

ADVENT 2021

Advent means “coming” ... as in Jesus is on the way! For the Christian church, it’s a celebration of Jesus’ arrival on earth 2000 years ago, His presence among us today, and the promise that He will return one day as king to defeat evil once and for all.

Jesus brings peace, hope, joy, and love to the whole world.

Whether you’re new to reading Scripture or not, this study’s for you!

Week of November 28th - PEACE

Day 1

1 Samuel 17:2-3, 13-17

The story of Jesus begins long before his arrival in a humble stable in Bethlehem. The authors of the Old Testament were inspired by God to begin weaving a story that culminates in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and then continues even today. Peace is a theme we see introduced in the Old Testament and embodied in the person of Jesus in the New Testament. Our reading today is about Israel’s King David (before he was king). He is one of the imperfect people in Jesus’ family tree.

His sons are in the midst of war and Jesse asks about their shalom. God brings peace in tumultuous times. Maybe you can relate and maybe it’s still hard to picture.

Have you experienced any glimpses of peace in your life this past year?

Day 2

Luke 2:8-14 (For more, read Genesis 3)

When God created the world and everything in it, He called it good... perfect... complete. He placed two very special trees in the garden of Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God didn’t create puppets. He gave His people the choice to trust and obey (but we know what happened next). Eternal life was in our grasp, but instead mankind chose to trust the Deceiver -- they chose not to obey God and sin entered the world. They felt shame, they felt guilt. God came to meet them in the garden, and they hid. As a mercy rather than a punishment, God sent His beloved creatures out of the garden. He did not want them to eat from the tree of life and live forever in a broken relationship with Him. From that point on, the world and everything in it was broken. But God had a plan to fix His broken world. He would bring peace to His people again.

Reflection Question | In the garden, Adam and Eve realized what they had done. They felt brokenness enter their relationship with God and one another, as though a critical part of those relationships was suddenly missing. The angels brought good news of completeness to shepherds in a field. Have you ever stopped to wonder... why shepherds??? Shepherds served a critical function in society, but they were by no means the most well-respected members of a community. What do you think -- why did the army of angels announce the good news to shepherds?

Day 3

Exodus 18:7

John 14:27

Let me paint a conversation we're all guilty of:

"Hey ___, how are you?"

"I'm pretty good"

"Glad to hear it."

And then we move right past the topic. In our individualistic Westernized culture, we really don't have a widely accepted way to ask the question Moses asked of his father-in-law. What if the next time you greeted someone, you asked, "How's your mental health? Physical health? Relational health? Do you have any need whatsoever?" (See what I mean? We'd never be invited to that party again!) Yet all these questions are wrapped up in peace.

Day 4

Isaiah 9:5-7

Jesus came into the world to bring complete restoration. He restores our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit works in our everyday lives to make us more and more like Jesus. This side of heaven, we'll never be perfect, but as we look back over our lives, we'll see places where God was working to bring healing (slowly yet surely) to those broken places.

Today we wrap up our word study of PEACE. We need to take it personal today answer it for yourself and spend a few moments taking it straight to God in prayer.

Reflection Question | Take a few minutes to reflect: What is the ONE area of your life that most needs the restoration that God brings? Is there brokenness that only the Prince of Peace can fully heal?

Week of December 5th - HOPE

Day 1

Isaiah 40:28-31

Psalms 40:2

Our theme this week is HOPE. Two Hebrew words are translated as “hope” in the Old Testament: *yakhal* (to wait for something to happen) and *qavah* (to wait in a state of tension). In the New Testament, the Greek word for hope (*elpis*) is also about expectation. This isn’t a frail “I hope I win a million bucks” kind of hope. Those who trust in God *expect* that He will act on their behalf.

Reflection Question | Time for a mental checkup: What’s your default definition of hope? Is it a deep trust/expectation kind of hope... or the more fragile “I hope I win a million bucks” kind? If it’s the latter, what would it take to shift your internal definition?

Day 2

Psalms 27:13-14

Psalms 130:1-5

Psalms 39:7

God is both the source of our hope and the one we trust in to act on our behalf. Hope is a recurring theme in the book of Psalms:

Reflection Question | When a situation seems crushing, where do you look first? We Americans like to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. The first place many of us start is by looking to ourselves or perhaps to our family or friends. God wants us to look first to Him. What is it that makes this so hard? Take an honest look at your behavior in the past. How long do you typically wait... what obstacles must you hit... to what depths must the situation sink before you look to God?

Day 3

1 Peter 1:3

Romans 8:20-21

Biblical hope and optimism are not synonyms. In 1 Peter 1:3, Jesus is called our “living hope.” He led the way from life into death... then out of the grave and into resurrected life. Jesus is hope for humankind and for the world itself, which was broken when sin entered through Adam & Eve’s actions in the Garden of Eden. Sin entered the world, twisting and corrupting everything in its path. No amount of research will stop people from getting sick. No number of policies will stop pollution. No efforts of humankind can stop people from hurting others in big and small ways. But...

Reflection Question | Hopeful people recognize there’s no evidence that things will get better by our own effort. Hopeful people simultaneously (and paradoxically) recognize that Jesus, our living hope, changes everything. Jesus has promised to bring a new heaven and a new earth when He returns. Imagine for a moment that you can leave the “death and decay” of this world behind and you’re getting a glimpse of the restored creation God has promised... what are you most excited to see (or perhaps *not* see)?

Day 4

2 Peter 3:9-13

Revelation 21:1-5a

Those who hope in Jesus do so *trusting* that He will bring about the complete restoration and healing He has promised. Today we’re going to meditate on that promise of restoration. And with the year we’ve had, can’t we all use a few moments to dwell on something truly hope-inspiring?

Reflection Question | As you read these two passages, did any words or images catch your attention? (For self-reflection: How’s your hope these days?)

Week of December 12th - JOY

Day 1

Psalm 16:8-9, 11

Romans 15:13

We spend a lot of time talking about things that bring us joy this time of year (family, gifts, music, decorations). This is the WHAT. But WHY did the God of the universe choose to give His creatures the gift of being able to experience joy?

Joy finds its origin in various sources throughout the Old and New Testaments. God finds joy in his creation. God's people also find joy in the beauty of the world. Biblical writers express joy over flocks, abundant harvests, weddings, children, friends, even a good bottle of wine!

Reflection Question | Why do you think God created us in such a way that we experience joy? He could have easily left this "ingredient" of humanity out, but He didn't.

Day 2

John 15:10-12

Hope of what is to come and trust in the One who brings a better future... this is what forms the foundation of joy that doesn't crumble on a bad day (or year). If we were going to oversimplify this into an equation, it might look something like this: God's love + His promises = foundation of hope = source of joy. The joy that God brings fuels our outlook on life and our ability to love others.

Reflection Question | It can be a joy to love others. But as someone said, "Not all people are life-givers. Some are life-suckers. Jesus calls us to love both." It's harder to love some people than others. But Jesus promises that it is *his* joy that fills us and enables us to love both kinds of people in our lives. What spiritual practices or habits help you tap into that joy on a regular basis? (E.g., weekly worship, daily Bible podcast, devotional book, etc.) If you're having trouble coming up with an answer, spend some time in prayer about what tools God may want to use to consistently bring His joy into your life.

Day 3

Hebrews 11:24-26

Luke 6:20-23

Imagine being Moses. Having walked away from the royal life in Egypt and all the luxuries this status invited, he finds himself leading the (oftentimes grouchy) Hebrew people through the desert. We've all been on a less-than-stellar road trip or even a vacation that did not go as planned. Imagine that scenario lasting for 40 years. For Moses, this road trip-gone-bad lasted for the remainder of his life... and yet, he had joy. Hebrews 11 says that his joy came from "looking to the reward" of being with God forever in heaven.

Jesus' earthly life was not what most people expected, starting with his arrival in a Bethlehem barn. Several times in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we see his followers getting frustrated or even upset that Jesus was not rising up to be the earthly king they imagined. They were hoping for someone to come in and overthrow the Romans, who were in power at that time. They were hoping for a *now* solution; they couldn't comprehend that Jesus might be bringing something even bigger.

Reflection Question | God didn't end Moses' wilderness wandering, yet he had joy in looking forward to his reward. Jesus says that the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and hated are similarly to "leap for joy" at the reward to come in heaven. Intellectually, it's one thing to have this kind of future-focused joy. But practically speaking? When we get laid off, or the kids are screaming, or we have to cancel Christmas plans with family? Yeah, that's a bit harder. What helps you refocus in those high-emotions moments? OR why is it so difficult to focus on the "future reward" in those moments?

Day 4

2 Corinthians 6:10

John 16:20-22

Psalms 30:5

Advent means coming; in this season, we celebrate Jesus' coming to earth as a baby *and* his coming again one day as king forever. This *now and not yet* theme of Advent is highlighted especially as we talk about joy: We have *joy now* because of a *not yet fulfilled* promise that on the other side of death, we will live forever with Jesus.

Reflection Question | Several times in the Bible, we read about this joy-and-sorrow paradox*. The kind of joy Jesus brings is different. This joy is not based on circumstances. This joy is not just a feeling (feelings are fickle). This joy looks over the valley to see the horizon... peers through the dark night to see the morning (Psalm 30:5) ... dwells on what is to come more than what is at this moment. Take some time to personally reflect on the last time you were in a dark valley. Can you think of a “code word” to help you remember all of God’s promises and remind you to turn your eyes to the next horizon?

*Here’s a helpful saying to remember the definition of *paradox* = “holding two equally true.” For example, the Christian belief in a Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- God in three “persons”) is a paradox. It shouldn’t shock us that some things about God appear contradictory to our finite minds. As another person said, “If God was so small, I could wrap my mind around him, I wouldn’t believe in him.”

Day 5

Isaiah 51:10-15

I want to give a bit of context before jumping into the passage. Since sin entered the world, mankind hasn’t had it easy. Putting our trust in God doesn’t mean we suddenly live in a world without sorrow or loss. We *all* experience brokenness. The prophet Isaiah shares God’s messages with the people of Israel who are complaining (and rightly so) that living in exile isn’t so great. Notice how Isaiah points them back to the way God has worked in the past and then God himself speaks through Isaiah, pointing to the future rescue He will work for all humankind through Jesus. (If you’ve got the *Jesus Storybook Bible* in your home, you may have noticed the tagline on the cover, “Every story whispers His name.” This right here is a great example of an Old Testament prophecy doing just that!)

Reflection Question | Read verses 13-15 again as you lay the biggest obstacle of this year before the Lord. Do you get goosebumps as you read that last sentence? The LORD of Heaven’s Armies stands by your side whether you realize it or not. He is for you.

Week of December 19th - LOVE

Day 1

Matthew 25:37-49

The countdown is on: Only five more days in Advent. We can't possibly squeeze this week's topic into just five days... and six wouldn't cut it either... because LOVE is something that we will never fully grasp in our lifetime.

Feelings are fickle. You've no doubt experienced this. One minute you're *happy* to help a friend in need but when they ask for something that's a bit too inconvenient or, worse, fail to adequately express their gratitude for your help... well, you probably weren't feeling so *happy* anymore. In Scripture, God often reminds us love is far more than a feeling. And praise Him for that!

Reflection Question | Sometimes loving people means pushing through my feelings in order to fulfill God's calling for me. Today's question is NOT one you'll want to answer on a public forum, just for self-reflection today: Who is that person God wants you to *choose to love* even (and perhaps especially) when it's hard? How does reflecting on Jesus' love for you change your attitude toward that person?

Day 2

Romans 5:6-8

Isaiah 9:2

John 1:9

We like to paint ourselves in the best possible light, don't we? Even the expressions we use in day-to-day life perpetuate this; we say, "They cut me off" rather than "I failed to make room for them to merge." (You Houston drivers, did you bristle a bit at the mere mention of traffic?) I don't know about you, but today's topic makes me bristle. I don't like to think of myself as the enemy of God. But that's what the Bible calls us: While we were still weak, infirm, feeble, lawbreakers, rebels... Christ died for us. The prophet Isaiah calls us "people walking in darkness" (9:2) and the Gospel of John speaks of Christmas hope: "The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world" (1:9). We like to paint ourselves in the best light, but the truth of the matter is that we would still be walking in darkness if not for Jesus arriving on earth 2,000 years ago. The light is His light shining through us. The love that premeditated the manger is unfathomable.

Reflection Question | This one's open-ended: When has God's great love for you been most real? Was there ever a time when it seemed far off?

Day 3

1 Corinthians 13

No question today, just one closing exercise I hope you take the time to complete. Read today's Scripture passage slowly twice. The first time, insert your name anytime it says *LOVE*. The second time, insert *Jesus'* name.

Was it difficult to read when it was your name? I'll admit, I only get through the first couple words. I come to an uncomfortable stop as my conscience grates against my words... _____ is *not always* patient, _____ is *not* always kind. But to read it the second time? With the Savior's name in its rightful place? Now *this* is a balm for my skinned-and-scraped soul. Jesus *is* patient. He's so very patient. And kind! He seeks my best interests; He keeps no record of my wrongs. Jesus never fails. Oh, how wonderful it is that he never fails me! Jesus, the only true embodiment of love, came down at Christmas because he *had to come*. We would never know love or peace or hope or joy... we would never know a relationship with God Himself... unless Jesus came down at Christmas. May the story of Jesus' arrival bless you as you ponder it once again this Christmas. (*Take the next two days to read through Luke 2:1-21.*)