

This month we celebrate Christmas.

A long-standing tradition in the church going back perhaps as far as the 5th century has been to celebrate the Advent season. Advent traditionally consists of the four Sundays preceding Christmas. The word advent is derived from the Latin *adventus* meaning “arrival” or “appearance.”

The tradition of celebrating advent involves remembering and meditating on four different themes – one for each of the four weeks. There is not complete agreement on the themes for these four weeks; different churches have different traditions. For our purposes in this study we’ll use the following themes:
Week 1 – Hope; Week 2 – Peace; Week 3 – Joy; and Week 4 – Love.

The four Sundays of advent this year are:
December 3, December 10, December 17 and December 24. Our study will begin on December 5 so, for the purposes of this devotional, we’ll follow this calendar:
Week 1 – Hope – Tuesday, December 5 to Sunday, December 10
Week 2 – Peace – Monday December 11 to Sunday, December 17
Week 3 – Joy – Monday December 12 to Sunday, December 24
Week 4 – Love – Monday, December 25 to Sunday, December 31

Our prayer at Graceway is that this month’s Praxis will encourage you and help you to grow more deeply in your knowledge of the word. Just as important if not more so, we’re praying that our Lord will allow the word to work in you by His Spirit to help you become more and more the person that He wants you to be!

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

"May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me-- even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons--¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!" (Ruth 1:9-13 NIV)

Have you ever found yourself in a position similar to Naomi? Sometimes events in our lives overwhelm us and we feel that there is no possible way that we can ever find a way out of our troubles. If you had the chance to meet Naomi at this time in her life what would you say to her? What do you say to yourself when you find yourself in a similarly oppressing situation?

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. (Acts 16:16-19 NIV)

In Acts 16:16-19 we see the story of two men who used a demon-possessed young girl for their financial benefit. Their hope was to make money – and when that hope was destroyed they were angered. They responded by trying to punish Paul and Silas for taking that hope away.

We can sometimes think that we know what is happening in our lives and have hope that things will continue as they are going. God, however, may have a different, and maybe even a better, plan! When my hopes are disrupted by God's plans, I don't always immediately say, "Thank you God." I can rant and rave about my apparent loss for some time. Until finally I come to see that God was in control all along. What He was offering me was a better hope than the one I had previously. Do you hope for the best things that you can imagine or do you hope for the things that God hopes for you? What do you hope for?

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

The LORD is known by his acts of justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.¹⁷ The wicked go down to the realm of the dead, all the nations that forget God.¹⁸ But God will never forget the needy; the hope of the afflicted will never perish.¹⁹ Arise, LORD, do not let mortals triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence.²⁰ Strike them with terror, LORD; let the nations know they are only mortal. (Ps. 9:16-20 NIV)

David, in the verses of this psalm, reminds us of God's integrity – His holiness. In His ongoing involvement in our lives, He is never forgetful of our needs – not for a moment. He always has, does, and always will do what is right. As part of that program, "God will never forget the needy." Be encouraged today because God is right there by your side even at this very moment. It is part and parcel of His holiness that He cares for His creation. How is He providing for you right now?

Wednesday, December 6, 2023

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.
¹⁵ My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long-- though I know not how to relate them all. ¹⁶ I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteous deeds, yours alone. (Ps. 71:14-16 NIV)

We see the psalmist practicing what he preaches! He determines to keep his mind set on what God has done before. The enemy wants us to look at our immediate circumstances and begin to feel inadequate. (Remember Peter in Mat. 14:29-31.) Our memories of how God has brought us through in the past are a gift meant to be used to remind us that what He has done before He is able to do again today and abundantly more that we can imagine. How can you more firmly fix your hope on Him today?

Thursday, December 7, 2023

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. (Prov. 13:12 NIV)

This verse encourages us in two different ways. First, it reminds us to be patient as we wait for the fulfillment of our own hopes. Genuine hope then must continue to hold on until those hopes are finally realized. Secondly, it reminds us that, if possible, we should do what we can to help to fulfill the hopes of others. We can find joy in our own lives by playing a role in seeing the fruition of others' hopes. What role can you play today to help fulfill the hopes of someone in your life?

Thursday, December 7, 2023

Know also that wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. (Prov. 24:14 NIV)

Those who seek guidance from the Lord will always have a hope for the future. God has made Himself known through His written word and through the living Word – Jesus Christ. With these gifts we have all we could ever need to find meaning and purpose in our lives. Allow God to move ever more deeply into your life. To know Him is to have hope in this life

This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. (Heb. 8:10-11 NIV)

What can you do to know the Lord better?

Friday, December 8, 2023

"Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.¹⁴
Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands?¹⁵
Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my
ways to his face. (Job 13:13-15 NIV)

At this point in the story, Job is about to offer a defense against the charges that his "friends" are leveling against him. In the midst of his trials notice his comment, "though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." Job had long before placed his trust in God. Even at this point when he has good reason to think that God has forsaken him, Job still holds fast to his hope in God. Whatever he may be going through now, he still believes that God will, in the end, do the right thing. Have there been times when you, like Job, felt as though God had abandoned you? How did God bring you through? What would you say to someone who is feeling as though God has forsaken him/her?

Friday, December 8, 2023

A person's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.⁶ So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired laborer.⁷ "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail.⁸ Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil,⁹ yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant.¹⁰ But a man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more. (Job 14:5-10 NIV)

Can you feel Job's despair? His hope is at a very low ebb. He's feeling as though he's at death's door and he's come to his end. As we saw above in Job 13:13-15, Job never entirely gave up hope but do not be deceived. Job underwent a severe test of his faith and hope in God. He came very near to total despair. Why does God allow Satan to push Job to this point? Could it be that Job could not have reached the peace he finds at the end of the story without going through the depths of this trial? Perhaps God may allow circumstances that seem to remove all our hope. Then, after we've gone through such a difficult trial, He will be able to bring us to a place of far greater hope in Him than we'd ever known before.

Saturday, December 9, 2023

As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed-- the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Rom. 4:17-18 NIV)

Our hope must never be based on what we believe might be possible or likely in this world. Our hope is in our God who "gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not." What impossible things are there in your life that God is challenging you to hope for?

Saturday, December 9, 2023

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:1-5 NIV)

Here we see that hope is the final result of a sequence of steps that God is working in all our lives. Suffering → perseverance → character → hope. According to this formula, we need to be willing to suffer. Next we need to endure as long as He deems necessary. As we endure we develop a strong character which then gives birth hope. The process may be long and very unpleasant at times. The end result is glorious indeed. Where are you in this process? How can you move forward in it?

Sunday, December 10, 2023

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Heb. 11:1 NIV)

As we conclude our week studying hope, let's spend some time in prayer and meditation on the opening verse of Hebrews 11. In this chapter, the writer of Hebrews makes the connection for us between hope and faith. How can we know that the things we hope for will indeed come to pass? If I were to hope with all my might then could it just be possible that a new Mercedes will show up in my driveway on Christmas morning? To hope like that is truly to hope against hope. But here's the good news folks – we have a far better hope than merely hoping for an automobile that will all too quickly age and break down. We have a hope to spend all eternity with other believers and with our God! And what's more we have good reason to believe that our hope is secure! Here in Hebrews 11 we see example after example of godly men and women who lived out their faith. In each example, a believer is motivated by faith to perform some action that demonstrates to the world that they do in fact have a hope for the future. Faith provides the foundation of their hope. It is God who gave them faith to have hope in the first place. (See Eph 2:8-10) So then faith, itself the gift of God, gives us the assurance to know that, as we place our trust in Him, we can have a sure hope that He will enable us to live our lives much like these examples here in Heb. 11.

Sunday, December 10, 2023

I have a friend whose name is Fred. He died several years ago of complications from a brain tumor. As death drew close he decided to write a letter to family and friends that he wanted read at his funeral. In that letter Fred told of his hope for his future – of the great expectations that he held for all that was to come after he was finally dead, finally done with this world. I will never forget his closing line, “I’m off on the most incredible journey of my eternal life.” Fred no longer has hope. Today Fred knows the reality of eternal life in all its splendor.

Do you have such a firm foundation as those in Hebrew 11? What changes can you make in your life so that you will be reminded daily moment by moment that God is at work in you and those around you to bring you closer – to help you see Him at work constantly in your life – to give you a better hope?

Monday, December 11, 2023

"Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ²⁴ "The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace." ²⁷ "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." (Num. 6:23-27 NIV)

Notice that the gift of peace is the result of God's presence. It comes as God blesses and keeps; as He makes His face shine on us and is gracious to us – He is with us. Spend a few moments and allow Him to draw you near. His desire is for you to know His peace. Allow Him to do that even now. Make a list of some of the things that God has done throughout your life to make you know that He is with you.

Monday, December 11, 2023

Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.²⁸ Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land had peace forty years. (Jdg. 8:27-28 NIV)

This verse is typical of many in Judges. In this book we see a repeated cycle: the Israelites begin by being faithful to the Lord. As God blesses they are thankful and rejoice in His goodness. As time passes, however, they become complacent. In their complacency they become disobedient and begin to worship other gods. Then God allows some enemy to overpower them and to rule over them. In their misery they cry out to God for help. Next, God raises up a judge to deliver them and the land enjoys peace for many years. Notice that Gideon made a golden ephod that was intended to remind people of God's deliverance. Over time it became a snare. Intended to be a means to draw people closer to God, it became a means of drawing them away. Perhaps you like me have seen times in your life where something like this pattern occurs. Times when you draw closer and times when you're tempted to pull back. If you can see this pattern in your life then commit yourself today to break it. What spiritual disciplines can you build into your life to keep you moving forward?

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the LORD. ⁶ Many, LORD, are asking, "Who will bring us prosperity?" Let the light of your face shine on us. ⁷ Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. ⁸ In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety. (Ps. 4:5-8 NIV)

Here in this psalm we see David acknowledge that the peace he knows comes from the hand of God. Note how he connects joy with peace in these verses. Feel the confidence that David feels as he speaks to his Lord. Take a few moments to write here what God's peace means to you. What experiences from your life come to mind when you think of God's peace?

Tuesday, December 12, 2023

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.¹¹ The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace. (Ps. 29:10-11 NIV)

In the Old Testament, flood waters are often indicative of times of chaos – times when everything seems out of control. In these verses the psalmist writes of God being enthroned over the flood. In other words, God is in control even when everything seems to be out of control. Know today, even when it may feel as though things are spinning wildly out of control, the reality is that God is still present; still offering the blessing of peace. Receive that peace as a child would receive a gift from his/her loving parent. How might you help others to receive that gift of peace?

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.¹² Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,¹³ keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies.¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. (Ps. 34:11-14 NIV)

As we've already seen it is God who is the author of peace. These verses remind us of our role in the process of having peace. We are encouraged to pursue peace. The writer encourages us to do so by controlling our tongues – no small feat! What thoughts come to mind as you think about how you might pursue peace today?

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.¹⁰ A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.¹¹ But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity. (Ps. 37:9-11 NIV)

For some the idea of being meek is related to being weak, ineffective and/or helpless. But the scriptures show just the opposite. In these verses we see “the meek” being set in opposition to “the wicked.” To be meek is to be humble. True humility consists of seeing things as they truly are – seeing things as God does. To be truly humble we must be careful not to overestimate ourselves or our abilities. At the same time, we must be careful to not underestimate ourselves or the abilities that God has given us. A humble person is one who knows the truth about himself/herself. Such a person is enabled by God to enjoy peace. What is the truth about you? What abilities has He given you? How are you using them to glorify Him?

Wednesday, December 13, 2023

Too long have I lived among those who hate peace.⁷ I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war. (Ps. 120:6-7 NIV)

While the world would surely claim that it wants peace, it does not. The world wants its own way. The world wants peace on its own terms. Do you see those around you striving for a false peace? In what ways does seeking a false peace frustrate the seeker? What can you do to help such a person?

Thursday, December 14, 2023

That is where the tribes go up-- the tribes of the LORD-- to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.⁵ There stand the thrones for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure."⁷ May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels."⁸ For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity. (Ps. 122:4-9 NIV)

For the old testament believers the temple was the place where heaven met earth. In Jerusalem in the temple in the Holy of Holies was the mercy seat. That was God's throne. The place where God sat enthroned before His people. It was so sacred that no one was allowed to enter except the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Of course, they knew as we do that there is no place on earth or in the heavens or under the earth where God is not present. The temple was a symbolic place. To go there was to show a deep devotion to Yahweh. To go there was to spend time, energy and money for the purpose of getting closer to the creator. While it would be wonderful to visit the Holy Land, such a trip is not a requirement. Right where you are today you can invest yourself in "praying for the peace of Jerusalem." Seek His face today! Through the blood of Christ a way has been opened for us right into the Holy of Holies! Enter in boldly. Know Him more closely. Let Him bring His peace into you – for, as a believer, your body has become a temple of the living God.

Thursday, December 14, 2023

Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife. (Prov. 17:1 NIV)

The value of peace is hard to overestimate. It sets the stage to bring us all sorts of blessings. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom, שְׁלוֹם. This word implies wholeness and completeness. Every need is met. There is no anxiety; no fear. God's peace is a throughgoing peace. Allow His peace to flood your life and meet every need! Write a few words here to thank Him for sending His Son to pay the price to make such a wonderful peace available for us.

Friday, December 15, 2023

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Lk. 2:12-14 NIV)

When you consider the powerful and cruel hatred of Satan and his desire to destroy, it might seem like a poor choice to send the Son as a helpless babe wrapped up in some rags in a feeding trough in a barn. For all the appearance of weakness there has never been nor will there ever be a more powerful force than the love of God given to us on that first Christmas morn. Spend a few minutes meditating on His infinite power displayed in His gentleness. Sense the strength of the Right Arm of God Almighty contained in the tiny fingers and hands of the infant Christ. Remind yourself that in order to bring you peace, He "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-- even death on a cross! (Phil. 2:6-8 NIV).

Write a few thoughts to express your gratitude to God the Father and to His Son our Savior.

Friday, December 15, 2023

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." (Jn. 20:19-21 NIV)

Here we see Jesus connect the concept of having peace with the idea of being sent to do His work. All that we do and say needs to be centered around who He is and who we are in Him. As Peter tells us, every one of us has been given one or more gifts to be used to benefit others – Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Pet. 4:10 NIV). How can you use the gift(s) you've been given to bring peace to others and deeper peace to yourself?

Saturday, December 16, 2023

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all his holy people throughout Achaia: ² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 1:1-2 NIV)

Paul often opens his letters asking God to bring peace to all the saints in the church. How do you greet other believers? How do you pray for them? How do you greet unbelievers and pray for them? Spend a few minutes thinking about believers and unbelievers in your life. Pray that God would use you to bring them peace.

Saturday, December 16, 2023

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. (Eph. 2:13-17 NIV)

Here in Ephesians Paul is discussing the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. His point is that Christ has made peace between them by breaking down the barriers that separate them. While peace is far more than the mere absence of war, there can be no peace where there is division. It is for good reason that Paul encourages us to live at peace with all men (see Rom 12:18). What can you do to better live at peace with all men? In doing so you promote peace for others and a deeper peace for yourself.

Sunday, December 17, 2023

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.²⁸ "You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. (Jn. 14:27-28 NIV)

As the time for His crucifixion drew near Jesus spoke these words to His disciples. What did He mean when He said, "I do not give to you as the world gives?" How is His giving different than what the world does? How does the way He gives affect the gift and you as the receiver of that gift? Today, are you living in His peace, expectantly awaiting His return?

Monday, December 18, 2023

Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people.²⁴ Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown. (Lev. 9:23-24 NIV)

Leviticus 9 records the first service in the tabernacle that the Hebrews built in the desert following the pattern shown by God to Moses. As the ceremonies were ending fire fell from heaven consuming the people's offerings. Their response was to shout out for joy. They knew for certain in that moment that God was with them and was for them. Take a few moments today to remember the time when you first came to the Lord. Write some of your memories here. Remember the joy that filled your entire being. If its been a long time since that day, meditate on your memory of it and allow it to invigorate you afresh today!

Monday, December 18, 2023

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."¹¹ The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."¹² Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. (Neh. 8:10-12 NIV)

Nehemiah 8 records the events of the day when Ezra the priest and his assistants read the law to the people as part of a celebration marking the completion of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The people stood for hours hearing the law most likely for the first time in their lives. They realized how far short they fell from meeting the requirements of the law. It caused them to grieve. Yet despite that grief they also had a great sense of joy because now they were able to understand. Knowledge of the law brought them joy. For believers today, especially for those of us who speak English, we have a true embarrassment of riches when it comes to various translations of scripture. There are dozens of different translations available for us. Beyond that, thanks to the work of many scholars, researchers and theologians who have gone before us, we have access to a library of ancient documents that bear witness to God's word to us. Thank God today for this incredible gift. Commit yourself to make better use of these gifts to know Him better. Rejoice in what you already have and expect to find even greater joy as you press in closer learning and growing in His word! How will you use the resources available to you to grow in Christ?

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far,²¹ to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. (Est. 9:20-22 NIV)

The book of Esther records the story of how God used Queen Esther and her uncle Mordicai to deliver the Jews from a terrible fate that the evil Haman had devised to destroy Jews throughout King Xerxes empire. Jews still remember this event today annually celebrating the feast of Purim. As believers we need to celebrate our joy during this time when we remember the birth of our savior. While covid will force some limitations, how can you find ways to celebrate and inspire joy for yourself and others in this Christmas season?

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

Hear, LORD, and be merciful to me; LORD, be my help." ¹¹ You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹² that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever. (Ps. 30:10-12 NIV)

These verses from Psalm 30 remind us that the source of our joy is God Himself. When we consider what He has done for us it is fitting and proper to be moved to rejoice. Allow the joy of what God has done for you to motivate you and encourage you today. How will you show your joy in the world today?

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Ps. 51:7-12 NIV)

Here in Psalm 51, David repents of his sin and asks God to restore him. Sin, by its very nature, becomes a block between God and us. It separates us from the joy that God wants for us. Sometimes the issues are big and very clear to us; other times it can be very subtle but no less destructive. Search your heart today. Is there anything you need to repent of? How can you build habits into your life to help you stay aware of the small things that might draw you away?

Wednesday, December 20, 2023

For the director of music. A song. A psalm. Shout for joy to God, all the earth! ²Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious. ³Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. ⁴All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing the praises of your name." ⁵Come and see what God has done, his awesome deeds for mankind! (Ps. 66:1-5 NIV)

Have you noticed how often references to joy in scripture are related to times of singing, dancing and shouting for joy? True joy is hard to keep down. In 2 Sam. 6:12-14 we read how King David himself danced for joy before the Lord when the Ark of the Lord was returned to Israel. Today, remind yourself of all that God has done for you and allow yourself to express the full gamut of emotion that your joy will inspire.

Thursday, December 21, 2023

In that day you will say: "I will praise you, LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.² Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation."³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.⁴ In that day you will say: "Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.⁵ Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you." (Isa. 12:1-6 NIV)

God brings joy into our lives by bringing us a gift that we desperately need. It is also a gift that no one else could offer. Let yourself get excited today as you consider the great lengths that God has gone to in order to offer you His free gift of salvation!

Thursday, December 21, 2023

This is what the LORD says: "Sing with joy for Jacob; shout for the foremost of the nations. Make your praises heard, and say, 'LORD, save your people, the remnant of Israel.'⁸ See, I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labor; a great throng will return. (Jer. 31:7-8 NIV)

In this scripture Jeremiah is prophesying about how God will restore His people after the time of exile is over. While it is likely that none of us will ever experience exile as the nation of Israel did, still we know some elements of exile. We can and do know what it is like to be separated from loved ones by death. Even in life we may know the exile of separation from friends and family caused by all kinds of circumstances that move us away from one another. Can you imagine the joy we'll know when at last we all meet again – family and friends reunited in God's eternal kingdom!

Friday, December 22, 2023

The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. (Matt. 13:20-21 NIV)

Here we see what joy ought not be. Joy should never be short lived! It is meant to endure. In this parable Jesus speaks of one who finds joy only to have it stripped away. Guard your heart! Hold fast to the joy that God gave you when you received His word! Meditate on His word. Remember what He has done for you over the years. Expect Him to remain active in your life. Take a few minutes to list what He has done for you lately. Rejoice in His grace and mercy.

Friday, December 22, 2023

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son.⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. (Lk. 1:57-58 NIV)

Joy wants to be shared. When events come to pass in our lives that bring us joy we're moved to share the details with others. In this way the joy of others as well as our own is increased. Sharing joy is one to the blessings that comes from living in community. Make a list of some of the joyful events in others' lives that they recently shared with you. Perhaps you've heard the old adage: "A joy shared is doubled and a grief shared is halved." Thank God for the community He's provided for you that can help to double your joy and cut your sorrow in half!

Saturday, December 23, 2023

because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. (1 Thess. 1:5-6 NIV)

Joy can be experienced even in the midst of severe suffering! The Spirit can work through suffering to make us keenly aware that we are God's people living out our lives in obedience to Him. Have there been times when you've experienced joy in spite of suffering? Write about the here.

Saturday, December 23, 2023

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. (Acts 5:40-41 NIV)

Surely these men were not happy about being beaten. Nonetheless they were filled with joy knowing that they were being who they were intended to be and doing what they were intended to do. How can you be more the person you're intended to be? How can you do more what you're intended to do?

Sunday, December 24, 2023

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2 NIV)

As we close this week let's once again look to Jesus our Lord and Savior. Before taking on human form He enjoyed all the benefits that come with existing in Trinity with the Father and the Spirit. In exchange for that joy, He left heaven and joined Himself in humanity to us. In exchange for the joy of being in the Father's presence He chose to die alone in my place, in your place. In exchange for His rightful privilege to be forever with the Father and the Spirit He chose to visit us here. From the eternal past He had been with the Father and the Spirit. Into the eternal future He will be with the Father and the Spirit. But there was a day, a time when He hung alone on a cross dying for me and for you. When he cried out, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" He wasn't looking for new information. He fully realized all the implications of what He was doing. His cry was one of despair. In the complete absence of the God the Father there is nothing but despair. For us in this world, even for unbelievers we are never totally separated from the Father. The world around us is His gift to us. The people in our lives are also a part of His gift and presence with us. As Jesus passed alone through death's door He suffered the full penalty of sin – separation from the Father – separation from all that He is and all that He does. To be completely apart from the Father is to be in hell. I believe that

Sunday, December 24, 2023

scriptures' warnings about hell fire are real and accurate. But honestly, the prospect of being so totally alone for all eternity in a place where I am all there is – that thought is terribly frightening – more than I can conceive.

Today, think about the weight of our sin, of your sin, that was placed on Him. Try to grasp the true price that was paid for your redemption. He was willing to put His joy aside for a time believing that once the sacrifice was made He would be restored to the joy He had with the Father and the Spirit before. And what's more, because of what He has done we too can now share for all eternity in the joy of the Trinity!

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, (1 Pet. 1:8 NIV)

Monday, December 25, 2023

And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."' (Gen. 20:13 NIV)

Notice Abraham's words "This is how you can show your love to me." While you may find a few scriptures that talk about love as an emotion or feelings, for the most part the scriptures talk about love in terms of what it causes people, and even God Himself, to do. As we go through this devotional this week. Look for that theme – love expressing itself through action. What are some of the things you do to demonstrate your love for your loved ones?

Monday, December 25, 2023

"You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies. ¹³In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. (Exod. 15:12-13 NIV)

The Hebrew word being translated here as “unfailing love” is Heseḏ טוֹהֵם. This is a loaded theological term. As you are probably aware most ancient peoples worshiped a plurality of gods. Pleasing them was an ongoing problem. The gods were fickle. They might be in a good mood today and bless you. Tomorrow, through no fault of your own, they might be in a bad mood and punish you without reason. Israel’s God, Yahweh, is different. His love is a promised love – an unfailing love. He has promised that He will not be fickle in showing His love for His people. He can be depended upon to always be just and loving. How does knowing about the nature of His “unfailing love” affect you? How does it make you want to respond to Him?

Tuesday, December 26, 2023

""Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt.¹⁸""Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (Lev. 19:17-18 NIV)

Here we see God commanding His people to show love to their neighbors. The context here implies that their "neighbors" extend only as far as other Israelites. How would this command be altered by Jesus?

Tuesday, December 26, 2023

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:4-5 NIV)

Deut. 6:4 is known as the Shema. This is a verse that faithful Jews pray daily. It is a reminder that there is only one God. For us today that may not seem like a very radical statement. But in the context of its day it was fairly unique. Some have argued that the Jews were not the very first to worship just one God. While there may have been other people who at some point held to monotheism, the Jews were the first to do so radically and to never shrink back from that belief. Immediately following the Shema comes a verse declaring that we must love the LORD God with all our being. This clearly demonstrates that love for God is a primary if not the primary command. How do you demonstrate your love for Yahweh?

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

Now that the LORD your God has given them rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan.⁵ But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to keep his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." (Jos. 22:4-5 NIV)

As the conquest of the promised land is being completed, Joshua sends the half-tribe of Manasseh and the tribes of Ephraim and Gad back across the Jordan to their inheritance on the east bank of the river. As he sends them away he cautions them to love the LORD their God and to keep all the other commands. The only command specifically singled out is the command to love the LORD. The primary command to them is the primary command to us – to love the LORD completely and totally. While they were with their brothers on the western side of the Jordan, they showed their love by obeying God and fighting with their brothers. When they returned to the eastern side, they showed their love for God by doing their best to raise their families and run their farms. As circumstances change, you may find yourself moving from one place to another. How might moving affect how you show your love for God?

Wednesday, December 27, 2023

Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt and married his daughter. He brought her to the City of David until he finished building his palace and the temple of the LORD, and the wall around Jerusalem.²The people, however, were still sacrificing at the high places, because a temple had not yet been built for the Name of the LORD.³Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places. (1 Ki. 3:1-3 NIV)

These verses in 1 Kings 3 tell us that Solomon demonstrated his love for the Lord by being obedient to the instructions that he'd received from his father David. At the same time we're told about how Solomon failed and came up short of the mark. We are not all that different from Solomon is this respect. We do love Him. At the same time there may be ways where we come up short of the mark. Take a close look at your own life. What changes can you make to stay closer to the Lord. How can you show a deeper devotion to Him?

Thursday, December 28, 2023

Do everything in love. (1 Cor. 16:14 NIV)

This very short verse is surely among the most difficult to obey in all scripture. With the single exception of our Lord, I don't believe I've ever heard of anyone who claimed to achieve it. But if the goal is unattainable then why include it in scripture at all? Why not just leave it out? The point is this. While none of us could ever achieve this goal in our own ability, still, because the Spirit of the living God is alive and living in each of us the potential to reach this goal is real. What can you do to move closer to reaching this goal?

Thursday, December 28, 2023

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. (2 Cor. 5:14 NIV)

Paul seems to have lived life so close to Jesus that wherever he might be and whatever he might be doing the love of God remained the primary driver in his life. He never lost sight of the man he had been. The "Damascus Road event" was never too far out of mind. That memory coupled with the tremendous grace that God had shown him fueled a lifetime of devotion that never ceased as long as he could draw a breath.

Friday, December 29, 2023

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven-- as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." (Lk. 7:47 NIV)

Jesus is dining at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. As they are gathered for the meal a woman whose sinful background was known to all, entered the room. She washed His feet with her tears and used her hair to dry them. Then she poured on an expensive perfume. All Simon could do was to belittle Jesus saying that if He truly was a prophet then He'd know what sort of woman this was. By doing what she did, the woman showed that she recognized the depths of her sin and her need for forgiveness. In response, Jesus forgives her sins. She loved much because she knew she'd been forgiven much. On the contrary, Simon's response is just the opposite. He is willing to talk about this woman's sin, but He says nothing to acknowledge his own sin. Simon seems to have believed that he had no need for forgiveness because he wasn't a sinner. He loved little because he'd been forgiven little. And so, because he would not recognize his sin, his sin remained! How much have you been forgiven. How does the measure of love you show for the Lord demonstrate the measure of forgiveness you've received?

Saturday, December 30, 2023

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ-- to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:8-11 NIV)

Paul expected that as a believer grew in knowledge and depth of insight, so would his/her love grow. Studying God's word is not simply an academic activity. If studying scripture does not bear fruit in terms of our love for God and others then it is all for nothing.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Pet. 3:18 NIV)

Sunday, December 31, 2023

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Jn. 15:11-13 NIV)

As His crucifixion drew closer, Jesus began to talk more to His disciples about His coming sacrifice. Look at His words in v. 12 here. "Love each other as I have loved you." He loved us to the point of holding nothing back. His sacrifice of Himself was complete and total. Speaking for myself, I must admit how far short I fall from reaching that goal. Nonetheless, the goal remains the same. The command to love as He loved still stands. What steps can you take to become more like Jesus? How far are you willing to go to spend yourself in love for another? Listen to the words of Paul as he closed his 2nd letter to Timothy:

"But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near.⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:5-8 NIV)