INTRODUCTION

Thinking back to my childhood, I really don't remember Advent being a part of the Christmas season. I do remember the presents, family gatherings, the decorations, the reading of the Christmas story, and all the desserts. But not any sort of thinking around Advent. I know that we all come from different family cultures and traditions around the Christmas season that have shaped the way we celebrate this season with our families, but we here at Burnt Hickory want to encourage you to give the season of Advent and this Advent Devotional a chance this year. So, for those of you that did not grow up celebrating the Advent season, what is Advent?

"Advent," in the Christian sense, is a word that describes a season of preparation or anticipation of the coming or visiting of Jesus. Advent, in its inception, was a period of preparation of new believers to be baptized on the day of Epiphany (January 6). Starting later in the 7th century, the Roman Christians attached the word Advent to the anticipation of Jesus's return at his second coming. In the Middle Ages, believers began to look to Advent as a season of preparation and celebration of the birth and anticipated return of Jesus. Today, at Burnt Hickory and in much of the Christian world, Advent is much more than a countdown to Christmas day. It is a time of hope-filled expectation. It is a time of re-centering ourselves and reflecting on Jesus, the One who came to "save His people from their sins" (Matt. I:21, NIV) and a time to eagerly watch for the final return of Christ Jesus.

Please know that during the Sundays of Advent, we will be looking into four different themes of life that occur as we wait in anticipation. We are looking at the HOPE, JOY, LOVE, and PEACE that Jesus brings with His coming, living, death, and resurrection. This devotional will give you so many more peeks into what the season and promises of Jesus bring as you prepare for Him. We hope that these traditions and devotions will aid you in your Advent reflections!

May God bless you and your family as you prepare for His coming.

MAR

Matt Petty Senior Pastor | Burnt Hickory Baptist Church

HOPE.

HOPE FOR CHRISTMAS

by Kimberly Reed

Do you ever get so caught up in the busyness of an event that you forget why you're there? Last Christmas, my family headed into our Christmas Eve service at church dressed to impress. My goal was to have our picture taken at the cute Christmas photo booth set up in the church lobby. I was so caught up in making sure everyone looked nice and was "just so" that I turned to my family and said, "You all better smile! Comb your hair and look nice! This is the Christmas picture that I am posting on social media so it better look great!"

Did you catch that we were going into church? We were walking into Christmas Eve WORSHIP! I was so caught up in making sure everyone was looking good that I forgot our purpose - to celebrate our precious Savior - God Incarnate - coming here to earth to save us all, no matter how we look! When I think back, it reminds me of two Marys in the Bible.

The first was a Mary we don't often talk about at Christmas. Mary, the sister of Martha, knew how to celebrate Jesus. When He came to her home for dinner, she sat at His feet and listened to her Savior. Whew! Not what I was doing last Christmas, that's for sure. I have a tendency to let my "Martha" show during the holidays — perfect pictures, perfect decorations, perfect meals, perfect gifts And I forget to let my inner Mary come out and just sit. (You can read the story of these two sisters in Luke 10:38-42.) She knew she was listening to the Hope that she had been told of since she was a little girl. My goodness, what an opportunity - and she was taking it all in!

The other Mary that comes to mind is the one we always talk about at Christmas, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Here was this young girl, overwhelmed after giving birth to the Savior of the world. She was in a strange place when the shepherds begin to file in, telling her and Joseph about their experience with the angels. Mary didn't send them out. She didn't prepare a meal for them. She wasn't embarrassed that the stable wasn't clean. No, scripture tells us that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, NIV). She took in the memories. I picture her closing her eyes as she held her baby close, not wanting to forget a moment.

This Christmas, I want to treasure every moment with Jesus. He came as the Hope of the nations. Goodness knows I need hope. Every day this world around me swirls in uncertainty. But this Holy Season, I want a "Mary" Christmas. I want to be like these two women, sitting at the feet of the Hope of the world, and drink in each moment, pondering it all in my heart.

Journal Prompt: Do you see yourself more like Mary or Martha at Christmas? What keeps you from having a "Mary" Christmas?

PREPARE WITH PRAYER

By CJ Crenshaw

For me, being prepared means having everything in order, well in advance, so there is no hurry or stress. It takes me about four weeks to get ready for one week of vacation! I became keenly aware of what being prepared looks like during my time as nanny for an orthodox Jewish family. The whole focus of their week – to prepare for the Sabbath – was admirable, but it was what 'had' to happen. Legalistic in many ways. I didn't observe a lot of heart preparation.

I'm a little obsessive over-prepping for Christmas. I have kept spreadsheets on preparations and presents right down to the pennies spent. I have reminders on my phone and have scheduled days and times to prepare. I have coordinated gifts, managed holiday meals for 40, and penciled in fun and rest as needed. Sounds like a blast, doesn't it?

I usually just end up praying! Praying I don't mess up. Praying I don't forget something. Praying I don't lose my mind. Praying I can get the gift that makes their faces light up. Praying that the holidays would be over! So much prayer, and all on the wrong end of the equation!

Re-orienting prayer so that it's the first thing I do in preparation for the holiday has changed my approach to Christmas. Yes, I still have the spreadsheet (the change hasn't gone that far), but my heart is different. There is a desire to be ready for the Lord, to be ready for the gifts He can bring, for the grace and peace that He comes to give us.

Strangely, even though we celebrate Christmas because He sent His Son to bring grace to us, we don't willingly accept that grace as we get ready for the holidays. We stress and fuss and generally beat ourselves up because our home doesn't look like the one in the magazine, or worse, like the one next door! We make ourselves ill with worry over gifts and meals.

What if this year was different? What if you took His word and prayed it during your run up to Christmas? I know there is a temptation to pull out Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." But we know from Pastor Matt that isn't the right application. Instead, let's pray Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (NIV).

Lord, help us to keep a pure heart this Christmas. Let us prepare our hearts for an encounter with You. Amen.

Journal Prompt: What scripture will help you prepare your heart? Look some up and then write them out in the first person. Do it now before the stress creeps in (as it undoubtedly will because the enemy is watching). Then you can pull out your personal prayer when you need to work your way through the stress!

HOPE IN THE DARK

by Daniella Peterka

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5, NIV).

The match struck into the darkness as I lit a candle in the late moments before midnight that Christmas Eve. Not a single thing that year felt like Christmas. Not a single cookie baked. No traditions to speak of. Living in a new house we were supposed to move into together, only to find myself alone with three daughters and a newborn son. I'd had a husband too, until he abandoned us that August.

I'd just nursed the baby, after hastily wrapping some last-minute presents, hoping tomorrow would pass off as a cheery Christmas despite the fact that I felt nothing in my heart. Daily running on empty, my heart and spirit were traumatized, and I found myself in the middle of a Christmas doused with broken hearts, broken dreams, broken hopes. How can I celebrate Christmas like this, Lord?

And there in the dark, approaching midnight, The Holy Spirit lit a small spark in my heart. Just sing with me. Really, Lord?

I picked up the candle from the table and walked into the hallway outside my room. I sat down with my back to the wall, candle at my feet, heart pulsing with pain, and waited for midnight. Growing up in the faith hadn't prepared me for my first taste of bitter suffering. Wounds still clouded my vision with all I'd lost, blinding me to the Holy One who had never left.

I turned my head to see the bright green numbers on the digital clock at my bedside. 12:00am. My voice timidly broke the silence.

"Silent night, holy night All is calm, all is bright" ...

A peace began to descend over me, stilling me in that holy moment. Just me and Jesus. My voice echoed down the hall as my softly sung words became worship. In that moment, I was beholding and singing to my King, my Friend, my Savior. Our Rescuer.

The kids slept on, oblivious to my rising voice outside their rooms.

"Christ our Savior is born Christ our Savior is born."

Flickers of joy quickened my heart as my Savior reminded me that He ... was ... still ... there. He was born into the dark, too. The darkness of a small stable, the darkness of a world marred by sin. To become the "hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure..." (Hebrews 6:19, NIV).

What began for me as a gentle invitation from the Lord would become a glorious communion and most anticipated secret tradition for the next four Christmases. No matter the circumstances each year, singing in the dark has become a tangible reminder of what I've had all along. Hope in the dark.

"But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in You" (Psalm 39:7, NIV).

Journal Prompt: Reflect on the present circumstances in your life. Are there deep hurts and disappointments, failures, or broken relationships that threaten to steal your sense of hope this Christmas season? How can you turn your eyes back to The God of all hope?

READY TO RECEIVE GOD

by Ginger Anderson

In 1982, I rededicated my life to the Lord, confessing to Him the mess I had made of my life, and asking Him to help me to view the rest of it as a chance to choose His will and His glory in all my decisions. As I examined our "Christ"mas decorations that year, I found little that actually glorified God; so, I began replacing tree ornaments and other decorations around our home. This was the start of a collection of nativities and ornaments that are a true joy to put out each year. Yes, we still have a couple of Santas, but as we told our children, Christmas is Christ's birthday, so we are going to do all we can do to get ready for His celebration.

This "outer" activity helps me to get ready for the "inner" celebration of Christ's coming at Christmas. It instills a deep sense of joy and helps me to center in on the faith and hope I have in Jesus Christ.

Chinese church leader Watchman Nee has my favorite definition of faith. Expounding on Hebrews II:I, ("Now faith is the confidence in what we hoped for..." (NIV)), Nee says, "Faith is the substantiating, or making true, of real things that are not seen. It is like a blind, deaf man who suddenly can see and hear things that were there all along. Now he has faith in those things; they are real to him." Nee points out that faith relates to the past ("God has done it.") so that we can have hope in the future ("God has promised it.").

Once I have faith in what God has done in the past, I can put my hope in what He has promised for the future. So, with hope in my heart, I am ready to receive Christ, celebrate His miraculous birth and His "birthday gift" to me – my salvation.

Journal Prompt: As you prepare to receive and celebrate God's precious Son this Christmas, consider all that He has done for you in the past. You might make a list of your blessings in your journal. You could begin with Ephesians 2:8-10, Galatians 5:22, Romans 6:23, Romans 12:6-8, and 1 Corinthians 1:7. After thanking God for each of these wonderful gifts, spend some time asking God how you might use them for His will and His glory.

HOPE ABOVE ALL HOPE

by Barbara Clark

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, NIV).

As we approach this Christmas season, may we take time to remember why Christmas is such a special time in our lives! It is our celebration of the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the heart of our hope for the future.

Lord, may we carve out time each day with You to fully understand the life and purpose of Your Son so that we will welcome Christmas morning with a renewed and deepened faith. May we fully understand the eternal hope all Your children are gifted with through Jesus' birth.

The Old Testament, written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, contains over 300 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled through His life, death and resurrection. (Some of those prophecies include Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7, 40:3-5, 42:I-4, 53, 60:6-7; Micah 5:2; and Zechariah 9:9.) Mathematically speaking, the odds of anyone fulfilling this amount of prophecy is staggering:

- I person fulfilling eight prophecies: I in 100,000,000,000,000
- I person fulfilling 48 prophecies: I in 10 to the 157th power
- I person fulfilling 300+ prophecies: ONLY Jesus Christ

God fulfilled all 300 prophecies about His son Jesus and hundreds to thousands of additional promises in the Bible. (Some of the verses showing fulfilment are Matthew I:20-23, 2:I-6; Luke 2, I9:35-37; and John 7:42.)

"So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11, NIV).

God keeps every single one of his promises! Go to His Word daily. Claim these promises for your life and for those you love. What hope this gives us, knowing that we are given eternal life because we believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died for our sins, and He was raised on the third day. We should eagerly ask God's forgiveness of our sins and turn to new lives daily.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter I:3, NIV).

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

Journal Prompt: Read through the book of Luke during Advent so that on Christmas morning you will awaken filled by the God of Hope with a new understanding of Jesus' life. Then, share with your family by reading about the birth of Jesus from Luke 2.

WHAT ARE YOU HOPING FOR?

by Katie Meriwether

The number one question to ask around Christmas time is, "What do you want for Christmas?" We are conditioned to be an expectant people during the Christmas season. What do you want for Christmas – I mean really want? My answer for a long time was for someone to remove the ache of loneliness.

For the first 27 years of my life, I was single. Christmastime seemed to amplify that fact, a constant reminder of what I wanted but didn't have - a partner to share the season with, my own house to decorate, a date to the Christmas parties, and a family to dress up for the Christmas card. My incredibly loving parents, sister, and friends made the holiday season fun, and there is so much more to a person than relationship status. However, the longing of my heart for companionship constantly overshadowed my Christmas cheer.

What do you want for Christmas? What is the longing of your heart? What are you hoping for?

Psalm 42:5, 42:11, and 43:5 all say, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God."

The psalmist spends two chapters telling God he feels empty, rejected, and forgotten. (Been there!) But in the middle of his lament, he commands his soul three times to "hope in God." The fact that he had to tell himself where to place his hope implies that our hope can be misplaced. Mine was for many years, expecting a relationship to solve my contentment crisis. I did get the relationship I wanted, but ultimately there will always be something else to want, another life-moment or season. We must first and foremost place all our hope in God.

Hope in God. This seems about as concrete a directive as "have faith." How do we do this? To hope in God is to remind myself of how He's been faithful so that I can trust Him for my future. To hope in God is to praise Him for the good gifts He's already given me. To hope in God is to recognize that Christ alone is my reward.

In Colossians I, Paul says that Christ in you is "the hope of glory." Christian hope is tied up in the eternal hope of glory in the future, the fact that He has saved us from our sins and offers eternal life. The Christmas season is the perfect reminder to ask where our hope comes from, knowing that the One who ushered us into this beautiful hope is Jesus, whose birth we now celebrate.

Journal Prompt: Is your hope misplaced? Are you expecting a gift, relationship, baby, apology, or promotion to heal your heart? Make a list of five ways God has been faithful to you in the last year, and then surrender yourself to Him as you trust Him for your future.

HOPE FOR ETERNITY

by Mary Powers

The dictionary defines hope as 'the feeling that what is wanted can be had, or that events will turn out for the best.' We hope for many things in this world. Little things like finding a parking spot at a crowded mall or bigger things such as a job, promotion, a spouse, a child. Sometimes we hope for things that are more like wishful thinking, such as winning the lottery or attaining world peace.

Oftentimes, when we get what we hope for, especially material things, we don't have the sense of satisfaction that we anticipated. We still have a deeper sense of hoping for something that we can't always identify – a hole in our heart that, ultimately, can only be filled by the love of Christ.

Years ago, there was a popular song titled "Is That All There Is?" It lamented the fact that nothing in this life is really satisfying. If this is all there is to life, it isn't very meaningful. Scripture tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:II that God has put eternity in our hearts. We are made to desire and hope for an eternity with our Maker.

In John 5:24, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life ..." (NIV). We are told in 1 Peter that He gives us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that our inheritance is kept in heaven for us. Paul tells us about our inheritance in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10: "...as it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived - the things God has prepared for those who love him..." (NIV).

We can rely on God's promise of eternity because, according to Scripture, He cannot lie and is not like man, who changes his mind. There is not one promise God has made that He has not kept. Our hope for eternity is a confident hope, because we can look back to see what God has faithfully done to know what He will faithfully do.

The Candle of Hope is the first candle in Advent week. The coming of Messiah, the Savior of all people, had been foretold by many of the Old Testament prophets. For hundreds of years, the Israelites looked and hoped for the fulfilment of that promise. The eagerly awaited Messiah would bring to the world hope for a new heart and a new spirit. Hope for eternity. The manifestation of that hope was the birth of a baby born in a feeding trough in a stable on a starry night in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago.

Journal Prompt: How has God been faithful to you? Do you live a life that reflects a confident – and hopeful - expectation of eternity?

LOVE.

LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING

by Lauren Kiszie

God is love and His love changes everything. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:9-10, NIV). God gave the gift of love through His son Jesus Christ. This act of love changed everything! His love brought us from death to life. His love satisfied a debt we could not pay. Christmas is a time to celebrate love and how our stories have been changed through the birth of a baby in a manger.

God demonstrated what real love, agape love, is through the Christmas story. The birth of Jesus was the beginning of the greatest love story ever. Christmas is a time to honor who God is and how His love changes who we are. His love empowers us to love others as He commands in John 15:12, "Love each other as I have loved you" (NIV). His love is unconditional, so we must love unconditionally. We cannot love based on how we feel. We love based on who we are: children of God who have been given the ability to love unconditionally through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This Christmas, let His love change everything! Instead of being tempted to turn Christmas into a never-ending to-do list of things to buy and places to go, let His love guide us into a season of hope, love, joy, and peace. May His love lead us into sharing the Gospel and the unconditional love of God with everyone we encounter. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, NIV). This Christmas, let us allow love to lead us into a celebration of the birth of our Savior and how His love changed everything!

Journal Prompt: What could you do differently this Christmas that would allow God's love to shine throughout this season? Is there something you need to give up or something new you need to start in order for you and your family to focus on the gift of God's love?

LOVE WITHOUT BARRIERS

by Meaghan Hart

"Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matt. 22:37-40, NIV).

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, '**Love your neighbor** as yourself,' you are doing right." (James 2:8, NIV).

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44, NIV).

This time of year, as we reflect on what Christ's birth means and what it means to be a believer of our Lord and Savior, it is also a great time to pray for the Lord to change our hearts and minds for those around us. As referenced above, we are told in scripture to love our neighbors. Not just love our neighbors but love our enemies and pray for them too! I do not know about you, but I find it hard to love a perceived enemy, let alone pray for them. I pray for family and friends, but enemies, that's too much Lord! That is how my worldly mind thinks at times. However, scripture also tells us not to let the world influence our hearts and minds. Just read James chapter 4 for a convicting word about resisting the world and the devil and running to God.

As you go about this season, slow down and look at who your neighbors are, or who you have a hard time with. Is there an actual neighbor who you just do not like, a family member who knows just what to say to make you mad, or are there people who you feel just do not deserve love, prayer, or grace? **Christ came for them, just like He came for you.** He calls us to pray for them and even show them His love, grace, and mercy. We can stop to hold that door for someone or take a meal to a neighbor or family. We can slow down and even ask that pesky neighbor over for pie and tea. I encourage you to pray and seek God's will for you, to seek out someone and slow down to show His love to this season. We never know what others may be going through or if they really know our Father's love. That is an opportunity to show them why Christ came and why it is so sweet to be forgiven and loved and set free!

Journal Prompt: Can you locate more scripture that commands you to love your neighbor or your enemy? As you read, who came to your mind as a challenging person that the Lord may be nudging you to stop and talk to or pray for or both?

LOVE CAME DOWN

by Connie Christianson

Love Came Down. What is your first thought as you read this? Do you ask what love is? Do you ask where the love came down from? Do you ask how love came down? Christians celebrate Christmas as the time when love came down.

A beloved Scripture, John 3:16, says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (NIV). Then in I John 4:7-8, the Bible says, "...love comes from God...God is love," and verse 10 says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." It's hard to imagine so great a love, such an unconditional love, such a sacrificial love.

Charles Spurgeon once stated, "Did you ever consider the depth of love in the heart of Jehovah when God the Father equipped His Son for the great enterprise of mercy ... The Father sent Him!" That's profound! God was willing to send Him; Jesus was willing to be sent. He was willing to leave heaven, come to earth to be abused and mistreated, abandoned, and ultimately killed, and then resurrected, for us, because of love, to atone for our sins, to give us eternity with Him!

So let's put it all together: God and Jesus are one, along with the Holy Spirit. God is love. Jesus is love. God sent Jesus from heaven to earth, and He willingly came. He came to show His love, and because of love, Jesus (Love) came down! He came to us. He came for us. He came because of love. Christmas is the time we celebrate that love came down. It's the Gospel in a nutshell. Love. Came. Down.

My youngest daughter always had a heart for God from the time she could understand who He was. She asked lots of questions about Him and about Jesus. At the age of four, she started saying she wanted to ask Jesus to come into her heart. We believed she was a little too young. We answered her questions as best we could but tried to stall her. Finally, when she turned 6, we asked our pastor to talk with her. Afterwards, he told us that he had no doubt that she understood, maybe more clearly than some adults. He stated that when he asked her why Jesus came to earth, she told him that people weren't doing things right and were messing up. She told him that because God loved us, He sent Jesus down to show us how to do things right. She understood God's love. She knew what Christmas meant and why we celebrate Christmas. Love came down! Love came down to show us how to do things right!

Journal Prompt: What is something you can do to illustrate to your family, friends, or others this Christmas the meaning of the statement "Love Came Down"? Is there an activity you can do with them, a place you can take them, or an event you can participate in with them?

12/11/2019

GOD IS FOR US

by Jenn Dennard

We had had an adventurous day tubing down the Ocoee River in the picturesque town of Helen, GA. Aside from getting stuck a time or two amidst the amoeba-like groups of tubers roped together, our family's time in the water was nearly perfect. The weather was cooperative – sunny and hot, with a brief shower toward the end to cool us off. (Christmastime temps were the furthest thing from my mind, though I did think it would be fun to come back to see the Alpine village decorated for the holidays.) We even had the chance to spend time on a few water slides during our two hour-long river "cruise".

The drive home was quiet, as my husband and the girls dozed in between recounting their favorite parts of the day. Picking up ice cream near home seemed like the ideal way to end our outing. Everything was going swimmingly ... until my husband hopped in the car with two cartons of ice cream and asked, "Do you still have your wedding ring?"

Looking down at my hand, I saw the ring he had proposed to me with nearly 18 years ago at a waterfall not too far from Helen. "Yes," I said, asking with a sinking feeling, "Do you?" He had apparently lost his in the river that day. Or perhaps in the gush of the water slide. As hard as he tried to track it down - making calls, sending emails - that ring remains lost. His frustration at losing it was understandable; it had sentimental and financial value. We joked that, based on its price and the number of days we've been married, that ring had cost us five cents a day, a price I'd willingly pay for the rest of my life to have the kind of love we've settled into. A downright bargain!

When frustrations like this hit us, I tend to ask myself, "How is God using this for His glory, His kingdom? What will the ripple effect be of a lost ring?" I have every confidence that, because God is for us, He will use this situation for His good in His perfect timing. Romans 8:28, one of my favorite verses, sums it up nicely: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (NIV).

For now, a lost ring reminds me that the price of Jesus' love for us is priceless and, thankfully, unconditional. And that God can – and most likely will - use a very human experience for His good purpose.

During this busy Christmas season, I encourage you to remember that God is always with us and for us, no matter how many frustrations we face. Hallelujah!

Journal Prompt: How have you seen God use a frustrating or negative experience for His glory?

LOVE FOR OTHERS

by Laura Peden

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, **do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back**. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:32-36, NIV)

You know those people who are really hard to love? No, I'm not just talking about those people who stole your identity and spent a bunch of money on your credit card. I'm not specifically talking about the ladies in the neighborhood that are always gossiping, or worst yet, still look amazing in a bikini after having 8 kids. I'm not even talking about the scary ones who have committed horrendous crimes we dare not mention here. I'm talking about the really hard people to love- those people who know way too much about you-Your family!

Most of us are entering the Christmas season with mixed emotions of excitement and stress. Shopping, planning, decorating, parties and not to mention all the food-it can become overwhelming. Add to the mix these people you call family and sometimes it gets... messy! I challenge you to consider the what Jesus said to his disciples, "Do good to them, and lend to them without expecting anything back."

Sure, it's easy to say you love others when it's Christmas. But what about the family member who hurt you as a child? What about the sister who judges your parenting or the brother who always makes you feel stupid? What about the disobedient child who is complaining about their gifts? What about the man who was once family and left for another one?

Jesus called us to be like Him. Jesus called us to love- not just our friends, not just the family whom we adore, not even just those people you hear about on the news who could never hurt us again. He calls us to love unconditionally those who have hurt us, betrayed us, caused us physical and emotional pain and yes, sadly, even those who still are. Why? Because I John 4:19: "We love because He first loved us!"

Journal Prompt: Who comes to mind when you think about someone hard to love? How can you demonstrate God's love to them without causing more pain to yourself? What does the second half of Luke 6:35 say is the result? (Read The Message version for a different perspective).

NOTHING CAN CHANGE GOD'S LOVE

by Anna Bollin

We live in the scope of time - past, present, future. At Christmas, we are always trying to recreate the perfect childhood memories, of the magic, excitement, innocence, and wonder of the season. If we are not trying to recreate it, we are striving to make it happen for this year or the next. If we do pull off what we believe is the perfect Christmas, with all the right decorations, presents, parties, and activities, by January I, it is over. It is a memory, that I, 5, 100 years from now, won't matter or even be a memory in anyone's mind anymore. Wouldn't it be cool if you could plan, organize, and pull off a perfect Christmas season, that would go off year after year without a hitch?

Psalm 103:15-18 begins by saying, "The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (NIV). Seems a little drab and depressing. Sometimes, Christmas can seem like that once the season is over. It only lasted what felt like a few minutes, in our dimension of time.

Thankfully, God exists in eternity, no past, present or future. He is in eternal now! He said in Exodus 3:14, "I AM who I AM." He didn't say "I was" and/or "I will be". Jesus said in John 8:58, "Very truly I tell you...before Abraham was born, I AM!" When God looked down through the corridor of time, there was no difference between the moment God chose to send his son to be born, to die on a cross for humanity, or that you or I accept God's gift of love. He saw it all: the fall, redemption, a new heaven and a new earth, before creation (Revelation 13:8). God's love is not something that was done once and we work to recreate or hope to experience in the future. It is eternally and infinitely now. It is not affected by time, my circumstances or my sin. It was, is and will be happening, eternally, **now**!

Psalm 103:15-18 finishes by saying, "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children - with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." Our lives here don't last any longer than the fresh poinsettia you buy in December, then is dead and in the trash come January. No gift or memory from Christmas of 2019, will last beyond the lifespan of your youngest family member. We need to step off the short track of our concept of past, present, and future, and onto the track of eternity, where God saw us, loved us and provided redemption for us, and has already placed us is heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-10). The perfect Christmas won't last, but our children's children's children will be impacted if we have accepted God's eternal and unchanging love for us, He is in us, and we are in Him, along with generations after us. That is a Christmas gift I will never have enough understanding (or paper) to wrap my mind around. It is so hard for our finite minds to understand infinite truths. Not just this Christmas season, but daily, we can live in the splendor, magic, excitement, and wonder of God's eternal, infinite, unchanging love for us.

Journal Prompt: What are you and your family doing this Christmas season to impact eternity, not just this season?

NEVER ALONE

by Kim Edde

As we come into the Christmas season, we begin seeing the Nativity scene on display. Each time I see this, I remember the story of the shepherds in the fields watching over their flocks that sacred night when an angel of the Lord appeared among them. The Word tells us in Luke 2:9, "the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (NIV). The angel then spoke to the men saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:IO-I3). It is amazing to me how God uses those same four words, "Do not be afraid" all throughout scripture comforting us to know He is always with us and we are never alone. In fact, God gives us this command 365 times in his Word (ironically the same number of days in a year), more often than any other command.

I believe the Lord ministered to the shepherds' hearts in that moment and that they felt a peace that only the Lord can provide in times of fear. One of my favorite verses in scripture is Jeremiah 29:II, "For I know the plans I have for you', declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." This one became a true promise in my heart Io years ago when I found out I had stage 3 breast cancer. After I had received this news, I woke up in the one night with an overwhelming fear that I had never experienced before; fear of what I was going to face and the unknown of whether I would live to see my children grow up. While I had people around me to support me in my fight, I knew it would ultimately be my body fighting. Unable to shake this debilitating fear, I called out to the Lord in that moment and He reminded me of Jeremiah 29:II. Much like the shepherds, His peace came rushing over me in a way words cannot describe. I knew in that moment He would go before me and that I was not alone in my fight against cancer. From that point going forward, I never again felt alone or fearful because I knew God was with me regardless of the outcome.

It is a peace that no one or anything can give you except Christ. There are promises all throughout the Word that tell us we are not alone. Psalms 46:I says, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." He is an ever present help in all that you may be currently facing or will in the future.

Isaiah 41:13 says, "For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand, and says to you, 'Do not fear; I will help you.'" It's in our hardest and darkest moments in life that we are susceptible to feeling alone, but if we will turn into God and His Word, His power, and His strength will comfort us during those times. I have found that the harder the challenges, the greater His power is revealed.

When feeling alone, be encouraged by these verses:

<u>Deuteronomy 31:6:</u> "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

James 4:8: "Come near to God and he will come near to you."

Matthew 28:20: "and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Joshua I:9: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Journal Prompt: In what moments in life have you felt the most alone? How did God comfort you during those times?

JOY.

JOY IN THE ASHES

by Maria Thomas

My favorite Christmas song is a very old carol ... "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". Its haunting, sorrowful tune reminds me that our greatest rejoicing is often entangled with sorrow. More than any other hymn, this one has the ability to make the hairs on my arms stand up at attention and causes tears to prick my eyes from its plaintive beauty. I so relate to this idea of rejoicing and sorrow being woven into a tune that sings over the lives of those who love Jesus.

There's a lot of pressure to be happy, to do happy, to "spread Christmas cheer for all to hear" during this time of the year. For most of us that comes naturally. But maybe today you're looking at Christmas through a pair of glasses that have lost their rosy sheen. If you've lost a loved one, you're struggling with illness, your marriage is under fire, you're parenting a prodigal, or any number of things that could cause you to be experiencing grief when you'd so much rather be excited about buying presents and baking cookies, know you're not alone. I've walked that road, too.

It's tempting to suppress it all, paste a smile on your face and post a picture of your perfectly decorated hearth as a way to block out reality. I'll be the first to admit it...I totally tried that approach. But it doesn't work. Thankfully, I have a wonderfully wise momma who challenged me to try something different the year that grief overtook my Christmas joy. She sent me a blank book and challenged me to document the things I was grateful for as I navigated that tough season. It sounds trite...ineffective at best, but it changed everything for me.

When we can look at our circumstances, no matter how grim they appear, and see that there is always be something to be thankful for, it changes us. As you start noticing and looking for those good things (even things as simple and mundane as twinkle lights and warm toes and salted caramel coffee creamer), you stop focusing on your circumstances and make room to focus on these truths: God is still good. He still loves you with an unfailing love. He chose you and keeps you safe in the palm of his hand. He is your provider and healer. He is for you. He is always with you. He is Emmanuel. Rejoice! Your list can become the gift that softens the plaintive tune of grieving with notes of joy

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6, NIV).

Journal Prompt: Whether you are sitting in the ashes this December, wishing you could opt out of all the Christmas cheer, or you're just so overwhelmed and busy that Christmas feels like a duty, can I challenge you the same way my momma challenged me? Right here on this page write these three little words ... "I'm thankful for ..." and then start a list. Maybe today is so hard that you can only think of one thing to be thankful for. But maybe tomorrow you'll fill up a whole page.

REDISCOVERING JOY

by Abbey Cooler

Just as I lay down my fork after having seconds of my grandma's famous pecan pie and starting to sample some of my aunt's famous coconut cake, I can feel the excitement of Christmas begin to build. I see it in the mall decorations, hear it in the Christmas songs that are playing everywhere I go, and even smell it in my own kitchen as I begin to make sweet treats. Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. But what if it isn't? What do you do with Christmas?

This is the question that came crashing into my family's life in December, 15 years ago. In July of 2004, my brother and sister in law found out they were expecting their first child. This was their first child, my parents first grandchild, and I was going to be an aunt for the first time. They couldn't wait until the typical 20-week check-up to find out if they were having a boy or a girl. Instead of being a routine and exciting visit, the visit brought them heartbreaking and life changing news. They were first told they were having a little boy. They were then told that the little boy had a health diagnosis that was "incompatible with life." The doctor told them that he would only live a few days, a few weeks, or a few more months.

On December 16, 2004, my nephew, Robert Michael "Tucker", was born into the arms of Jesus. On December 23, 2004, when others were putting the last touches on their Christmas decorations and making last minute purchases of presents, my Godly brother and sister in law were placing their baby boy in a tiny grave. Yet, on December 25, 2004, they celebrated Christmas with our family. How? How were they able to take a step or even their next breath, much less be joyous?

My brother and sister in law clung to Christ. They did not find comfort in a cheesy quote or a random Bible verse given to them by well-meaning comforters. Their faith was not based on a faith that causally says, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!". Because if God loved them, why did He allow this tragedy to occur? If God's plan was so wonderful, why were they experiencing such enormous pain? The strength they found to celebrate Christmas in the midst of all their grief was a faith based on the truth of Scripture and the comfort of Christ, who is all powerful, all knowing and all gracious.

Was it easy? Was it without tears and anger? Absolutely not! That first Christmas, just a few days after experiencing one of the greatest fears and devastating heartbreak a parent could ever endure, was raw and real. My family's faith and celebration of Christmas was not based on fancy decorations or the perfectly picked present, but it was worshipping the real reason, the only reason for the season, Jesus Christ.

Journal Prompt: Describe your "not so perfect" Christmas. What are some ways you keep Christ in the center of Christmas? How can you show grace to your friends and family this Christmas?

DEEP BREATHS

by Laura Godfrey

Have you ever thought about how funny some of the lyrics are to our most-loved Christmas songs? "Silent Night" for instance. I've given birth before, so I doubt there was anything "silent" about that night, especially on a dirt floor in a stable! What about "Holly, Jolly Christmas"? I think most of us feel it would be more realistic to sing "Have a Stressful, Restless Christmas".

The fact is, the Christmas season is probably the busiest one that we have. Even though we may love the idea of silent nights that are holly and jolly, most of us have a challenging time trying to make that happen.

While it's not realistic to clear the calendar and sit on the couch watching hallmark channel 24/7 from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, there are a few intentional things we can do to enjoy this season and keep our hearts focused on Jesus even in the midst of the craziness.

Let's keep things simple and start by taking deep breaths.

Do it with me. Breathe in. Breathe out. Again.

There's scientific research to prove that when you take deep breaths, you get more oxygen to your brain, and when your brain is better oxygenated, it performs better. So what does this have to do with Christmas? EVERYTHING!

Not only do we need to be taking physical deep breaths, but we also need to find ways to stop and take spiritual deep breaths. Just as clean refreshing air filling our lungs is good for our overall functioning, taking the time to breathe in the Holy Spirit and allow Him to fill our hearts will make all the difference in the world.

So how do we make sure this happens? It's all about taking the time to be still. Creating margin within our busy schedule to do the things that are good for our souls. Don't wait for someone else to make this happen for you. We have to be vigilant protectors of our time, especially when things have a tendency to get crazy!

This stillness before the Lord will be just the deep breath you need to keep yourself from unraveling and therefore losing the joy that should be such a prominent part of this time of year.

So, take a deep breath, friend. Take time to be still before the Lord. Watch as his joy fills your soul and experience this Christmas Season like you never have before!

Journal Prompt: Take some time today to take deep breaths. How will you create margin in your day and enjoy stillness before the Lord?

JOY IS NO SECRET

by Paula Seal

Have you ever thought about how much time we spend looking for answers to secrets? Think about it, we want to find the secret to good hair, to young skin, and how to stop the aging process. Every new mom wants to know the secret to getting a newborn to follow her schedule. What is the secret to a happy marriage, a happy teenager, an ideal family? I personally have looked most of my life for the secret to easy weight loss and then the secret to keeping the pounds off. (I've come to the conclusion it will remain hidden.) We don't know the secrets of Tutt's tomb, nor has the History Channel discovered the secrets of Oak Island, and for centuries people have tried to figure out the Colonel's secret ingredients in Kentucky Fried Chicken! Whether it is a trade secret, a top-secret document, a secret hiding place, or the secrets of nature, secrets are hidden and concealed and made know to only a few trusted individuals.

Secrets drive me crazy! Be honest: they probably drive you crazy too! As I child I always knew what I was getting for Christmas, because I could not stand the secret hidden under the wrapping paper. I became very adept at unwrapping, seeing the gift and then rewrapping. There is only one problem with that; I had to pretend I was surprised when we opened presents on Christmas Eve. Some secrets are better left unrevealed until the right time. Sometimes when we learn a secret we are hurt by the revelation, and wish it never been known. I gave up the joy of the revelation on Christmas morning, because I couldn't wait.

Israel had been waiting for hundreds of years for the mystery, or secret, of the Messiah to be revealed. One starry night on a hillside in Bethlehem that secret was revealed by a host of angels to a group of shepherds. The angel said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10, NIV). JOY was revealed that night; Joy is NO secret! The Psalmist knew the secret; "You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalms 16:11). The Secret of Joy came to earth to dwell among us in the form of a baby, who grew into the man, Jesus, who told His disciples, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Abiding in Jesus, the true "vine," we bear the fruit of the Spirit - joy - and it is full. Jesus, who is the "pioneer and perfector of faith", who knew the "joy set before him", our salvation and a relationship with us, "endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). It is in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that we find true JOY, a JOY that lasts all year long, not just in the secrets hidden under a Christmas tree. Those things bring temporary joy, and we have all seen the new wear off of a gift very quickly. Lasting joy, the kind of joy that "rejoice[s] always," (I Thessalonians 5:16) comes through the One we celebrate at Christmas.

This Christmas may our definition of Joy be that of Rick Warren, "Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright, and the determined choice to praise God in every situation."

JOY to the world the Lord has come!

Journal Prompt: Re-read the quote from Rick Warren. What is keeping you from having that "quiet confidence that everything is going to be alright" this Christmas? How can you rest in His presence? What scripture can you cling to as a reminder of this?

IMPOSSIBLE JOY

by Kayla Knicely

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James I:2-3, NIV).

If you've grown up in the church (and maybe even if you haven't) you've probably heard this verse quoted many times. And, if you're like me, you probably didn't give it much thought past "I should be happy even when things are not going so well". But over the last few years, God has revealed to me a deeper meaning of this verse, and it has truly changed my life.

In December of 2018, just a year ago, my husband left for Afghanistan. Our daughter was almost 2, and I was very pregnant with our son. We had no idea if my husband would be able to make it back for the birth, and frankly, we had no promises that he would come back at all. To say it was a season of uncertainty is an understatement.

I was fortunate enough to be a part of a small group of other Army wives who met virtually each week. One night we were talking about how we were all feeling and the questions we would get peppered with all the time. One of the most popular questions was, "How are you doing with everything? How are you feeling?". We all agreed that we had a strange, overwhelming peace about everything, and as we began to talk about things, there was an excitement that no one would understand. Because how can a group of women be excited when their husbands are in a war zone? Well, we understood that God chose us for this time. THIS was our mission. As much as God had placed our husbands in a far away land for a specific reason, He also created this time to teach us something important. To allow us to minister to people, to allow people to minister to us, to show us things about ourselves we never knew. That's why we were a joyful group of ladies during a time where most expected us to be struggling through each day. That's not to say there weren't hard days (you could find me on the floor in the corner of the kitchen crying on several occasions) but even on those days, I held on as tightly as I could to the truth that God invited me on an adventure with Him and I didn't want to miss a thing.

I realized it's not just about "smiling through the storm". It's about knowing that whatever you're going through, God has chosen YOU to go through this with Him. I know the storms are hard and exhausting and we just want them to be over, but if we rush through it or try to avoid it, we'll miss what God has for us in the **journey**.

Journal Prompt: Think back on a hardship that you endured, not just the beginning or the end, but the middle. How did God show up? What amazing and life-changing things happened along the way? Next time you're going through an impossible situation, stop for a minute, lean closer to our sweet Jesus, and pray, "Please don't let me miss the middle. Please open my eyes to what you are teaching me on this journey". Who knows, this may be your greatest adventure yet.

JOY IN THE LORD

by Sheiletta Jackson

Each day we find ourselves in the midst of complex and sometimes downright lastminute decisions and choices. I constantly look to the Lord to give me guidance and a clear mind in making these decisions.

One of my favorite scriptures is James 1:2-8: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do"(NIV).

This scripture speaks to me in many ways. Teaching me to stay focused, positive, and encouraged during the storms and in the valleys. Seek God for the answers, and wait on Him for He knows what is truly best for me. Also, whatever I lack in the moment ask Him for it, and He will supply my every need in His timing. So just as James spoke to the twelve tribes, I feel that God continues to speak to us. Always remembering the Lord wants us to be positive, full of joy and expecting greatness in our day instead of listening to the lies of the enemy. Satan wants us to be hopeless, faithless, and negative. But, thank God, through Christ Jesus we have been redeemed, given a sound mind, and can find joy early in the morning.

Decide early to enjoy every challenge that you face today, knowing that God will be with you and make your path straight and to assist you in everything you set out to do in His name. We must stand firm in resisting the devil and trust in the Power of our God. Wake up knowing we are victorious in our lives today and always.

Journal Prompt:

- How can you change your perspective on a daily basis?
- What tools do you use during your dark times to be uplifted?
- How can you encourage others during their trials?
- How are you shining your light in this dark world?
- What examples do you look to when joy is hard to find?
- In what way do you worship during the dark times?
- What scripture do you know that pulls you out of the negative space?
- Do you get alone with God when you need to be strengthened?

JOY ISN'T JUST A HAPPY THOUGHT

by Mary Aldrich

That's right, joy isn't just a happy thought, it's multiple happy thoughts back to back to back. Enough happy thoughts that you actually feel and believe that life is amazing. But in order to see that among the pain all around, you'll need a completely different way to look at life.

Joy is going to take looking at the picture of the world from the perspective of how God might see things. The bigger picture. His story. It's a totally different perspective of life; so much so that your current circumstances don't impact your ability to feel genuinely excited and encouraged by what's going on, and how God is winning regardless of current circumstances.

It's a choice to consider things that are pure, holy, just, virtuous, worthy of praise, and good report and to actually allow those things to sink deep inside your bones, in spite of fears, unknowns, and unkindness around us.

It's permission to celebrate your smallest victories in choosing to glorify God the same way you cheer when your team wins the World Series or the Super Bowl. Things like celebrating self-control, courage, perseverance, kindness, unconditional love in a trying situation, and resting to be ready for loving people well tomorrow.

It's permission to dance like you are having the time of your life simply because you remember that God is working all things together for good, that every day he is working and moving in YOUR life and the lives of others over and over again.

Joy is living as if we truly and fully believe that God has got our backs, is planning our futures, and is working in this present moment so much for our good that if we had all the facts, we'd choose it! Joy requires faith. Faith in what isn't seen, because sometimes what we do see appears to be heartbreaking. But true joy requires remembering that this life isn't the main event- it's only the precursor to eternity.

Joy...but how to grab it? Yes, be thankful. Yes, be grateful. But also, give your physical body and chance to actually feel like you are thankful and grateful. Smile. Open your arms. Sing! Lift your eyes up and delight in our Creator! Pause in your busy life to really and truly CELEBRATE the Lord of our Salvation, the goodness of our God, the blessings in our life, the help that He brings.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:9-11, NIV).

Journal Prompt: Consider completing these sentences: 1) Three of my favorite ways to celebrate include... 2) I can see God working in my life (where?)... 3)I can see God working in the lives of others (where?)...

Take a minute to really enjoy this moment recognizing His Story at work today!

PEACE.

MAJESTY IN THE MIDST OF CHAOS

Kimberly McDurmon

Majesty: (n.) sovereign power, authority, or dignity.

The very definition of the word "majesty" exudes who we as Christians know God to be. We sing it in worship: "Majesty...worship His majesty." We also see it in scripture throughout the Bible. Psalm 93:I says, "The Lord reigns, He is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength; indeed, the world is established, firm and secure" (NIV). When the scripture speaks of being robed in majesty, it is referring to Him being wrapped in the esteem of those He has created.

So how do we find majesty in the midst of the chaos that rears its ugly head smack dab in the middle of the very season set aside to celebrate our Majesty's birth? Of course, I'm not speaking to everyone. Surely there are those that plan ahead, have Pinterest-worthy decorations, think of the perfect gifts, and wrap them in perfect bows. Some of you may whip out dozens of delectable creations and deliver them to your friends and neighbors in celebration of the season. All this is wonderful; but I must admit, I am definitely not that girl. I won't even go into the state of my home or the failure of my baking attempts, because honestly, it doesn't matter.

Think about it: a precious baby boy was born in a nasty stable with dirty animals and laid in a food trough for goodness sake! I wonder sometimes if Mary ever beat herself up over the unworthiness her Savior's delivery room. Was she incredibly embarrassed? Who knows? But honestly that doesn't matter either. The only thing that matters is that Jesus came to deliver us from an eternity of Hell, and it didn't matter whether He was born in a barn or in a penthouse suite.

Can we all agree that we need to focus more on the splendor of our Majesty rather than the splendor of worldly things? Hebrews 12:2 says, "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."

Can we choose to keep our eyes on our creator and find the Majesty in this Christmas season with joy and peace in our hearts? His strength alone will secure us in the chaos and His glory is oh so worthy to be praised!

Journal Prompt: In the chaos of Christmas, take some time to journal on the splendor of our Majesty and reflect on His peace that He offers. Journal your prayer to Him.

THE PATH TO PEACE

by Sarah Elmer

"But the meek will inherit the land, and enjoy peace and prosperity" (Psalm 37:II, NIV). My circumstances in life have never been more demanding. I'm expecting my 8th child in 9 years. I'm going through the journey of growing a baby yet again, and it's with 7 little darlings who still need their momma. I'm homeschooling, which means living 90% of my life in our house, bearing up underneath the weight of a "lived in" home, a new challenge, since I've always liked to have things "just so." I'm never not needed. The well of patience can always be deeper.

Will I say, "Enough! I cannot! This is too much to bear!" I admit, some days I do say that. And I am met with a quick peace that The Lord loves me. He will not break me. He wants His power to be made known in my weaknesses, and I have many opportunities for weakness.

Submitting to the Lord requires death to self. But I desire to stay comfortable. I enjoy making things easier on myself. Who wants to go the harder route? Let's order out instead of cooking at home! Let's get a housekeeper instead of appreciating what I own by caring for it! These are HARD choices that stretch my comfort and confront my sense of self-preservation and desire.

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds" (John 12:24).

God does this because He cares deeply about changing me to be more like Him. Comfort will lie to me and whisper "proud nothings" in my ear. My Heavenly Father loves me too much to let me fall under that spell. Those lies will bring me discontentment and numb me to His Spirit, preferring my will to His. Comfort will tell me that I am more in charge of my own destiny than I am, and it will lead me into a yoke of fear. It's my choice how I will respond to this inner work.

I can compare it to laboring with a child, a process of which I am very familiar. The baby comes faster if you can relax and release yourself to the waves of the pain. Peace, deep-in-the-heart peace, comes from letting go. It's when I try to take on the job of my husband, or lead where I am not required to lead, or force my own time table, that I cannot find my peace. I lose my peace when I look at the waves of comparison. I lose my peace when I don't attend to what I am supposed to: my Lord, my husband, my family, my home, my community. I lose my peace when I don't make time to read God's Word. I lose my peace when I love or trust in something other than Him.

I lose my peace when I am not submitting to His righteousness and obeying His Word. "The fruit of that righteousness will be peace..." (Isaiah 32:17). When I obey, when I submit, when I keep a quiet heart, and "make it [my] ambition to lead a quiet life" and to "mind [my] own business and work with [my] hands" (I Thessalonians 4:11), I see deep joy and endless peace abide in me. I will then remember that whatever comes my way, whatever the ebb and flow, my posture before the Lord should be of humble submission. This is how Your servant finds peace.

Journal Prompt: Make a list of what pulls you from peace and what draws you to peace. Spend time in prayer giving those things that pull you from peace to God. Practice those things that draw you to peace today.

12/24/2019

LIVING AT THE PITCH OF PEACE

Kristen Dodgen

One of the things I dearly love about Christmas is the music. I'm the one who is sad when all the stations stop playing Christmas music. The music and sounds of the season can be reminders of the simplicity and depth of our Savior's love for us. He came to us humbly to offer himself in exchange for a lifetime and eternity of peace. Unfortunately, not all songs are performed on pitch.

Sometimes we get off key with the song of our lives. We have complicated our season and our earthly lives with the jingle-jangle of the noise of the world instead of the peace of our Savior. Colossians 3:I6-I7 brings us back in tune with strong encouragement to "let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (NIV). Gratitude is given to us at the Pitch Pipe of Peace as we examine all our many blessings, beginning with our gift: our Savior!

During this advent season of busy schedules, busted budgets, and potential family feuds, bring the knowledge and peace of Christ Jesus into your home, and as you go out, create a refuge for yourself, your family, and those around you. James tells us that "wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17-18). In Romans we are encouraged to be the people who "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19).

Clearly, God cares about our soul and the calm within. As you proceed closer and closer to the day we have set aside to celebrate Christ as the Church, make yourself mindful of being a catalyst for peace. Make your home and your relationships places of refuge in which Christ's love can be shared with all.

Journal Prompt: What can you tangibly do in your home this Christmas to pursue and promote peace? How can you encourage others around you to live in the Peace of Christ?