire is a simple, quiet, peace-filled life that honors God and points others to Jesus. I desire to be holy in all I do.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What habit, thought or distraction would you say most interferes with your pursuit of holiness? What steps can you take today to overcome those things and live the life God calls us to?*
- \* *Place a donkey near Mary. She may have ridden a donkey to Bethlehem, because she was so close to having a baby. Years later, Jesus Himself would ride a donkey into Jerusalem.*

# IMMANUEL WITH THE BRUISED AND BURNT OUT

READ MATTHEW 12:18-21

My graduate school acting teacher often repeated the saying, “The first step to solving a problem is admitting you have one.” The Pharisees in Matthew 12 had trouble with this step, even though Jesus took pains to point out the condition of their hearts. On the other hand, the disabled, ill, and afflicted were painfully aware that something was wrong. Recognizing they were bruised reeds and smoldering wicks they sought help in Jesus. And He was willing to heal them.

I think this passage is so beautiful because it shows Jesus’ heart posture toward the whole world. He is focused on His kingdom-building work. On the one extreme, He engaged in public discourse but when He perceived that the Pharisees were enflamed against Him, He withdrew from them. But as Immanuel, God with us, He continued to walk alongside the humble and to show them His grace (James 4:6-10). When the crowds followed, He healed them all.

But Jesus kept a low profile in the wake of the Pharisees’ conspiracy. He commanded those He healed not to make Him known. Today, we live in a ‘broadcast’ world. Social media has given everyone access to a public voice and presence. It has its benefits. But it also increases the temptation for shouting and quarreling in public. I think Jesus gives us a model for our focus: alongside Him in His ministry to the bruised reeds and smoking flax. He shows us that our big God is involved not only in conversation, but also in something bigger—He is interested in how we are doing. How is your health? Are you in relationship with Jesus? Are you spending time with Him, learning from Him in His word? Are you taking His advice?

God knows our needs, even before we ask, and He will provide. First, we need to recognize our need; and second, humbly go to Him for help.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *A reformer once called the human heart a “perpetual factory of idols.” Have I put anything before God in my life that I need to repent from? God promises “times of refreshing” for those who repent and turn to him (Acts 3:19). This is a powerful promise.*
- *Is there someone I am standing aloof to that I need to reconcile with? Have I become numb to the danger of chronic sin?*

BY STEVEN JAEHNERT

## FINISHING THE RACE

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14

When I played basketball in high school the conditioning workout I dreaded the most was “beach day.”

Maybe it sounds fun to you: “Let’s go to the beach and play around!” But beach day for our basketball team meant going to the nearby Indiana Dunes and running up Mount Baldy, a 125-foot-tall sand dune. Running in sand is no fun, running up a 125-foot sand dune is *really* no fun!

The first run was hard—we’d be straining to finish all the way to the top—and the second run was brutal. The third run up, well, it wasn’t pretty!

We would be slipping, we’d be flopping down on the slope, sometimes even sliding backwards into our teammates, but our coaches would keep urging us upward and we’d know at the top was our prize: a chance to rest and to slide back down and cool off in Lake Michigan.

Paul speaks of straining to finish the race. He was putting everything he had into finishing his life focused on the hope God had set before him. He didn’t know if Jesus would come again before he died or after, but his hope was the eternity we all have to look forward to, the prize of a life with God.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *As you look to the end of your life, what aspect of eternity motivates you the most? How does looking forward with hope help you live your life today well?*

# LIVING A LIFE OF HOPE

READ PSALM 25:4-6

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines hope as "desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment." This definition does not acknowledge or make important the source of confidence or offer a guarantee in that desire ever being fulfilled. There is no solid basis on which to ground the expectation. It is nothing more than wishful thinking. The biblical concept of hope has a solid source; an historical lineage grounded in real world experiences.

I have heard it explained that the Proverbs 31 woman who can "laugh at the days to come" does so because she literally walks through life backwards. She thinks and processes life, makes decisions, then takes action by remembering and intentionally focusing on how God has been good to her in the past. She has no worries, her hope for the future cannot be shifted because she has seen and experienced the great mercy and love of God. She doesn't spend time staring into the dark abyss of the future fearfully wondering if God will do what He has promised.

I am sure it was a spiritual journey for her to capture lessons; allowing them to build and strengthen her hope. And so it is for us.

If living a life of hope has not been your legacy or past experience, let me suggest 4 ways you can practice:

- Read the faith stories of biblical heroes. Note how they listened to the voice of God, obeyed, and used that moment to build their hope in what God still had yet to accomplish.
- Read the modern faith stories of those who have had a long and faithful dedication to God no matter what circumstance they encountered.
- Seek out those in your community who have walked with God for a long time. Listen to their stories. Inquire about their faith practices. Allow them to encourage you to stay focused.
- Raise your own Ebenezer. Raise your 'stone of help'. Begin the practice of remembering God's faithfulness to you. Mark when He shows you mercy, celebrate when He answers prayer.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Choose one of the four practices above to engage with today.*
- \* *Place the magi in another room. These travelers remind us that Jesus' followers would be from all nations.*

BY JENNIFER DREGER





# PEACE

WEEK 2

# WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE SHOULD WE BE?

READ 2 PETER 3:10-13

I remember as child approaching Christmas with a certain degree of caution. While my belief in the source of my presents varied through the years (parents handle this how you want!), I was certain that my behavior in the weeks leading up to the big day would have an impact on gifts I would receive. So while in November I might grumble and complain about washing the dishes or vacuuming the carpet, in December I was always, “Yes Ma’am” and eager to serve. My anticipation of the rewards impacted my behavior.

In 2 Peter 3 we are reminded of a reality that should impact every day, every moment, of our lives. Read verse 10 for a moment and let it sink in what Peter is telling us: *“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.”*

Whoa! We don’t know when the “day of the Lord” will happen but it will happen, and it will happen quickly and dramatically. That should impact how we live, as Peter very clearly shows in verse 11, *“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives...”*

Lest we ponder the question in fear, Peter asks and answers the question immediately, *“You ought to live holy and godly lives.”* But notice, the ultimate reason he gives for us in this is not one of avoiding the fire and destruction coming, but because *“...in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”*

There is a reward waiting for those that love and follow Jesus and yes, there is punishment and destruction coming for those who don’t. But living holy and godly lives in this world is not to earn us some reward or spare us from some punishment or destruction, Jesus has already done both those things for us! Instead, we are to consider this life an opportunity to prepare us to live in a new world full of righteousness. The abundant life Jesus promises us in the life is a taste of the glorious life we have waiting for us in the new heaven and the new earth. Let’s be the kind of people that live in anticipation of the day of the Lord coming.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Do you think it makes a difference if you live a holy life to avoid the destruction of that day or to because you’re looking forward to the new world full of righteousness? Why?*
- *What can help you keep the Day of the Lord in mind more often so that you can live more intentionally in response to it?*
- \* *Bring out the figures of sheep and shepherds and set them outside of the stable. These will be the first to hear that Jesus is born!*

BY JIM CALER

## FAMILY TALK

READ 2 PETER 3:8-9

*Hark the herald angels sing  
Glory to the newborn King  
Peace on earth and mercy mild  
God and sinners reconciled*

Have you ever heard the Christmas carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"? It's a song that tells about the angels' visit to the shepherds the night Jesus was born. They came to announce the Savior, and the peace He would bring. It was great news that had been promised by God through the prophets throughout the Old Testament.

Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, people haven't had peace with God or with each other. Adam and Eve had been good friends with God. They walked in the garden with Him. Imagine what they talked about! But, when they disobeyed, they knew they had done wrong, and they hid. Their friendship with God was broken, and their disobedience moved them out of that good peaceful place where they were with God. We know that peace with God is still broken in our lives when we feel guilty for disobeying.

Adam and Eve lost peace with each other, too. When God asked, "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?," Adam and Eve started the blame game. "It was her fault." "It was his fault." They weren't loving and truthful. And after that, the Bible tells us that people kept hurting each other through lying or jealousy or fighting. People stopped treating each other right.

Jesus came to bring the peace we need. Right now, anyone who trusts that Jesus saves us from sin can trust that God forgives them and welcomes them into His family. That means you and me! Right now, we can pray to God the Father and know that He hears us because Jesus is speaking for us. Right now, we can ask the Holy Spirit to grow the fruit of peace in our relationships with each other.

And someday, when Jesus returns, we will have the most remarkable peace of all. The prophet Isaiah describes the peace of Jesus' kingdom like this:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;  
and a little child will lead them.*

Can you imagine? The peace of the new heaven and the new earth will be so complete that all animals will be at peace, even animals that are usually enemies. We will live in complete peace with God and each other in a beautiful garden city.

### LET'S TALK:

- *Where do you need peace right now?*
- *Pray that Jesus will give you His peace.*

# PEACE

# BEING GOOD

READ JAMES 3:13-18

As a child, I remember being on my best behavior in the weeks before Christmas, because being good equaled gifts! Everyone got along. Catholic school teachers could relax for the first time since September—maybe the last time till June. Their relief a result of the well-behaved, attentive students who all waited for Santa. How funny that these childish notions are similar to what James said about how to live.

In the whole of chapter 3, James addresses our godliness and our humanness. He acknowledges that we try to live in holiness but then criticize and judge those we consider "less" than us.

I've read his words on wisdom many times. I am sometimes intimidated by people who know the Bible in the same way that I know Dr. Seuss. They have a verse for every situation and problem, haughtily explaining that I should know this. Am I "less" than they because I cannot quote the Bible, book, chapter and verse? Am I "less" of a Christian because I know what it says, but not exactly how it is said?

Wise people who know the Bible don't have to throw quotes around to show us their wisdom. I have met many Christians whose only indicator of their faith is the way they act. They are wise to see the message they convey is not only from words. Their patience and kindness expose their wisdom. They respect the wisdom they have and share it with those who are not as informed. Sharing instead of shaming is their wisdom. When I ask for help, they eagerly provide verses for me to calm myself. They do not criticize my situation, or that I don't know where to turn, but offer divine help to get through.

James assures us that we can inspire and save each other if we embrace God's wisdom. We become the peacemakers. The understanding of peace excludes jealousy and shame, anger and criticism. This peace draws people to God. The learned and learners equally benefit from the peace God makes available to us. We are the harvest as we gather each other to enjoy the peace and goodness of God.

I guess that being good does guarantee gifts.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why do you think it can be tempting to judge others' lives as we try to live our own, holy lives?*
- *Why do you think James says that as peacemakers, we are planting seeds of righteousness?*

BY MARGARET DUCHROW

# AN ETERNAL "TO-DO" LIST

READ COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

In the buildup to big events, there are some ways we can prepare. Let's say you're hosting a party; well before guests arrive, you'll send out invitations, build a shopping list, decorate your space. Before a new baby is born, parents discuss names, set up a nursery, buy or register for necessary items.

Similarly, living in anticipation of the day to come gives us great hope, something to work toward and get excited about. This passage from Paul's letter to the Colossians outlines what you might call our "to-do list" while we wait—practices to undertake, and qualities to "put on."

Maybe, like me, lists are how you get things done. Without reminders in my planner or phone, I might forget everything I'm meant to pick up at the store and everywhere I'm meant to be on a given day. But admittedly, standing in front of a long list can feel daunting—especially when the contents are as important as these.

I don't think it was Paul's intent to overwhelm the Colossians (or us!) in setting forth these standards for living a godly life. Rather, he summarizes the point of it all in verse 17: *"whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus."* Ultimately, we are called to be "Christ-centered," to orient our life around God and His Word.

We are human; even declaring through baptism that we're "dead to sin, alive in Christ" doesn't mean we will get it all perfectly right moving forward. God gave us a generous gift to help us along the way: each other! Paul reminds us of this blessing in the way he words his letter; the "you" he addresses is not each individual, but rather the collective group.

We're a culture of list-makers, multi-taskers, résumé-builders and Pinterest-board curators. Just like that Christmas gathering you're planning, or the out-of-town guest you're preparing to host, it's easy to get lost in the details and lose sight of the bigger picture. Let us pray that as we journey through this season of Advent, we refocus on what kind of people we ought to be in the eyes of the Lord.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What does it mean to you to "do it all in the name of Jesus"? What does that practically look like in your day today?*
- \* *Scatter some sheep figures all around the room. Let them remind you of how people are lost without the Good Shepherd, Jesus.*

BY RACHEL SHUSTER

# EVERLASTING PEACE

READ EPHESIANS 2:14-22

How far would we go to establish peace in our lives? Peace in the wider world, ending all wars, tensions between nations, people groups, religious factions? Peace in the relationships we are a part of, whether at home, school, in our families, with our co-workers?

I know how life is when everything is at peace with those around me. I also know how unsettled it is when there is conflict. When I have disagreements in my family or unresolved issues at work, I long for relationships and situations to return to peace.

In this passage, Paul is writing to the Ephesian Church, discussing how peace was brought to those who were God's chosen people to those who used to be outside.

And what great lengths Jesus went through to establish this peace! Paul uses some active verbs to describe how Jesus brought about this peace. He "destroyed" the dividing barrier of hostility between Jew and Gentile (v. 14). Later in the passage Paul writes that He put their hostility "to death" (v. 16). He abolished the legalism of the law with its commandments and regulations. The way that Jesus brought this peace? Through His bloody death on the Cross (v. 16). God never ceases to amaze with the plan that He used to reconcile the world to Himself and to each other. The most ugly, violent execution brings about everlasting peace. Jesus would literally endure anything so that we might have peace.

The second half of the passage details the great blessing that in Christ there are no foreigners, no outsiders. Instead, we are all joined together into a great building, a temple. And what dwells in that temple? Nobody less than our living God by His Holy Spirit. What an incredible reward! All because Jesus, Our Prince of Peace, established His everlasting peace with us through the Cross.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *How can we demonstrate today God's peace in our lives to those who have not experienced this peace?*

BY KEVIN KELLY

# SUFFERING PRODUCES HOPE

READ ROMANS 5:1-5

Since we are in a season of discipleship, I want to share a little about influential people in my life who were unknowingly discipling me.

I struggled with alcoholism for 8 years. I started going to a secular treatment program and people in that program helped me to gain my faith in the Lord again. You see, I couldn't fathom not drinking for a week, let alone even one day! But these people were sober for years they suggested to me that what I was lacking was faith: did I have faith that what they were saying was true? Did I have faith that they were really sober?

Even before my faith in the Lord was restored, these people were showing me grace by faith, and in a way, they were boasting in the hope of the glory of God. They didn't realize it, but they were discipling me.

Just because I am sober now doesn't mean my life is amazing, but because I have a relationship with the Lord today and my faith is in Him I know that, no matter what suffering I'm going through, I have support. I can bring my suffering to Him through prayer, and to other brothers and sisters in Christ to overcome those temptations. Through this support, I can persevere—even if I make a mistake, I can pause, keep pressing forward, and keep going. The more I maintain my daily prayer and Bible reading, I continue to grow my character. I have hope again, because someone showed me what that looked like.

Each day, I wake up thanking God for another day and asking Him for direction. Whenever I sin, I can remember the hope I have through the glory of God. We have the Holy Spirit in us! The more I listen to Him, the more hope I will have. It hasn't always been easy for me to keep growing and have faith that God is with me in everything, but I know that when I do, my mind stops running and I can live in the moment.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *How important is it to you to have others around you that you can look to for support, encouragement and conviction as you grow in your relationship with Christ and go through the stages of suffering, perseverance, etc.?*
- *Who are those people in your life today?*
- \* *Bring your sheep figures close to the shepherd figures. The shepherds were keeping watch at night when they heard the news about Baby Jesus!*

BY CURT CLEMETSON



# THE PERFECT GIFT

READ 2 PETER 1:2-8

As a child, Christmas always brought a longing for that one perfect gift that would make me happy. If I could just get that new bike, the one with the banana seat and shifter on the top tube, I would be happy and satisfied!

Now that I am older, my thoughts turn towards a deeper longing. As an introvert, I find myself thinking that if I was just more of a people person or if I was just more comfortable in my own skin, then I would be truly happy and have a better life. Today's passage speaks to just this type of thought when Peter states, "*His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life!*" (v. 3). Peter goes on to say that "*he has given us his very great and precious promises*" that lead to a complete life in Him. What wonderful news and how appropriate a message for this Advent season. God has given and is still giving us the perfect gift in His divine power. Imagine the power of the God of the universe at work in us. We may think that we are not adequate, but God has given all we need to live up to His calling.

In a season where we so often fret about finding that perfect gift or worry about what we need to have a better life, we can just slow down and recognize the great and perfect gift our Father has already given us. In His Son He has given us the perfect example of how we should live and in His divine power he has given us what we need to live according to this example. We tend to dwell on our inadequacies as if they can't change. Instead, we can focus on the promises of God and receive His priceless gift. His love is without bounds and the immensity of His provision is hard to imagine!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *How would recognizing that in him we have everything we need for a godly life change the way you think about your life and circumstances?*

BY GEOFF JOHNSON

# LIVING IN LIGHT OF GOD'S PROMISES

READ JOHN 14:1-3

*"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." (John 14:1-3)*

Chances are good you have heard this passage read at a funeral at some point. The promise contained in these words and the hope it offers is often used to provide comfort for those mourning the loss of a loved one, especially if that loved one knew and followed Jesus.

What's interesting is that this passage comes immediately after Jesus told His disciples some very troubling news. In John 13, He predicts His betrayal and Peter's denial. Yet, in light of that, Jesus commands them not to let those events trouble their hearts!

Jesus is indicating that we have power over how we respond to troubling events and thoughts. We are not "slaves to the moment," but have the ability to find peace in the midst of chaos and confusion. But notice what that ability is based on: *"Trust in God, trust also in me."*

The more we believe in the promises of God—that ultimately what He says is true both about our lives in the here and now and our lives for eternity—the more we can choose to live in light of those promises. We can live with hope, with confidence, and with godliness.

Let the promises of Jesus equip you to live this life prepared for His return and our eternity.

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *In what specific areas of life do you need to remember Jesus's command to not let your heart be troubled? How can His promises help make that more of a reality for you today?*



JOY

WEEK 3

# GROW IN THE GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS

READ 2 PETER 3:14-18

When I was a child there were few things that I looked forward to more than opening gifts on Christmas Day morning. Our family routine that morning included having some sort of breakfast together as a family before we would open the gifts. In other words, from a child's perspective, stretching things out as long as possible to make us wait as long as possible before we could get to the gifts. Kelly and I kept a similar routine on Christmas morning when our sons were growing, and it was for a reason. As much as our sons, like me as a child, would want to open gifts as soon as possible, we knew that Christmas morning was not just about exchanging gifts. It was about something more.

Throughout 2 Peter, the writer has invited his first readers and us to return to what is most important, which is what God has done in Jesus Christ. He has reminded us to hold to the truth in Christ unto the very end, even amidst trying times, such as the persecution that the first century believers faced. In chapter 3 of that letter, the writer has reminded his readers and us to live in light of the end of all things.

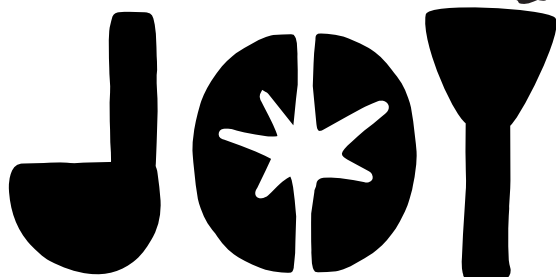
It is in light of what is most important, what is truly coming, that we live each day now. Admittedly, there are times when we lose perspective on what matters most. We may mistake one thing or another for the most important thing. When we lose our focus or get off track in our life with God, it is good to return to what the heart of everything is about and live in that way.

The writer says, *"So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless, and at peace with him. . . . grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 3:14, 18). So, let's live with holy anticipation now in light of the end and what's most important.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What do you think it looks like to live daily in light of what matters most in faith and life?*
- *How could your Advent journey, whether on your own or with others, reflect this holy anticipation of what's most important?*
- \* *Move Mary and Joseph and the donkey a little closer to the stable. Mary and Joseph were filled with JOY as the time for Jesus' birth came closer.*

## FAMILY TALK



### READ 2 PETER 3:14-18

Imagine that you and your family are getting ready for your next birthday party. You've had the date circled on the calendar for weeks. Then, the day arrives! In the morning, you're hanging decorations and blowing up balloons. Your mom is frosting the cake and your dad is hanging a piñata! But, out of nowhere, a fight breaks out between you and your brother—a *bad* fight—and you are both in trouble! Now, you don't feel in the party mood at all. The joy that was building up to this celebration is totally, sadly gone!

No matter how great a celebration is, if our hearts are heavy—if we know we have done wrong—we can't have joy. The apostle Peter wrote letters to Jesus' followers. In his second letter, Peter kept pointing to a day when Jesus would return. He described this place, as "*a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells*" (2 Peter 3:13). Heaven will be the most amazing celebration we will ever see! When this day comes, we want to enter Heaven with real joy—the kind of joy that comes when we have followed Jesus with our whole hearts (2 Peter 3:14).

So keep on following Jesus—reading His Word, talking to Him, worshiping, meeting with His people, the church. When we do this, Jesus promises to draw close to us (James 4:8). Even if we mess up and need to ask His forgiveness, we can know that He will show us mercy and make our hearts right. Then, when we finally see Jesus, we will be able to say with real joy: *Let the party begin!*

#### LET'S TALK:

- *Have you ever been somewhere where you should be happy but inwardly, you feel sad, frustrated, or angry? What was that like?*
- *How do you describe joy?*
- *How does following Jesus with our whole heart bring us joy?*



# A LITTLE WHILE

READ 1 PETER 1:6-9

*"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."* (1 Peter 1:6-7)

I've never seen gold put through a fiery furnace, but I've watched a blacksmith at work. He inserts a long iron rod into the flames of a wood-burning stove, usually for just a few minutes. He pulls the rod out and with its end glowing red, he puts it on the anvil. He pounds it, shapes it, sometimes twists and curls it. He makes something functional and beautiful. The time in the fire is brief, the pounding is hard—sometimes even causing the blacksmith to return it to the fire if it's not malleable enough—but the end result is durable and valuable.

Peter encourages his readers by reminding them that their trials, like the iron rod in the flame, are for *"a little while"*; but the result is something durable, beautiful, and even useful for the Kingdom of God. Trials never feel like *"a little while."* Waiting for the test results of a biopsy, searching for a job during months of unemployment, or working through a complicated relationship—none of it feels like *"a little while,"* except in light of eternity.

But what is this "proof" of the genuineness of our faith? That despite the trial, in fact, through the trial— we love God anyway. Most of the time, we think transactionally: We love and obey Jesus, and then, He makes sure that things go our way. Or, to go a step further, we think, "Okay, God, we'll go through this trial, but there has to be purpose—some better result so that we know our suffering was not in vain."

But, God doesn't want a transaction; He wants our hearts. In the midst of the fiery trial, He asks, "Do you still love Me, for Who I am—not only for what I can do for you?"

We don't enjoy trials, but through them our joy is Jesus Himself. When we can endure suffering without knowing the outcome or purpose, we can be confident in knowing that the trial is temporary, but our love relationship with Jesus will go on to eternity.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What can you do to help find your joy in Jesus even in the midst of trials?*
- *Looking back, as you examine times in your past that you've endured trials, can you see how has God grown you through them?*

BY LAURE HERLINGER

# REJOICE ALWAYS!

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

When Paul wrote this he was in prison, and he knew that his circumstances weren't going to get him down—he was going to rejoice in the Lord always. And he wanted the Philippian church to do the same whenever life got hard. We need to do the same today. When I have abundance and when I have little, I need to give God all the glory.

Recently I started the ministry residency program here at Eastbrook so that I could get a full-time perspective of what it is like working at a church. I'm truly grateful for this opportunity but I was worried and anxious about the amount of money that I was going to make and that I wouldn't be able to stay living where I live while working here.

Well, I prayed and petitioned to God. I believe God works through people also, so I also asked for people to pray for my situation and keep in mind of someone looking for a roommate to share my apartment, or a cheaper apartment altogether. I talked with another friend, and he mentioned a living subsidy to help pay my rent. I could let fear of the word "no" stop me from asking, or I could ask and see what happens... well, they agreed to it! What a blessing! The next action I needed to take was to call my apartment and see if they would keep my rent the same. So, I took the action, but they wouldn't answer me. My lease was set to end on October 31 and I kept calling but no answer. They didn't send me another lease agreement until October 21 which they said they would cut the rent raise in half, so only \$37.50 instead of \$75.00. That amount was doable! All I had to do was pray, and ask God for direction, and then take that direction! God is good all the time!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What do you think keeps us from praying and petitioning God when certain circumstances come up in our lives?*
- *Memorize Philippians 4:4-7 as a source of confidence to approach God in these moments.*

BY CURT CLEMETSON



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 19



# RUNNING TOGETHER

READ HEBREWS 12:1-3

When I was young my primary focus was playing sports. I was consumed by it. The common theme across the various sports I played was that they were all team sports. Rarely did I compete in any individual sports. I enjoyed the camaraderie, the teammates, the communal aspect of the team more than anything. Whether celebrating success or wallowing in sorrow it was better done together.

Yet, too often I viewed my faith very differently. The lessons I learned early in life, which were reinforced time and time again in college, was that the church will let you down and hurt you so best to focus on the individual race that has been marked out for us.

Despite these early lessons, time and again I have returned to community with other followers, in different ways and in different settings, because of Paul's description of the church as Christ's bride. It is a fantastic analogy. My love for my wife has continued to grow despite, and in many cases because of, our disagreements and frustrations. Whether celebrating success or wallowing in sorrow it is better done together.

In this passage from Hebrews we see the juxtaposition of an individual pursuit, running, with a picture of community: being surrounded by "pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on," as Eugene Peterson describes. Recently, when I was once again struggling with the frustration of not feeling I was tapping into the abundant life that Jesus said He came to give us, my small group challenged me to think of times when I felt like I was living that full life. Every example I thought of began and ended with a small community of believers who shared life with me or an older Christian who simply walked alongside me. Yes, God desires to have a personal relationship with us on a one-on-one basis, however looking back on my walk with God it is those that have surrounded me, encouraged me, grieved with me, and challenged me that have allowed me to tap into the abundant life that Jesus promises.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *Is there someone in your life that is helping you tap into the abundant life Jesus has promised or is God calling you to be that veteran cheering on another follower of Christ?*
- \* *Place animal figures in the stable. This barn was a humble, but JOYFUL place for Jesus to be born!*

BY KEVIN KUNDINGER

# LIVING WATER

## READ ISAIAH 12:1-6

*"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." (Isaiah 12:3)*

In joyful anticipation we gather around the living water, Jesus, longing again for His refreshing waters. Robert E. Webber explains, "During Advent, we turn to Isaiah to hear how God can stir up the water of our dead spirituality and refresh us with a new spring of clear and lively water of life."

I remember being pregnant with my first son, due at the end of December, during Advent. As I carried him, I traveled with Mary to anticipate the joy of the coming Messiah. I heard verses like, *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel"* (Isaiah 7: 14) and *"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"* (Isaiah 9:6). I was expectant of my own first child, but also of the coming Messiah, who would make all things right. He Himself, the presence of this coming baby and King, would be God with us. He would be a Counselor, mighty and powerful, an Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. Jesus was everything my soul was longing for.

Joy comes as we continue to long for the refreshing waters of Jesus. Are you aching for this living water? How are you drawing with joy from the waters of salvation? Are you taking time to listen to your Counselor, Prince of Peace, and Everlasting Father?

Sit with Him. Picture yourself with Jesus. Tell Him of your longing, your aches, and the deepest desires of your heart. In Jesus' presence is all joy. In Jesus presence is everything we need. When He speaks He changes all things. May you spend time in His presence today, and experience His life-giving joy.

He invites each one of us to draw from His wells of salvation, to spend time with Him, the only source of living water.

### FOR REFLECTION:

- *Read Isaiah 12:1-6 again, this time picture God in the various stances it describes: "He was angry, now He comforts, He comes to save me, His is my salvation, His is strength."*
- *How do each of those pictures of God lead you to praise Him? How should they lead us to proclaim Him to the rest of the world?*

# THE JOY OF NEW LIFE

READ JOHN 16:16-24

*“A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her [hour] has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.” (John 16:21)*

In this passage, Jesus is patiently explaining to His disciples what they can expect when He is put to death. Surprisingly to me and maybe to you as well, He chooses to explain how both joy and sorrow will come from His death by using the metaphor of a woman in labor.

First, He teaches us about joy. We can see that the joy Jesus is describing here, joy rooted in Christ, is very different from the joy the world talks about. This joy is not surface-level; it’s not an emotion like glee or happiness. Rather, it is deep and rooted, and it exists independently from circumstances. Verse 21 does not say that the woman’s pain and anguish go away after her baby is born, it says that she *forgets* her anguish; the joy of seeing a new child born into the world has supremacy over her suffering. And this is not 21st century childbirth that Jesus is talking about, with doctors and epidurals and NICUs and C-Sections and all of the marvels of the information age. This is 1st century childbirth, where a woman was literally putting her life at risk to bring a new child into the world.

Second, Jesus is teaching us something about what *His* joy looks like. Maybe your translation of verse 21 says that “*her time*” has come, but it would be more accurate to the Greek to say that “*her hour*” has come. This is the same word Jesus uses throughout the book of John to describe the time for His death on the Cross. In doing this, it seems as though He’s making a connection between the woman’s “*hour*” to risk her life for her new child and His own “*hour*” to sacrifice His life for us—His children. Jesus chooses to use this metaphor and to identify with this woman to let His disciples back then and us now know that while there will be anguish, that anguish will be forgotten because of the joy of bringing each of us, His children, into new life. We are His joy!

As Christmas nears, and as we hear the stories of that other brave woman, Mary, risking her life to bring baby Jesus into the world, may we remember that the joy of Jesus’ birth is only a fraction of the joy that Jesus experienced as He birthed each of us into new life on the Cross.

**FOR REFLECTION:**

- *What does the fact that Jesus was willing and able to endure such horrific things as He did in going to the Cross, but still anticipated joy over the salvation He was bringing you mean to you? How will you respond to that?*

BY LIZ CARVER

# THE "AH-HA" MOMENT

READ LUKE 2:8-20

As my children have grown up in their schooling, I have had the privilege of getting to help them with homework. Yes, I said privilege. Sure, there are moments of frustration, of impatience and even of confusion (more of those as they get older and the work gets harder!) but there is nothing like the joy I feel when I see them “get it.” Maybe it’s a tough equation or difficult song to play for band, but when it “clicks” and I see how excited they get in overcoming that hurdle, my heart swells!

I can only imagine how God felt when watching the shepherds receive, understand and respond to the message He had sent them via the angels. Maybe in the moment there was shock and uncertainty, but it is clear after the angels left that the shepherds knew what they were supposed to do.

*“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”*

I imagine God waiting to see if they “got it” and then He Himself rejoicing as He watched these humble men hurry off with their new knowledge to see His special gift for the world.

I love that once they had seen and rejoiced over the baby themselves, they immediately went and spread the word to everyone they could find, ultimately *“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”*

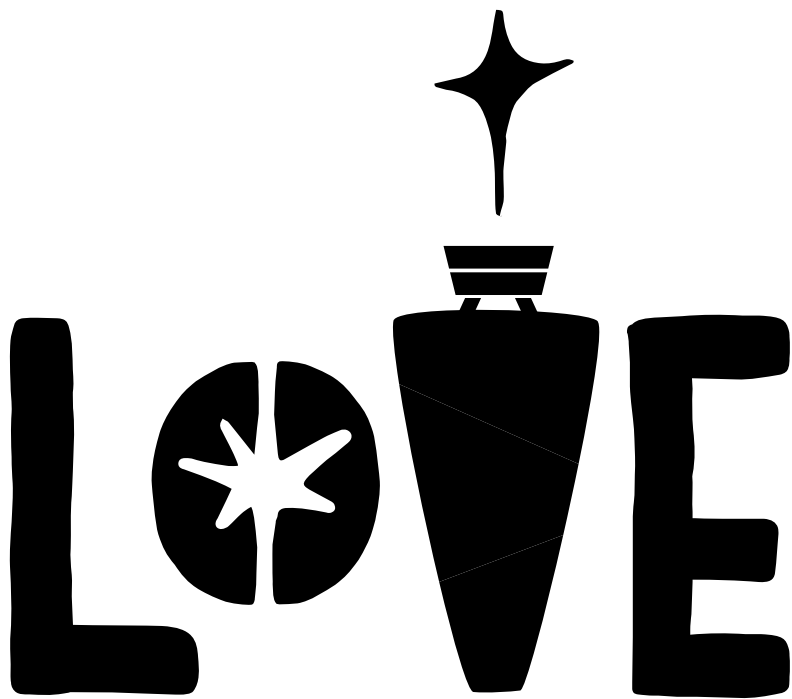
Not only did they receive this new knowledge about God’s gift—but they shared that knowledge with others.

Growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus is never just about ourselves, but ultimately about helping others to experience it and for the ultimate glory it brings God!

## FOR REFLECTION:

- *What knowledge of God or His grace have you grown in recently that you can share with someone else? Who and how will you do that?*
- \* *Place Mary and Joseph in the stable. The time has almost arrived for Baby Jesus to be born!*





LOVE

The word "LOVE" is rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter 'O' is replaced by a solid black circle containing a white, six-pointed starburst. The letter 'V' is replaced by a solid black silhouette of a perfume bottle with a tiered cap. Above the bottle's cap is a larger, black, four-pointed starburst.

WEEK 4

The text "WEEK 4" is written in a white, hand-drawn, sans-serif font and is centered within a thick, black, horizontal brushstroke that has a rough, textured edge.

# SAVIOR, MESSIAH, LORD

READ LUKE 2:1-20

The Gospel of Luke offers one of the most detailed explorations of the story of Christmas. Luke has researched deeply the background of the nativity story and opened it for all who would read it after his day.

By all accounts, the story of Jesus' birth seems ordinary if you only read the first seven verses of Luke 2. A couple travels far from home and has their baby during that journey. But there is more here than the superficial reading of the story would tell us.

The next section of the story makes that clear as a myriad of angels rip open the skies to announce this baby's birth in a magnificent way to a group of sleepy shepherds gathered in fields outside the city. Their description of this baby astounds: *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord"* (Luke 2:11). A Savior...the Messiah...the Lord.

When Peter wrote the letter we know as 2 Peter to a group of early followers of Jesus, he named Jesus in similar ways: *"To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours"* (2 Peter 2:1b). As the letter continues, Jesus is described with various words, but most recurring phrase is *"Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18). Peter echoes Luke's words about Jesus. He is the Lord over all things and a reflection of God's being and character. He is Savior, the One who will save us from sin, evil, and death, those things from which we cannot save ourselves. He is Christ, Messiah, the One promised through all the Law and Prophets to usher in God's eternal kingdom.

Today we celebrate the birth of Jesus, so let's celebrate Him as our Savior, our Messiah, and Lord.

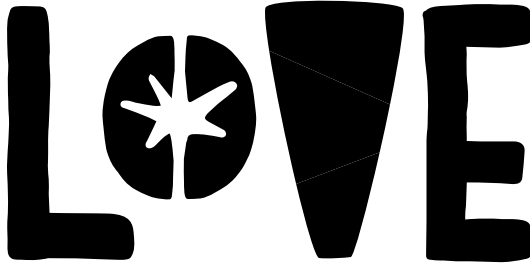
## FOR REFLECTION:

- *Reflect on each word applied to Jesus—Savior, Messiah, Lord—what do they mean to you?*
- \* *Place the Baby Jesus figure in the stable. In the middle of the night, in this little barn, Jesus was born! "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son..." (John 3:16).*

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24

BY MATT ERICKSON

## FAMILY TALK



### READ LUKE 2:1-20

If you have a baby brother or sister, you know how it is: even though babies are so tiny and helpless, they can really turn a house upside down! They wake up crying all night long, they need all kinds of special equipment, and when they begin to crawl, they get into all kinds of trouble! No matter how much work babies can be, there is one thing that's sure—their families LOVE them! Babies don't try to "be good" and earn their parents' love, and they don't have to. Their parents already love them with a fierce "no-matter-what" kind of love.

Did you ever wonder: What does God think when He sees us? We get ourselves into all kinds of trouble, we need lots of help, and sometimes, we think we don't need God. Does He get mad and give up on us? No, He looks at us like a parent looks at their baby—He loves us with a "no-matter-what" kind of love.

And, how do we know this? Because, at Christmas, God sent Jesus into the world. For hundreds of years God had sent special messengers—prophets—to warn His people about their sins and call them back to Himself. Finally, when the time was right, He sent Jesus to us. Jesus would be born as a baby, but He would grow up to save the world. He would do this by paying for our sins on the cross. The Bible says:

*"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).*

Baby Jesus is the best Christmas gift ever! He is the proof that God loves us enough to do everything needed so that we could live forever with Him.

#### LET'S TALK:

- *Parents, share a memory of each of your children from when they were babies.*
- *Do you sometimes feel like God's love for you depends on your behavior? Why or why not?*
- *How does the story of Baby Jesus' birth show God's love for us?*
- \* *Place the shepherds near the stable. The angel told them that the Savior had been born! They believed, and there were the first to see Jesus and to tell others about Him!*



# ***SPECIAL THANKS***

## **EDITING TEAM**

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## **WORKS CITED**

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.