

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

*the advent guide for
sinners and sufferers alike*



THE
HALLOWS
CHURCH

The Gospel of Luke

THE ADVENT GUIDE FOR SINNERS AND SUFFERERS ALIKE

2021 Devotional

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THE
HALLOWS
CHURCH



INTRODUCTION

Dear Hallows Family,

Every year around Christmas time, my family would read the Gospel of Luke together. Sometimes it was in our living room; other times it was at church. The second chapter of Luke was probably the Scripture I heard the most. I didn't appreciate it much then — I just wanted to get to the gifts! It wasn't until much later that I realized the gift was truly Jesus. As a child, I did not realize the severity of sin or the weight of suffering. I didn't realize what it meant that this child we read about every year was God himself stepping out of heaven to be tempted by sin and to defeat it through suffering on the cross.

While the book of Luke is the story of Jesus, it is also the story of us. It shows the difference that Jesus made in the lives of sinners and sufferers. In the same vein, the whole story of Scripture is the story of God, but also the story of us. It tells us who God is, who we are, and why we so desperately needed Jesus to rescue us. Over the next 4 weeks we will walk through selected passages of that story and see what it has to say about hope, peace, joy, and love. These reflections on Scripture have been written by sinners and sufferers like you and me, for sinners and sufferers like you and me. Our prayer this Advent season is that, while you are eagerly awaiting Christmas, your mind's attention and heart's affections would be stirred toward Jesus and eagerly wait for His triumphant return as we reflect on His humble entry. **Hallelujah, what a Savior!**

- Stephen Searles, Hallows Church Planter in Residence

advent playlist



Scan for the
Spotify playlist

Angels We Have Heard on High - The Modern Post
Joy to the World (Joyful, Joyful) - Phil Wickham
Come Thou Long Expected Jesus - Meredith Andrews
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel - Sovereign Grace Music
Emmanuel (Every Promise Yes in Him) - Caroline Cobb
O, Holy Night - Chris Tomlin
Silent Night - Bifrost Arts, Dianne Birch
O Come All Ye Faithful - Rend Collective
God With Us - All Sons & Daughters
Praise the Name Emmanuel - Grace Snellville Worship
This is Love - Paul Baloche, Kathryn Scott
Behold Him - The Sing Team
Come and Stand Amazed - The Modern Post
What Child is This - Ghost Ship
The First Noel - The Sing Team
Joy Has Dawned - Kings (MHM)
Go Tell It On the Mountain - Shane & Shane
Hark the Herald Angels Sing / King of Heaven - Paul Baloche
Child of Glory - The Sing Team
All Glory Be to Christ - Kings Kaleidoscope

hope WEEK ONE

hope

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

1 Peter 1:3-13

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. 5 You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 You rejoice in this, even though now for a short time, if necessary, you suffer grief in various trials 7 so that the proven character of your faith—more valuable than gold which, though perishable, is refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; though not seeing him now, you believe in him, and you rejoice with inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 because you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who prophesied about the grace that would come to you, searched and carefully investigated. 11 They inquired into what time or what circumstances the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when he testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 12 It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you. These things have now been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—angels long to catch a glimpse of these things.

13 Therefore, with your minds ready for action, be sober-minded and set your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.



Through Christ, we are given a living hope that rewrites the past, present, and future.

REFLECTION

The holiday season brings with it a plethora of great binge-worthy shows, but also a continual stream of brain cell-depleting Hallmark frivolities. What annoys me most about “Hallmark”

stories is how inconsistent they are with real life. But it's not the happy endings that upset me. I believe the stories that hold the most "true to life" kind of truth are the ones with happy endings: when the prince saves the princess, when the beauty transforms the beast, and when all is made right. When there is a wedding and a happily-ever-after. Traditionally, Advent—a Latin translation of the Greek word *parousia* meaning "arrival"—was a time of expectant anticipation of Christ's second coming. It is a season of waiting when we look forward to the celebration of God becoming flesh, of Christ born in a manger, but also anticipate the day when He will come again to set all things right. This good news is, as J.R.R. Tolkien says, the "underlying Reality" (Timothy Keller, *King's Cross*, 228), the One True Story behind all other stories, the ultimate happily-ever-after that should shape our imaginations in such a way that it changes how we see everything: past, present, and future.

In this passage, Peter goes to great lengths to speak of the amazing hope we have in Christ by the Spirit. It is a vibrant, growing, and lasting hope of an inheritance kept for us by God. It is a sure hope because it is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is no wish-dream, no Disneyland fairytale. Our hope is based on the finished work of the God-man Jesus, the culmination of all the pages of history, of the prophecies of old and the dreams of the past come true in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The hope we have in Christ rewrites all that came before Him, for all Scripture speaks His Name (v. 10-11; Luke 24:26-27). The hope we have in Christ invades our present, rewriting the trials we face, for we have a Suffering Savior who walks with us (v. 8-9) and who uses even the most difficult moments of life for His glory and our good (v. 6-7). The hope we have in Christ rewrites our future, for we look forward to the day when we will meet face to face with the source of our hope and the culmination of our inheritance: God Himself. As this amazing hope captures our imaginations, we become a people who *live the future now*, a people ready for the Christ who has come and will come again.

- Jake Hess

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » How often do you meditate on the good news of Jesus? Is it a story that captivates your imagination? Why or why not?
- » What do you do when faced with your own suffering or the suffering of those around you? How might you find comfort in the God who suffers with you?
- » The literal translation of verse 13 is "gird up the loins of your mind," which is a word-picture based on the Middle-Eastern practice of tying one's long robes around the waist in preparation for physical activity. How is the hope we have in Christ shaping how you go about your day-to-day responsibilities? Do you have a mind that is alert and ready for the activities of the reigning and coming King?

hope

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

Psalm 9

I will thank the Lord with all my heart; I will declare all your wondrous works. 2 I will rejoice and boast about you; I will sing about your name, Most High. 3 When my enemies retreat, they stumble and perish before you. 4 For you have upheld my just cause; you are seated on your throne as a righteous judge. 5 You have rebuked the nations: You have destroyed the wicked; you have erased their name forever and ever. 6 The enemy has come to eternal ruin you have uprooted the cities, and the very memory of them has perished. 7 But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for judgment. 8 And he judges the world with righteousness; he executes judgment on the nations with fairness. 9 The Lord is a refuge for the persecuted, a refuge in times of trouble. 10 Those who know your name trust in you because you have not abandoned those who seek you, Lord. 11 Sing to the Lord, who dwells in Zion; proclaim his deeds among the nations. 12 For the one who seeks an accounting for bloodshed remembers them; he does not forget the cry of the oppressed.

13 Be gracious to me, Lord; consider my affliction at the hands of those who hate me. Lift me up from the gates of death, 14 so that I may declare all your praises. I will rejoice in your salvation within the gates of Daughter Zion. 15 The nations have fallen into the pit they made; their foot is caught in the net they have concealed. 16 The Lord has made himself known; he has executed justice, snaring the wicked by the work of their hands. Higgsion. Selah

17 The wicked will return to Sheol—all the nations that forget God. 18 For the needy will not always be forgotten; the hope of the oppressed will not perish forever. 19 Rise up, Lord! Do not let mere humans prevail; let the nations be judged in your presence. 20 Put terror in them, Lord; let the nations know they are only humans. Selah



True hope is ever-accessible to us because of the eternal faithfulness of God, but it takes discipline on our part to put hope into practice in our daily lives.

REFLECTION

The psalms are filled to the brim with encouragements to hope, but not just hope for the sake of hope, or to hope in any earthly circumstance, but specifically to hope in God (Psalms 16, 31, 33, 38, 42, 119, 130, 147, the list goes on and on). But what does that look like on a practical

level? The opening verses of Psalm 9 point us to an exercise in hope that I think we should consider:

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart” – I personally find it difficult to give my full attention to anything. Even in prayer, I find it hard not to get distracted by to-do lists, deadlines, or song lyrics. Being wholehearted in front of God seems difficult, time-consuming, and honestly a little scary. But wholeheartedness doesn’t mean pretending that we have it all together. Instead, God asks us to bring our whole sinful, doubtful, questioning, worried selves before Him, and let him teach us how to surrender our whole selves to him.

“I will recount all of your wonderful deeds” – The psalmist praises God for bringing about a specific victory (v. 3-6) but a few verses later prays for God to help him in a different circumstance where victory hasn’t yet been secured (v. 13-14). Taking the time to praise God for what he has done—for example, through journaling—helps teach our minds and hearts that God is trustworthy in any present trouble.

“I will sing praise to your name, O Most High” – If COVID taught me anything about gathered worship, it was that there’s no replacement for singing praise to God in community. There’s just something deeply moving and special about adding your voice to many, all singing words of faith, whether you’re one of the ones on the mountaintop, or whether the truth of the words of the song feels so far away in the midst of your own struggles.

I am encouraged by the psalmist’s desire to praise God when He has clearly won the victory—giving wholehearted thanks, writing it down/telling others, and singing songs of praise. But the real hope doesn’t only come in those mountaintop moments; instead, it shines brightest when we can hold fast to the promises of God even when the circumstances happening around us don’t look like victory. May our hope be rooted in an eternally faithful God who will fulfill every promise He has made.

- Emily Schutsky

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » When was the last time you devoted your full attention to God without having any distractions around? Challenge yourself to take some time to just sit with Him, praising Him for what He has done (in prayer or in song!).
- » Do you have a practice of “recounting all of [God’s] wonderful deeds” (v. 1)? Start a habit of writing down answered prayers, moments of grace, or even your testimony, and don’t hesitate to revisit those pages in moments of doubt and despair.
- » Do you find it easier to have hope in God in the mountaintop or valley moments? What about the everyday, mundane moments? What about today, right now? Ask God to show you where you are placing your hope right now and to help you fix your eyes on Him, the true source of our eternal hope.

hope

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1

Isaiah 40:21-31

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not considered the foundations of the earth?

22 God is enthroned above the circle of the earth; its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like thin cloth and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

23 He reduces princes to nothing and makes judges of the earth like a wasteland.

24 They are barely planted, barely sown, their stem hardly takes root in the ground when he blows on them and they wither and a whirlwind carries them away like stubble.

25 “To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal?” asks the Holy One.

26 Look up and see! Who created these? He brings out the stars by number; he calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength, not one of them is missing.

27 Jacob, why do you say, and Israel, why do you assert, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my claim is ignored by my God”?

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the whole earth. He never becomes faint or weary; there is no limit to his understanding.

29 He gives strength to the faint and strengthens the powerless.

30 Youths may become faint and weary, and young men stumble and fall,

31 but those who trust in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not become weary, they will walk and not faint.



We are often content with insignificant things, but God is faithful to give us the “real thing” we really need that is only found in Jesus.

REFLECTION

I was recently listening to a song by Cody Fry called “Pictures of Mountains” when I was struck by his lyrics. In his singer-songwriter piano ballad, Fry reflects on seeking something real but remaining content in representations. He longs for the simple joy of discovery, yet chooses to read reviews instead. He longs for friendship, yet contents himself with online posts. At first, his loneliness and fear prevent him from seeking the real thing:

*It's almost as if I have been everywhere | Almost tasted the food, almost breathed in the air
But nobody's heart ever pounded | From that feeling of being surrounded
By pictures of mountains*

As the story-song finds its end, his entire perspective is changed when at last he experiences the real thing. The pictures of mountains are confronted with reality. What he had tried to soothe his satisfaction with finds its end as his heart meets what he had been chasing after:
*I thought that I knew what a mountain was like | 'Til I stood in the valley and looked up at the sky
And I felt my heart beating faster | That feeling I'd been chasing after
Is something that no one can capture | In pictures of mountains*

What I found so telling about this song was the human condition of settling for insignificant things when we are offered the real thing in Christ. In our human nature, we would rather hear about something good than experience the real thing.

Such was the same for Israel. Years were spent talking about a God who once chose them for Himself, they no longer sought Him but settled for stories of the past; yet, there they were, longing for the real thing, but had forgotten how to find Him. However, just because they had forgotten their God doesn't mean He had forgotten them. Through His prophet Isaiah, God confronts Israel's contentment of settling for a "hidden" God when He had been there all along, as if they had been looking at pictures of mountains in a valley surrounded by the real thing:
[read verses 27-29 on the left.]

It is within our nature to settle on insignificant things in life. But, friends, have hope today that God will not leave you there in the longing. Our hope is that the all-sovereign, all-sufficient God of the universe will jolt our hearts toward His and recapture our imaginations when we've forgotten our true love. Jesus was hidden and ignored by God, feeling an unmet longing, so we would never have to. His incarnation, death, and resurrection sealed our position to forever stand in the reality of God's presence. In the seasons when we become content to look down at our pictures, His Spirit will lift our heads to look up at the mountains.

- Mark Smith

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Read Isaiah 40:21-31 and reflect on the questions the Lord answers to Israel. What is the ultimate aim in asking Israel all these questions?
- » How is God's sovereignty reflected in this passage?
- » Who is hope promised to?

hope

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

Romans 8:18-30

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation eagerly waits with anticipation for God's sons to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility—not willingly, but because of him who subjected it—in the hope 21 that the creation itself will also be set free from the bondage to decay into the glorious freedom of God's children. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together with labor pains until now. 23 Not only that, but we ourselves who have the Spirit as the firstfruits—we also groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 Now in this hope we were saved, but hope that is seen is not hope, because who hopes for what he sees? 25 Now if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with patience.

26 In the same way the Spirit also helps us in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us[a] with inexpressible groanings. 27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. 30 And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.



The exhilarating anticipation hope brings helps us to persevere through suffering.

REFLECTION

I am not a patient person. Like, literally not at all. My wife, Jess, conversely, is. She would never have imagined opening Christmas presents before Christmas morning, and then she married me. The fact that we have all these gifts just sitting there under the tree already bought and paid for and we are WAITING to open them has always driven me crazy! We got married 7 days before Christmas, and would be on our honeymoon on Christmas Day, so I got my way on our first Christmas together—we got to open everything early. It. Was. Glorious. Turns out Jess is a great gift buyer. The gifts she got me were so much better than what I would have bought for myself. Honestly, they were so great that they probably were worth waiting for.

Every year I now have this hope, this exhilarating anticipation of the amazing gifts Jess will give me. And now, as those gifts start piling up under the tree, I can persevere all the way to Christmas to open them because I know they will be great. (Ok, so not all the way to Christmas. I beg her and wear her down for weeks and she normally lets me open one on Christmas Eve. But the truth still holds that because of hope I can wait).

How much greater is our hope in Jesus? In this passage, Paul says that all of creation has been groaning in anticipation like a woman in labor for Christ's return. The Kingdom He is ushering in is so much better than the kingdoms we try to build ourselves. So, friends, let us sit in exhilarating anticipation knowing that one day our King is coming to set us free from our current suffering and to set the world in order once and for all. How great a hope that is.

Also, let the person in your family that is like me open a gift on Christmas Eve. It's really REALLY hard to wait.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Recount a story in your life when you were able to hold on because of hope.
- » How does the hope of Jesus' return change the way we should live our lives today?
- » What suffering are you most hopeful will end?

hope

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3

Psalm 33

Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous ones; praise from the upright is beautiful.

2 Praise the Lord with the lyre; make music to him with a ten-stringed harp.

3 Sing a new song to him; play skillfully on the strings, with a joyful shout.

4 For the word of the Lord is right, and all his work is trustworthy.

5 He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the Lord's unfailing love.

6 The heavens were made by the word of the Lord, and all the stars, by the breath of his mouth.

7 He gathers the water of the sea into a heap; he puts the depths into storehouses.

8 Let the whole earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.

9 For he spoke, and it came into being; he commanded, and it came into existence.

10 The Lord frustrates the counsel of the nations; he thwarts the plans of the peoples.

11 The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart from generation to generation.

12 Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord— the people he has chosen to be his own possession!

13 The Lord looks down from heaven; he observes everyone.

14 He gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth from his dwelling place.

15 He forms the hearts of them all; he considers all their works.

16 A king is not saved by a large army; a warrior will not be rescued by great strength.

17 The horse is a false hope for safety; it provides no escape by its great power.

18 But look, the Lord keeps his eye on those who fear him— those who depend on his faithful love

19 to rescue them from death and to keep them alive in famine.

20 We wait for the Lord; he is our help and shield.

21 For our hearts rejoice in him because we trust in his holy name.

22 May your faithful love rest on us, Lord, for we put our hope in you.



Jesus is the only true source of hope.

REFLECTION

God wired us for hope. I think one of the places this is most evident in our culture is in the stories we enjoy and embrace. Whether these stories are in the print of books or on a screen, hope is a common thread throughout. Something bad is happening, some evil has run rampant, and the people are looking for hope. Oftentimes, hope comes in the form of an unlikely hero—the orphaned boy who lived, the fatherless girl from the poorest place, the abandoned boy with murky, hidden origins. Even in that, it seems that God has placed in our hearts this idea of unexpected, unlikely heroes.

In verses 16-17 of Psalm 33, the psalmist points out that even the seemingly mightiest earthly saviors will fail. Great armies and human strength cannot save. Even if they save in the moment, they cannot save us from the ultimate evil. God alone is the only one powerful enough to save us from the evils of sin and death. And who does He choose to use in his salvation plan? The most unexpected and unlikely hero of all—Jesus—the only true source of hope.

- Jess Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » What earthly saviors do you falsely put your hope in?
- » Think of one person in your life who is still looking for the hope that Jesus has to offer. Pray for opportunities to share your hope in Christ with them this Christmas season.

peace WEEK TWO

peace

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, 4 endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope. 5 This hope will not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. 8 But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath. 10 For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11 And not only that, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation..



*Christ has brought our souls peace
through reconciliation with God.*

REFLECTION

Have you ever raised 6 boys? No? Me neither, but it sounds like a nightmare. That, however, is the task that my mother and stepfather took on when they were married in 2009. Admittedly some of us were already grown, but none of us was “raised”. At 21 I was the oldest, the youngest was 6, and we all lived in the same house. It was chaos. I’ve never read *Lord of the Flies* but I’m assuming it was kind of like that from all the movies and television shows that have referenced it. All 6 of us boys, plus the 2 adults, all had our own agendas, fears, preferences, schedules, pet peeves, and egos. These things tended to overlap and clash in the weirdest of ways, but the bottom line is that 8 people in a 5-bedroom 2.5 bath house is the truest form of chaos you could imagine.

Earth is very similar to that crowded house. Everyone has their own agendas, fears, preferences, etc. So, we are at odds all the time. How far we have come from the perfect tranquility of Eden. This chaos is synonymous with sin. While Genesis gives us only the briefest description of this beautiful garden God had created earth to be, we know it was in order. In fact, Genesis 1 is literally a list of things God did to bring order out of chaos. The most chaotic thing ended up being us, rebelling against God to promote our own agenda. This act caused so much more chaos than we could have ever imagined. Sin brought death and disease and suffering. But the Bible tells us that, before time began, God had a plan to bring order, or peace, back out of the chaos. So, He sent Jesus to us. Here Paul tells us that when we were enemies of God, He sent Jesus to reconcile us to Himself. What kind of enemy does that? Well, no enemy at all, but a loving Father and Creator who would tell us that “blessed are the peacemakers.”

As much as my parents prayed for peace (and finally have it now that all of us have moved out), we should continue to pray that the world knows the peace that Jesus offers to us.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Where do you desperately need to let the peace of God reign in your life?
- » How have you seen the effects of chaos in the world this week?
- » If the opposing force of peace is chaos, what steps can you take to reclaim some order in your life?

peace

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7

Isaiah 32:1-2, 14-18

Indeed, a king will reign righteously, and rulers will rule justly.

*2 Each will be like a shelter from the wind, a refuge from the rain,
like flowing streams in a dry land and the shade of a massive rock in an arid land.*

*14 For the palace will be deserted, the busy city abandoned. The hill and the watchtower will become
barren places forever, the joy of wild donkeys, and a pasture for flocks,
15 until the Spirit from on high is poured out on us. Then the desert will become an orchard,
and the orchard will seem like a forest.*

16 Then justice will inhabit the wilderness, and righteousness will dwell in the orchard.

*17 The result of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quiet confidence
forever.*

18 Then my people will dwell in a peaceful place, in safe and secure dwellings.



*The rule of King Jesus establishes a
Spirit-empowered Kingdom of peace.*

REFLECTION

Like many of us growing up, I was a kid fueled by my imagination. I could spend countless hours whacking away at trees with a stick and have the time of my life. But does growing up mean we have to leave our imaginations behind us? As we grow older, it can be easy to allow our brain-space to be replaced with the cares and worries of “real” life: picking up the kids from school, watering the plants (great, that one by the window is dying again), and paying bills, not to mention the eternal litany of our screens, which can easily fill up every free moment of our waking hours. I would argue, however, that the Christian life requires a bit of holy imagination. Imagination is not the work of “make-believe” but the creative act of making the unseen seen, of animating the hopes and dreams that delve to the depths of what is really real. As those who live between the two advents of Christ—His first coming as a babe in a manger, and His second when He will return to set all things right—we must be those who, in and by the Spirit, creatively live in light of His Kingdom that has come and is coming.

In this passage, the prophet Isaiah invites us into this holy imagination. He speaks to Israel, a small nation caught between the violent world powers of their time. It was a world filled with chaos and death, a world much like our own. Yet, Isaiah speaks of a different sort of king (v. 1): a king who cares for his people (v. 2). This king brings a new kind of Kingdom, leading a new kind of people empowered by the Spirit (v. 15). The fruit of the Spirit is a healed earth, its justice and righteousness, which leads to peace, safety, and quiet rest (v. 15-18).

What is amazing for us today is that this Kingdom of peace has already been won for us by the work of King Jesus on the cross. We have the Spirit, growing in us the fruit of justice. We are covered by a righteousness not our own, but the very righteousness of the King who has come and is coming. Though it takes some imagination, we do have a real and lasting peace even now, in the midst of our troubles, as we place our trust in the One who will have the last word (John 16:33). Even so, just like the ancient Israelites, we are still waiting: waiting for the coming of our King when every brokenness will be healed and peace will cover all creation. Until that day, we live with holy imaginations, bringing into the present the future Kingdom to come.

- Jake Hess

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Do you find it difficult to quiet your mind and meditate on the promises of God? Why or why not? What keeps you from doing so?
- » How might you live in light of God’s Kingdom of peace even now? What are some creative ways to do so this Advent season of waiting?

peace

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8

John 14:27-29

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful. 28 You have heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29 I have told you now before it happens so that when it does happen you may believe.



The peace of Jesus is constant and everlasting.

REFLECTION

If you ask any beauty pageant contestant what society needs the most, their answer will most likely be world peace. Christian or not, each one of us feels the brokenness of this world, and we all long for resolutions that bring peace. In New Testament times, Roman peace was seen as a peace that would be ushered in by force. Sadly, we can see how our world today is no different. Our world can sometimes use violence and oppression as ways to bring peace, but these actions only contribute to brokenness rather than remedy brokenness.

The peace that Jesus provides is different from the peace the world provides. Why? Because the peace of God does not come through power but through weakness. It was a humble death on the cross that made it possible for us to experience God's peace. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus has secured us with the peace of God—a peace that lasts. When Jesus told His disciples He was giving them His peace, He had just finished telling them that the Holy Spirit would be with them after His departure. Even though Jesus was physically leaving His disciples, they would be left with Jesus's peace because the presence of God would remain with them. Unlike the remedies of this world that fail to consistently bring us relief and comfort, the presence of the Holy Spirit within believers means that we have the peace of God with us always.

Even though we live in a broken world, our hearts do not have to be troubled or afraid. As believers, we have the peace of God that washes over us when we are anxious. The peaceful presence of God comforts us when we are overwhelmed and restless. And in the moments we look at our world and long for peace, we can be reminded how God has provided a remedy for the brokenness of our world. The peace provided through salvation in Christ echoes the peace that is to come. When Christ returns, all of creation will be made new. The brokenness of this world will be repaired by God's grace. This future reality relieves our hearts when we feel troubled or fearful in the present. Our God has gifted us His peace, and we will experience His peace for all eternity.

- Alexa Hess

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » What does it say about God's character that He wants to give us His constant peace
- » To where do you turn to find peace? How can you turn to Jesus when you desire peace?

peace

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9

Ephesians 2:11-22

So, then, remember that at one time you were Gentiles in the flesh—called “the uncircumcised” by those called “the circumcised,” which is done in the flesh by human hands. 12 At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, 15 he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace. 16 He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death. 17 He came and proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So, then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.



Remember that while at one time you were without hope and without God, now you can live in and from the peace the Son of God offers.

REFLECTION

Before and afters: don’t you love them? From following Instagram accounts detailing home remodels to listening to the testimonies of those wowed by the newest, greatest health supplement, we can’t help but take pause when something offers a picture of drastic change and potential for a “better” version of life. In today’s Scripture focus, we see that even God wants us to remember “befores” and “afters.” In particular, He wants us to remember what life was like before Christ acted on our behalf. By remembering and comparing the “before and

after picture” often, we can live in and from the peace God has attained for us through His Son, Jesus.

So often the journeys of those we follow in Scripture, as well as our own, experience sobering consequences of forgetfulness, whether it’s forgetting God’s wise commands, gracious promises, holy character, or glorious works. Forgetfulness is our default, so we have to fight to remember—daily, sometimes moment-by-moment—the gospel, and that it does, indeed, make a difference in all of life. As you spend time in Ephesians 2:11-22 today, take note and allow yourself to be humbled by the reality of who you were before Christ and the accompanying tension, fear, and distress of living apart from Him. Do you see it: the hopelessness and unrest between you and fellow human beings, as well as with God? Go through the entire passage, circling, underlining, recalling, and meditating upon the isolation and disturbance you have been saved from—a life without peace.

Now, go back through the passage and take note of the turning point in verse 13: “But now in Christ Jesus...” Underline and star all you are and all the peace you can experience now. Notice also that all the benefits and blessings you are given are not by any active work of your own; it is God entirely who is coming, creating, proclaiming, reconciling, building, doing, and making. The only work for you and me is to remember. Let us remember that Christ Jesus came to tear down any wall of hostility so that you and I may enjoy the peace that comes with unity, fellowship, and intimacy with Him and one another. This is our “after” potential: being securely, wonderfully built up together as His dwelling place. This is our testimony of transformation to the watching world. May we remember to live in and from this gift of peace when our lives are challenged with any type of disturbance, insecurity, disunity, or fear.

- Kim Arthur

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » What are our experiences and realities apart from God’s saving work on our behalf? (List all the ways throughout the entire passage)
- » What are some of the blessings and benefits we experience now in Christ because of Christ? (List all the ways throughout the entire passage)
- » Consider God’s desire that you would live in unity—relationships marked with peace and fellowship—with other believers (verse 15) and Himself (verse 16). How do His work and His desires help you to face recent fears, insecurity, apathy, distance, or even hostility with God or your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?

peace

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10

Isaiah 9:1-7

Nevertheless, the gloom of the distressed land will not be like that of the former times when he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali. But in the future he will bring honor to the way of the sea, to the land east of the Jordan, and to Galilee of the nations.

2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.

3 You have enlarged the nation and increased its joy. The people have rejoiced before you as they rejoice at harvest time and as they rejoice when dividing spoils.

4 For you have shattered their oppressive yoke and the rod on their shoulders, the staff of their oppressor, just as you did on the day of Midian.

5 For every trampling boot of battle and the bloodied garments of war will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child will be born for us, a son will be given to us, and the government will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

7 The dominion will be vast, and its prosperity will never end.

He will reign on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish and sustain it with justice and righteousness from now on and forever. The zeal of the Lord of Armies will accomplish this.



The peace found in the creation of God's Kingdom will usher in joy like we have never known.

REFLECTION

One of my favorite musicals has a line that says, “The opposite of war isn’t peace, it’s creation.” This line has always stuck with me. When we think of the peace that Jesus brings, it comes with not just an end to war and oppression but the creation of a new kingdom—a kingdom in which the government will rest on His shoulders and the weight of sin and suffering will be no more! This new government will be sustained with justice and righteousness, and joy will pour forth from the people.

We live in turbulent political times where so many look to governmental figures to save them from things that those same figures need saving from as well. We are continually let down by those we have elected because they are fallible. Their governance cannot match the justice and righteousness that our souls long for. We are blessed to live in a country where our government is not oppressive, but millions of our fellow believers do not have that same reality. So, while we can relate to these words, think how much more they mean to those who hope for the peace that Jesus brings as they live under true oppression. The prophet Isaiah was writing to a people who knew, and would know almost constantly, governmental oppression. In fact, Jesus is born into a time of great governmental oppression for His people. The Messiah, or Savior, foretold in this passage was supposed to end their oppression and finally grant peace to the people of God. But, instead of freeing them from governmental oppression right then, Jesus came to establish a new kingdom that would reign eternal and would free His chosen people from a much greater oppression: sin and death.

In this Advent season, how joyful can we be for the peace that God sent to us in Jesus! This peace is creating a new kingdom where all sin and suffering will cease, and justice and righteousness will reign supreme.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » How can we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who cannot openly celebrate this Advent season?
- » How have you allowed a lack of peace to steal your joy?
- » What would God’s peace on earth look like?

The logo features the word "joy" in a dark red, lowercase, cursive-style font. The letter "j" has a red dot above it. To the left and right of the word "joy" are decorative clusters of three dots each, arranged in a triangular pattern. The top dot is red, and the two bottom dots are green. Below the word "joy", the words "WEEK" and "THREE" are written in a dark grey, uppercase, sans-serif font, separated by a wide space.

joy
WEEK THREE

joy

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13

Isaiah 12

On that day you will say: "I will give thanks to you, Lord, although you were angry with me. Your anger has turned away, and you have comforted me.

2 Indeed, God is my salvation; I will trust him and not be afraid, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my song. He has become my salvation."

3 You will joyfully draw water from the springs of salvation,

4 and on that day you will say, "Give thanks to the Lord; proclaim his name!

Make his works known among the peoples. Declare that his name is exalted.

5 Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things. Let this be known throughout the earth.

6 Cry out and sing, citizen of Zion, for the Holy One of Israel is among you in his greatness."



Joy is found when we continually drink in the forgiveness, comfort, and salvation of God – our Living Water.

REFLECTION

Most days my house is filled with noise. The dinner table is often surrounded by boisterous voices clamoring to be heard. Erratic clanging and crashing echoes off the floors and ceilings as kids play. On good days, though, our house is full with song and laughter as well. My children sing impromptu songs of praise when they receive the dinner they were craving. My youngest sings songs of love to her stuffed animals. My son cheerfully hums to himself as he creates scenes of grand adventure in his mind. Their joy is apparently incomplete without the accompaniment of some type of sound or song cuing the rest of the world in that something good, something right, something enjoyable is occurring.

In this passage, Isaiah reflects upon the day when each "citizen of Zion" (God's redeemed) is bursting with gratitude and joy as they "draw water from the springs of salvation" (verse 3) –

when they can't help but sings songs of praise considering who God is and what He has done. Just think about how God has removed all obstacles to lasting joy: in His mercy, God turns his anger away from the sinner (12:1b), which we know is thanks to God's gracious intervention through Jesus (Ephesians 2:3-8, 13-14). Sit in that for a moment. God's righteous anger, the reason for our guilt, the source of our shame is...forgiven. Everything in you and me that deserves the wrath of God is atoned for by the willing sacrifice of God Himself. As if that wasn't enough, however, Isaiah reminds us that God continues to move towards us to comfort us when we are afraid, when we are weak, when we need rescue (12:1b-2).

So let us continuously draw from Jesus, our Living Water (John 7:37-38; John 4:10-42), and as we drink from the springs that will not run dry, may our joy not be contained. May it swell up and burst forth in praise as the smaller things we enjoy in life so often do. Consider the numerous opportunities to proclaim God's name as you hear stories of others suffering, crippled with fear, and heavy with weakness. Publicly rejoice in how God has been graciously at work for generations upon generations and continues to be right here, right now. Let His works, His greatness, and His name (Isaiah 12:4-6) be made known throughout the earth, including the places you currently dwell.

- Kim Arthur

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Do you find it easier or more common to sing the praises of the temporal things you find enjoyment in now rather than the One who provides eternal joy?
- » It is possible to drink from other wells when we sense a thirst for life, for strength, for enjoyment, for comfort – even as a believer. If you feel dry or lacking desire to sing to the Lord (verse 5) and cry out about His greatness (verse 6), is it possible you have not been intentionally, continuously drawing water from springs of salvation (verse 3)? If not, how will you choose to respond now?
- » He addresses our guilt with forgiveness, the weight of suffering with comfort, the enslavement of fear, sin, and weakness with salvation – all of this when we “joyfully draw water from the springs of salvation” (12:3). Who in your life needs to experience this?

joy

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14

John 16:19-24

Jesus knew they wanted to ask him, and so he said to them, “Are you asking one another about what I said, ‘In a little while, you will not see me; again in a little while, you will see me’? 20 Truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice. You will become sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy. 21 When a woman is in labor, she has pain because her time has come. But when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the suffering because of the joy that a person has been born into the world. 22 So you also have sorrow now. But I will see you again. Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy from you.

23 “In that day you will not ask me anything. Truly I tell you, anything you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. 24 Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.



Joy will win because Jesus wins.

REFLECTION

As I write this, I can feel my sweet baby bouncing around in my belly. In a few short weeks (maybe even by the time you are reading this), Stephen and I will finally get to hold this miracle in our arms. Of course, between now and then I'll have to go through [insert dramatic music here]...labor.

Want to know something crazy? I'm excited about labor. Looking forward to it even. I know, I know. It's going to be painful. Maybe the worst pain I've ever experienced in my life. But here's the thing. After I go through labor, I get to hold our baby—a sweet, miraculous gift from God that I have been praying and hoping for my entire life. Even more than that, Stephen will get to hold our baby. I think about that moment so often. I cannot wait to see his face light up as he looks at our child for the first time. The joy in that moment will be immeasurable. The anguish I may have felt in the hours leading up to that moment will pale in comparison. Joy will win.

Jesus uses the example of labor and birth in this passage to mirror His own death and resurrection. The disciples were going to experience the true sorrow of His death. But the pain of that sorrow would not last. Jesus would conquer the grave, ultimately conquering the power of sin and death. Their sorrow would turn into joy—a joy that Jesus says no one can take away. A joy that we too can now experience if we choose Jesus. Joy will win because Jesus wins.

- Jess Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Recount a time in your life when God turned your sorrow into joy.
- » In what ways do you let circumstances/people/the world take your joy from you? What can you do to refocus on the joy of Jesus during this season?

joy

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15

Psalm 16:5-11

Lord, you are my portion and my cup of blessing; you hold my future.

*6 The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.*

7 I will bless the Lord who counsels me— even at night when my thoughts trouble me.

8 I always let the Lord guide me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

9 Therefore my heart is glad and my whole being rejoices; my body also rests securely.

10 For you will not abandon me to Sheol; you will not allow your faithful one to see decay.

11 You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures.



*How joyous is it that God holds our future in His hands
and guides our paths!*

REFLECTION

Plotting out courses each semester was one of the WORST things for me in college. I went to A LOT of college, like a lot. I kept switching degrees and schools so every time that happened, I would have to look at what courses transferred, what new prerequisites each program had, what courses were offered in which semesters, how I could arrange those classes so I wasn't taking too many 8 AM classes, how I could have the best professors, and... well, you get the picture. It was anything but joyful. Then in my last year of college, I found this amazing tool: an academic advisor. I was forced to meet with this person because I was a "new" student and I thought it was such a waste of time. Wrong. Before I even got to our meeting, she had mapped out a plan for me to complete my degree in the next few semesters. She knew what classes I needed, what professors I should be taking, and even had insight into at which times those classes would be offered so I could work around my work schedule. Her name was Dr. Li, but I could have sworn she was an angel! My heart filled with joy when someone paved the way for me to get to the place my heart had longed for 14 years—graduation.

On this earth, our wandering hearts desire a path for our lives. As much as we desire independence and making our own path, when we find that there is one already laid for us and we are counseled by the one who created that path (and created us), our souls' weariness begins to lift. Knowing that the God of the universe has all our days written in His book and is willing to illuminate that path for us if we would only just follow him should awaken joy in us. Not only will He guide us, but He will walk with us, and in His presence there is abundant joy!

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Where are you losing joy by not following, or even seeking, God's predetermined path for you?
- » In what ways can you rejoice in the plans you are seeing God lay out before you? What are those plans?

joy

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16

Zephaniah 3:14-17

Sing for joy, Daughter Zion; shout loudly, Israel!

Be glad and celebrate with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem!

15 The Lord has removed your punishment; he has turned back your enemy.

The King of Israel, the Lord, is among you; you need no longer fear harm.

16 On that day it will be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear; Zion, do not let your hands grow weak.

17 The Lord your God is among you, a warrior who saves.

He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will be quiet in his love.

He will delight in you with singing.



The Lord rejoices over and delights in us.

REFLECTION

I am about to hold my first earthbound child (we have one worshipping Jesus in heaven already) for the first time, and I could not be more excited. I am going to be that dad that just stares at his kid and the whole world melts away, I think. I mean, I'm pretty sure that is how I will be. But we don't really know what those little ones will do to us when they get here. We can have all the plans in the world for how we will parent, but I'm told that so much of that goes out the window once we actually hold that little gift from God. But I do know one thing I will do for sure: I am going to sing over them. I love singing. I honestly just love music, but listening isn't enough for me—I must vocalize it, rather poorly, but I've got to participate! I want to sing songs about them, to them, and hopefully one day with them. Music communicates directly from our souls and sometimes, when overcome with emotions, there is no way to express them BUT through music. I hope to teach that to my children from the time they are born: I have so much joy that they are here that I must sing to them.

In our passage today, we see Father God doing exactly that: rejoicing over us with singing. I can picture me holding my child and praising God for them as I sing songs of love and joy over them. I also picture myself being sung over the same way. As we lay down at night, free from the punishment of sin because of His son, I imagine God the Father, creator of galaxies and soccer, singing songs of joy over us. Joy is infectious, and it is from Him that we derive our own. He delights in you, friend. He delights in forgiving you of sin and sparing you from its consequence. Sit and rest in His joy so that your mouth might be filled with rejoicing and praise.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Tell a story of a time that music moved you to tears of joy. What made the song or moment so special?
- » Why do you think singing is part of our weekly worship rhythms?
- » What is the lyric from a song of worship that you remember when you need joy?

joy

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17

Luke 15:3-7

So he told them this parable: 4 “What man among you, who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open field and go after the lost one until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, 6 and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ 7 I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need repentance.

- Joy is what heaven and humanity shares with God when the lost are found.

REFLECTION

I think it is fair to say that, in one way or another, everyone's a storyteller. Stories are within us and exude out of us naturally. We humans are moving from one experience to another, taking with it reactions, responses, and memories that become refined into a story. Some share stories vividly, while others choose to share quietly. Even Jesus told stories through parables. Luke 15 consists of three interrelated stories told by Jesus: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In them we are told stories with a prominent theme: God's emotive response is joy when the lost are saved. Isn't that amazing? As God Himself pursues his people, joy is His reaction and is shared in the response of the heavenly host.

Joy is a unique emotion. Similar to happiness, it's a "good" feeling, causing the joyful to express a type of happy reaction. But joy is not happiness because its root is always tied to sorrow, sadness, and suffering. It is a prevailing positive emotion out of a prolonged negative one. So it is significant to consider that when the lost are saved, Jesus tells us (sinners and sufferers filled with prolonged negative stories) that joy is the response of God Himself. Meaning, He too shared a prolonged negative emotion in order for joy to prevail. Furthermore, joy is infectiously shared by all the heavenly host. Joy is what heaven shares with God when the lost are found. The story of the lost sheep is the story of a shepherd enduring prolonged pain and suffering to find his lost sheep and joy prevailing. The shepherd then joyfully carries the sheep back home and invites the town to respond. Joy prevails in the shepherd as he tells the story of his rescue and he invites others to join in.

Since stories are important, we must remember that Jesus came to us incarnate so joy would prevail in heaven and earth through the stories we tell. As you reflect on Jesus' story of the lost sheep today, remember that there was earnest seeking, tenderness, and rejoicing in heaven when the Great Shepherd rescued you. May joy then be the prevailing emotion in the stories you'll share with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers during this Advent week!

- Mark Smith

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » How is the shepherd described in this parable? How do his emotions compare to his circumstances?
- » In what ways is Jesus shaping your stories? How does the Gospel shape our understanding of how we respond to our salvation and lost people?
- » If we are to be like Christ and rejoice when the lost are found, how can the church help support that effort? Are there any ministries that come to mind?

love WEEK FOUR

love

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20

I John 3:11-18

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: We should love one another, 12 unlike Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous.

13 Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death. 15 Everyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him. 16 This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has this world's goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God's love reside in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.



Love isn't about what you get, but what you give.

REFLECTION

The great philosopher Jennifer Lopez once stated, “My love don’t cost a thing.” Now, while she was saying that you don’t have to buy her love with money or physical things, I don’t think Scripture teaches that love is free. Love, in its truest and fullest form, costs us. The greatest love we have ever seen cost Jesus a lot. Stepping off His heavenly throne to be born on earth, He was tempted in every way, persecuted, rejected, hated, betrayed, beaten, spit on, and murdered. Love like that costs something.

In today’s passage, the apostle John, often seen as Jesus’ closest friend, says that we know love because Jesus laid down His life for us. Then he goes further and says we should lay down our own lives for our brothers and sisters, and that, if we have the means to help another believer and refuse to do so, God’s love does not reside in us. Words cost us nothing, which is why they aren’t love. Sacrifice and love seem to be unable to be separated. Therefore love isn’t about what you get but what you give.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » Do we love with the expectation that we will get something in return?
- » Who in your life is hard to love right now? What steps can you take to love them better?
- » Why is it so hard to believe that love as the Bible describes can exist on earth?

love

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21

Romans 8:31-39

What, then, are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He did not even spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him grant us everything? 33 Who can bring an accusation against God's elect? God is the one who justifies. 34 Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is the one who died, but even more, has been raised; he also is at the right hand of God and intercedes for us. 35 Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

*Because of you
we are being put to death all day long;
we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.*

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.



Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

REFLECTION

I want you to think back with me to elementary school science: mixtures and solutions. What's the difference? Easy. Mixtures can be easily separated. A tossed salad is an example. I don't know why you'd want to, but after you toss a salad, you could divide all the parts back out again. Solutions, in contrast, cannot be separated once they are put together. Once you stir the lemonade powder into the water, that's it. Together forever. Eight-year-old me aced the matching test that came at the end of this unit.

Fast forward a few years and my world was shook. You actually can separate solutions, just not easily. Mind blown. Definition begrudgingly changed. Solutions cannot be easily separated. If you heat up that glass of lemonade, the water will evaporate and you're left with a pile of sugar.

Thankfully, if we are in Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God. And, unlike in the case of my understanding of solutions, that won't change. Paul was writing this in light of much more harrowing circumstances than I've ever faced, but the truth remains the same. In whatever you are currently experiencing in life, cling to that truth: The love of God is more powerful than anything we can ever come against.

- Jess Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » List some things in your life that have made you feel separated from the love of God.
- » How should the life of a Christian look different than the life of a nonbeliever since Christians know that nothing can separate them from the love of God? How are you succeeding or failing to live in that truth?

love

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22

Luke 10:25-37

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Then an expert in the law stood up to test him, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the law?" he asked him. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind," and "your neighbor as yourself."

28 "You've answered correctly," he told him. "Do this and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 Jesus took up the question and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. 34 He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.'

36 "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

37 "The one who showed mercy to him," he said. Then Jesus told him, "Go and do the same."



Love is a verb!

REFLECTION

*Pullin' out my big black book | Cause when I need a word defined that's where I look
So I move to the L's quick, fast, in a hurry | Threw on my specs, thought my vision was blurry
I looked again but to my dismay | It was black and white with no room for grey
Ya see, a big "V" stood beyond my word | And yo that's when it hit me, that luv is a verb
Words come easy but don't mean much | When the words they're sayin' we can't put trust in
We're talkin' 'bout love in a different light | And if we all learn to love it would be just right
- "Luv is a verb" by DC Talk*

These words by the greatest Christian band to ever grace us with their music have a lot to say. The song states simply that love, or luv, is a verb. While you all may be saying “Duh, Stephen, we all passed 4th grade English,” some of you would be lying, but for the rest of you, just stick with me. So often today we attribute love to a collection of feelings and emotions often caused by brain chemistry and your brain’s response to pheromones. This is what science and society tell us love is anyway: feelings and chemistry...two things that can change and shift, and require no motion, no effort, and definitely no commitment.

Toby, Kevin, and Michael told a very different story, and, in our passage today, so did Jesus. He stated that loving God and loving your neighbor are the two greatest commandments, so the expert in the law—who thought he was all that and a bag of chips, trying to be fresh (stick with the 90’s vibe with me)—responds “well, who is my neighbor?” Dude was straight trippin’, but Jesus would respond with this parable of a Samaritan man going out of his way to take care of a fellow sinner and sufferer. I can imagine Jesus saying “Boo-yah” at the end as the man was silenced. 90’s slang aside, Jesus really did push the definition of love to a whole new level. It wasn’t just about a feeling of sympathy for the broken and hurting man on the road; it wasn’t even empathy. It was full-on compassion that drove the Good Samaritan to action. This is what Advent truly is all about. God so loved the world that, instead of just sympathizing with our sin and suffering, He sent His son to us—not to condemn us, but to rescue us. Loving like Jesus forces us to move, and go, and do. Just like He did.

- Stephen Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » What does loving your neighbor look like in your life right now?
- » How have you been guilty of relegating love to just a feeling and not an action?
- » In light of this parable, who is your “neighbor” that you have been failing to love like Christ?

love

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

Psalm 116

*1 I love the Lord because he has heard my appeal for mercy.
2 Because he has turned his ear to me, I will call out to him as long as I live.
3 The ropes of death were wrapped around me, and the torments of Sheol overcame me;
I encountered trouble and sorrow.
4 Then I called on the name of the Lord: “Lord, save me!”
5 The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is compassionate.
6 The Lord guards the inexperienced; I was helpless, and he saved me.
7 Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.
8 For you, Lord, rescued me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.
9 I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.
10 I believed, even when I said, “I am severely oppressed.”
11 In my alarm I said, “Everyone is a liar.”
12 How can I repay the Lord for all the good he has done for me?
13 I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.
14 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.
15 The death of his faithful ones is valuable in the Lord’s sight.
16 Lord, I am indeed your servant; I am your servant, the son of your female servant.
You have loosened my bonds.
17 I will offer you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord.
18 I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people,
19 in the courts of the Lord’s house— within you, Jerusalem. Hallelujah!*



God’s love for us is worthy of our life-long praise.

REFLECTION

I don't know about you, but reading through this psalm out loud today felt like falling in love all over again. It brought to mind the day of my baptism 8 years ago – declaring out loud in front of a nerve-wracking number of people that my life would now be devoted to Jesus, and being both fully terrified and fully elated at the same time. Echoing the psalmist's declarations that he would “pay [his] vows to the LORD in the presence of all the people” (v. 14, 18), I made lofty, hard-to-keep promises not to drift away or forget how good He was or ever give into temptation again. And it all felt true, because I was in love. That statement could easily sound wholeheartedly naïve, but I think its simplicity reflects the childlike faith that's expressed in the opening of the psalm:

*I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live. (v. 1-2)*

The psalmist here is erupting in praise due to some precise but unspecified answered prayer, and I'm sure this is a feeling we can all resonate with—whether it's the birth of a healthy child, a marriage proposal a long time in the making, the dream job, or a loved one being brought out of sickness or affliction that seemed insurmountable. God is absolutely worthy to be praised in these moments, and I hope that we take each and every one of them to re-declare and re-affirm our love for Him, because of how bountifully He has dealt with us (v. 7).

However, even if you feel like your recent prayers have gone unanswered and you are doubting God's abundant love for you, I pray you can return with me to the greatest answered prayer and greatest display of love that our God has poured out on us:

*For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living. (v. 8-9)*

- Emily Schutsky

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » What time in your life does this psalm lead you back to, when you were ebullient in praise to God because of an answered prayer or a great display of His love for you?
- » When God answers prayer, are you quick to share that with people? How could you encourage someone in your life with a testimony of an answered prayer today?

love

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24

1 John 4:7-21

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us. 13 This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and we testify that the Father has sent his Son as the world's Savior. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God—God remains in him and he in God. 16 And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. 17 In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, "I love God," and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister.

 *God's love completes us.*

REFLECTION

Marriage is impossible. Can we be real for just a moment? I, Stephen, want to be left alone to watch sports all day, live in my mess, and do everything spur of the moment. I, Jess, on the other hand, want to snuggle at all times (Stephen: gross), have everything in the place I think it should go, and plan every moment of every day. Our marriage shouldn't work. Sometimes it is A LOT of work. But when we got married we knew that the only way we could even imagine it working is if we both clung to Christ and loved each other like He loved us. We even went out of our way at our wedding ceremony to emphasize God's love for us, not just our love for one another. We wanted our friends and family to understand that love that lasts forever MUST include Christ because it is through Him that we even know what love is.

So often in our culture, people embrace the idea that when we go looking for love, we are looking for someone to "complete us." In a way, that is true. We are born needing to find the one who makes us whole again. But here's the deal. You will never find it in a spouse. You will find it in the actual reason for the Christmas season—love stepping out of heaven to rescue us. To complete us. This love, Jesus, allows us to remain in Him and ultimately allows us to remain with each other. When I (Jess) walked down the aisle to meet Stephen under an arch of flowers, I wasn't half a heart, walking towards my missing piece. My heart was already whole in Christ. Stephen and I didn't need each other to find love. We both already had love—we had God. And God is love.

- Stephen & Jess Searles

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » In what ways are you looking for human love to complete you?
- » John says that God is love—what do you think that means? How does that change what love looks like for you?
- » John says that perfect love casts out fear. What fears do you need God's love to cast out?

NOTES & PRAYERS

NOTES & PRAYERS



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