

God with Us

Advent
DEVO

God with Us

Emmanuel means "God with us," and this is where our series title comes from. Jesus was the "with" of God, in bodily form, in a very specific time in history. And He is still with us. Each week of Advent, we will focus on an aspect of God, His character, or His promises to us, and how that is revealed in Christ. As we look back to the first Advent through Bible reading, let's also meditate on how God is still with us through each of these big concepts in our lives today. The celebration of Christmas should bring us more than warm feelings. It should affirm our faith in our very present Savior.



~ Hope ~

Week

ONE

This week we will focus on **HOPE**: the biblical basis for hope, what it means, what it promises, and maybe even how we can be hope bearers. Here is a question to have in the back of your mind this week:

FOCUS QUESTION

Because God is **STILL** with us,
how is **HOPE** with us?

Day 1

Hope Begins

Genesis 3



Most of us associate Genesis 3 with the fall of humanity, where the man and woman saw and took for themselves the very thing God had said to avoid. This one act ushered in death and destruction. However, this is also the place where we turn to find where our hope begins. God does not abandon His people, nor does He leave them without hope. Sin and death do not get the final say. God promised to make all the sad things untrue with one promise, uttered to the serpent, through whom destruction found its way into the Garden.

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." -Genesis 3:15

The death promised to the man and woman would not come without a promised redemptive hope for all humanity. The woman would have an offspring that would destroy death and destruction for good.

This is where it all begins. This is what God's people would watch and wait for. Hope for. Their Messiah would come to vanquish evil.

...But would they recognize Him?

Read

Genesis 3

How does reading this passage through the lens of hope change how you understand it?

In addition to promising to destroy evil, what other glimpses of hope do you see here?

What does Genesis 3 have to do with Advent, waiting for the Birth of the Savior?

Listen

Lauren Daigle, "Light of the World"



Day 2

Hope Rescues

Exodus 12:1-28



In today's passage, God's people have now grown to be a nation, and have been enslaved by Egypt for over 400 years. They must have felt hopeless. But God saw. Exodus 2:23-24 says, "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew."

So, God set out to rescue His people; to remind them they still had hope. Moses, spared from the slaughter of the Israelite infants (Exodus 2:1-10), raised in the house of Pharaoh himself, returned to lead the rescue (Exodus 3:1-4:31). The ten plagues that afflicted Egypt showcased God's power over Pharaoh and prepared the Israelites to flee to freedom. At the tenth and final plague, all the firstborn children and livestock would be killed. But God made a way for His people to be spared from destruction. They were to take a spotless lamb and kill it, painting their doorposts with its blood. "For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you" (Exodus 12:23).

The blood of the lamb would mark the homes of God's people, and they would be spared. God reminded them they could still hope in the promise He'd made.

Could Moses be the one for whom they were waiting? He was a deliverer. But was he *the* deliverer?

Or would there be another infant born (Luke 2:1-20), spared a king's decree to slaughter infant boys (Matthew 2:16-18), who would Himself provide the blood needed to mark God's people for their rescue (Matthew 26:27-28)?

Read

Exodus 12:1-28

This is another passage that is full of terror and torment, yet we can be reminded to look for hope. Where is there hope present?

Is it neat and tidy and quick? (How long had the Israelites been enslaved?)

What connection do you see between the blood on the doorposts and Jesus' blood?

Watch

Prince of Egypt, "When You Believe" scene



Day 3

Hope Foretold

Isaiah 9:1-7



God's people have had no small number of hardships by the time the prophet Isaiah speaks. Judges 21:25 says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." This did not prove to be for their good. They were rebellious toward God. This resulted in a fractured nation, exile from their homeland, and rampant idol worship.

In fact, Isaiah said, "And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish. And they will be thrust into thick darkness" (Isaiah 8:22).

Surely all hope was lost.

The very next statement Isaiah made began with, "But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish" (Isaiah 9:1), and he proceeded to prophesy about the coming Messiah in more detail. When it seemed like God had every right to abandon his people, He reminded them of the promised hope. They must hold on to their hope in the coming Messiah.

Read

Isaiah 9:1-7

Verse 2 tells us on whom the light has shined. Why is this significant?

By what names will this child be called?

What will living under His rule be like?

Listen

Handel, "For Unto Us a Child is Born"



Day 4

Hope is Near

Luke 1:26-55



God's people had waited a very long time for their Deliverer. It only took us 4 days to get here, but we've covered a span of approximately 4,000 years. They were waiting for something magnificent, only to have generations and generations of family members come and go. Finally, after 4,000 years, Israel was ready. Can you imagine something worth hoping for that is able to sustain hope for generation after generation?

And then, can you imagine being the first person to know that what has been promised will now come to fruition through you? And that it would happen in a miraculous and scandalous way?

An angel came to Mary, a young woman who knew the history of her people well. He told her she would give birth to the Messiah, the long-awaited Deliverer. She rejoiced.

Her people's hope, and the hope of the world, would be born through her!

Hope is near.

But would He be as they imagined?

Read

Luke 1:26-55

What was significant about Mary that enabled her to be the mother of the Messiah? Obviously, nothing she had done. But where did she live? Whose family line was she in? Why did these things matter concerning the birth of the Messiah? For help answering these questions, read 2 Samuel 7:12-13, Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:1-2.

Despite the virgin birth being foretold (Isaiah 7:14), and despite an angel telling Mary what would happen, what do you imagine being an unwed pregnant woman would be like in her culture?

Spend time reading Mary's song, The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). How did Mary respond to this news? Where did her hope remain?

Listen

Amy Grant, "Breath of Heaven"



Day 5

Hope Still Waits

Titus 2:11-14, 1 Peter 5:6-11



The hope that the Israelites had in their coming Messiah wasn't fully complete with the birth of Jesus. We know He lived a perfect life, but one that was upside down from what many expected of their Deliverer. They wanted political freedom and power. He brought humility and healing. His death brought about their deliverance, not from their political oppressors, but from their ultimate oppression of sin and death. And this deliverance was not only for the Israelites. As promised to Abraham many (many, many) years before, through Jesus, the whole world would be blessed.

Through faith in Jesus, we are adopted into the family of Abraham, Jacob, and David. Now, we experience the protection from spiritual death that Jesus' blood provides. But our hope doesn't just look back to the historical event of Jesus' death and resurrection. It looks side to side as we live here and now and bring the Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Our hope also looks forward to Christ's final return where we will meet him face to face.

We still wait, but not like those who have no hope.

Read

Titus 2:11-14, 1 Peter 5:6-11

What is to be characteristic of God's people as we live and wait for Christ's return?

Our hope is past, present, and future.
Where have you seen God at work in your past?

In your life right now?

And what do you hope He'll do in your heart in the future?

Watch

Danny Lamonte, God of Hope video





~ Preparation ~

Week

TWO

This week we will focus on **PREPARATION**: waiting, promise, and the Old Testament prophecies that pointed forward to a coming Messiah. Here are the over-arching questions for meditation throughout the week:

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Because God is **STILL** with us,
how is **PROMISE** with us?

How should we **STILL**
be in **PREPARATION**?

What are we
WAITING FOR now?

Day 1

Waiting is Preparation

Malachi 3:1, Isaiah 40:1-5, Matthew 3:1-3, Luke 1:5-24



From the beginning of the Bible, we see God preparing. He prepared the garden for the man and woman. He prepared Abraham for the Covenant that would be made, and the nation Abraham would be made into. He prepared Moses to be a deliverer in the way that he was raised: Israelite by birth, Egyptian by adoption, shepherd and wilderness expert as preparation for the 40 years in the desert. He began preparing the way for the Messiah to come as soon as sin entered the earthly kingdom. We see evidence of His careful preparation in nearly every story we encounter in the Bible.

One of the most foundational tools of God's preparation for His people is waiting. Sarah had to wait until she was 90 years old to bear a son, despite Abraham being told by God that he'd be the father of a great nation (Genesis 17:15-21). Moses waited 40 years in exile out of Egypt, away from his home, before returning to Egypt as God delivered the Israelites (Exodus 2:11-4:17). Those 40 years of waiting were preparation for what he would endure with the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt.

One particular person would pave the way for the King. And God prepared the way for him through prophecy many years before his birth.

Read

Malachi 3:1, Isaiah 40:1-5, Matthew 3:1-3, Luke 1:5-24

What waiting had been done by Elizabeth and Zechariah?

What did their waiting prepare them for?

What was to be John's role? (Hint: Look at Luke 1:16-17)

As you look at your story, what have you been prepared for through waiting? Or maybe you're currently in a season of waiting. What might God be preparing you for? How will you know?

Listen

Matt Redman, "Hearts Waiting"



Day 2

God prepared His people

Isaiah 11:1-16; Isaiah 53



Scripture is full of God preparing His people to receive His mercy through the Promised Messiah. As they waited, they were to be a beacon of light and hope to the world around them. Yet they failed again and again to show what the True God was like. So, God sent prophets to warn the Israelites of their waywardness, call them to repentance, and remind them of God's long-suffering faithfulness and mercy.

The prophet Isaiah gave us so many glimpses of who the coming Messiah would be. The Israelites had become accustomed to being oppressed as a people. They hoped their deliverer would be a conquering king, riding in on a white horse to save them from their political oppressors. But through Isaiah, God was preparing His people to expect a different type of deliverance, one that would lead to true and everlasting peace—in the soul and amidst the nations. He would be what Israel failed to be. He would bring peace to the point of perfection. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). This can be seen as predatory nations no longer oppressing Israel. It could also be understood as looking forward to a time when God will fully redeem the entire earth, reversing the curse put in place in Genesis 3:17-18. What a day that will be!

Isaiah also painted a picture for the Israelites of the unexpected nature of God's Messiah. He would not be what they expected. In fact, they would outright reject Him. The very people God chose would be the ones to reject their Deliverer because He did not come as they expected Him to. They were not prepared.

Read

Isaiah 11:1-16 and 53:2-12

The study notes in the ESV Study Bible summarize 11:1-16 as "The Messiah will transform the world." What transformations do you see in this passage?

If the full realization of what Isaiah prophesied hasn't occurred, (We can agree that the world is not at total peace yet, right?) how can this passage help us prepare our hearts for the time when it will come to be?

Isaiah 53 has long been called the "Suffering Servant" passage, and Christians agree it is a prophetic portrayal of what the Messiah will be like. Keeping this passage in mind, if Jesus were to come back today, what would He be like? Where would He be? Who would He spend time with?

Listen

Meredith Andrews, "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus"



Day 3

God Prepared for the Unimaginable

Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-25



If Larry King could have asked Jesus one question, he said it would have been this: "I would ask him if he believed that he was born of a virgin birth, because whatever the answer is changes or reinforces the world" (LA Times Article, 1990).

Jesus performed many miracles during His time on earth, many of which were witnessed publicly and recorded. But this one sign, that God gave to King Ahaz through Isaiah almost 700 years before, is perhaps the most significant of all. Let's sit with the magnitude of this for a moment. A young, unmarried woman, in a culture that valued women for their sexual purity and reproductive ability, would become pregnant, not from her fiancé. Those around her were likely faced with two choices. They must believe that she had been chosen by God to miraculously grow the Messiah in her body as the fulfillment of the promise to Eve, or they must believe that she had been unfaithful to her fiancé. Adultery was punishable by death under Old Testament Law (see Lev. 20:20).

Yet again, God had prepared His people for this moment. This unimaginable moment. This great reversal of the promised son to Sarai, for whom bearing a child should have been impossible due to her age and a lifetime of infertility. But now, the Prince of Peace, King of Kings, and Lord of the universe would voluntarily take on vulnerable, needy, human flesh and be birthed by a young woman, for whom it should have also been impossible to bear a child, but for a very different reason.

God spoke to King Ahaz through Prophet Isaiah, offering him a sign of when the Messiah would come. He said, "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

When Gabriel appeared to Joseph to assure him that the time had come for the fulfillment of this prophecy, he referred to this statement given all those years before. Joseph and Mary both would have been familiar with this prophecy. Joseph chose to believe the angel and stay with Mary, effectively saving her life.

As hard as it would have been to believe, God had prepared them for this miraculous moment in time.

Read

Matthew 1:18-25

Have you ever thought that the answer to whether Jesus was really born of a virgin would, as King said, “change or reinforce the world”?

How important was God’s preparation of not only Mary and Joseph, but also those around the couple?

Listen

The Piano Guys, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”



Day 4

God Prepares the World



What happened in the time between when the Old Testament was finished and the New Testament began? This could be thought of as a time of silence from God. There were no prophets, great rescues, or narratives recorded for the Israelite people. We might even take a moment to dwell in silence to consider the 400-year period in which God's people had to carry on with their lives for generations without a word from God.

But silence from God has never meant inaction.

If we look at the events of world history through the perspective of God's preparation, our minds and hearts will be enlightened and encouraged.

Near the time of Jesus' birth, Rome had become the largest city the world had ever known, and its surrounding empire was unrivaled. Under the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace, all the countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea were under one government (including Israel and Judah), which led to an unprecedented period of political peace.

In an undoing of the chaos and division sparked by the Tower of Babel, when communication became impossible, the Greek language began to draw everyone together. Under the Roman Empire, Greek was used for commerce and important documents, so everyone who conducted business or wrote letters across nations could communicate freely with one another. Even many common people could speak Greek among other languages. In addition, the Romans built a network of roads that spanned roughly 50,000 miles, leading into and out of the great city of Rome. The Romans constructed these roads to make travel throughout the empire easier, thereby efficiently enforcing their rule.

All of this meant that when Jesus had been resurrected and commanded His disciples to go to the nations and make disciples, the world was prepared, and His people were ready and able to obey such a commandment. What the Romans intended for the increase of their rule would ultimately allow another Kingdom's message to spread far and wide in a way that had never been possible before.

Sit

Today we are going to experience the silence. No reading or link to a song is provided. Sit in silence. Then consider these questions:

Have you ever considered the amount of impact the political world had on the moment in history when the Messiah would come?

Try to imagine Jesus coming at a time before such travel was possible, or when communication between people groups was impossible. How does this help us remember that the gospel is not just good news for the Jews, but also for the whole world?

Are there any areas of your life where you feel like God is silent? Could He be preparing you for something?

Day 5

Preparing for Christ's Ultimate Return

Matthew 5, Matthew 6:9-13



God did everything necessary to prepare the world for the coming Messiah. Yet, we can all agree that even with the death and resurrection of Jesus, evil was present in life then, and remains in life now. The first coming of Jesus was when "Heaven had broken through. The great rescue had begun" (Sally Lloyd-Jones, *Jesus Storybook Bible*). But this was just the beginning. When He left, He promised to return (John 14:1-3) but He didn't leave his followers helpless. He prepared them for what was to come and promised to send His Holy Spirit. (Read the rest of John 14.)

What do we do in the meantime?

In Matthew 6, Jesus addresses three areas of Jewish piety, the second being prayer. As He instructs His disciples on how to pray, He begins with the invitation to address God as "our Father." This is an invitation to siblingship with Jesus Himself—something no one deserves, but He offers freely to His followers. As God's people now, we wait for His return with a new family, with a shared status with Jesus (Mark 3:34; Hebrews 2:11), and with the promised aid of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us.

Jesus prayed "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." He was inviting His disciples to participate in God's kingdom work on earth now, to live our lives in a way that shows God's power to restore and renew all things. Even the most broken. Not through our own power, but through the Spirit of God living in us. We look at how Jesus lived His life and what He called blessed in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). We pray for eyes to see where His restoration and renewal is needed on earth today. We spend time with the people that Jesus would have eaten dinner with (Mark 2:15-17). We care for the widows and orphans (James 1:27). We love those the world calls unlovable. We love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and

strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. (Mark 12:29-31) We speak of Jesus' forgiveness of sins, but we also prepare for His return by proclaiming with our lives that while we are waiting, we work toward bringing goodness, wholeness, healing, and light everywhere we go. Living in God's kingdom now gives the world a glimpse of God's new creation to come.

Read

Matthew 5

Describe the Kingdom of God based on Jesus' proclamations.

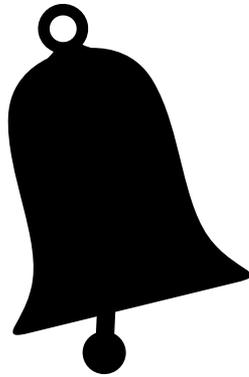
Matthew 6:9-13

How can you live in such a way that brings God's Kingdom to your neighbors? To your city?

Listen

Citizen Way, "The Lord's Prayer"





~ Joy ~

Week

THREE

JOY is our focus for this week. Not to launch the week with a grim reality, but joy is in short supply in our world right now. Instead of letting that bring us down, we can see it as a great opportunity. Through the Holy Spirit, we have a source of **JOY** that is different from so many people that we encounter every day. Here are the over-arching questions for meditation:

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Because God is still with us,
how is **JOY** with us?

How can we display **JOY**
to those around us without
being seen as fake or out
of touch with reality?

Day 1

Joy to the Earth

Psalm 98



Psalm 98 celebrates the great things God has done for His people. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and in doing so, glorified His name among other nations. They heard about and feared the God of the Jews (Joshua 2:8-11).

Celebration calls for singing. It's understandable why many of the psalms (songs) of the Bible are celebration psalms.

But have you ever considered whether the earth itself, not just the people in it, sings its praise to God? In Ancient Near Eastern culture, different elements of the earth were ascribed deity. In contrast to the deity of the earth, this psalm reminds us that there is one God, and even the earth is joyfully subject to Him, and celebrates under His rule and reign because He is good.

Similar to the Israelites rescue from slavery, we too have been rescued. We were once slaves to sin, but we have been set free (Romans 6:5-11). And we can sing a song of celebration, remembering that one day, even the earth itself will be renewed and restored to its full goodness.

Read

Psalm 98

What brokenness (in or near you, or in the world, or the earth itself) do you long to be restored?

Can you imagine the joy when that brokenness is restored?

What songs come to mind first when you want to rejoice over something? Consider making a playlist of celebration songs today, to remind you that it is God's rescue that is the source of all our joy.

Listen

Phil Wickham, "Joy to the World"



Day 2

Joy to Those Who Mourn

Psalm 126



Israel was not known for its might or power. In fact, the nation was acquainted with many sorrows. Lamentations 1:2 speaks mournfully of Jerusalem after the Israelites had been exiled, "She weeps bitterly during the night, with tears on her cheeks. There is no one to offer her comfort, not one from all her lovers. All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies." And later in vs. 16, "I weep because of these things; my eyes flow with tears. For there is no one nearby to comfort me, no one to keep me alive. My children are desolate because the enemy has prevailed."

And yet with God, we can rest assured that weeping will never be final. As we read Psalm 126 today, we'll see heartache and joy tied up together. Although the first three verses focus solely on the joy resulting from God's rescue and restoration of His people from their exile, we are reminded of their desolation during exile written about in Lamentations. Out of their sorrow came great joy as the Lord restored His people to their promised land.

The second half of the Psalm speaks to their understanding that while full restoration has not been completely realized (restore our fortunes, Lord), they trust that what is sown, even in tears and heartache, will be fruitful through the Lord's good grace.

The intermingling of joy and weeping in this Psalm should be a powerful reminder for us that joy does not necessarily equal happiness. Joy is intimately tied together with hope and faith, all of which require a longing for something that is not fully present right now. What we sow in and through our lives might be through bitter tears, but we can trust that God has been and will be faithful to us, just as He was to the Israelites, again and again. He has begun the restoration process for us through the life, death, and resurrection

of Jesus, and because of that restoration, we can echo this psalm joyfully, even if through tears. "As Henry Nouwen reminds us, "By inviting God into our difficulties, we ground life—even its sad moments—in joy and hope."

Read

Psalm 126

What other instances in the Bible remind us that joy and heartache often coexist? Why is this not a bad thing?

How does Jesus' life remind us that we can have hope and joy, even amidst grief?

Have you ever experienced restoration after being hurt? Can you describe the experience and whether it led to joy (if not necessarily happiness?)

Listen

Josh Groban, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear"



Day 3

Joy to the Margins

Luke 2:8-20



When John the Baptist was born, his father was a priest in the temple. His mother and father were well known. There was a celebration among the people, and he became the "talk of the town" after what had happened to his father (see Luke 1:5-25). Everyone who knew Zechariah, Elizabeth, and new baby John marveled, and "All who heard about him took it to heart saying, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the Lord's hand was with him" (Luke 1:66). John's birth came with an earthly pronouncement fit for a priest's son.

And then there's Jesus.

Jesus, God Himself, took on flesh descended from the line of kings (Matt. 1:1-17), and was born in the humblest of circumstances. He arrived to relatively poor parents, with no earthly fanfare, and not even a proper roof over His head. He was born and laid in the place where the stable animals received their food.

Also, in contrast to John's birth, the announcement of Jesus' birth didn't come to those worshipping at the temple. It didn't come to the priests, or the most religious and holy. It came to those on the margins of society, the ones with whom Jesus would eventually identify Himself (John 10:11). And this glorious announcement didn't come from humans at all!

In the quiet of the night, angels, God's holy messengers, appeared to the sleepy shepherds. They announced news of great joy that is for all the people. "Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord." This news wasn't just for the most holy or pious or important. This news was brought first to the shepherds, the working class of their society. This Savior wasn't lying in a palace, where these shepherds would be a bit out of place and possibly

unwelcome. This baby Messiah was lying in a manger, surrounded by animals. These shepherds would feel right at home as they knelt by that manger throne and joyously worshipped this humble infant King.

We know from Jesus' life and ministry that He continued to move among the humble, the disdained, and even the outcasts. He dined with them. He touched and healed them. He prayed for them. What joy He must have brought them! After seeing the Christ child, Mary, and Joseph just as the angels had said they'd be, the shepherds go and "report the message they were told about this Child." This made the shepherds the first humans to herald this divine news. What an honor to be bestowed upon the humblest of society!

Read

Luke 2:8-20

Of all the people the angels could have visited, why do you suppose God sent them to the shepherds?

The angels interrupted the shepherds' normal lives. They were simply tending sheep when the heavenly host appeared. Has God ever spoken to you in the normal flow of life? As you go through your day today, be mindful of God's presence, and write down where and how you see Him at work.

Listen

The Spirituals Choir, "Hark the Herald" (Sing Out Loud)



Day 4

Joy to the Foreigner

Matthew 2:1-12



Jesus wasn't just visited by the shepherds. Although many nativity scenes may lead us to believe otherwise, the men later termed "Wise Men", or "We Three Kings" arrived on the scene as much as two years later. Matthew doesn't give us a highly detailed description of these men, and perhaps rightly so as the main character of the story is Jesus. But they did play a significant role in the narrative for more than one reason.

What we do know about them from the text and cultural context is that the Magi were from "The East," so they were not Jewish, but Gentiles. And they were not just ordinary Gentiles. They likely came from the court of a foreign king and practiced a religion called Zoroastrianism, using astrology, which is expressly forbidden to the Israelites (Deut. 18:9-14, Isaiah 47:13). These two religions were at odds with each other. And yet, here we have a large group of foreign, religious diplomats of sorts, bringing expensive gifts to this young Jewish toddler, to celebrate Him as King.

God did not send angels to announce to these Magi that a King had been born. He placed a star in the sky: a star they would have noticed and interpreted through their pagan astrology. A star which led them to not only the Jewish Messiah, but the Savior of the world. In God's good grace, He invited the Magi to come worship Him, using a way these men would recognize, despite its forbiddance for the Jews. These Magi were the beginning of God fulfilling His promise that through Abraham's offspring blessing would come to the whole world (Genesis 12:2-3).

And that blessing is Jesus. Joy to the World indeed.

Read

Matthew 2:1-12

God continued to use unexpected people and means in His quest to redeem and restore His creation. The Magi, as practitioners of a pagan and forbidden religion, would be highly unlikely men to worship the Jewish God. And yet God invited them. What other unexpected people are used to carry out God's grace throughout the Bible?

Are there any people in your life that you are certain would never come to worship Jesus? Do the Magi give you any encouragement that God cares for all people and desires that all should worship Him? Pray specifically for those that come to mind for which you think it would be impossible. With God, nothing is impossible.

Listen

Rend Collective, "We Three Kings" (We're Not Lost)



Day 5

Joy to Those Who Wait

Isaiah 40:31, Revelation 21:1-8



Just as the Israelites waited many long and arduous years for the arrival of their promised Messiah, so we too must now wait for His eventual return. Just as they did not know the time of His birth, so we do not know the time or place of His second coming (Mark 13:32-33). In the meantime, we wait with hope. And we prepare our hearts and God's Kingdom in this world. And we wait with joy, because of what God has already done for us through Jesus, and what He's promised to do when He comes back.

John saw a picture of this good restoration and wrote that, "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He 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" (Rev. 21:3-4).

Our joy comes not from our current comfort, but from the promised hope that comes through Jesus. Take heart as you wait, for "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom" (Isaiah 40:28). When the Israelites were tempted to despair at their exile, God reminded them that He is always present, and unlike young men who do get tired and faint, God never tires. He never forgets His promises. Those who hope (also translated trust, wait, expect) in the Lord will renew their strength.

There is joy for those who wait. His name is Jesus.

Read

Isaiah 40:27-31

The Israelites were prone to despair and discouragement as they waited for their deliverance. As you wait for Jesus' return, how do these verses bring you encouragement?

What word does your translation use in verse 31? Is it "hope", "wait", or something else? Now look at this same word across several translations and consider all the slightly different words to help you develop a robust meaning for that phrase.

Revelation 21:1-8

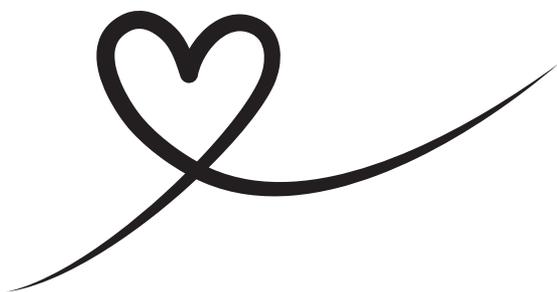
Describe the beautiful restoration that will take place. What joy will there be when all the heartache of this world is wiped away, and replaced fully with God's perfect presence?

What are you most looking forward to about Jesus' return?

Listen

The Afters, "Joy Unto the World"





~ Love ~

Week

FOUR

If we had to narrow the entire story of Scripture down to just one word, that word would have to be **LOVE**. It's appropriate as we bring our Advent preparations to a close that we end with love. A simple, one-syllable word, **LOVE** perfectly encapsulates the theme of God with us. This is what we will explore during this final week of Advent. Here is the over-arching question for this week:

FOCUS QUESTION

Because God is still with us,
how is **LOVE** with us?

Day 1

It All Depends on Love

Matthew 22:36-40; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5



If you had to sum up the Old Testament, how would you do it? Obscure laws, rules, and oppression? Sinners in the hands of an angry God?

When Jesus was asked this question, do you know how He responded? He said the Law and the Prophets (which is a shorthand name for what we know as the Old Testament) can be summed up in two commands. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. "On these two commandments depend all the Law and Prophets" (Matthew 22:39).

Jesus first refers to Deuteronomy 6:5 which is part of The Shema, a daily prayer which reminds God's people that their whole selves belong to God. Loving God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind demands an entire self devoted to God. In Deuteronomy, God continued to tell Moses how often they should talk of these things. He said it's when you "sit...walk...lie down... get up..." In other words, it's all the time. God wants whole people, for the whole of time.

Jesus then referred to Leviticus 19:18 when the Israelites were commanded not to bear a grudge or take vengeance, "but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The Kingdom that Jesus brought to earth as it is in heaven consists of a people who will embody these two things. When we love God with our heart, soul, and mind, every part of us is wholly devoted to Him. And out of this devotion comes a supernatural love for others as ourselves. Our love for others will grow when we draw nearer to and love more deeply the God who loves others so much that He sacrificed Himself for their good (1 John 4:9-10).

The more we love Him, the more we love others. On these two things rest the entire Kingdom of God.

Read

Matthew 22:36-40, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19:18

How would you have summed up the Old Testament before today's reading?

How do love for God and love for others relate to each other? Can you have one without the other? Why or why not?

Are there areas of your life where your love for God seems to be strong and others where it seems to be weak? Considering Deuteronomy 6, why is this a false dichotomy? What steps can you take to walk in love in all that you do?

Watch

Danny Lamonte, Love Delivered video



Day 2

He Loved First

1 John 4:7-12



As we draw nearer to Christmas with each day, our hearts are reminded that God loved us so much that Jesus came to earth as a human infant. He was separated from God the Father, lived a life of humility, and endured suffering on earth to the point of death on a cross. This ultimate act of self-sacrificing love restored our ability to be in a loving relationship with God.

With God though, love is not just something that He does, it is who He is. John reminds us that if we do not love, we do not know God, because *God is love* (1 John 4:8). His followers, too, are to be known for their love, but not just any sort of love. Anyone can love others who are loving toward them (Matthew 5:46-47). Christ followers are to be marked by the same kind of love that God has toward us. This is the kind of love that puts others first, even when (especially when) others have nothing of value to return to us.

This isn't optional for those of us who choose to follow Christ. This is to be our identity. It should permeate every area of our lives. Love for others in the way that God has loved us should be the defining characteristic of our lives, our parenting, our work, our politics, our friendships, our online presence, etc. We didn't love God first. He loved us first. He loved us when all we had to offer in return was filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Created in the image of God but marred and broken by sin, we needed rescue.

We needed Love.

We need Him. And those around us need Him too. And they'll know Him through what they see in us.

Read

1 John 4:7-12

If someone were to ask you to describe God, what would you say? Would "love" be the first thing that comes to mind?

Would the people closest to you say that your life is defined by love?

What do you need to grow in love for God? For others? Talk to God about this now.

Listen

Zach Williams, "Go Tell It on the Mountain"



Day 3

Love the World

John 3:14-17



If the entire Bible can be summed up in two commandments, love God and love others, then the message of the Gospel can be summed up pretty well with John's words: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Note that John does not say that God loved the Israelites, so He gave them His Son. He said He loved the world, and that whoever believes in Him should not perish. John continues in the next verse, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him" (John 3:17).

When God promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation, and through him (Abraham) the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3), this is what God had in mind. When God looked at the serpent in the garden and promised an offspring from Eve that would one day crush evil's head (Genesis 3:15), this is what He meant.

Jesus coming into the world reminds us that God is faithful, even when we are not.

His motivation is love, not condemnation. Those who do not believe are already condemned and God looks on them with love and goes after them, like the shepherd searching for the lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14).

May we have this kind of love and compassion for those around us who don't know Jesus.

Read

John 3:14-17

Is the Gospel a message of love to you? Why or why not?

When are you tempted to forget that God loves the entire world? Do you tend to see the world through a lens of anger and judgment, or a lens of love and compassion?

How have you experienced God's loving faithfulness this Advent? Where do you need to experience it in your life today?

Listen

Maverick City, "The First Noel"



Day 4

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43-47



Loving people who love you in return isn't always easy, but if we're honest, it's pretty easy. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said as much when He said "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?" (Matthew 5:46-47).

Starting in Matthew 5:17, Jesus tells those listening that He hasn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Then He begins to show that God's law is meant to reveal, change, and transform the heart, and not just lead to outward obedience. Every time Jesus says, "You have heard it said," He brings up a law the Israelites would have been familiar with. As He follows up each one with, "But I say to you..." He expands the law to reveal how deeply we need to be transformed.

At the end of Matthew 5, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven...'" An enemy of the Israelites would have been anyone who opposed God, and here Jesus says His followers should not only love their neighbors but go beyond that and love their enemy and pray for those who persecute them. This is what God's children do. They don't just love those who are easy to love. They love those who are opposed to them. This is what we do. When the love of God is our identity, we go beyond loving the loveable. We don't return evil for evil; we don't exchange snide online remarks about our enemies. We don't belittle those who frustrate or annoy us. We don't even seek vengeance on those who seek our harm.

Just as Christ loved us before we were lovely, and we were therefore made lovely, we love our enemies in word and deed. In so doing, we show the world who this God of love really is.

Read

Matthew 5:43-47

Consider Jesus' powerful words in Matthew 5. They are more than mere words since Jesus loved his enemies even unto death. How does that truth encourage you today?

Are there any individuals or groups of people you struggle to love? Why? How can God's unconditional love for you change the way you see them?

Think about how you became a Christian. It was probably because someone in your life loved you, not because they argued well. First, thank God for this person/people. Second, ask God for the grace to follow this example in order to love others well.

Listen

For King and Country, "Little Drummer Boy"



Day 5

Love Endures Forever

Psalm 136



On this last day before we celebrate Christmas, we give thanks.

We give thanks to our God for who He is and all He has done, and all He will do. He has done great wonders. He has made the heavens and the earth, given us night and day, and all beauty on the earth. He has rescued His people from captivity; with strength He parted the Red Sea and delivered His people into safety from harm.

He removed opposing kings and gave His people their promised land. He remembered His people in their low estate and rescued them from all their enemies.

He paved the way for the Messiah to come, to rescue His people, and all who would believe in Him. He allowed Jesus to be the sacrificial Lamb for our sins, that we might be redeemed. He raised Jesus from the dead and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. He uses the weak and lowly for His good purposes. He heals our hurts, our trauma, our illnesses. He comforts us when we mourn and grieve and cry. He helps us help others to know wholeness and safety. He helps us love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and He helps us love others as ourselves.

Today, on this last day before we celebrate Christmas, we give thanks, for His love endures forever. From the beginning of time, until He returns and makes all things new, His love endures forever.

We now wait with hope, we prepare, we rejoice, and we love Him and others, because His love endures forever.

Read

Psalm 136

What can you give thanks for today? Talk to God about it.

Christmas reminds us that we still wait. We wait for Jesus' second coming. As you wait, what specific promises of God that you've read throughout this Advent season can you hold tightly?

Spend a few moments reflecting on what God did in and through you this Advent season. Take time to talk to God and enjoy his presence.

Listen

Chris Tomlin, "Joy to the World" (Unspeakable Joy)





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printed November 2022