

TODAY IN THE WORD™

A ministry of Moody Bible Institute

LIVING IN HOPE

A Study for Advent

DECEMBER 2020

When God Draws Near

From the President of Moody Bible Institute

“When God draws near, He disrupts our ordinary life and ushers in an extraordinary adventure.”



Many years ago, I was driving downtown on the expressway, concentrating on the road ahead. Suddenly, my daughter who

was three at the time began to tug on my sleeve. “Daddy, Daddy,” she said. Keeping my eyes on the cars ahead of me, I answered, “What do you want?” But my little girl was undeterred. “Daddy, Daddy, look!” she exclaimed, pointing out the window. In front of us was a double rainbow! I was so focused on driving. I almost missed something extraordinary.

When God draws near, He often disrupts our ordinary to usher in the extraordinary. Mary was a 16-year-old girl with regular teenage issues, when her life was extraordinarily interrupted by an angel Gabriel: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled (v. 29), then puzzled (v. 34) by his words. He explained that she had found favor with God and would give birth to God’s son, Jesus. God would disrupt Mary’s life in an extraordinary way and send it in a new direction.

Many of us fear disruption.

When unexpected events present themselves, we react with irritation or even dismay. We can be so focused on our own plans that we ignore what God is doing. But as believers, we may want to pause to consider whether this is a God encounter. Because when God draws near, He disrupts our ordinary life and ushers in an extraordinary adventure. Jack was a businessman living the American dream. He was excited to retire and play golf. What Jack didn’t expect was that his plans would be interrupted by God. When I talked to Jack a few years later, he told me he could never have envisioned what he was doing now. Jack was engaged in a nonprofit ministry that is changing people’s lives . . . all because the extraordinary interrupted an ordinary life.

As we enter this season of Advent and celebrate the Lord’s birth, I would encourage you to allow for your plans to be interrupted by God. Allow Him to take center stage, so you can fully appreciate the extraordinary gift of His Son, Jesus. Like Mary, we can rejoice at His interruption, recognizing that “the Mighty One has done great things for me” (v. 49). When God draws near, it can be life-changing. ■

The Christmas Story

by Dr. John Koessler

“Just as Jesus did not cling to the rights and privileges that were His as God, we are to have the same mindset in our relationships by putting the interests of others above our own (Phil. 2:4).”

The Bible’s account of the nativity is a story like no other. And while it is a story, it is not fiction. Most stories have a beginning, middle, and end, but the story of Jesus has no beginning. According to Scripture, in the beginning, Jesus “was with God,” and Jesus “was God” (John 1:1). The nativity is the Bible’s record of the time that Jesus, who already existed as God, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

The theological term of Christ’s becoming flesh is *incarnation*. One of the most important truths of the Christian faith, this is about more than God appearing in human form. It is a doctrine about the unity of the divine and human in Jesus Christ. Philippians 2:6 tells us that when Jesus was born, He was already “in very nature God.” At the nativity, Christ took to Himself “the very nature of a servant” by being “found in appearance as a man” (Phil. 2:8). Jesus did this not only to set an example for us but also that He could provide salvation “by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:8).

The fourth-century theologian and church leader Athanasius explained that the incarnation was necessary because “not otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition.” Because Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11).

Through His incarnation, the Savior provided a pattern for all who are in Christ to follow. Just as Jesus did not cling to His rights and privileges that were His as God, we are to have the same mindset in our relationships by putting the interests of others above our own (Phil. 2:4). Because Jesus, who has always existed as God, was raised to everlasting life, we too will be raised. Our story has been joined to His, a story that will never end. ■

For Further Study

To learn more, read *The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation* by Andreas Kostenberger and Alexander Stewart (Crossway).

Go Deeper

We hope these questions will help you consider (or discuss with others) what God is teaching you through this month's study of His Word. We've left a bit of room to write down your thoughts as well!

WEEK 1: Choose one biblical character in the Christmas story who you relate to the most. What is special about this person for you?

WEEK 2: How is biblical hope different from the world's idea of "hope"?

WEEK 3: Now, answer that same question about joy, peace, and love.

WEEK 4: Christmas is a familiar topic. What new things did you learn from this study?

Want more questions? Check out the Go Deeper section on our website or app!

TODAY IN THE WORD™

Living in Hope: A Study for Advent

*He has given us new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. — 1 Peter 1:3*

It's been a hard year for most of us. But as we anticipate Christmas, we rest in the words of the Psalmist: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). Advent reminds us that the Living God is with us during each step of our journey. Christmas is a beautiful celebration of Emmanuel, God with us, when the Greatest of All became one of us.

So, join us, as we learn about hope we have in Christ, and rejoice in His salvation—a present truth and our future hope. We pray this study for the Advent season will encourage your heart and help you:

- Understand the hope, love, joy, and peace at the heart of the gospel and the Christmas story
- Celebrate the truths that brought joy to the world and to you personally
- Live out these truths in your relationship with God and fellow believers

Thank you for walking alongside *Today in the Word* in 2020. This ministry wouldn't be possible without the prayer and financial support of friends like you. Your help means the world to us! The journey continues. Merry Christmas! ■

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The First Week of Advent: Hope

Read Matthew 12:15–21

*He will proclaim justice
to the nations.—Matthew 12:18*

The weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent. Why? Because Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” Christmas is the season in which we celebrate the arrival of the turning point in God’s plan of redemption—the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ. In today’s culture, the Advent season is marked by the four Sundays preceding Christmas, with each assigned a particular theme: first, hope; second, love; third, joy; and fourth, peace. This month’s devotional study is structured around these four themes. Since in Scripture the four themes are intertwined, they’ll also be interwoven in our study. Together, we can prepare our hearts for the Christmas holy day, as well as better understand and celebrate the connections between Christmas and the gospel.

We begin our study with hope. Biblical hope is closely connected with faith (Heb. 11:1). Faith treats the future as if it were already accomplished, because God has promised. With reference to Christmas, there are many promises that God has already

kept (Messianic prophecies), and this strengthens our faith that He will keep the rest as well. That’s genuine hope!

In today’s reading, Jesus was doing healing miracles, but not yet claiming to be the Messiah because the timing was not yet right in God’s plan (vv. 15–16). Even so, the Pharisees were already plotting to kill Him (v. 14). Matthew chose this moment in his Gospel to remind readers that Jesus’ ministry fulfilled a prophecy of Isaiah (v. 17; Isa. 42:1–4). This prophecy describes God’s beloved Servant who would “proclaim justice to the nations” (v. 18) through meekness (v. 19), gentleness, and kindness (v. 20)—the kind of behavior seen in Jesus’ healings. His actions reveal His identity. No wonder “the nations will put their hope” in Him (v. 21)!

► One way some families enjoy marking this holiday season is with an Advent calendar. Though we’re several days in, it’s not too late to get one (or make your own). Many versions are available online or at your local Christian bookstore.

Pray with Us

Heavenly Father, as we enter the Advent season we ask that you prepare us to honor you with our celebrations. Make your promises ever-present in our minds and fill our hearts with the hope we have in Jesus.

Hoping in the Promise Keeper

Read Romans 4:18–25

He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.—Romans 4:20

In her song, “Faithful God,” Laura Story magnifies the Lord’s trustworthiness: “For you are the love that never leaves / The friend that won’t deceive / You’re the one sure thing / Faithful God, every promise kept / Every need You’ve met, faithful God. / All I am and all I’ll ever be / Is all because You love faithfully / Faithful God.”

Unlike worldly hope—which can be mere wishful thinking—godly hope is grounded in God’s absolute integrity. He always does what He says. He always keeps His promises. No exceptions. Paul illustrated this with the story of Abraham (vv. 18–21). God promised that Abraham would be “the father of many nations” (v. 18). Yet at age 100 he didn’t have a single son. Hope at this point seemed entirely unreasonable, humanly speaking. Abraham was not delusional. He knew the facts: “His body was as good as dead” and his wife’s womb was dead as well (v. 19). Yet Abraham’s faith did not falter. He

was fully persuaded that God would keep His impossible promise. In fact, since there was absolutely no human way for this promise to be fulfilled, God would get even more glory!

On this side of the Cross, our faith is the same as Abraham’s (vv. 22–25). His faith “was credited to him as righteousness” (v. 22). What he looked forward to, we look back on: the saving death of Christ. “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (v. 25; see Isa. 53:12). “Justification” is our righteous standing before God, accomplished in and by Christ. This is how we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1). In Jesus, all God’s promises are kept, wherever we are on the gospel story’s timeline.

► If you’re looking for more God-centered ways to celebrate this Christmas season (and other holidays as well), we recommend the book *Putting God Back in the Holidays*, by Bill and Penny Thrasher.

Pray with Us

Dear God, as we remember Abraham’s faith in your promises, we rejoice in the impossible things that you have accomplished for your glory—including our salvation! Thank you for your faithfulness.

Hope of Redemption

Read Romans 8:18–25

The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.—Romans 8:19

“In the barn on Christmas Eve, after all the people leave, The animals in voices low, remember Christmas long ago.” So begins *The Animals’ Christmas Eve*. In this children’s book, the animals retell the first Christmas, recalling the birth of the Christ-child and how He was laid in one of their feeding troughs. The story ends: “Twelve chimes ring out from far away—the lovely bells of Christmas Day. And every beast bows low its head, for one small babe in a manger bed.”

The natural world has a stake in Christmas, too, for as today’s reading makes clear, the hope of redemption extends to creation (vv. 19–22). The Apostle Paul explained that creation is in “bondage to decay” (v. 21) not by its own fault, but rather due to the sinful choice of Adam and Eve, whose Fall brought death into the world. When God’s plan of redemption is complete, and “the freedom and glory of the children of God” are fully realized (v. 21), then, too, will nature be

liberated. This process is like childbirth: Pain leads to new life.

Creation’s groaning resonates with our own (vv. 23–25). We, too, are waiting. We have “the firstfruits of the Spirit” as a down payment, but the full “redemption of our bodies”—that is, the day we will have resurrection bodies like Christ’s—is yet future (v. 23). Our “adoption to sonship” has begun, but the full inheritance has not yet been received (v. 23). Patient waiting is required. This is the hope of salvation: in the armor of God, the helmet that protects our head (1 Thess. 5:8). What we are waiting and hoping for, with faith-filled certainty, is so precious that our present sufferings are not worthy of comparison (v. 18). Salvation is a present truth and a future hope!

► Consider well-known Scripture stories from a different perspective. Choose one character (an angel, a shepherd, the innkeeper, or maybe even a sheep) and try relating what happened the first Christmas from their viewpoint.

Pray with Us

Lord, we feel the groan of creation echoed in our own souls as we long for the future redemption of our bodies. Sustain our future hope and teach us to live out our salvation as a present reality.

The Personal Side of Hope

Read Psalm 130

*I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.—Psalm 130:5*

Do you have biblical hope? The great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon responded: “When you are cleaned right out, when even the last rusty counterfeit farthing has been emptied out of your pocket and you stand before your God as a wretched, starving and bankrupt beggar, your abject poverty and dire need will commend you to His mercy and love!”

Hope in the Lord is not abstract but gritty and realistic. Today’s reading begins: “Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD” (v. 1). The hope of Christmas is for you, today, no matter how dire your situation. It’s not only about Abraham and Messianic prophecy and the liberation of creation—it’s for each one of us personally. God has numbered the very hairs on your head (Luke 12:6–7), meaning He knows and cares about every detail of your life.

Psalm 130 models prayer from this perspective (vv. 1–2). Why did the psalmist feel so low? In this case, because he’d sinned and felt guilt

(vv. 3–4). That’s why this psalm is one of seven “penitential psalms.” Based on our record, no one can stand righteous before the Lord. The only reason a relationship with Him is possible is that God has granted mercy and forgiveness. Only because of this can we serve and worship Him.

Centered in faith on this hope, the psalmist waits for the Lord (vv. 5–6). He knows God’s mercy and forgiveness will transform his feelings and the spiritual reality of his situation. He longs for this as eagerly as a watchman waits for morning to dawn, and he exhorts God’s people to do the same (vv. 7–8). God’s “unfailing love” is our only hope of redemption from sin!

► One way to better realize the hope we have in Christ is by practicing confession. We encourage you today to bring your sins before God’s throne: confess, mourn, and repent of sin. Then, you can realize the joy and freedom of God’s forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

Pray with Us

You are the one who searches hearts and exposes darkness. Forgive us our sins and give us a craving for righteousness that is mightier than any temptation. Almighty God, thank you for your steadfast forgiveness!

The Strength of Hope

Read Isaiah 40:25–31

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.—Isaiah 40:29

Forty Roman soldiers in 4th-century Armenia disobeyed the emperor's order. These brave Christians stood firm, refusing to offer a pagan sacrifice. They were imprisoned and tortured, stripped and herded onto a frozen pond. Warm baths were offered to anyone who would deny their faith. But as the sun set, the men sang hymns, refusing to disgrace their Savior! Their martyrdom is a dramatic example of the strength of biblical hope. "What is death for us but an entrance into eternal life?" they asked. This was not wishful thinking or human optimism. This is rock-solid standing firm on the character of God—true biblical hope.

Isaiah knew that the only foundation for true hope is the character of God (vv. 25–28). These verses reveal Him to be incomparably great, powerful, all-seeing, caring, tireless, wise, and eternal. He's the Creator and knows the stars by name. Israel's complaint in verse 27 was not legitimate. God saw and cared about what was happening to them.

God "gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak" (vv. 29–31). Those who hope in Him have access to the awesome power that brought the universe into being! This is far beyond our pitiful human resources. How else could people in crisis "soar on wings like eagles"? This vivid imagery emphasizes strength, freedom, and effortlessness (the eagle is not working hard). In Him, we can soar above our current circumstances.

The verb "hope" (v. 31) has also been translated "wait" or "trust." These ideas are woven together—to wait for the Lord also means to hope in Him. It means we can trust Him absolutely. There's a forward-looking eager expectation here. Despite our present circumstances, godly hope sustains and strengthens us!

► Isaiah 40:30–31 is a classic Bible promise that will encourage you during difficult times. Why not memorize these verses during this month? Then they'll be in your heart and mind, ready and available for instant access!

Pray with Us

Father, we cannot rely on human strength to carry us through hardship. Instead, help us to look to the hope we have in your Son, Jesus Christ. Strengthen our faith through both happy and hard times.

The Second Week of Advent: Love

Read John 3:1–21

Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.—John 3:16

In China, some parents follow their freshman children to university. They're allowed to camp nearby for a month in order to help them adjust to life away from home by, for example, cooking their meals or washing their laundry. Tianjin University offers "tents of love" for free so that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, can take part in what is becoming a move-in tradition.

God loves us even more than those devoted parents! On this second Sunday of Advent we will focus on love, namely, God's love for us, which He demonstrated by sending His Son for our salvation (v. 16). Today's reading begins with a dialogue between Jesus and a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus. What did it mean to be "born from above" that is, to experience spiritual rebirth (vv. 3–7)? Jesus helps the baffled rabbi, using a comparison to Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the wilderness (vv. 14–15; Num. 21:4–9).

John 3:16 is one of the most well-known and often referenced verses in the New Testament because it clearly explains the message of the gospel. Nicodemus learned that being born again is the only way to enter the kingdom of God. It's a work of the Holy Spirit, accomplished for those who put their faith in Christ. The same promise-keeping love of the Old Testament is now climactically seen in God's gift of love, His Son.

By believing in Him, we receive eternal life instead of the death we as sinners deserve. But it's important to remember that it is a gift; it can also be refused. Those who do not believe in Jesus will be condemned and receive the just punishment for their sin. Will you accept this gift today?

► You could receive no better gift this Christmas than the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. If you haven't done so already, choose today to put your faith in Jesus. Accept Him as your Savior; confess your sins, and accept His sacrifice on your behalf.

Pray with Us

Dear God, we confess that we are sinners destined for eternal death, but your salvation gave us eternal life. We place our hope in your Son and ask your Holy Spirit to continue the work of renewal in our lives.

Follow in Love

Read John 13:1–35

*As I have loved you,
so you must love one another.—John 13:34*

The classic Christmas movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” celebrates the sacrificial love of its main character, George Bailey. As a young man, George gave up his dreams of success and travel, to stay and help his father and his community. When he almost lost everything, it is up to his friends and family to teach him that his selfless acts of love made a difference in their lives.

In today’s reading, we see an intimate moment between Jesus and His disciples. Jesus warned that He would not be with them for much longer (v. 33). He washed their feet and predicted Judas’s betrayal knowing that His time was drawing near (v. 5). Under these circumstances, what important message did He have for them? Simply this: To follow Him, they must love another as He had loved them (v. 34).

How did Jesus love His disciples? He would lay down His life, sacrificially, to accomplish His Father’s will. Jesus would be glorified by obeying His Father, that is, His

obedience would bring honor to the name of the Lord (vv. 31–32). At the completion of His mission of salvation, He would return to heaven and sit at the right hand of His Father. Where He was going, His disciples would be unable to follow, but they could continue to follow Him by imitating His example.

We are called to love as Jesus loved. Why? “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (v. 35). In what sense is this a new command (v. 34)? They had been given a new standard: Christ’s perfection. We’ve gone from “loving our neighbor” to “loving our enemies” (Matt. 5:43–45). Loving as Christ did is one of our Advent priorities.

► Loving one another like Christ loved us can take many forms, including acts of service or sharing our finances/food/possessions (Acts 2:42–47). Consider one way you can follow Christ’s example and show God’s love to someone during this Christmas season.

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, you have told us to love one another as you love us. Please fill our hearts with your love for others and open our eyes to practical ways we can demonstrate your love this week, and throughout this Advent season.

To Love Is to Obey

Read **John 14:23–31**

*Anyone who loves me will
obey my teaching.—John 14:23*

Do you believe that being a Christian means denying yourself? While this is a basic biblical truth about discipleship, a recent survey revealed that only 36 percent of churchgoers “strongly agreed” with it. Nineteen percent actually “disagreed.” What we may choose to forget is that biblical obedience means putting God first, above our own selfish desires.

Jesus taught that to love God means to obey Him (vv. 23–24). We may think of “obey” as a cold, dutiful verb, preferring “love” which feels warm and pleasant. But our Lord wove them together. Words or feelings are meaningless without actions to back them up. Obedience is the “proof of the pudding,” as a previous generation would have said. Now we might say, “Walk the talk,” or perhaps “Keep it 100.”

As in the previous chapter (see yesterday’s devotional), Jesus warned the disciples of His imminent departure (vv. 25–27). But He wasn’t leaving them alone. He would send the Holy Spirit, who would help

them remember His teachings. It’s implied that the Spirit would also help them obey those teachings. That’s good, because the kind of love and obedience Jesus described are beyond human ability. He promised them the gift of His peace, a divine sense of spiritual well-being that would stand against their natural fears and anxieties.

Jesus said the disciples should not be sad about His departure, but joyful (vv. 28–31). Why? Because it would mark the completion of His redemptive mission. Although it might have felt like these events were engineered by “the prince of this world,” Satan, everything happened by the Father’s will and Jesus’ choice (v. 30). Christ’s example of love and obedience now enables our own. That is a reason to rejoice!

► What about you? Take time to consider the spiritual truths of Christlike obedience and self-denial by meditating on John 12:23–26. Jesus used the object lesson of a seed to illustrate this important truth.

Pray with Us

We live in a society that promotes self-care and individualism, where denying oneself is not only counterintuitive, but countercultural. Father, please help us obey you out of a genuine, faithful love for you.

Abiding in Love

Read John 15:9–17

I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.—John 15:16

We are living between two Advents: Christ's birth and His return. How should that affect the way we live? A.W. Tozer answered: "In the midst of our lives, and between the two great mountain peaks of God's acts in the world, we look back and remember, and we look forward and hope!"

In other words, we must abide in Christ (v. 9). "Abide" is not a word we use much today, so translations often replace it with other words such as "remain," "continue," or even "reside." Abide means to make a firm decision to "stay in place." The key idea is that we "stick close" to Christ, understanding that our life and fruitfulness depend upon Him.

But we're not just to abide near Christ, we're to abide or remain in His love (vv. 9–11). How? By keeping His commands, just as He perfectly kept His Father's commands. Abiding in His love by keeping His commands is the only pathway to godly joy. These

verses close the loop on the past few days: To follow Christ means to love Him and one another; to love means to obey His commands; and to obey means we will abide or remain in Him.

The most important command is to love one another (vv. 12–17; 1 John 4:12). We are to love others as Christ loved us, selflessly and sacrificially. To follow Him in this way gives us the privilege of being His friends. After all, He loved us and chose us (in Jesus' day, disciples usually chose their rabbi, not vice versa), shared "everything that I learned from my Father," and called us to "go and bear fruit" (vv. 15–16). As we walk through this season of Advent, choose to abide in His love, by obeying His commands and demonstrating His love to others.

► This truth makes the devotional application clear: How can we show the love of Christ to another person today? Make a list of possible ideas, and then choose one to act on today!

Pray with Us

Lord, thank you for choosing us to abide in you. Tune our hearts and minds to yours so that we can love others with your love. Guide us today to someone whom we can serve in your name.

Love in Action

Read 1 John 3:11–24

*Let us not love with words or speech
but with actions and in truth. —1 John 3:18*

During a lockdown in Vietnam to combat the COVID-19 virus, some people had difficulty obtaining enough food. In response, a Ho Chi Minh City businessman set up free “rice ATMs” to help. Anyone who needed it could withdraw (at no cost) one day’s worth of rice for a family. His idea caught on in other cities around the nation.

What a great practical example of love in action! In today’s reading, John initially explained love via its opposite, hate (vv. 11–15). Cain failed to love his brother, Abel, and instead murdered him out of envy. In the same way, the world will hate and envy us as followers of Christ because we’ve passed from death to life. Love and life are a matched set, as are hate and death.

The key to godly love is action (vv. 16–18). Words by themselves are not enough (see James 2:14–17). As always, Christ is the model we should imitate—He laid down His very life for us! How can we imitate this once-

for-all event? By helping a brother or sister in Christ with our material possessions. A believer who fails to do so lacks God’s love and is thus the moral equivalent of a murderer. The phrase “has no pity” (v. 17) can be more strongly translated as “shuts off his compassion” or “closes his heart against him.”

Finally, the apostle expounded on how loving actions help reassure us of our status in Christ (vv. 19–24). Even if our (fallible) heart or conscience condemns us, one proof of our spiritual rebirth in Christ is that we’re able to show the love of Christ in action. This is not to our credit or glory but to God’s, for it’s the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live in this way.

► We’ve arrived at the same application as yesterday: How can you show the love of Christ to another person? Today, we encourage you to think specifically of helping in terms of material needs.

Pray with Us

As we prayed yesterday, we ask again, God, that you would lead us to a person to bless with acts of love today. Help us provide for someone’s needs so they may know your great love for them.

Love Never Fails

Read 1 Corinthians 13

The greatest of these is love.—1 Corinthians 13:13

“Love Divine, all loves excelling,” begins Charles Wesley’s famous hymn. “Joy of heaven to earth come down / Fix in us thy humble dwelling / All thy faithful mercies crown. / Jesus, thou art all compassion / Pure, unbounded love thou art; / Visit us with thy salvation / Enter every trembling heart.” Praise is a natural response to the perfection of God’s love. First Corinthians 13 gives us a partial description of God’s love, as well as a challenge. Here the apostle Paul explains how we should love one another as Christ loved us! Without love, things that are otherwise considered good have no value (vv. 1–3). The good things used as examples here are spiritual gifts from the previous chapter, but the principle applies across the board. Without love, nothing is truly gained or accomplished.

Love has such a high value that we should be deeply interested in defining or describing it (vv. 4–7). Paul lists some of its qualities positively: what love is or does—such as

showing patience, being kind, and persevering. We also learn what love isn’t or doesn’t do—such as “not self-seeking,” “not easily angered,” and “does not delight in evil” (vv. 5–6). Consider that Christ perfectly fulfilled each of these standards and more!

The bottom line is that everything fails or runs out except love (vv. 8–13). The world is characterized by change, decay, and death. Our understanding of life, of God, and of our purpose is partial at best. But one day, “when completeness comes”—a reference to Christ’s return—this will end (v. 9). Our knowledge will be far greater, like passing from childhood to adulthood. Most importantly, we’ll know Him clearly and directly. We’ll see Him face to face. How we long for that glorious day!

► Today, choose one of the qualities of love listed in verses 4–7. Ask God to show you how you can grow in this particular aspect of love during this Advent season. Make that quality your focus in prayer this weekend.

Pray with Us

Heavenly Father, which quality of love would you have us focus on this weekend? Please sustain us as we strive to emulate Christ’s perfect love toward others.

The Seeking Shepherd

Read Luke 15:1–7

*Rejoice with me;
I have found my lost sheep.—Luke 15:6*

What does it mean when we say, “The Lord is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1)? Phillip Keller offers an answer to this question in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. “This thought alone should stir my spirit, quicken my own sense of awareness, and lend enormous dignity to myself as an individual. To think that God in Christ is deeply concerned about me as a particular person immediately gives great purpose and enormous meaning to my short sojourn upon this planet.”

Today’s parable conveys this message as well. It’s the first in a series of three stories Jesus told about finding lost things (a sheep, a coin, a son). All three stories show how much God values us and how much effort He puts forth “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Even more significantly, the story highlights the loving nature of the Shepherd Himself, Jesus. Our Good Shepherd loves each of us so much that He is willing to leave his 99 sheep (“in the open country,” but protected) and search for the one who was lost (vv.

3–4). Notice it’s not the sheep seeking the shepherd but the other way around. God’s love pursues *us*, as we see throughout the Bible. And when we’re found, there is great “rejoicing in heaven” (vv. 5–7). Joy is always greater when the need and forgiveness are greater as well (see Luke 7:41–43).

Two audiences were listening to this parable. One was “tax collectors and sinners,” lost sheep in need of a Savior (see Luke 5:31–32). The other was the Pharisees. They were also lost but refused to admit it. They pridefully complained about Jesus’ willingness to associate with the other group (vv. 1–2). In this story, Jesus sadly mocked them as “ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent” (v. 7). They did, of course, but their hearts were closed to Christ.

► You may have sheep and shepherds as a part of your nativity set. If you have time today, read the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10:1–18 and reflect on the fact that God is your shepherd, a powerful image used throughout Scripture.

Pray with Us

Lord, please humble us as we remember that each of us was once a lost sheep. Move us to compassion for the sheep who are still lost and show us how we may join in your loving pursuit of them.

The Third Week of Advent: Joy

Read **John 3:22–31**

*He must become greater;
I must become less.—John 3:30*

Your church may celebrate the season using a traditional Advent wreath embedded with five candles. The wreath is often made of evergreens, which symbolize eternal life. Four of the candles are arranged in a circle, one lit for each Sunday of Advent. The fifth in the center is lit during the Christmas Eve service. This final “Christ candle” is usually white, signifying light and purity, while three of the others are purple, signifying Christ’s kingship.

The remaining candle, lit today on the third Sunday of Advent, is rose pink, signifying joy. Today’s reading begins our focus on joy in the context of humility. After baptizing Jesus, John the Baptist continued his ministry of proclaiming the kingdom and calling people to repentance. He could have seen Jesus’ overlapping ministry as competition and could have shared the envy expressed by some of his own disciples (vv. 25–26). Instead, John had a clear understanding of God’s plan and his role in it. What mattered most was the identity and

authority of Jesus, the Messiah (v. 28). He was the Son of God from heaven (v. 31). Metaphorically, He was the Bridegroom at a long-prophesied wedding (v. 29). John saw his own identity and mission entirely in relation to Christ. John was the forerunner, sent ahead to announce the Messiah (vv. 27–28). He was otherwise a normal man (v. 31). Metaphorically, he was the friend of the Bridegroom, or what we might call today the “best man” (v. 29).

John’s response to these truths is instructive. Far from feeling envious, he felt complete joy (v. 29). The Messiah had come, the Bridegroom had arrived! John’s mission and joy mandated that Jesus “must become greater; I must become less” (v. 30). Such humility is the exact opposite of worldly “joy” and ambition.

► To help launch this week’s Advent theme of joy, consider singing or listening to the Christmas carol, “Joy to the World,” or a popular chorus, “The Joy of the Lord Is My Strength” (see Neh. 8:10).

Pray with Us

We delight in Christ, the Son of God and the Bridegroom of the Church! Today we echo John’s words, praying that we would be humbled and Christ magnified.

The Joy of the Downcast

Read Psalm 42

*My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.—Psalm 42:2*

Though the funeral of Charles Dickens was private, the grand doors of Westminster Abbey opened afterwards, allowing thousands to pay their respects to the famed novelist. People placed flowers into the grave, along with written tributes on scraps of paper or cloth. Because of his novels such as *David Copperfield*, Dickens was seen as a champion of the poor and the downtrodden.

Christmas can be an especially difficult season for the downcast. But we know that true hope and joy is found in God alone. This is the main theme of today's reading. This is why the psalmist thirsts for God above all else (vv. 1–2). While he longs to worship once again with God's people (vv. 3–4), at present he feels sorrowful, abandoned by God, and mocked by others. Notice that he doesn't dismiss these emotions or try to will himself toward acting happy. Instead, he meditates on the fact that God is greater than his problems, and by doing so, hope prevails. This becomes

a refrain or chorus throughout the psalm (see v. 11; Ps. 43:5).

The psalmist recognizes that God is the *only* real source of hope (vv. 6–10). Even though his soul is discouraged, and he feels like he's drowning or overwhelmed, forgotten and oppressed, in pain and attacked, nonetheless he trusts and hopes in the Lord his Rock. In the midst of all these negatives, he experiences God's love (v. 8).

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus as the only true joy and hope of the downcast. Without Him, we would be doomed to spiritual death with no hope of rescue. Like the psalmist, we, too, thirst for Him, hope in Him, and take our stand on Christ our Rock!

► Are you feeling downcast today? The psalms are a comfort to those who are struggling as they put into words our emotions, bringing them to God. Pray through the psalms during this season and know that the joy of the Lord will give you strength.

Pray with Us

Even in a season of joy we are often laden with fears, hurts, and sorrows. Lord, help us always remember that you are already victorious over evil and pain. You are a limitless source of hope, joy, and strength in every season.

Questions & Answers

by Dr. Rosalie de Rosset, Professor of Communications and Literature

Q I've heard people say we should be "students" of the Word. What does that mean, really?

A First of all, it is helpful to define the word *student*. One dictionary describes a student as one devoted to learning—a pupil, a scholar—especially one who attends a school or who seeks knowledge from teachers or books. The essence of being a student of the Word is that the best way to read the Bible, since it is crucial to what motivates a believer and central to his or her life choices, is to read it attentively, using good resources. The good news is you don't have to be a scholar to do this. My grandfather never graduated from college, but he was a memorable pastor, had a great library, and knew the Bible well. My mother knew as much if not more than a Bible college graduate because she loved and studied the Bible. I would consider them both students of the Word.

In fact, we can read the Bible every day obediently and still not get much out of it if we don't pay attention to detail. To be a student of the Word means to read it through, engaging with the text, writing down your questions, looking up words you don't understand or maps to place the locations. To understand

the biblical context, the history, the purpose of the writing, the meaning of the passages, you can use a good Bible commentary or even talk with your pastor or a Bible teacher. When we become students of anything, whether cooking, car mechanics, or an academic discipline, it means learning in an organized, in-depth fashion. We expend effort to really understand and grow in the area of our choosing. It is a worthy goal for every believer to be a student of the Word (2 Tim. 2:15).

Q Rereading Psalms, I'm struck by the psalmist's obsessive pleas to punish sinners and destroy enemies, compared to Jesus' love for sinners and admonition to "turn the other cheek." Why is this?

A Your observation is apt. Anyone reading the Psalms may be troubled to come upon passages where the writer implores God to punish his enemies in specific and sometimes violent ways. If we are honest though, in our heart of hearts, we may at times resonate with these passages. These are called the "Imprecatory Psalms," calling for curses on the enemy (Psalms 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, and others).

It is important to note that there is something good about the psalmist's

“The freedom forgiveness brings to the spirit is palpable. While we may always remember the hurt, we pray toward the time when we can forgive with no weight or pressure, but with a letting go.”

recognition of evil and his desire for justice and righteousness. It is right to hate evil and to want it avenged. In an essay in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* (chapter 3), C. S. Lewis doesn't excuse the Psalmist's practice, but he does argue that the sense of moral indignation behind these curses is better than the indifference of those who live looking the other way, those who fail to call out what is wrong. However, while the psalmist's curses are understandable human responses, they are not examples of what is right. We must examine our feelings, catching bitterness and hatred, asking God for the ability to forgive and then trusting Him for the outcome.

Q I'm finding it hard to forgive and (especially) to forget what someone has done to me. I know the Bible tells us to forgive, but is it necessary to forget? What if I still have hard feelings toward that person??

A Forgiveness and forgetfulness are not the same thing. You may never forget the effect of someone's injury against you. Remembering may even serve as an alert against being injured again in the same way. Christian theologian Lewis Smedes wrote, "If you forget, you will not forgive at all." In fact,

one forgives most completely when one has first fully acknowledged the depth and extent of the offense. That can be a long, reflective process that may or may not include the offender's admission of wrong.

Too many Christians try to hurry the process along. They move so quickly to forgetting that they may actually be in denial rather than practicing true forgiveness. However, remembering does not mean you should continue to let the offense have power over you. As Smedes notes, "We have the power to forgive what we still do remember." That power is available through Jesus Christ. The much-quoted passage, Ephesians 4:32, says: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." We can do that most profoundly when we reflect on how God forgives our sins constantly. That inspires humility. The freedom forgiveness brings to the spirit is palpable. While we may always remember the hurt, we pray toward the time when we can forgive with no weight or pressure, but with a letting go. ■

The Joy of Finding Christ

Read Matthew 13:44–46

*Where your treasure is,
there your heart will be also.—Luke 12:34*

A French family found an unexpected treasure in 2018. It was a vase, kept in a shoebox and stashed in their attic because they didn't like it much. When examined by experts, the vase turned out to be from the 18th century Qing dynasty in China. In perfect condition with remarkable artistic details, it sold at auction for \$19 million!

Before you run off to search your own attic for treasure, consider today's parables. Both are pictures of what it's like to find the kingdom of heaven. The first compares it to finding a treasure hidden in a field (v. 44). Hiding valuables in this way was more common in an age without safes or bank vaults. The discovery here was an unexpected surprise. Understanding the value of what he's found, he rushes off joyfully to sell all he has in order to buy the field and thus obtain the treasure.

The second parable compares finding the kingdom of heaven to finding a pearl of tremendous value (vv. 45–46). The discovery comes after

a long quest, but the result is the same. The man joyfully "sold everything he had and bought it" (v. 46). Both stories demonstrate the supreme worth of the kingdom—and by implication, of salvation and of Christ—and the necessity of total commitment. There can be nothing halfhearted about Christian discipleship.

The joy in these parables is in finding Christ, for He embodies the kingdom of heaven. Just as heaven rejoices when one lost sheep was found (see December 12), so also do the "lost sheep" celebrate the treasure of being found by the Good Shepherd. Their joy signals the start of a transformed life. After all, the treasure is not "ours," but rather we belong to the kingdom!

► Did you ever find an unexpected treasure, like a dollar bill left in your pocket? Or maybe it was something you actively searched for, like geocaching. Luke 12:34 encourages us to ask: Where or what is my treasure? What do I value above all else?

Pray with Us

We are the lost sheep who have been found, and we rejoice in this glorious truth! We praise you, Jesus, our great Shepherd and our greatest treasure.

The Joy of the Resurrection

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12–23

*Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?—1 Corinthians 15:55*

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we must not forget the joy of the Resurrection (Matt. 28:1–10; Luke 24:36–53). What an incredible example of tremendous grief turned to overwhelming joy! After Jesus was executed, His followers were mourning and afraid. Would the authorities come for them next? Then the women brought an incredible tale—Jesus was alive! His grave was empty and the stone rolled away! Their lives, and indeed the entire world, had been turned upside down.

The fact that Jesus died and was resurrected is our hope and joy because Christ’s resurrection guarantees our own! To rejoice in the hope of resurrection is an act of faith. From God’s perspective, it has already been accomplished. Christ is “the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18). There will be many to follow, including ourselves.

Paul asked, “What if there is no resurrection?” (1 Cor. 15:13–18). In that

case, Christ has not been raised, our faith is useless, and the gospel is false. If this were true, we’re not saved, and the dead will stay dead. Without the truth and doctrine of the resurrection, we cannot have hope or faith in Christ (v. 19). If this life is all there is, and death is the end, then death and sin have won.

On the other hand, if Christ did rise from the dead, then so will we (vv. 20–23). In this case, our faith is powerful, the gospel is true, we’re saved from sin, and proclaiming the good news of Christ is our greatest privilege and responsibility. He has won the victory, all praise and glory to Him!

► It may seem odd to read about the resurrection at Christmas. But we can more fully appreciate the story of Jesus’ birth when we know the ending. Today, we thank God for the joy of His birth *and* the joy of His resurrection which conquered the grave once and for all.

Pray with Us

As Christ was resurrected, so are we raised with Him. Thank you, Father, for the resurrection and the new life you give us. Because Christ lives, we have assured faith, confident joy, and guaranteed hope.

Our Living Hope and Joy

Read 1 Peter 1:3–9

He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. — 1 Peter 1:3

A popular contemporary Christmas song by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend declares: “Joy has dawned upon the world, / Promised from creation: / God’s salvation now unfurled, / Hope for every nation. / Not with fanfares from above, / Not with scenes of glory, / But a humble gift of love: / Jesus born of Mary.”

Christ is indeed our living hope and joy! All four themes of Advent are found in Him and especially in His work of salvation (vv. 3–5). Salvation is new birth (past) into a living hope (present) through Christ’s resurrection, with a secure inheritance (future) yet to be fully received. God did all this out of His great mercy, and our best response is joy, praise, and worship. In our present Christian lives, we’re to live as people who “through faith are shielded by God’s power” (v. 5). Since He’s omnipotent or all-powerful, we can therefore live with absolute confidence that nothing can happen to us that is out of His control.

This kind of faith is not a sad or stoic thing, but a joy-filled

responsibility (vv. 6–9). Though we’re sure to experience trials and sufferings, these prove the quality of our faith and therefore bring more glory to God (see also James 1:2–4). They’re part of the process of our sanctification: To believe in Christ means to love Him and to be filled with “an inexpressible and glorious joy” (v. 8) as we journey on toward the Celestial City. The word for “joy” here carries the specific sense of exultation and victory. Peter began verse 8, “Though you have not seen him” because he’d actually seen Jesus, but he knew the readers of his epistle had not—including us!

► Do you have the assurance of salvation? There are times when we might backslide and wonder if we’re still saved. Satan might even whisper nagging doubts into our minds. But there’s no need to worry! Our salvation is secure in God’s hands, now and forever.

Pray with Us

Father, there are times when we may doubt your promises, flee righteousness, or live in apathy. We pray that you will always draw us back and fill our hearts with renewed fervor. Thank you that our salvation is secure in you.

Rejoice Always

Read Philippians 4:4–9

*Rejoice in the Lord always,
I will say it again: Rejoice!—Philippians 4:4*

The very first Christmas card was designed and printed in 1843 in England. Two outer panels showed people caring for the poor, while an inner center panel pictured a family enjoying Christmas dinner. Though their popularity is decreasing among younger generations today, as recently as 2010 an estimated 1.5 billion Christmas cards were sent in the United States. That accounted for 45 percent of all cards sent throughout the year!

Especially among friends and family, Christmas is a season of fellowship and joy. In today's reading, Paul wasn't necessarily thinking of Christmas, but the four themes of Advent appear nonetheless. First, joy. He exhorted the Philippians to rejoice always (v. 4). "In the Lord" meant this wasn't part of the ebb and flow of our normal emotions, but rather an essential connection to the truth of the gospel. Does "always" mean we never feel sad? No. Paradoxically, Christians are capable of lamenting and rejoicing at the same time.

Second, hope. "The Lord is near" reminds believers of the hope of Christ's Second Coming (v. 5). With reference to the present, when we have anxieties and worries, hope means we can turn them over to the Lord in prayer, with thanksgiving (v. 6). Why carry such a heavy burden ourselves?

Third, peace. When we turn our anxieties over to the Lord in prayer, the result is the peace of Christ guarding our hearts and minds (v. 7). Christ's peace stands sentry at the door of our hearts, making sure life's troubles do not trouble us. This kind of peace comes from knowing God is in control. Fourth, love. This is the way to put the gospel into practice (v. 9).

► Another traditional part of family and church Christmas celebrations is a Nativity or manger scene. They can be as small as an ornament or a life-size outdoor display. In what ways do you think this special holiday decoration helps us celebrate the joy of Christmas?

Pray with Us

Lord, we look to you for joy that surpasses understanding. We place our hope in you, regardless of defeat. We find peace in your power, unfazed by fear. We draw on your love, unchecked by human weakness, to love others.

The Prince of Peace

Read Isaiah 9:2–7

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light. — Isaiah 9:2*

Right now, how many wars do you think are happening around the globe? The United Nations has three criteria for a conflict to be called a war: First, it must involve armed struggle by at least one province against another. Second, it must be formally declared. And third, it must have been going on for at least six months. Using these standards, there are 134 wars taking place around the world at the time this was written.

Is it any wonder we long for the Prince of Peace to return? Tomorrow is the fourth Sunday of Advent, for which the traditional theme is peace. Today's word of Messianic prophecy names the Lord using several related titles and word-pictures. His coming, wrote Isaiah, will be like a light in the darkness, like the hope of dawn's arrival (v. 2). Jesus called Himself the "light of the world" (John 8:12), and His disciple Peter later celebrated God's calling us "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). In the shorter term, though God had allowed the conquest and exile of

His disobedient people, one day He would shatter the yoke of oppression and liberate them, just as in the days of Gideon (vv. 3–4). The picture of burning the warrior's boots (v. 5) indicates the arrival of a time of peace. In the longer term, God would send a once-for-all liberator, Messiah Jesus, who would fulfill God's plan of redemption (vv. 6–7). He would be the Wonderful Counselor, acting in marvelous wisdom; the Mighty God, or all-powerful Divine Warrior (see Ps. 24:8); the Everlasting Father, provider and protector (see 2 Sam. 7:16); and the Prince of Peace, the One who will bring not only the end of all wars but also complete *shalom* or holistic well-being (see Isa. 11:6–9).

► If you enjoy classical Christmas music, one album I love that includes all the themes of Advent is *Angels' Glory*, featuring Kathleen Battle (voice) and Christopher Parkening (guitar). Listen to your favorite Christmas music as a part of your worship time today.

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, you are the ultimate victor, and we rejoice that your victory guarantees a future of peace. Fill our hearts and minds with your peace today.

The Path of Peace

Read Luke 1:67–79

The punishment that brought us peace was on him.—Isaiah 53:5

The dedication of a baby is a special event. On that important day, the parents and infant dress for the occasion, standing in front of the congregation while the pastor officiates. Church practices may differ, but they have a similar intent—that these little ones will know God and experience His blessing. It is a solemn moment, as parents, family members, and the church pledge to raise this child to know and love God.

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent. Our reading is Zechariah’s song on the occasion of the birth of his son, John the Baptist. Packed with Old Testament allusions, this song is primarily about God and the coming of the Messiah. God’s promises and plan of redemption had been at work throughout biblical history (vv. 68–75). Now a “horn of salvation” (v. 69) had been raised up, just as God had promised to Abraham and foretold through many prophets. This Person would serve God in perfect righteousness and bring divine

mercy and deliverance to us who are helpless to save ourselves.

Zechariah’s son, John, would prepare the way with a message of repentance and forgiveness (vv. 76–77). He would be followed by the Messiah Himself, Jesus Christ (vv. 78–79). He would bring spiritual light (see Isa. 9:2) and “guide our feet into the path of peace.” Peace with God would come at a high price, paid by God Himself through the death of His Son. While today’s parents wish all good things for their child’s future, Jesus was born at Christmas in order to be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).

► We’ve shared several favorite Christmas songs, poems, and books during this month’s study. What are some of your personal favorites? How do they help prepare your heart for Christmas? Why not gift one to a friend?

Pray with Us

Father, thank you for your redeeming love that gave us eternal life, joy, and peace in Christ. Help us to walk worthy of your kingdom!

Christ, Our Peace with God

Read Romans 5:1–8

*While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us. —Romans 5:8*

When we say it's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas, we may be referring to the changes taking place in our home. Scattered family members often return. A tree is decked with ornaments. Cookies are baked and stockings hung. Holiday movies are watched, over and over again. Christmas carols fill the house.

These special traditions may help us sense God's peace. But to think properly of "peace," we should think first and foremost of peace with God. He is perfectly holy, so our sinfulness makes us His enemies. Unless we repent, we remain in rebellion and at war with the Almighty. On our own, we're not capable of making peace with God (vv. 6–8). We need a mediator and a substitute, someone else to pay the price (death). Christ took our place when He died on the cross. To die for one's enemies demonstrates a love far greater than human love. Only God, namely the Second Person of the Trinity, loved us enough to die for us "while we were still sinners" (v. 8).

Paul highlighted two results of God's saving love: First, we can have peace with God (vv. 1–2). Since we stand before God justified by faith in His Son, we're no longer under sentence of death and no longer at war with Him. This is the "grace in which we now stand" (v. 2). It also gives us the certain "hope of the glory of God" as we eagerly anticipate the day when our salvation will be experientially complete (v. 2). Second, we can "glory in our sufferings" (vv. 3–5). This isn't spiritual masochism but a purposeful, joyful choice. When we're filled with God's love, suffering leads to perseverance leads to Christlike character leads to true biblical hope.

► The only way to experience true peace is through a relationship with God. Christmas can be a fruitful time for sharing the gospel. At this time, people are sometimes more open to hearing the good news. Look for opportunities to share with others what you believe!

Pray with Us

Almighty God, we ask you in Jesus' name to give us eyes to see those who need to hear the gospel. Holy Spirit, give us words to lead them to repentance and peace with their Creator.

Christ, the Hope of David

Read Luke 1:26–38

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David.—Luke 1:32

When the angels appeared, delivering an important announcement, they were fulfilling a Messianic prophecy: “The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,” meaning “God with us” (Isa. 7:14). As the gospels repeatedly point out, many aspects of the Christmas story fulfill Old Testament prophecies. How is this possible? Because we serve a God who plans and determines all of history.

This is yet another reason for us to trust Him! That’s what Mary did when confronted with the incredible message from Gabriel: She would be the mother of the Messiah, who would also be the Son of God. She was “greatly troubled” because she was a virgin, betrothed but not yet married to Joseph (vv. 29, 34). Gabriel answered by reassuring her that God would be with her (v. 35). For Mary, that was all she needed to know, but he also graciously communicated to her another sign: her relative Elizabeth’s pregnancy (v. 36).

More than one prophecy was being fulfilled in Gabriel’s words. Mary’s child, the long-awaited Messiah (see Luke 3:15), would sit on the throne of David (both Mary and Joseph were descendants) (vv. 31–33, 35). “His kingdom will never end” fulfills 2 Samuel 7:16 from God’s covenant with David. Perhaps unexpectedly, the child would also be the “Son of the Most High” and the “Son of God,” that is, the Second Person of the Trinity (v. 35). Jesus, conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit, would be fully man and fully God! Mary responded in faith, understanding that “no word from God will ever fail,” or as another translation says, “nothing will be impossible with God” (vv. 37–38).

► If you are interested in learning more about biblical prophecy, Moody professor and Q&A columnist Michael Rydelnik co-edited the *Moody Handbook of Messianic Prophecy*. Add it to your Bible study reference collection.

Pray with Us

As Christmas quickly approaches, we remember that Christ already fulfilled many Old Testament prophecies. Lord, thank you for the assurance and the promises you give in your Word. Thank you for being a God we can trust.

The Hope of Immanuel

Read Matthew 1:18–25

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.—John 1:14

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is a beloved Christmas carol, saturated with longing for God’s promised Messiah. We celebrate not only His coming as a baby at Christmas, which lies in the past, but also His Second Coming in glory, which lies in our future. Dating back to the eighth or ninth century, it’s one of the oldest carols we still sing today. Think of it—we’re singing about the same Savior as believers did 1,200 years ago!

We celebrate the hope brought by Immanuel, meaning “God with us.” While Gabriel announced this good news to Mary, an angel of the Lord shared the news with her betrothed husband-to-be, Joseph. Mary had of course told him her story, but it was just too unbelievable (v. 18). A virgin birth? Seriously? So he’d decided to divorce her quietly rather than proceed with marriage to an apparently immoral and dishonest woman (v. 19).

Then the angel appeared to him in a dream and confirmed Mary’s

truthfulness. The child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would “save his people from their sins” (vv. 20–21). This was another way of saying Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God, as had been prophesied long ago by Isaiah (vv. 22–23). The name “Jesus” means “the Lord saves.”

Joseph’s response was impressive (vv. 24–25). Consider the stakes: If he believed the dream and married Mary, but it was false, then his life was ruined and society would view him as a prize idiot. Nonetheless, he trusted God, married her, and named the child Jesus. For them as a couple, then, the hope of Christmas had both personal and cosmic implications. God’s redemption is always both—the fact that He is with us affects us as individuals as well as the whole world.

► During your personal time of worship and reflection today, listen to the carol, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” or even sing aloud. You can look up all the verses in a hymnal or online!

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, you came to earth as a baby, and you have promised to return and take us with you to our Father’s house. Even as we celebrate the peace of this season, we look forward to your Second Coming. Come, Emmanuel!

The Birth of Our Savior

Read Luke 2:1–7

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.—Luke 2:7

On Christmas Eve, 2019, a special baby arrived at the Potter Park Zoo in Michigan. A male black rhino calf was delivered safely, which is significant because only 5,000 of these critically endangered animals remain in the wild in Africa. While we may get excited about the birth of a rare black rhino, how much better should we feel about the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity! One is exciting, but the other is life-changing.

So much of God's plan for history came together on Christmas Eve. At the macro-level of the Roman Empire, Caesar took a census at precisely the right time, likely for reasons of strengthening political control and generating more tax revenue (vv. 1–3). Caesar Augustus, also called Octavian, was the great-nephew of Julius Caesar and governed for 41 years. One result of his imperial edict was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (not Nazareth), as had been prophesied (Mic. 5:2).

God's sovereign care was also

evident at the micro-level of Mary and Joseph's young family (Luke 2:4–7). They'd gone to Bethlehem for the census because Joseph was of the line of David. They were probably planning to stay with relatives, but no guestroom was available so they ended up staying where animals were kept. We only know this detail from the single mention of the "manger" or animal feeding trough in which baby Jesus was laid.

Despite all the fulfilled prophecies, the circumstances of Jesus' birth were surprising and full of incongruities. We need to hear this story with fresh ears. The Messiah had been born . . . in a barn? The King had come . . . as the child of a poor couple? "God with us" had arrived in the flesh . . . and the first witnesses were animals?

► Are you attending the Christmas Eve service at your church tonight? If Advent candles are part of your worship tradition, it's finally time for the "Christ candle" to be lit!

Pray with Us

Dear Jesus, you are the Light of the World. We are awed by your love and humility, as you came to us in the flesh, so that we could become one with you. May you be foremost in our hearts and minds this Christmas Eve.

Good News of Great Joy

Read Luke 2:8–20

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. —Luke 2:10

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the prevailing sense of anxiety that came with it, television actor John Krasinski asked a simple question: “Why has there never been a news show dedicated entirely to good news?” He decided to host an online video show simply titled, *SGN* or *Some Good News* focusing on inspirational and positive news stories. To his surprise the simple, informal show received 71 million views! People were hungry for good news.

The shepherds in today’s reading were watching over sheep outside Bethlehem, perhaps tending to the flocks reserved for temple sacrifices. Little did they know that on that ordinary night God would choose them as the first people to receive the news of the Savior’s birth (v. 8).

The message was straightforward (vv. 9–14): The Messiah had been born! This was good news of great joy for everyone! The messenger was a single angel, followed by “a great company of the heavenly host” (v. 13)

who burst forth in praise to the Lord. Literally, this phrase is “a multitude of the armies of heaven,” signaling that the invasion of Satan’s territory had begun!

After they recovered from their terror and awe in the presence of the glory of the Lord, the shepherds obediently went and found the child, lying in a manger (vv. 15–16). Then they did what we should all be doing—spread the word (vv. 17–18), praising God for all that had taken place (v. 20). Notice that while the good news is “for all the people,” that is, all nations, including Gentiles (v. 10), the peace announced by the angels is only for those “on whom his [God’s] favor rests” (v. 14). With whom is God pleased? With those who believe on the name of His Son.

► Merry Christmas to you and your family from all of us at *Today in the Word*. As you celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, know that we are rejoicing in this special day with you.

Pray with Us

Merry Christmas! Our Savior is born! Father, we are overjoyed and humbled by the birth of Jesus. We believe in the name of your Son and we thank you for your undeserved favor and grace.

The King Has Come!

Read Matthew 2:1–12

Out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. — Matthew 2:6

What about this star that made it so special? The star of Bethlehem was special because it led the magi to Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Bible scholar Colin R. Nicholl researched astronomy to make his case that this star was actually a comet. His book *The Great Christ Comet* argues that this interpretation further supports the historicity of the Gospels.

The magi mentioned in this second chapter of Matthew were likely Persian astronomers and astrologers who were well-trained to observe and track these types of celestial phenomena. Months after Jesus' birth, they followed the star to the right house (v. 9). They may have known Messianic prophecies via Jewish exiles in Babylon (such as Daniel), or even from the days of Balaam (see Num. 24:17). How many of them were there? We don't know, although three is the traditional answer due to the specific mention of gifts (Matt. 2:11). What motivated them? Their stated desire was to worship the newborn King (v. 2).

Their arrival would certainly have captured the attention of everyone in Jerusalem! Imagine a caravan of distinguished foreign visitors arriving unannounced and telling everyone they're in search of a new king. No wonder Herod was fearful. This event substantiated at least five features of the Christmas story. First, it confirmed Bethlehem as the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (vv. 5–6). Second, it proved again that God would control events (v. 12). Third, it revealed that human authorities would lie and oppose Jesus (v. 8). Fourth, the star provided another miraculous sign of the Incarnation. Fifth and finally, the magi's visit demonstrated that Christmas is for all, the Gentiles as well as the Jewish people. Jesus is King of all nations.

► Tonight, step out in the darkness of the evening (even if it is chilly) and look to the sky. Observe the stars and marvel at the handiwork of God's creation, which remains completely under His control today.

Pray with Us

God of all miracles, you love us and know each of us intimately. Thank you for sending your Son, so each of us can know you personally.

Hope Fulfilled

Read Luke 2:22–35

My eyes have seen your salvation. — Luke 2:30

Our hope is in the Lord! That truth is so important, we should shout it from the rooftops. Pastor and author David Platt explained why we're compelled to spread the gospel of Christ: "[I]f Jesus *did* rise from the dead, if Jesus alone paid the price for man's sin, and if Jesus alone conquered sin, death, and the grave, then going around the world and telling people about Jesus is the only thing that makes sense."

This is the true spirit of Christmas, as we see in Simeon's pronouncements. Forty days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph took her purification offering to the temple (v. 22). They also planned to dedicate their firstborn son to the Lord (v. 23), as the Law prescribed (Ex. 13:2). There they encountered Simeon, a devout worshiper who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (v. 25), that is, the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had promised he'd see the Messiah with his own eyes, during his lifetime (v. 26). Mary and Joseph might have been a bit shocked by the old man who

took their baby in his arms, but they could sense God at work.

Simeon's first pronouncement focused on rejoicing in hope fulfilled (vv. 29–32). "My eyes have seen your salvation"—the Messiah had finally come! God had kept His promise to Simeon and to generation upon generation of Israelites. And not only them, for the Messiah is for "all nations," including Gentiles. The Redeemer had arrived in the person of Jesus Christ!

Simeon's second pronouncement was to Mary (vv. 34–35). These words are a bit more cryptic and indicate that the Messiah will be opposed and hearts will be revealed in how people respond to Him. Mary herself would experience deep sorrow.

► Spend some extra time today praying for your unsaved friends and family members. Ask God to give you open doors for faith conversations and enable you to live the truth of the gospel before them.

Pray with Us

Father, we all have friends or loved ones who do not yet know you. We ask you to pursue and win them as you have pursued and won us. Show us how to be your hands and feet in this work.

The Supremacy of Christ

Read Colossians 1:15–20

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.—Colossians 1:17

When live sports shut down earlier this year due to COVID-19, ESPN aired a documentary entitled *The Last Dance*. It focused on Michael Jordan who led the Chicago Bulls to six NBA titles. The storyline declared Jordan to be the GOAT (Greatest of All Time), among basketball players. While humans can claim to be the greatest at some things, Jesus Christ is the greatest of absolutely everything (v. 18)! The season of Advent tells the story not just of a baby in a manger, but the supremacy of Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, now incarnated or made visible as a human being (v. 15). We celebrate that the Greatest of All became one of us!

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul affirmed that Christ is “firstborn” or supreme over creation (vv. 15–17). All things were created through Him, including the natural world, human beings, and the supernatural realm (angels and demons). All things were also created for Him, meaning that

they serve His purposes and bring Him glory. Finally, all things continue to be dependent on Him, that is, they exist or “hold together” because of Him (v. 17).

Christ is supreme in redemption (vv. 18–20). He is the “head of the body, the church,” the company of the redeemed (v. 18). He was the first to be raised from the dead with a glorified body—in time, we will follow. His shed blood paid the price for our sin and made our peace with God. By His Son’s substitutionary atonement, God reconciled all things to Himself. The only way God’s perfectly just requirements could be met was through His own perfect love in the Person of His Son.

► The first line of the Lord’s Prayer is for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Similarly, we can pray for Christ to have the first place in our own lives and on earth, just as He already does in heaven (Matt. 6:9; Phil. 2:9–11).

Pray with Us

Lord Jesus, following your instruction on how to pray, we ask that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, specifically in our lives and hearts. Align our will to yours so that we may desire what you desire.

Christ's Second Advent

Read Acts 1:1–11

This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back.—Acts 1:11

“Every true Christian is a citizen of two worlds,” wrote Martin Luther King Jr., “the world of time and the world of eternity. We are, paradoxically, in the world and yet not of the world . . . As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty to any time-bound custom or earth-bound idea, for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality—God and his kingdom of love—to which we must be conformed.”

One of the best ways to celebrate Christ's first Advent is to pray with keen anticipation for His Second Advent. Following His resurrection, for 40 days Jesus appeared to many people and “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (v. 3). As His time on earth drew to a close, He instructed His followers to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit (vv. 4–5; see Acts 2).

Jesus' followers naturally wondered what would happen next. Some were expecting the Messiah

to set up His kingdom (v. 6). He told them, however, that the time for that had not yet come (v. 7). They were to spread the good news throughout the world (v. 8). The promised Holy Spirit would be the One empowering them to carry out this mission! When Jesus ascended into heaven, His disciples stared up into the sky, stunned (v. 10). Was this a temporary disappearance? Would He return? Two angels definitively answered this question:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (v. 11). And here, you and I today as His church are still waiting eagerly for Christ's return!

► Are you eagerly waiting for Christ's return? Sometimes we avoid talking about the Second Coming because it feels controversial or risky. But Paul commanded us to encourage one another with this truth (1 Thess. 4:16–18).

Pray with Us

Lord, as we look forward to the Second Coming, we are aware that we join countless Christians in a vigil that began when you ascended. Teach us to live according to the guidance of your Spirit.

Our Blessed Hope

Read Titus 2:11–14

We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.—Titus 2:13

G. K. Chesterton, English literary critic, mystery writer, and Christian apologist, wrote a poem entitled “The House of Christmas.” It centers on the theme of *home*, the idea that Christmas contains the truth and purpose and meaning for which all human beings long. Chesterton believed that our searching brings us “home” to the stable where Christ was born: “To the end of the way of the wandering star, / To the things that cannot be and that are, / To the place where God was homeless / And all men are at home.”

We have looked at the four themes of Advent seen in the Bible: hope, love, joy, and peace. Each of these is found in Christ. They’re certainly found in the Christ of the Christmas story (v. 11). He came as the living embodiment of God’s grace to offer salvation to all. Without God’s love in Christ, none of us has any hope of peace with God.

These themes should be found in our lives as followers of Christ

(vv. 12, 14). “Grace teaches us”—the sense here is of training a child toward mature adulthood—to live righteously. We’re to say “no” to sin and worldliness, and “yes” to godliness and the fruit of the Spirit. The hope of salvation spurs us to love one another and to rejoice in the Lord always.

In addition, the four Advent themes will be found in the Christ who is coming again (vv. 13–14). This is where we as His people find ourselves today—between Advents. Waiting in this case is not a boring duty, but a joy-filled privilege or “blessed hope.” His return will bring sinful human history to a close and usher in the Millennial Kingdom—human life and the rule of God as it was meant to be experienced!

► As your thoughts turn to the coming new year, we invite you to spend some time pondering the opportunities to which you will say “yes” or “no.” Do your choices fit well into verse 12?

Pray with Us

As we look back on the season of Advent, what have we learned? Almighty God, lead us through the coming months with your hope, love, joy, and peace. Show us how to reach unbelievers with your eternal, glorious truth.

A Benediction for Advent

Read Romans 15:12–13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him.—Romans 15:13

In the midst of personal tragedy and the American Civil War, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow penned the words to a familiar Christmas carol, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” He wrote: “And in despair I bowed my head / ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said / For hate is strong, and mocks the song / Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.” But even in anguish, Longfellow expressed godly hope: “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep / God is not dead, nor doth He sleep / The wrong shall fail, the right prevail / With peace on earth, goodwill to men.”

Whatever your circumstances this Christmas season, we trust this study has met you with the truth and encouragement of God’s Word. The reign of Christ, both present and future, is the foundation of our faith and hope (v. 12). Paul makes it clear, by referencing the Old Testament, that God’s plan of redemption has always included the Gentiles. He quotes

Isaiah 11:10, demonstrating that the “Root of Jesse” is Christ, from the line of David. Paul was eager to spread the good news of Christ to the Gentiles especially (see v. 16).

Before he continued, the apostle couldn’t help but pause for a word of praise and benediction (v. 13). Paul was overflowing with hope! Biblical hope isn’t something we must create within ourselves. It’s not mere optimism or positive feelings. Rather, hope is something that God fills us with—and He’s not stingy! “Overflow” can also be translated “abound,” and one translator even renders it “brim over.” Notice that God also fills us with joy and peace. That’s three of the four Advent themes in one verse!

► One good way to conclude this study might be to review what God has taught you personally through it. Review your personal journal, study notes, or the selected Scripture passages. Write down your two or three biggest takeaways.

Pray with Us

Father, thank you for the things you taught us in the year 2020. May your Word transform us and may your truth carry us in love and joy into the New Year.

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