AXIS PRESENTS

ADVENT

The magic of Christmas
is in the person of **Jesus.**

LIGHT



Welcome to *Advent: Light*

Dear Parents,

We long to get Christmas right.

There are traditions we want to keep, memories we hope our kids will carry with them, and a truth we want to make sure doesn't get lost somewhere between the parties, presents, travel, and everything else that December can involve.

We want so badly for those memories to move beyond the spectacle, and into the truer message underneath—the thrill of hope that entered a weary world. The promise that after the long, dark night...

Light has come.

For generations, God's people waited in the dark for the promised Messiah. They waited through uncertainty, longing, and silence. And then, in an unremarkable corner of Bethlehem, under starlight, God came near.

That moment is the heart of Advent. And it's why we created *Advent: Light*.

Our hope is simple: that in the middle of everything this season holds, your family would keep returning to the Light at the center of it.

Don't worry—this isn't one more thing to get right this December. It's Light, and it's Lite.

Each day offers a short reflection, a passage of Scripture, and a conversation starter designed to help your family turn toward Jesus together. These conversations might happen around the dinner table, on the drive to school, or in the last light of day before bedtime. You might make it through every day. You might miss a few—or a lot.

Hold it loosely.

Jesus is not waiting for your December to magically become less December before He draws near. When He was born, He came into a world that was perfectly ready for Jesus, even if individual people were not.

Our prayer is that somewhere in the middle of it all, your family would return again and again to the Good News of great joy:

The Light has come. And the darkness has not overcome it.

May you feel the thrill of that hope anew this Christmas—and may your home be a little brighter because of it.

The Axis Team

"Until He appeared and
the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope ...
a weary world rejoices."

Advent Together

Christmas can fill up fast, but celebrating Advent doesn't have to mean adding more to your list. These simple activities are invitations to slow down, connect, serve, and have some fun together. Choose what fits your family, skip what doesn't, and enjoy making space for meaningful moments along the way.

01 **Three-Gift Gratitude:** Everyone names three gifts from the past year that weren't bought: a friendship, an experience, or something God taught them, for example.

02 **Listen Together:** Using the free **Public Reading of Scripture** app, listen to a few chapters of the book of Luke together during breakfast.

03 **Love For Those Incarcerated:** Alongside your teen, choose a child to sponsor and buy them a gift through the **Prison Fellowship Angel Tree** program.

04 **Make It Snappy:** Recreate one of your favorite holiday photos from when your kids were little with your older kids and teens.

05 **Candlelight Leftovers:** Ask your teens to set their plans aside for a night and host a candlelight dinner, with two caveats—you have to cook together, and you have to use ingredients you already have at home. Fancy dishes optional!

06 **Deck Your Halls:** Pull out the Christmas boxes and set up the garlands, ornaments and lights together. Give each person a chance to tell you about their favorite decoration.

07 **Mugs of Mirth:** Make some hot chocolate (or hit up a drive-thru to get some!) and explore the Christmas lights in a nearby neighborhood, on foot or in the car. Bonus points if you bundle up in your coziest PJs first.

08 **Cookie Decorating:** Roll out a family recipe (or opt for Tollhouse) and bake some cookies together. Whip up some colorful frosting and embrace your inner artist.

09 **Special Delivery:** Think as a family of someone who could use some extra Christmas cheer. Then, make a treat with them in mind, and deliver it together.

10 **Hallmark at Home:** Everybody writes down their favorite Christmas movie, and it goes into a hat. Draw names to watch a holiday movie as a family.

We'd love to see how you used this list!

Tag **@axisconversations** with a photo of your family using ***Advent: Light*** and you might see it shared on our Instagram!

HOPE

"The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God."

C.S. LEWIS



We use the word hope pretty casually.

WEEK 01

We *hope* traffic isn't terrible. We *hope* the interview goes well. We *hope* they still have our size. We *hope* a hard season ends, or that tomorrow feels a little easier than today.

Hope, for us, is often just uncertainty with a preference attached: *I really want this thing to happen, but who knows?*

But biblical hope—Advent hope—is wildly different.

Biblical hope looks honestly at what is broken without turning away. It does not deny the darkness or depend on circumstances getting better. Instead, it anchors itself to the character of the One who has been faithful before and has promised to be faithful still.

For generations, God's people lived in the tension of this kind of hope. They waited for the promised Messiah. Years became decades. Decades became generations. Empires rose and fell. God's people suffered, wandered, wondered, and waited. They had a promise, but they couldn't yet see its fulfillment.

This is the tension at the heart of Advent: holding fast to what God has promised while waiting for what we cannot yet see.

And then, after generations of waiting, Jesus came.

God did not remain distant from the darkness. He stepped into it. The Light of the World entered our suffering, our uncertainty, and our longing.

And still, we wait.

We live between what God has already done and what He has promised to do—*the already, and the not yet*. Jesus has come, but all things have not yet been made new. We still experience grief. We still watch people we love suffer. We still carry questions without answers and pray prayers that seem to go unanswered.

Advent reminds us that biblical hope is confidence in the God who has already come near, who remains near even now, and who has promised that one day He will bring heaven to earth and make all things new.

Our hope is not that the darkness isn't real; it's in the fact that the darkness has not overcome the Light.

Lights. Presents. Family. Friends. Time travel.

WEEK **01** / DAY **01**

Just a few of the core elements of the season of Advent.

Week one of Advent is all about hope. But the hope that Advent invites us into requires us to simultaneously project ourselves into the future, and also into the past.

We look to the future in anticipation of Jesus's return. Because although it's easy to forget it in our 9-to-5, grocery-shopping, present-buying, house-cleaning lives, one day this entire world order will end.

Translation: one day our lives are going to get so much better.

But we also revisit the past, entering into the experience of the original Israelites, who were looking forward to the arrival—or the "advent"—of the one who would come to save them.

In some ways, of course, the past and future are very different. But today's verse, Isaiah 9:2, purposefully blurs the line: "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

"Doesn't sound that blurry," you might think. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. He came 2,000 years ago."

However, scholars suggest that this portion of Isaiah was written about 740 years before the arrival of Jesus—although written as if the event had already occurred. This is sometimes called the "prophetic perfect tense" in the Bible: a way of referring to future events that are so certain, they are described in the past tense, as if they had already happened.

There is some debate in Jewish circles about what Isaiah thought he was referring to. But Matthew 4 explicitly refers to Jesus's ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah 9:2. If we can accept that the same spirit who inspired the New Testament also inspired the words of this Old Testament prophet, then it's reasonable to conclude that Isaiah was actually talking about Jesus—even if he didn't know it.

In other words: Isaiah had enough trust in God that he could speak about something way beyond his lifetime with certainty.

This brings us to our conversation starters for today:

How much trust do we have in God right now? When Jesus says He is coming back "soon," do we believe Him—even if we don't know what "soon" means? And more than that—do we believe that whenever He comes back, it will be the best possible thing at the best possible time?

Advent is a time to reflect on exactly these sorts of questions.

The hope of Advent is about Jesus coming back to restore our world. But when the eternal God breaks into space and time, it forces us to rethink everything. Tomorrow we'll talk about what it means when the Light of the World breaks into the darkness of our circumstances.

Part of why we called this resource *Advent: Light* was because we hoped it would not feel like a heavy add-on to an already busy season. (We know you've already got a lot going on!) But today's verse, like yesterday's verse, also involves an experience of actual light.

When the human eye has adjusted to being in darkness, the pupil dilates to let in as much of the minimally available light as possible. Essentially, the eye is trying to make the most of a scarce resource. (Shout out to the Christmas budget.)

But then, if a bright light comes on in front of someone with dilated eyes, the amount of light that rushes in through that person's wide-open pupils can overwhelm their vision, for a time.

This is part of what is happening, both literally and spiritually, in Luke 2:8-12. The passage says:

> *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

The beginning of 1 John describes God—incarnate here in the form of a helpless child—as a form of pure light. Light is a good and beautiful thing. Light clarifies for us what was unclear in darkness; it shows us what reality is actually like.

But light can also be overwhelming. And like pupils used to darkness, after the appearance of glory, we too have to get used to a new normal.

That brings us to today's conversation starter:

How has knowing Jesus changed what is "normal" for you? What has changed about your life as a result of knowing Him?

Although knowing Jesus can bring about changes and challenges to our status quo, knowing Jesus should fundamentally be a relief—that this is actually what the God of the universe is like. Tomorrow we'll talk about how understanding Jesus's personality contributes to the hope we celebrate during Advent.

WEEK **01** / DAY **03**

The first week of Advent centers around the topic of hope because the one whose advent we look forward to—is truly something to look forward to.

There is no one else who could better deserve to be installed as the king of the universe. And this king balances gentleness and justice at a level that no earthly ruler ever has.

Referring to another passage from Isaiah, Matthew 12:20 describes Jesus this way: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory.”

Jesus’s primary concern here is not literally about plants and candles, nice as those are. The verse is about Jesus’s care for the wounded, worn out, beat-down members of the human race. We have hope because Jesus has not come to press those of us who already feel broken past our breaking point; He has come, and comes again, to put the world right.

Compare this to King Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12:14 (NLT), who shortly after becoming king announced his new leadership style to the people this way: “My father laid heavy burdens on you, but I’m going to make them even heavier! My father beat you with whips, but I will beat you with scorpions!” (Imagine if a U.S. President began his inaugural address this way.)

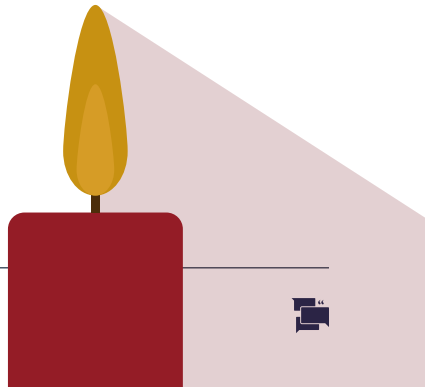
We do know that whenever Jesus comes back, it will be the beginning of a time of judgment. Because the discernment involved in judgment is essential for establishing justice.

But we also have hope: because the only one who deserves to judge has also been utterly self-sacrificial and gentle.

Conversation starter:

What’s the most surprising thing about Jesus to you? Why do you think that surprises you?

The gentleness of Jesus is, truly, a beautiful source of hope. But there are so many aspects of who Jesus is that bring hope and encouragement in equal measure. Tomorrow we’ll talk about another aspect.



Yesterday we talked about how Jesus's gentleness gives us hope. Today we're going to talk about how his self-sacrificial service also gives us hope.

In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said about Himself that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Let that sink in.

Many Christians have devoted their entire lives to serving Jesus—often (though not always) with beautiful, pure motives. And yet, this verse confronts us with a radical reversal.

Jesus did not come to be served; He came to serve you.

The God of the universe came in the flesh to serve the human race, and He did so to the fullest possible extent—suffering and dying, as a way to "give his life as a ransom for many."

To be clear, the model of Christian life is a life of service. In the context of today's verse, Jesus is basically saying to His disciples, "Because I have been like this with you, you must also be like this with each other." We should show up not with the desire to be served—but to serve others.

But we do this not from a place of insecurity, self-abasement, or emotional deficit. We do it because the infinite has made Himself finite, for our sake. Because He first served us, we also serve others.

Conversation starter:

What do you think it means that Jesus said "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve"?

The self-sacrificial service of Jesus is a beautiful occasion for deep, real hope. But unfortunately, it's often all too easy for the hope that's available here to get siphoned off toward material objects. Tomorrow we'll talk about how to navigate that pull from a Biblical perspective.

As we said in the introduction to this week, it's often easy to use the word "hope" flippantly: we hope traffic isn't terrible. We hope the interview goes well. We hope the store still has our size.

We can agree that it is generally good for traffic not to be terrible, for interviews to go well, and for our size to be in stock. But the satisfaction that each of these brings does not last. In each category, we will only be temporarily grateful—and then we will move on to some other longing, fear, or frustration.

The Christmas season is often a time when months of product advertising really start to bear fruit in our kids' hearts. Many now are really hoping to receive the new clothes, new makeup, and new game consoles that their TikTok feeds have been telling them about.

The promises underneath the products are always the same: if you have this, then you'll be happy; then you'll be accepted; then you'll be satisfied.

And all of this may actually be true—but only momentarily.

Axis is not anti-gift, or anti product; we are anti-deception. We are anti-mirage. Let the good gifts be gifts and occasions for gratitude; but let's not go in expecting that our hearts will be healed because of them, or that our kids will never want again.

Expecting material objects to bear this kind of weight only sets them up to disappoint us.

1 Peter 1:13 says this about hope: "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming."

There are some things that are worth "setting our hope on," and other things that simply are not. Having minds that are "alert and fully sober" is not just about avoiding drunkenness, but about resisting the temptation to set our hope on any particular earthly thing. As Christians, our ultimate hope must remain rooted in something beyond what we can see and touch.

Conversation starter:

How would you describe your relationship with "stuff"?

Today was primarily about material objects—but of course, this isn't the only way to misplace our hope. Tomorrow we'll talk about some of the deeper issues around placing our hope in the wrong things—and how Jesus offers a better way.

Our culture is full of examples of people who put their hope in things that didn't deliver.

WEEK **01** / DAY **06**

Jim Carrey is attributed as saying, "I wish everyone could experience being rich and famous, so they'd see it wasn't the answer to anything."

Many people who have walked away from Christianity did so because they were led to put hope in false promises made on God's behalf. The "prosperity gospel," for example, promises that God will directly and proportionately match our faith with some sort of earthly blessing (usually a financial one).

As Katelyn Beaty writes in an article for Religion News Service: "The giveaway of any prosperity teaching is an 'if/then' formula: If you do this, then you will get this. If you put a $100 bill in the offering plate, then you will get tenfold back. If you stay chaste now, then you will later be blessed by marriage and children. Like all powerful myths, it offers the illusion of control in an unpredictable world."

In Romans 8:24-25, the Apostle Paul writes, "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Hope launches our imagination and anticipation beyond what we currently have and what we're able to do for ourselves. Hope in God dares to believe and trust that, in the end, things will work out—that no matter the challenges we face in this life, God is still going to come through.

On that day, as Julian of Norwich put it, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Or, as J.R.R. Tolkien put it, "everything sad will come untrue." It will be a day when, as Revelation 21:4 says, "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

But not even Jesus knows when that day will be. So above all, Christian hope requires us to cultivate patience.

Conversation starter:

What do you think it takes to get better at patience, and waiting?

During Advent, we celebrate the beautiful hope we have in Jesus's return, and in the renewal of all things. But hope is not only about looking forward to the future—it also helps us live better lives in the present. Tomorrow we'll talk about how.

For some people, the concept of hope feels like a recipe for disappointment. Because after all, if we don't get our hopes up, then our hopes won't have to fall down.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, a prisoner named Red says to another prisoner named Andy, "Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane."

From Red's perspective, having hope (of escaping from prison, or creating a better life someday) could only keep them from trying to make the best of their present lives.

So what is actually the point of having hope? Does having hope actually help us live better lives now—or does it only steal the energy we could be spending on making things as good as possible in the present?

Hebrews 6:19a provides an answer to these questions, when it says, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

Hope is presented here as something that stops our soul from drifting. It keeps us stabilized. Whereas the various struggles and circumstances of our lives might have blown us off course, hope can keep us focused, rooted, and stable.

Said another way, hope isn't only about looking forward to some future destination; it keeps our souls fixed and focused in the present. Hope protects us from distraction.

So, although hope is about our anticipation of Jesus's return, the message of today's verse is that it also stabilizes our life now. In the midst of various complicated life circumstances, hope keeps us from losing sight of where we're ultimately going—and helps us to take the next right step in that direction today.

Conversation starter:

What do you think Hebrews 6:19 means when it calls hope "an anchor for the soul"?

One of the side effects of having this sort of "anchor for the soul" is often a sense of peace. But in a season that's fundamentally defined by longing, what does peace actually look like? Tomorrow we'll step into Peace Week.

PEACE

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

LUKE 2:14



The first Noel began with a young, unmarried woman nearing the birth of her first child far from home.

WEEK 02

Rome ruled over the people of God, and Caesar's decree for everyone to return to their hometown to be counted in a census had set Mary and Joseph on the road to Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown. But soon after this, another ruler, threatened by the news of a newborn King, ordered the death of every boy two years old and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. Families grieved and lamented—but Mary and Joseph took their child and fled to Egypt.

As chaotic and painful as this time would have been, it was into that darkness that the angels announced peace had come.

As Luke 2:14 puts it, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

What did peace mean in a world like that?

For God's people, peace meant shalom. It meant the hope of things being set right—of restoration, wholeness, and life as God intended it to be.

What arrived in Bethlehem was not peaceful circumstances.

It was Peace Himself.

Advent does not promise us a world without pain and chaos. Rather, it points us to the One who entered our broken world to make all things whole again—to bring shalom.

Peace is not something we wait for our circumstances to give us.

Peace is a Person. And His name is Jesus.

The birth of Christ has always been depicted as a peaceful moment in Christmas pageants.

WEEK **02** / DAY **08**

Animals graze and gently neigh as Mary and Joseph gaze upon sweet baby Jesus. The wise men kneel before the King, and the stars twinkle above.

This is not what Christmas feels like in the year of our Lord, 2026.

There are the financial pressures of Christmas wish lists and elaborate meals, weekends with entirely overbooked schedules, and the pressure to make sure Christmas Eve clothes are good enough, and/or to secure matching family pajamas. For some of us, the pressure around maintaining traditions and making sure everyone feels happy can rather quickly pull us in the opposite direction of peace.

But Mary and Joseph certainly weren't in peaceful circumstances, either. Under Roman oppression, they were forced to travel about 100 miles to register for a census. When Mary gave birth to Jesus, Luke says that "there was no guest room available for them," so she had to lay the Son of God in an animal feeding trough. You could say His arrival was chaotic.

And yet, in Isaiah 9:6, he prophesied that Jesus would be the Prince of Peace: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given… And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Jesus didn't arrive once everything had calmed down. Peace arrived right in the middle of the chaos.

The New Testament emphasizes a "ministry of reconciliation," which refers to reconciliation between God and humanity through Jesus. When we are reconciled with God, harmony is restored. That is peace in its wholeness. In other words, the peace Jesus offers isn't dependent on finding or manufacturing "peaceful" circumstances.

In the same way, maybe peace this Advent isn't found by trying to wrangle and control all the chaos swirling around us. Maybe it's remembering that the Prince of Peace is already in the middle of it.

Conversation starter:

Where do you need peace in the middle of the chaos? Talk about what tends to steal your family's peace during Christmas. Then choose one moment this week to stop together and remember that peace doesn't require everything around you to be peaceful.

If Jesus, the Prince of Peace, arrived right in the middle of a chaotic situation, what would it look like to receive peace in the midst of our chaotic life situations? We'll talk about that tomorrow.

Wouldn't it be nice if during the Christmas season we could simply take a break from our problems?

Maybe we could put the health diagnosis on hold. Maybe the overdue bills could pause for an additional 30 days. Maybe a child who has walked away from their faith could temporarily put their disbelief on hold.

Unfortunately, the problems that exist from January through November typically remain through December. So, how is it that we are expected to have peace when hardship is present? Perhaps it is our definition of peace that we need to adjust.

People often seek temporary coping strategies to find peace. But whether we turn to vacations, money, relationships, or even substances, none of these things can ever truly fill an inner void or change the way things are.

In contrast, godly peace is rooted in Isaiah 26:3, where God promises "perfect peace," shalom shalom, meaning wholeness and completeness. The verse says, "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you."

So many of us as believers still feel anxious and overwhelmed despite Jesus' promise of peace. It can be difficult when your marriage is suffering, your children are hurting, or when it feels like there isn't enough money to make it to the end of the month.

This shows us that the battle for peace begins in our minds.

The Hebrew behind the phrase "minds are steadfast" carries the idea of being supported or sustained. It gives us this picture of a mind that is leaning on God and resting on His truth. We are kept in perfect peace not because everything around us is inherently peaceful, but because we trust in God and our minds are fixed on the One who holds us in the middle of it.

Conversation starter:

What has your mind been fixed on lately? Talk about the worries or fears your mind tends to return to. Then choose one truth about God that your family can come back to when those thoughts begin to take over.

When we're able to see God as a source of steadfastness and stability, peace naturally follows. But where we often look for peace is in our emotions—a place that, for many of us, can feel like the opposite of stability. Tomorrow we'll talk about how to navigate that tension.

We tend to think about peace as an emotion. I feel calm. I feel settled. I'm not worried. If nothing is keeping me up at night and my stomach isn't in knots, then I must be at peace. However, if I am not feeling peaceful, it's easy to assume that I must be doing something wrong. Am I not a good Christian if I don't feel peaceful?

It is not uncommon at Christmastime or during the holidays to have to spend time with someone you're not in a good place with. Maybe you and a family member don't see eye to eye about politics and you're sitting across from them passing the mashed potatoes and trying your best to make small talk. You both know that something between you isn't right. You can be in someone's presence without being at peace with them.

The Bible actually talks about peace this way, too. It's not talked about as an emotion or feeling—but as a state of a relationship.

Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

If you notice, Paul doesn't say we feel at peace with God, he says we have peace with God. Sin separated us from God. There was something broken in the relationship that we couldn't repair ourselves, and then Jesus came to reconcile us to God and restore all that has been broken.

This is why we celebrate the birth of Jesus as such good news. Jesus came to make peace between us and God possible—and that peace doesn't vanish on the days we don't feel particularly peaceful.

We can feel anxious and still have peace with God. We can be grieving and still have peace with God. At night when our minds are spinning out, and refuse to shut down because we have questions and fears, we can still have peace with God.

Our feelings change day to day (and sometimes hour by hour)—but what Jesus accomplished does not.

Conversation starter:

Do you ever feel like you're doing something wrong when you don't feel peaceful? Talk about the difference between feeling peaceful and having peace with God. Then take a moment to thank Jesus together that our peace with God depends on what He has done, not on how peaceful we feel today.

The expectation that peace requires "feeling peaceful" can be one of the biggest hindrances to actually experiencing peace. But another one of the big obstacles to experiencing peace is comparison. Tomorrow we'll talk about how to navigate that.

The Christmas season often has a way of making us very aware of what we don't have.

WEEK **02** / DAY **11**

Perhaps the neighbor has stunning Christmas lights and an Instagram-perfect tree. Maybe your teenager's TikTok feed is filling up with expensive "must-haves" and wish lists for the season. Maybe your good friends can afford to surprise their whole family with a trip to Disney World for the holidays.

Comparison has a way of turning what we have into something that suddenly doesn't feel like enough.

We can be deeply grateful for our family, our homes, our jobs, and what gifts we can put under the tree and still ache to do just a little more. We may think that, if we could have just a little more money or perhaps a little more time—or if we could, just for one year, give our kids the Christmas that we see someone else giving theirs—then maybe we would finally feel content.

Paul addresses contentment very differently. In Philippians 4:11 he says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

He says he learned to be content. It's not something that came naturally to him, and it certainly wasn't the result of finally getting every material thing that he wanted. In fact, in the very next verse he says, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation."

Paul had experienced both sides. He knew what it felt like to have plenty and also what it felt like to have nothing. Maybe our contentment and peace aren't about pretending that it doesn't sting when we can't give our family something that we wish we could; maybe they're more about learning that "enough" doesn't have to be determined by what someone else has. Comparison can all-too-easily strip us of our peace and give us a reason to believe that we need more.

Conversation starter:

What makes you feel like what you have isn't enough? Talk about the ways you find yourself comparing with other people, especially during Christmas. Talk about things that your family already has and that you don't want to overlook—while wishing that you had more.

One way to respond to the temptation to envy what others have is to practice the spiritual posture of surrender. At the same time, "surrender" can sometimes be a way to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of disappointment. Tomorrow we'll explore how to navigate this aspect of peace.

There are prayers that are easy to pray once, but that are much harder to pray year after year.

Maybe it's the desperate prayer for your own healing or for someone you love. Maybe it's a prayer for a son or a daughter who has turned away from faith. Maybe it's your aching prayer for a baby, or to see a door you've been knocking on finally open.

You've faithfully prayed, you've asked people around you for prayer and you believe wholeheartedly that God is capable of answering... but still, you wait.

Sometimes we pray for so long that eventually it can feel easier—and perhaps even more spiritual—to stop hoping for the thing we want. We call it "surrender." You try to earnestly say to God, "Whatever you want, Lord."

There can be tremendous faith in those words—but sometimes surrender can be used as a way to protect ourselves from the vulnerability of hope.

Simeon knew something about waiting. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. Scripture doesn't tell us how long Simeon waited. We only know that he continued waiting for what God had promised.

Then one day, Mary and Joseph walked into the temple carrying Jesus. In Luke 2:29, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace."

He never had to give up his longing in order to wait faithfully. He waited until the day the promise (Jesus) was finally placed in his arms.

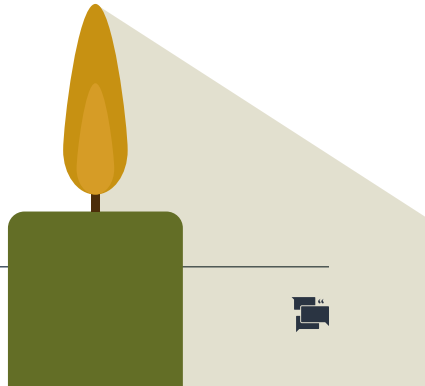
For some of us, the answer we are waiting for may not come tomorrow, and it may not come the way we expect. Some of the things we long to see happen may not happen on this side of eternity.

But peace doesn't mean we have to stop longing for these things. Peace and longing can coexist.

Conversation starter:

Is there something you have prayed for that you are still waiting for? Talk about what makes it difficult to keep hoping when an answer doesn't come, and then bring this prayer to God again. Ask honestly for what you hope for while trusting Him with what happens next. Ask Him for His peace in the waiting.

For peace to continue in the midst of longing, it has to anchor itself fundamentally in trust—trust in God most especially. But in order to maintain that kind of trust, we sometimes have to withdraw from social circumstances and spend time with Him. Tomorrow we'll look at how Jesus made space for this very thing.



Life requires much of us. Many of us work at home and at a job. We take care of children and sometimes elderly parents. Perhaps we have disabled family members who need extra care. We cook. We clean. We wake up, do it all again, go to sleep, and repeat.

Throw the holidays into this relentless cycle, and burnout city awaits.

When life requires so much from us, peace can start to feel like an impossible luxury—something we might get to when everyone else is taken care of and everything else is done.

We can be so stingy with taking time for ourselves, even though Jesus Himself set a regular example of stepping away in solitude. For example, after He fed the 5,000 men (plus women and children), Jesus sent His disciples ahead of Him and dismissed the crowds so He could be alone. In Matthew 14:23, it says, "After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone."

Even Jesus, the Son of God, made space to be alone and pray. What may be even more important is when He did it. Jesus didn't wait until nobody needed Him anymore. There was still more ministry to be done when Jesus withdrew.

Perhaps that is what makes stepping away so difficult for us. There is always something else we could be doing. Another load of laundry. Another email. Another Christmas present to wrap. Another person who needs something from us. We tell ourselves we'll rest when everything is done, but everything is never done.

And yet, stepping away was part of the rhythm of Jesus' life with the Father. He withdrew. He prayed. He rested. Then He returned.

During Advent, it may feel like there is very little you can remove from your life. But peace may not require an empty calendar or a finished to-do list. Sometimes we have to stop while there is still more to do and trust that it is okay to leave something unfinished.

Conversation starter:

What makes it hard for you to stop and rest when there is still something left to do? Talk about what makes you feel guilty for resting. What is one thing your family could intentionally leave undone this Christmas in order to make room for rest, prayer, and peace?

In the example of Jesus, we get a picture of pursuing peace by voluntarily withdrawing from circumstances. But peace also often comes to us in the midst of circumstances. Tomorrow we'll talk about how.

There are some moments during Christmas that you wish you could just bottle up forever.

Moments like taking an evening family walk to look at Christmas lights when the air is crisp, and you're all laughing and talking about the fun, creative ways people have made their houses festive. Maybe you pass a Star Wars Christmas-themed house, and somehow it works, but it still can't compete with the neighbor across the street who has synced their house to flash and come alive to music. Or maybe you make the drive to a church that is putting on a live nativity scene, and you try to imagine what it must have really been like on that holy night. You come home and defrost with a cup of hot chocolate and talk about what you loved.

These moments are gifts, and being present to simply enjoy them is sacred.

In Romans 15:13, the Apostle Paul writes: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

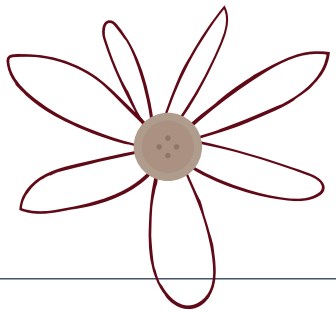
We often picture peace as being quiet and still, but the placement of peace and joy right next to each other in this verse reminds us that peace can also be there in a noisy house full of people you love. Peace can come with the joy you feel when that one Christmas song comes on and you just can't help yourself—you must dance. Peace can be watching your favorite Christmas movie for the five-hundredth time while you argue with a family member about whether *Die Hard* is, in fact, a Christmas movie.

Paul prays that God would fill us with so much joy and peace that we have more than enough to get by, so much that we begin to overflow with hope. And if he made this prayer, we know it's possible.

Conversation starters:

What is one Christmas memory you wish you could experience all over again? Share some of your favorite Christmas memories with each other. What made them so special? Then talk about something you're looking forward to enjoying this Christmas.

One of the things we talked about this week is how peace and joy are often found together. But what exactly is the difference between peace and joy? Tomorrow, we'll start Joy Week.



joy

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

LUKE 1:46-47



Mary was young, unmarried, and pregnant in a culture in which that carried enormous consequences.

WEEK 03

Whatever plans she had imagined for her life had been interrupted by an announcement she could barely comprehend. And it was into these circumstances that Mary penned her song of joy surrounding the incomprehensible mysteries that had been revealed to her.

Her circumstances seemed impossible. Yet something had happened that was bigger than her circumstances: God had come near. The Savior of the world was coming.

Throughout Scripture, joy is not tethered to the moments when life works out. It appears in wilderness and waiting, in suffering and uncertainty, because biblical joy—Advent joy—is rooted in who God is, what He has done, and what He is doing.

Mary could rejoice because she knew God was keeping His promises.

She was carrying the evidence.

The child growing inside her was the beginning of everything God had promised to set right. The proud would be scattered. The humble lifted. The hungry filled. Mercy would extend from generation to generation.

Mary could not see how the story would unfold. She could not yet see Bethlehem, Egypt, the cross, or the empty tomb.

But she knew God was writing the story—and in that, she could rejoice.

Advent joy does not require us to know how our circumstances will resolve. It invites us to remember what Mary knew: that God is faithful, God is at work, and God has come near.

In Jesus, Joy Himself has come.

In Disney's hit movies, *Inside Out* and *Inside Out 2*, Joy is depicted as the blue-haired, yellow-bodied captain of tweenager Riley's crew of emotions.

Joy is motivated to engineer and protect Riley's mental state, even if it means suppressing other emotions or denying reality.

Joy is stubbornly optimistic, and, until she does some serious character development, she is adamant that happiness should be Riley's permanent state. She tries to keep things lighthearted, even when the situation clearly calls for some gravity.

Joy is what you might call "mission-oriented." But the other characters aren't always thrilled by Joy. Which is super relatable, because the very idea of joy, when you're not feeling it, can be kind of annoying.

If we're being honest, some of us are probably still waiting for our joy to show up. And if it hasn't yet, we might think it'll come from that one present, that one family event, or the tradition we're still looking forward to. And if those moments turn out to be disappointing, all this talk of Christmas joy may feel even more obnoxious.

When it feels like "joy" is eluding us, it can help to remember what it is—and what it isn't. Real joy isn't on a mission. It's a settled state.

In Galatians 5:22, joy is listed as one of the Fruit of the Spirit, right alongside love, peace, forbearance, etc. The Greek word used for "joy" here is chara. The word doesn't describe a temporary reaction to superficial circumstances. It's a state of calm delight—a deep rejoicing in God's grace.

It's based on the spiritual reality that we belong to God. It's grace, recognized. Joy isn't calling us to elevate our energy level or express a happiness we don't feel. It's just paying attention to the truth of God's calling on our lives; it's noticing His lordship, His goodness, and His love.

We've already got everything we need to press into joy, even if our circumstances try to tell us otherwise.

Conversation starter:

If joy is "a state of calm delight," what would be the opposite of joy?

Joy is certainly a nice thing to experience. But for Jesus, joy wasn't just an optional extra occasional emotion—it was central to what He wanted to impart to His followers. Tomorrow we'll look at why.

John 15 is perhaps most well known as Jesus's farewell address to the disciples. It contains Jesus's own explanation of Himself and why He came, spoken in the Upper Room on the last night before His crucifixion.

Jesus looks around at His best friends, knowing His time left on Earth with them is dwindling by the second. Whatever He gives them here will have to be the hope they hold on to after He is arrested, convicted of blasphemy and treason, and tortured to death.

In John 15:1, He tells them, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

Jesus then extends the analogy to explain that abiding in Him and in His words will glorify God, but that "apart from me, you can do nothing." It's surprising language, considering that He is about to be very much apart from them—at least in body.

Then Jesus talks about joy. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The Greek word chara is used again, indicating that Jesus wasn't talking about regular old happiness or even some state of ecstasy. The direct translation of the words is something more like, "These things I have spoken to you, so that my joy, in you, may be."

Jesus was promising to pass on His own deep understanding of God's nature, God's love, and God's person. That was His joy. And that was the only thing that could complete the disciples' joy. When we think about it that way, including it in His farewell address makes a lot of sense.

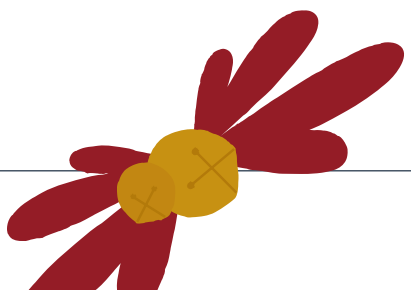
He goes on to warn the disciples that they will be hated by the world—again, not exactly the parting words most would envision. But it is that joy that He is passing on that will sustain them, even in the face of persecution, and even in the pain of His physical absence.

Joy isn't just a moment of surprise and delight—although it can be that, especially during Advent. But it is also a survival component; an ingredient that helps us understand the unthinkable, when it happens. It's the unshakeable belief that God is not cruel, that grief is not wasted, and that life is not senseless.

Conversation starter:

When Jesus said He was leaving His joy with the disciples, what do you think He was referring to?

The joy of Jesus is a beautiful, somewhat mysterious concept. And clearly it includes more than just happiness and "good feelings" as we tend to think of joy. In fact, it may have even included the concept of "resilience." Tomorrow we'll unpack that connection.



If joy is a feeling of calm delight, it is profoundly disconnected from the feeling of instant gratification. It's borne out of deep knowing as we trust that we have a loving Creator.

When Beethoven wrote "Ode to Joy," the final movement of his Symphony No. 9, it wasn't meant to be a Christmas song. The melody was later used for Henry von Dyke's poem, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," which is performed by many churches during the holiday season. The original lyrics to "Ode to Joy" were from Friedrich Schiller's poem of the same name.

What most people don't realize is that "Ode to Joy" was the culmination of 30 years of Beethoven's work. It was a long-held dream of the composer's to set Schiller's poem to music, and it almost went unrealized.

No composer at that time had even woven lyric poetry into a symphony before. By the time Beethoven figured out how he wanted to do it, he'd been through a lifetime of hardship and gone deaf. When the work was finally completed, there were logistical problems with booking the concert, and Beethoven insisted on conducting the debut himself. The work was so difficult that several soloists quit. But in the end, the masses met the music with thunderous applause.

The words of the poem, translated from German by Michael Kay, point to an infinite source of Divine joy:

> *"Be embracéd, all you millions,*
> *Share this kiss with all the world!*
> *Way above the stars, brothers,*
> *There must live a loving father.*
> *Do you kneel down low, you millions?*
> *Do you see your maker, world?*
> *Search for Him above the stars,*
> *Above the stars He must be living."*

"Ode to Joy" was ultimately a tribute, not to delight or pleasure, but to resilience. Beethoven, who had lamented that his deafness led him to live as an exile, didn't hear the music in his lifetime—and even still, his effort was redeemed.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 is another such ode to joy. Paul writes with admiration to the church at Thessalonica, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." To live with joy—the knowing that God is real and with us, even in uncomfortable or desperate circumstances—is to imitate the example of Christ's life.

Conversation starter:

What does joy in the midst of suffering look like?

Joy in the midst of suffering can feel counterintuitive, even paradoxical. But there's one man in the Bible who experienced that more acutely than perhaps anyone else: the prophet Jeremiah. Tomorrow we'll talk about how he found joy in the communion with the Lord even in the darkest times.

Christmas is a time when a lot of us find joy in what we eat. Whether it's a Christmas cookie exchange or a big spread of roast turkey and glazed ham at a family Christmas party, there's a lot of great stuff being served up at Christmastime. A 2024 survey of 852 American adults found that 59% say Christmas dinner is one of the things they look forward to the most.

And part of what makes eating at Christmas time a little bit different is simply the anticipation. We know we're having a dish we only eat a few times a year, and that it took special care and preparation. If we're eating with our friends, coworkers, or family, we're experiencing a feast in community with others, which makes it even better.

The prophet Jeremiah wasn't exactly a welcome sight on Jewish feast days. He tended to rail against the hypocrisy and disloyalty of Judah. He wasn't known as the most joyful guy, either—but he still provides some insight into what joy can be.

In Jeremiah 15, he shares a dialogue he's having with the Lord. It's a message God is instructing him to share with the people of Judah, and it is not celebratory news. God's chosen people have been so disloyal that He no longer wants them in His presence. The Lord declares that He would send away even the most legendary heroes of the Jewish faith, Samuel and Moses—and that now, homelessness, destruction, and death await them.

The coming judgement sounds so terrifying that Jeremiah regrets even being born. Sharing God's message has meant he's been rejected by his community and his family, and now he's all alone, in deep distress.

As he responds to the Lord, he offers words of lament, humility, and confession. In verses 15-16, he says, "Lord, you understand. Remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake. When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, Lord God Almighty."

He's been alienated, diminished, and now, horrified. Jeremiah is not exactly chowing down on a Turkish delight. And yet, he says that his joy is restored by being fed on God's words.

In Greek, we have the word chara again, but in the original Hebrew, we have sason, a word that refers to spinning around with excitement. When he consumes God's word, Jeremiah is brimming with delight. It's the only joy he has left, as he sits apart from all the merrymakers and celebrants in his community.

Conversation starter:

What would it mean to be "fed on" God's word?

Jeremiah's ability to find joy in the words of the Lord is beautiful. But the Bible also talks about creation itself as a profound source of potential joy. Tomorrow we'll take a look at that idea.

Throughout these passages this week, we've talked about how joy co-exists with suffering. How joy doesn't indicate the absence of hardship, but gives us instructions for how to cope with it. How to know deep down that God sees us and sends rescue and redemption.

In Psalm 96:11-13, the Psalmist points to the beauty and celebration that are already apparent in the natural world: the sky and the ground we stand on; the ocean and all it contains; the fields and the forest. All are called to rejoice.

Samach is the word used here to describe the joy of the heavens—it means to be glad, but also to brighten up. And giyl is the word used to describe the joy of the earth. That word alludes to spinning and leaping with joy. Psalm 96:11 calls the sky to light up in response to who God is, and for the earth to spin on its axis as a form of rejoicing.

In verse 12, alaz is the word used to describe the fields. It's a form of joy that feels triumphant. The harvests of the field are called to triumph, the way a successful crop would feel. Also in verse 12, the trees are invited to yerannenu—a ringing shout for joy. What would a tree's song sound like? One might imagine the rippling sound the wind makes when it's blowing through leaves.

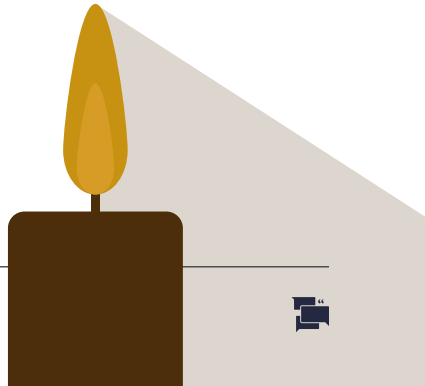
In this passage, the joy that's resounding out of creation could also be creation doing all of the things it would naturally do—for God's glory.

Joy isn't an emotion we simply consume. It doesn't roll through us, bring us high, and leave us empty. It calls us to respond with rejoicing, often by simply living our ordinary lives in response to God.

Conversation starter:

What are some concrete examples of rejoicing in everyday life?

This kind of everyday joy is available to us constantly, if we only know where to look. But as much as joy can look like a stable presence, it can also look like a surprising interjection into our circumstances. Tomorrow we'll talk about what that looks like.



At the end of *Avengers: Endgame*, all hope seems lost. Half of Earth's population has been blipped out of existence. The surviving heroes, including Captain America, Thor, and Iron Man, have been waging one last battle against the Machiavellian villain Thanos, who now seeks to annihilate them all.

A bloodied and beaten Captain America, determined to fight to the last, gets up to make one final stand. He embarks on what is sure to be a death march, walking to meet Thanos above the blighted ruins of the Avengers Compound. But just when all hope is lost, he hears the voice of an old friend coming through on his comms device.

"Captain. Can you read me?"

Captain America can't respond. He can't believe what he's hearing—the voice of Sam Wilson, the Falcon, who isn't supposed to be alive. The next line is, "On your left." A mystic portal appears. And all of the lost heroes return, materializing out of the air to fight by his side.

No comic book fans were surprised that the Avengers won against Thanos in the end. But the thing that few fans guessed, and the mystery that brought a record-breaking number of fans into the theater, wasn't who would win. It was how it would unfold.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, "Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons I believe Christianity. It is a religion that you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we had always expected, I should feel we were making it up. But, in fact, it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up. It has just that queer twist about it that real things have."

Joy can be something we live; our natural state. But joy is also a product of anticipation—in some moments, a delayed hope is fulfilled at last. But in others, a thrill you never could have seen coming.

In Matthew 2:10, the Magi complete their long journey to find the baby Jesus. The star they first saw in the sky—the star of Bethlehem—was a divine signal. They believed it was the fulfillment of a prophecy. But they couldn't know for sure what that really meant, how long their trip would take, or who they might find at the end.

They've been waylaid and questioned by Herod, the Roman-appointed king of Judea. A deeply paranoid individual, it could not have been a pleasant interrogation. Now they've been released to continue on their way. And the star reappears in the sky, coming to rest with a clear destination. Their pilgrimage will be fulfilled.

And they are absolutely overjoyed. The language Matthew uses here makes it clear they weren't simply resting in assured knowledge. They were joyful to the max. Ecstatic.

They weren't surprised God had sent a savior. But they would never have guessed who it would be. And now, the big reveal was just behind the doorway.

Conversation starter:

What's been a surprising source of joy for you this year?

One of the clear realities of joy is that it coexists with other emotions—even difficult emotions like fear. Tomorrow we'll look at a biblical example of how joy and these sorts of emotions can exist together.

WEEK **03** / DAY **21**

By now, the countdown to Christmas is in its home stretch. Parties, performances, and present-wrapping are in full swing. But before we give in to holiday-fatigue and going through the motions of it all, let's take one last look at joy.

One of the most famous examples of joy in the Bible happens right after Jesus's resurrection is discovered. It's joy mixed with confusion—and terror.

In Matthew 28:8, Mary Magdalene and a few other women who had followed Jesus have arrived at His tomb. But instead of finding Jesus's body, they receive a message from an angel, letting them know that Jesus has risen from the dead. The women are "afraid, yet filled with joy," and they hurry away to tell the other disciples.

They're thrilled, but they're also scared. God has given them a great gift. But they don't quite know how to make sense of it.

The truth about Jesus's coming, living, dying, and resurrecting isn't just amazing. It isn't just surprising. It's scary. Because it means we have to do something in response to it. And we can't be sure where the path of following Christ is going to lead us in this lifetime.

But the joy—the calm knowing, the settled state of deep gladness—is just as powerful as our fear. It can overwhelm our doubt. And it can compel us into belief, obedience, and meaning.

Joy doesn't always mean we are safe, at least not in the physical sense. But it can mean we're fulfilled because we recognize the good gift of God's story and our place inside of it.

Conversation starter:

Can you think of a time you felt just as scared as you were excited? How would you describe that feeling?

The truest source of joy, ultimately is love—the love of God, and the love of each other. But what does "love" actually mean, according to Scripture? Tomorrow, we'll start Love Week.

LOVE

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

JOHN 8:12



When Jesus spoke these words ...

WEEK 04

He was standing in the temple during the Festival of Tabernacles, a celebration filled with reminders of God's presence with His people. Each night, enormous lamps illuminated the temple courts, recalling the pillar of fire that had led Israel through the wilderness.

Against that backdrop, Jesus made an astonishing claim: ***He* was the Light.**

This has always been the movement of God's love toward His people. When Israel wandered in the wilderness, God went before them as fire in the night. When they were afraid, rebellious, and lost, His presence remained—a guiding light and a reminder that they had not been abandoned.

And then, in Jesus, the God who had gone before His people came to dwell among them.

This is the story of Advent, and it is a story of love.

God entered our darkness as a child. The Creator stepped into His creation, took on flesh, and made His home among the people He loved. He came close enough to be touched, rejected, misunderstood, and wounded. Wherever darkness had taken hold, Jesus moved toward it. He stepped into the places sin had devastated and suffering had hollowed out, knowing all the while where His love would lead.

The child laid in a manger had come to give His life. The hands that reached out in healing would be pierced. The One who wept beside a grave would enter one Himself. And on the cross, as darkness covered the land, the Light of the World bore the weight of sin and death for us all.

And yet...

The darkness that received Him could not keep Him.

On the third morning, Light burst forth from the grave. Death gave way to the dawn of resurrection, and the One who had entered our darkness walked out of the tomb alive.

This is the love we celebrate during Advent: the Light of the World came knowing what loving us would cost Him, and He came anyway.

Advent reminds us that God did not simply send a message of love.

He sent Himself

We put so much effort into creating a Christmas experience for our families.

WEEK **04** / DAY **22**

We choose presents, make delicious meals, decorate together and go to beautiful candlelit Christmas Eve services. We try to fill our time with the people we love and put a lot of work into creating moments of peace and joy that our families will hopefully remember.

And then, eventually, Christmas ends.

The presents are opened. The meals are eaten. The decorations come down… depending on your personality, that might happen before the new year, or you might be one of those end-of-February people. (No judgment.)

Eventually, everyone returns to normal life.

And yet, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, the Apostle Paul writes: “And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

There is something especially beautiful about the word remain at Christmas, when so much of what we work to create during this season is temporary.

Love remains.

And that is really the story we have been celebrating all along.

Jesus’ arrival is the most beautiful and clear expression of God’s love for us. God did not love humanity from a distance; He chose to come near and entered our world as a baby. Jesus lived among the people He so deeply loved. Christmas shows us that love moves toward people and enters their lives and gives itself away.

The most meaningful thing we can give at Christmas isn’t something we can wrap. Long after the details are forgotten, people will remember how they were loved.

Conversation starter:

What is one way someone has made you feel deeply loved at Christmas? Talk about the moments when someone made you feel seen, cared for, or loved, then choose one way your family can help someone else feel loved this week.

Love is a beautiful concept. But what does it mean to keep loving people even when we’re worn out? Tomorrow we’ll explore what that looks like.

How do you find yourself today? You might be in the thick of the winter break chaos, ready for your kids to go back to school and your in-laws to pack up their bags, but here you are. Here, God is.

I am friends with a lot of teachers. One of them recently joked with me, "Don't give it your all at work today." In our achievement-oriented culture, this idea can land weird. But there might be a part of you that breathes a sigh of relief. You don't have to give it your all today for you to have loved and served others well. Perhaps bearing with them is enough.

Bearing with our loved ones is not permission to be passive, but to trust that God doesn't need us to be at 100% in order to use us. Paul was writing to the church in Ephesus when he implored them, as Ephesians 4:2 (ESV) says, to bear with one another in love "with all humility and gentleness" and "with patience."

Easier said than done, right?

Our church and our families are both full of wonderful and wonky folks that we don't get to choose. They are a gift to us. And they can also be burdensome, tiring, and exhausting. Sometimes we have to bear with them. But notice, you don't just bear with them—you bear with them in love.

Bearing with one another is an underrated kind of love. It isn't the love that they make movies about, or write songs about, but it is one of the most important expressions of care we can give to our loved ones when we feel like we are at the end of our rope.

It's nothing extravagant. It might look like kindly opting out of an activating political conversation between relatives while you are trying to wrap last-minute presents, because you just can't go there right now.

Bearing with one another in love doesn't mean having a "grin and bear it" mentality. It means being honest about what shape your love will take right now and communicating that with humility, gentleness, and patience.

Maybe that means picking up cookies instead of making them from scratch (you're still providing sweets, and that's got to count for something). As much as part of you might want to curl into a ball on the couch and not get up, you have stuff to do. But when you dust it off, that stuff is simply love—loving your family through picking out thoughtful gifts, cultivating meaningful traditions, and making delicious meals.

Bear with one another, in love.

Conversation starter:

Why do you think Ephesians 4:2 emphasizes bearing with one another?

Our families and church congregations are certainly full of people we sometimes have to "bear with." But what about our friendships? Tomorrow we'll explore how this same concept of bearing with one another in love might apply to them.

A particularly memorable line from the American sitcom *The Office* comes from one of the Christmas episodes. As plans for the office Christmas party go awry, Michael Scott says, "Happy Birthday, Jesus. Sorry your party's so lame."

Jesus is our Lord and our friend. He says it Himself, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends."

As you begin to eagerly anticipate Christ's birth, consider with God what it would mean to celebrate His birthday, as you would a friend.

Some families go all out for birthdays, while others treat it like a normal day. Sometimes the gifts, traditions, and busy schedules make us forget that it is our dearest friend's birthday.

In John 15:13, Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the greatest act of love in history—He is our ultimately faithful friend. What does it mean to truly share and celebrate in this friendship?

While celebrating friendship and birthdays looks different for everyone, quality time and intentional planning are great places to start. Maybe this will look like reading some scripture by the fireplace as a family and thanking Jesus for His friendship. One idea might be going around as a family and each affirming a quality of Jesus that you would like to embody as a friend.

Ultimately, friendship is embodied in love. So, consider as a family how you can let love be the center of Christ's birthday celebration this year—make a meal for someone, invite in a friend with no family in town, or anonymously give a gift to someone in need. Find a way to love one another as Christ loved us.

Conversation starter:

Why do you think Jesus referred to His followers as "friends"?

We tend to think of friendship-love as a feeling that develops on its own over time. The idea of friendship with Jesus may be no different; but in the Bible, "love" is often defined not just as a natural feeling—but as a commandment. Tomorrow we'll explore what that means.

Fred Rogers, creator of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, once said that, "The greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they're loved, and capable of loving." He also said, "Love is at the root of everything… love or the lack of it." Our own experience of having been loved first (or not) determines the quality of our relationships and how we see our place in the world.

Surely this is part of why, when Jesus is asked in Matthew 22:36-40 about the greatest commandments, He strings together a passage from Deuteronomy 6 and another passage from Leviticus 19, saying, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

The greatest commandments are all about love. And yet, love in the biblical sense is different from what we often think of as "love" today. This is not about mustering up powerful feelings for God and our neighbors (although as C.S. Lewis and Tim Keller have written, loving feelings do tend to follow loving actions). Instead, biblical love is about learning to orient our lives around what matters most to God, and to others.

Learning to love our neighbors starts with gratitude for the love God has given us. We love because He first loved us—even though our selfishness and sin had marred the image of God within us. God sees through all of that—and loves us still. As the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Conversation starter:

How can you tell whether someone loves you?

Most people today wouldn't fight the idea that love should be a high priority. But tomorrow, we'll talk about how the life of Jesus is what gets to define what "love" actually means.

It's the day before Christmas, and maybe you still have a lot to do. There could be hours of cooking, baking, cleaning, and wrapping still ahead.

Or maybe you're completely prepared. You've taken care of your entire to-do list, and your family is going to coast through the rest of the Christmas season in blissful cooperation without any stress on the horizon. (We've never met a family like that, but we've heard they might exist.)

Your heart may feel totally prepared. Maybe you've been following along with us through *Advent: Light*, and we hope it's been a joy and blessing to you. Maybe you've missed a few days—or maybe, you only picked up this resource this week. No matter what the case may be, we'd ask you to reflect on one last thing.

Jesus came to us as a gift, a baby, a human container for God's love. But we don't worship love itself—or at least, that's not what being a Christian is about. We worship Jesus.

In 1 John 4:8, we're told, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." God is love. Which means Jesus is Love. Which means the story of His life is the story of what Love is.

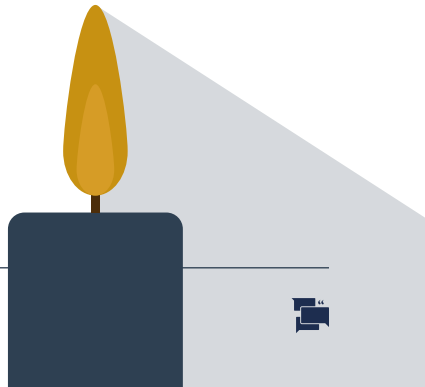
To follow Christ's example, we can't just give people our love in the squishy, feel-good way. We have to give them ourselves. Our full selves. The parts we don't think anyone wants. The parts we wish didn't exist. That's the whole of love—that's its ultimate conclusion.

And to really worship and honor Jesus, we can't just love Him as an abstract idea, or accept His love passively. We're called to participate in, and to echo His sacrifice. It's a high calling—in fact, there's no higher one. But the Holy Spirit equips us to do it.

Let our celebration of Christmas reflect Christ, and let our Love reflect His love. Merry Christmas!

Conversation starter:

What's the difference between worshipping Jesus and worshipping love?

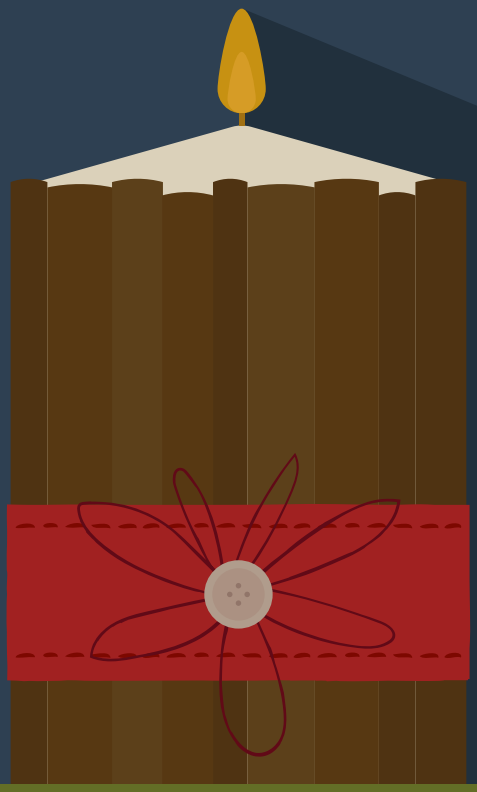


Advent

Light

The most important thing we're thinking about this month?

It's Jesus.



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