

CITY ON A HILL'S
**UPSIDE DOWN
CHRISTMAS**

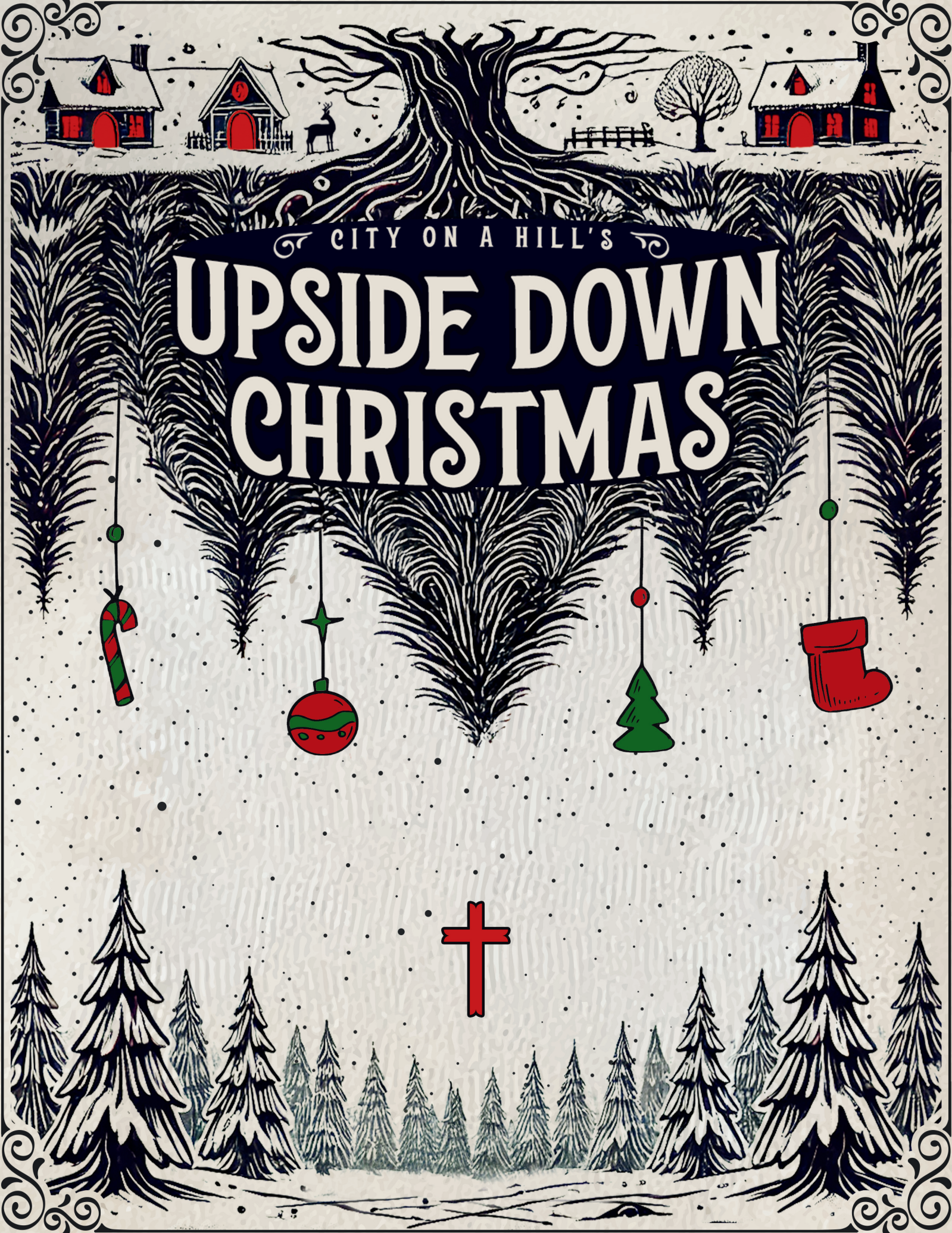




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ADVENT IS HERE, BUT WHO CARES?

WHAT ADVENT IS, AND WHY IT MATTERS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

It's a strange word, isn't it? Advent. What in the world does that even mean? And why are we spending an entire month talking about it? Advent seems like a word that doesn't really belong in the English language, and that's because it doesn't. Advent stems from the Latin word *Adventus*, meaning "arrival." Simply stated, Advent is a season observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. It's a time to reflect on the goodness of God who sent His Son to a dark and weary world. It's a time to consider what the arrival of Jesus Christ means, not only for the people in the 1st century but for us today, as well. But, why does Advent matter?

Think about it: the holiday season is busy. Schedules change. There is extra shopping to do. You sometimes have commitments with extended family (which is a very touchy subject for some folks). Relatives often come in from out of town or you end up planning on going out of town to visit family elsewhere. Traffic becomes more of a problem. Stores are overpacked with frantic shoppers. Restaurants have waiting lists that are 30-45 minutes long on weeknights. But hey, at least we get holiday drinks from Starbucks, right?

As exciting and stressful as the holidays can be, we are at high risk and often don't even realize it. We are at risk because our attention is suddenly taken by a myriad of details and if we aren't careful, we forget what all the chaos is about. It's the old, tried and true Sunday school answer: Jesus. As we traverse the month of December, we will be embarking on a study on how Advent meets us where we are. This packet will serve as both your curriculum in bible study (if you choose to go to one) and also a space for notes during the sermon each week. We've also included some devotionals written by some of our members here at City on a Hill, as well as lyrics to a Christmas carol that highlights each week's theme. I encourage you to do the devotionals and the Bible study portion even if you don't attend a Bible study.

My prayer is that this study becomes a place of refuge in your mind when things get a little too chaotic. When you are unsure how family gatherings will go this year, remember hope. When you are stuck in traffic and stressed out, remember peace. When you are anxious about all of the things you need to get done before Christmas morning arrives, remember joy. And when you are gathered with individuals you love, sharing gifts with one another, remember the love that God demonstrated to us when He gave us the gift of Jesus.

Immanuel came, and He is still here.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 5:43-48

To understand the importance of Christian love in the face of worldly hate.

All You Need is Love

In John's Gospel, Jesus issues a new commandment for His disciples that will not only separate them from the rest of the world, but demarcate them as His disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:34-35). The mutual love of Christians is a beautiful thing to behold and definitely not normative in the world today. The average, non-church-going, non-Christian doesn't have the same expectation of love, in part because they don't share the same definition of love. Christian love is not like worldly love. It is sacrificial (Jn. 15:13). It is patient and kind (1 Cor. 13:4). It is never resentful (1 Cor. 13:5). It endures all things, good and bad (1 Cor. 13:7). It covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). It's disarming, to say the least.

But what kind of conduct should we exhibit towards those who not only reject our love, but actually *hate* us? There are innumerable stories of estranged children who hate their Christian parents because they disagree with their social or political views, or childhood friends growing apart because one chose to live a lifestyle that the other could not fully endorse. The current cultural climate that American Christians find themselves in is one that says, "If you don't agree with me, you hate me." This has only be amplified since the 2024 Presidential Election, and the effects of this hostility will be most coldly felt during the holiday season, where warm unity will be trodden upon by unrighteous indignation. How do we live among those who disdain that which we value? How do we interact with those who believe us to be hateful or narrow-minded? How do we engage those who believe us to be monsters? Jesus speaks to this exact scenario in the *Sermon on the Mount* as well in Matthew 5:43-48.

Read the Text:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48, ESV)

Study the Text:

It's All About the Heart

Chapter 5 begins with Jesus “seeing the crowds,” and then “going up on the mountain” to sit down with His disciples (Matt. 5:1). This sets forth the greatest sermon in recorded history, the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, a collection of “blessed are” sayings (Matt. 5:3-12). He then teaches about the importance of good works which make a person like “salt” or “light” in a dark world (Matt. 5:13-16). The bulk of chapter 5, however, is committed to a reframing of the Old Testament law. Jesus chooses six topics to which the Old Testament law speaks - anger, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and how to treat your enemies - and reframes them according to law of Christ. He shifts the emphasis away from what a person does to who a person is. The violation of these laws becomes less about action and more about intention; less about conduct and more about *the heart*. With this in mind, let's examine what Jesus says about how we ought to relate to those who hate us.

You Have Heard It Said

Verse 43 begins by stating an Old Testament law: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” This is a partial quotation of Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The law Jesus quotes omits the “as yourself” portion and adds “hate your enemy,” which is nowhere *explicitly* commanded of the people of God as an acting law. However, the relationship between Israel and the enemy nations is complicated. On the one hand, there are a number of passages that promote a deep hatred for those who hate God and His people (Deut. 23:3-6; Ps. 139:21). On the other hand, there are passages that speak to loving actions towards enemies (Ex. 23:4-5; Prov. 25:21-22). Additionally, sometimes the term “hate” in the Bible more often means to *love someone less* than others, but not actually *hate* them. All of that to say, it's an oversimplification to teach what had apparently been taught. Remember, Jesus doesn't lessen the demands of the law (Matt. 5:17); apparently the Pharisees had.

It would honestly be so much easier if this saying were true. How do you know who to love? “Anyone who loves you or is your neighbor.” How do you know who to withhold love from and instead hate? “Anyone who is your enemy.” This would be such a simple way to live your life. The trouble is, it would also be *wrong*.

But Jesus Says to You

Jesus continues in verses 44-45: “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” The simple answer to how you are to relate to those who hate you is: “You love them and you pray for them.” What is love? See the above opening paragraph. It's sacrificial, patient, and all of the other attributes we've already mentioned. That is the kind of love you are to demonstrate towards those who hate you. You love them, and you pray for them, and not just when it's easy or when they are behaving nicely, but always and constantly. And somehow, when we do this, there's a reward to it: “For if you love those that love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt. 5:46). Even non-Christians will love those who love them; this is not real love. True love covers a person even when they are not worthy of it. It's full of grace and mercy.

How to Love Those Who Hate You

So practically, what does this look like? It means responding to angry, snarky comments with gentle kindness. Remember, “a gentle answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). It means being willing to serve those who revile you. It means praying daily for those people by asking God to soften their hearts and remove the veil from their eyes that they would see reality for what it truly is. It means asking God to reveal Himself to them in a manner that is fully disarming. It means asking the Spirit of God to confront them in their anger and hate and convict them of it, that they would repent. I like to think of loving my enemies in two phases.

PHASE ONE: REBUFFING ATTACKS

Phase one is all about rebuffing and disarming their aggression with kindness so that I give them no further reason to hate me. One slip up is all it takes. Any response that doesn't proceed from the Spirit can be used against you. If you respond in anger or frustration, it will only likely confirm what the person already thinks of you. Don't give in to the temptation to go tit-for-tat with angry people who hate you. They'll only use it against you later. Phase one is all about enduring the waves of attack. Rebuff them with kindness and pray for them repeatedly. If you do this, you'll be in a good place for phase two *if it happens*.

PHASE TWO: RESTORING THE RELATIONSHIP

Now, a fair warning - phase two doesn't always happen. It requires a kind of work from the Spirit that you simply can't demand. But if it happens, usually it looks like the person being worn down by a mixture of your love towards them in the face of their anger mixed with other negative consequences of their choices. When this happens, you will be in a position to begin restoring your relationship with them if you've handled phase one well. When they come out of the fog of anger and into reality, they will be able to adjudicate all of their previous interactions more clearly. The goal is for them to see in a right state of mind that you have been consistently loving regardless of their disposition.

Remember, loving your enemy is a commandment. It isn't a means to an end. We don't love our enemies in order to win the fight or argument. We don't love those who hate us with the expectation that one day we will have a restored relationship with them. On the contrary, “we love because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). Whatever happens as a result of your obedience to God is up to God. Your role is to love those who hate you. So, during this Advent season, if you find yourself at odds with people in your life (especially family members), remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). In doing so, you truly become a child of the Father in heaven (Matt. 5:45), and are thus “perfect,” or more accurately, “mature” (Matt. 5:48).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 5:43. What Old Testament verse does Jesus quote here?

2. Read Deuteronomy 23:3-6 and Psalm 139:21. What do these verses teach about conduct towards enemies?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 23:4-5 and Proverbs 25:21-2. What do these verses teach about conduct towards enemies?

2. Read Matthew 5:44. What does Jesus say to do instead?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 5:45. What is the result of loving your enemies and praying for them?

2. Read Matthew 5:46. In your own words, summarize this verse.

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 5:47. In your own words, summarize this verse.

2. Read Matthew 5:48. What does the word “perfect” likely mean here?

Discuss the Text!

Week 1 Discussion: Pray!

Loving and praying for your enemies is difficult, but it is not optional; it's a commandment. Talk as a group about the ways in which you need to better pray for people who hate you. Be intentional about praying together as a group specifically for your enemies.

1. Icebreaker: How do you handle rejection or personal attacks from people who hate you?
2. Is there anyone estranged from your family that you can pray for this week?
3. Is there anyone estranged from your church that you can pray for this week?
4. What is one behavior you are going to change this week regarding how you respond to people who oppose you?
5. Spend some time as a group this morning praying for the various names written down.

Takeaways:

1. Jesus teaches us to not only love our neighbors, but to love our enemies and pray for them.
2. In doing so, we become set apart from the rest of the world.

DEVOTIONAL 1: LOVE

CHARLIE ANDERSON

Have you ever considered exactly what love is? In our freewheeling world of moral relativism and feeling based societal adjustments, or soup-of-the-day ideology, we have many attractive, bright, and shiny temporary definitions of love. We can take our pick! But be forewarned, the key word is “temporary”, all change rapidly as society bounces around on the waves of life, having no steering rudder or accepted “absolute truth” plumb line. What is your foundational definition of “true love?” Is your “love authority” based on social media, a book, a celebrity, scholarly literature, or a popular societal movement? Are your feelings based on following your heart, or the admiration of a popular movie/TV or sports character?

As we approach advent season marking the arrival of the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, the only credible and absolutely perfect Sources of truth, on all matters, are the Bible and the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus Christ as our Helper.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13, NASB clearly tells us what is not love and what is true and accurate love. Leaning on two God provided sources will keep our compass bearing on true and accurate love.

What God says is not love!

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NASB, God tells us that much of what our world defines as love is not love. God draws a distinct line of separation.

- Fancy words or eloquent talk are not love. They are only noisy, irritating, and clanging symbols. V.1
- Prophecy, understanding mysteries, or possessing great knowledge are not love. V. 2
- Faith strong enough to move mountains is not love. V. 2
- Giving away all you have and having a very generous nature are not love. V. 3
- Willingness to deliver up your body to be burned is worth nothing and is not love. V. 3

What God says is love!

GOD tells us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NASB what love is:

- Love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud. V.4
- Love is never haughty or selfish or rude, demanding of its own way, irritable, or resentful. V.5
- Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. V.6
- Love bears all things, believes all things. Hopes for and endures all things, and never ends. Vs. 7-8

DEVOTIONAL 1: LOVE

CHARLIE ANDERSON

Every verse in Psalm 136:1-26, ESV ends with “for his steadfast love endures forever.” The God we serve gives us His unconditional love today, tomorrow, and for all eternity. What God says love is, is the only true and unchanging definition of love.

As we move through the advent season and every season, our God is clear about the true definition of love. God’s eternal, patient, unchanging and unconditional love for us is freely given. His definition is the only true and eternal “Love.” As we learned last year during the Advent Season – God’s Love is Radical Love. One year later, approaching the end of 2024, God and His radical love have not changed. Approaching the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, I am praying that we will consider and pray about the following rhetorical questions; then listen for, hear, and act on God’s direction.

1. How we are doing in our expression of radical and unconditional love for and to God? How are we extending it to others?
2. Are we surrendering all of our life to Him? Are we trusting Him to change and mold our attributes into His Godly character?
3. Are we fulfilling His commission to us to share the Good news of Jesus Christ?

DEVOTIONAL 2: LOVE

DERRICK BLEDSOE

There are many ways in which we might talk about God, and most of them are powerful, if not downright scary: “a burning bush” (Ex. 3:2-5), “a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire” (Ex. 13:21-22), “Thunder, lightning, smoke, and fire” (Exodus 19:16-18), and one seated on a throne, beaming with light, with wheels that traverses the earth and angels that surround Him (Ezek. 1:15-28). These are powerful images that convey what God is like.

So it's confounding, then, when this incomparable Being is found in the Gospels as a mere baby. Charles Dickens said it best in *A Christmas Carol*: “For it is good to be children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child himself.” The Advent story forces us to come to grips with the fact that the same God who embodies the pillar of smoke and fire also embodies the frailty of human flesh. It is difficult to imagine the King of universe depicted in Ezekiel 1 being clothed in infancy, and yet, this is precisely what happened. But why? So that God, the One who weighs the scales of justice and judges the unrighteous, might become “the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10).

So often, I am tempted to define love on my own terms: “Love is a feeling. Love is something I feel for people I care about. Love is romantic. Love is committed. Love is irrational.” Love is often whatever we want it to be. But the Bible reveals to us that love is actually not a feeling or sentiment, but a Person, the God-Son, Jesus Christ. God has revealed to us what His love is like by sending Jesus Christ, the enfleshed embodiment of love, into the world that, through His innocent death, the guilty might find life (1 Jn. 4:9-10). And this love is intended to not only move to us, but through us. John writes: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:11). The Christian life is not simply about being loved by God but loving others with the same love we've received. And it is our love for one another that serves as a witness to the unbelieving world (Jn. 13:35).

To love others, then, means to love in the same way God has loved us: sacrificially (Jn. 3:16). That means that love is not a feeling, but a foregoing of my own desires in service of others. It's not romantic as much as it is redemptive. It's not affectionate as much as it is an action. Love is the choice to serve the lowly by making myself even lower. It is the act of “doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility counting others more significant than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3).

Love is fundamental to the Christian experience, for “anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8). You cannot be a Christian and reject the command to love others. In fact, you cannot be a Christian and reject any of His commandments, because keeping His commandments is, in and of itself, an expression of love (Jn. 14:21).

I love Advent. I love the traditions. I love the music and decorations. I love spending time with my family. I love worshipping with my church. But what I love most is the God who not only loves me but teaches me how to love because He Himself is love.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

To understand what to do when you feel anxious.

It's the Most Anxious Time of the Year

"Tis' the season to be stressed!" That may not be the most uplifting thing to read in a Bible study, but we are after all in pursuit of truth, not a feel-good devotional, and it is true that the holiday season is *stressful*. The American Psychological Association estimates 9 in 10 Americans feel anxiety during the holidays. The Harvard Medical School notes that sixty-two percent of respondents in a survey by Healthline described their stress level as "very or somewhat" elevated during the holidays, while only 10 percent reported no stress during the season. For a time that is supposed to be characterized by love, joy, peace, and hope, those things sure seem hard to come by. Thankfully, we can look to the Word of God for comfort when we feel anxiety setting in.

Read the Text:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Right Mindset

In his letter to "the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi" (Phil. 1:1), Paul gives instructions in the fourth chapter concerning what the Christian mindset ought to be like through a set of clear imperatives (or commandments). Below is a breakdown of each of the commandments Paul gives with special attention paid to key details and terms.

REJOICE!

The first clear commandment is to "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4). What does it mean to rejoice? It means, "to be glad, to be joyful, to be full of joy!" To rejoice is to praise the Lord in gladness! The word "always" is a bit of an unfortunate translation because it might lead the reader to think that they should be rejoicing for every single second of every single hour, a feat impossible to sustain. However, it's the Greek term πάντοτε (*pantote*), which means something like "at all times," and not the Greek term αἰεί (*aye*), which conveys the idea of doing something "constantly." In other words, regardless of whether you are on the mountaintop or in the valley, those experiences should not detract you from rejoicing in the Lord.

The phrase in this commandment is “in the Lord.” We are to rejoice in the Lord, not in our circumstances. In fact, rejoicing in the Lord is always connected to the works of God. Moreover, rejoicing should be in response to what God has already done through the Lord Jesus Christ, not incidental moments or future hopes. In other words, while we ought to be thankful for the small blessings we receive on a day-to-day basis, those small blessings are not the basis upon which we rejoice. It is Christ, the cross, and the empty tomb alone that draw out the praises of God’s people. This is such an important distinction to make. Why? Because while your life will change as time passes, the finished work of Christ never changes. If our rejoicing is tied to our experiences now, it will ebb and flow with our lives. I might rejoice when things go well, but when things go wrong? I won’t feel like rejoicing any longer. And yet, Christ is deserving of my praise regardless.

There are moments in the Advent season that will be inevitably difficult; rejoice in the Lord! There are moments in the Advent seasons that will be especially exciting; rejoice in the Lord! Never let the highs nor the lows detract you from the giver of all good gifts (Ja. 1:17). When I anchor my joy to the work of Christ, my joy is constant and thus I am not subject to the whims of my emotions. Paul says, “Let your reasonableness⁴ be known to everyone” (Phil. 4:5). The term “reasonableness” is better understood as “gentleness.” In other words, when I anchor my joy in the work of Christ, I am gentle regardless of the circumstances I face. This does not mean that I won’t become frustrated or angry or sad, but that I will not be taken over by those feelings. There is nothing wrong with feeling your emotions; it’s being mastered by them (or *anything*, for that matter) that the Bible speaks against (1 Cor. 6:12).

REQUEST!

Not only are we to rejoice, but request! Notice, Paul first says: “do not be anxious about anything” (Phil. 4:6). The word “anxious” is the Greek term *μεριμνάω* (*merimnaō*), and it means “anxious, solicitous, to expend careful thought.” It’s the action of nervously fixating all of your attention on something that you usually cannot control. For example, in Luke 12, Jesus speaks against worry about what you will eat or what you will wear on the basis that the Father in Heaven feeds the birds and clothes the fields, and yet He loves us infinitely more. Yet, basic needs are just that; *needs*. When we don’t have what we need, it’s easy to worry about how we will acquire it. The Bible qualifies this as being *anxious*.¹

How can Paul say something like this? I have a wife that sometimes wrestles with feelings of anxiety, and I can tell you for certain (trust me, I’ve tested it) that saying things to her like, “don’t be anxious about that” works about as well as an “As Seen On TV” kitchen appliance (which I can also confirm *never* works). So how can Paul say this, here? Well, notice what he begins his statement with in the second part of verse 5: “The Lord is at hand.” Paul reminds us that Jesus’ second coming is not only certain, but *imminent*, and therefore we can choose to not be anxious about things that ought to worry us because all of it is, in a sense, temporary.

Instead of worrying, Paul suggests instead: “But in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Instead of focusing on what you cannot control (which creates anxiety), Paul tells us to focus on the One who controls all things, and make your requests known to Him (namely, that He would solve whatever is creating anxiety in you in the first place). We are to come to Him in

¹ This is not to be confused with a clinical definition of “anxiety” or “panic attacks” which are often treated with *Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors* (SSRIs). If you are someone who struggles with a chemical imbalance that causes anxiety, panic attacks, or depression, you need to see a medical professional for further evaluation in order to determine the best course of action.

prayer with thanksgiving (or *rejoicing*... sound familiar?) in our hearts to ask Him for help. Whenever I shift my focus away from what I cannot control onto Him who controls all things, my feelings of anxiety momentarily dissipate. This is how you push back against the tyranny of the holidays! Rejoice in the Lord, always, and request His help in overcoming the anxieties of the day through prayer with a thankful heart for all that He has done.

REST!

The final imperative is *implied* in verse 7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This a truly unique verse. The phrase, “the peace of God” (ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ θεοῦ [*he eirene tou theou*]) is found nowhere else in the entire New Testament. When you rejoice in the Lord and make your requests known to Him in moments of anxiety, the peace of God “which surpasses all understanding” protects you from further stress and worry. The term “guards” is the Greek word φρουρέω (*phroureō*), and it’s actually a military term. In other words, the peace of God is that which keeps out the negative thoughts that lead to anxiety in the first place. That this peace surpasses all “understanding,” or “knowledge,” means that it overcomes that with which knowledge cannot sufficiently contend. Verses 4 through 6 are all about what we do; verse 7 is all about what God does.

That this comes so closely after the exhortation for two women in the Philippian church to make peace with one another is not accidental. Paul, in verses 2 and 3, urges “Euodia and Syntyche,” two women who were in apparent disagreement with one another, to “agree in the Lord.” Paul likely includes verses 4 through 7 as not only a separate line of thought, but one closely related to the topic of relational peace. In other words, when Paul says to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4), to let “your gentleness be known to everyone” (Phil. 4:5), and to “not be anxious about anything” (Phil. 4:6), he likely has a relational perspective in mind. To say it another way, while there may be circumstantial things that create anxiety in your life (e.g. your job, your finances, etc.), it is the relational domain of life that is most likely to create stress. It is against this kind of stress that the peace of God can overcome.

What About Now?

The takeaways are obvious. First, consider why you rejoice in the Lord (that is, if you rejoice *at all*). If it isn’t in view of what Christ accomplished through His death, burial, and resurrection, consider that your rejoicing may be misplaced. Rejoicing over circumstantial blessing is short-lived and ill-advised. Second, determine to make your requests to God for the things over which you have no control with a spirit of thanksgiving, and in light of the imminent return of the Lord. Third, evaluate your relationships to determine if “agreement in the Lord” is needed. One massive thief of joy, especially during Advent, is relational discord. As Paul reminds us: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Rom. 12:18).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Philippians 4:4. What does Paul tell us to do?

2. Read Philippians 4:4. In what (or who) specifically are we to rejoice? Why is this an important detail?

Day Two

1. Read Philippians 4:5. What are we to make known to everyone? What does “reasonableness” mean?

2. Read Philippians 4:5. Who is at hand? Why does this matter in the context of this passage?

Day Three

1. Read Philippians 4:6. What are we to not do?

2. Read Philippians 4:6. Instead of being anxious, what are we to do instead? How so?

Day Four

1. Read Philippians 4:7. What does the “peace of God” surpass? What does that mean?

2. Read Philippians 4:7. What will the “peace of God” do?

Discuss the Text!

Week 2 Discussion: Rejoice and Request!

So often, during the Christmas season, stress and anxiety are at an all time high. To counter this, Paul gives us some specific ways in which we might counter anxious thoughts. We are to “rejoice in the Lord always,” and “make our requests known to God.” Talk as a group about the challenges of walking in obedience to this passage, and what you need to do differently to have success.

1. Icebreaker: Does the Christmas season stress you out? If so, why?
2. How well do you “rejoice in the Lord always?” Is your rejoicing anchored in the finished work of Christ, or do you find yourself more often rejoicing in circumstantial success?
3. How does the imminence of Christ’s return shape the way you handle hardships?
4. How often do you pray? And when you pray, how often are you gut-level honest with God in your requests?
5. Do you have “the peace of God?” If you do, describe it.
6. What requests do you need prayer for right now?

Takeaways:

1. We are to rejoice always, regardless of our circumstances.
2. We are to request God's help in moment of anxiety.
3. The peace of God guards our hearts and minds from further trouble.

DEVOTIONAL 3: JOY

JESSICA BLEDSOE

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

Joy. What a word. Such a tiny word in our language, and yet one that stirs big emotions and brings to mind weighty memories and situations. And oh, what a controversial word for us Christians! Are those of us in Christ called to be shiny and happy all-the-day long, radiating smiles to a broken world? Or is it ok to be sad sometimes? But not too sad because then what kind of witness are we? I mean if you're sad, do you even love God?

I struggle deeply with feeling burdened by life. Everything I do is just another task that has to be completed, and most of the tasks I've been given I am not adequately equipped to fulfill. So, I fight viewing life as a chore I have to complete while constantly failing. If I were to add “feeling happy all of the time” on my list of to-dos, I think that would about do me in. Luckily, Scripture doesn't direct us towards happiness, but joy.

James, the half-brother of Jesus writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Ja. 1:2-3).

Right after greeting us, James hits us with a seemingly paradoxical task: to consider it joy when we face trials. The dictionary defines trial as “subjection to suffering or grievous experiences; an affliction or trouble.” This does not exactly engender positive feelings such as joy. So why would James tell us to consider our trials as joy? Well, he tells us: “For the testing of your faith produces steadfastness,” or “endurance.”

The dictionary has a few other definitions for trial: “Test, proof, a tentative or experimental action in order to ascertain results; experiment, temptation.” I don't think it's a coincidence that the English translator chose the word trial here – afflictions, troubles, temptations are all testing grounds for your faith.

DEVOTIONAL 3: JOY

JESSICA BLEDSOE

James goes on to say: “And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (Ja. 1:4). The goal, the purpose, of the life of a Christian is to be conformed into the image of Christ. Part of this process includes refining us – putting us through fire to get rid of contaminants and purify our hearts. But, fire hurts. It burns, scolds, and causes pain. This pain, however, is not without value; it leads to purification, healing, and being made complete.

In those moments when I am burdened by life or overcome with pain, I know that my Savior is using those moments to purify me and bring me closer to Him. It is not that I am happy that I suffer, for we do not have a God who desires us to be masochists who find pleasure in pain. We have a God who is not only near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18), but Who desires us to endure the pain of trial so that He can sanctify us – make us complete, lacking nothing. I can have joy knowing that the result of my pain and suffering will make me more like Jesus.

Without Jesus, pain is without purpose. As they say, “It sucks to suck.” But for Christians, we don’t have to let our pain be wasted. Instead, it can lead you to your Savior who will cleanse you and heal what is broken inside of you. We have a Savior who will not only comfort us in our afflictions but will use them to make us holy. Knowing that brings me joy.

1. Do you feel that you are going through a trial right now? How do you think God will use it to refine you?
2. How did you face trials before Christ? How do you face them now? Can you see a difference?
3. Is there a trial in your past that God used for His glory and your good?

DEVOTIONAL 4: JOY

EMMA CUNNINGTON

Perhaps one of the things I find most challenging about the Christian faith, is the existence of two opposing things at the same time.

Peace and Chaos
Love and Hate
Hope and Fear
Joy and Sadness

I find a lot of joy in the Christmas season, the lights everywhere, cozy winter evenings snuggled watching a Christmas movie with my kids and yummy Christmas treats.

But the reality of the sinful life is still very evident even in the 'most wonderful time of the year'. Stress, chaos and sadness are still there, and often times are even heightened with the additional events and expectations that this season brings.

I love this line in the Christmas Carol, O Holy Night:

"A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices"

It is a reminder to me that two opposing things can exist at the same time. A weary and tired world of people can rejoice and find joy in a tiny baby that came to earth.

Jesus' birth is the fulfilment of a promise, but also a sign of promises still yet to be fulfilled.

While we know and can find joy in the saving work of Jesus on the cross, we still live in the pain and heartbreak of a fallen and broken world.

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.' And the one sitting on the throne said, 'Look, I am making everything new!'"

Revelation 21:4-5

My prayer for you this Christmas season, is that whatever comes your way, that you can find joy in Jesus. Not only in the tiny baby that came from heaven to give us salvation now. But also joy in knowing that one day all the hurt and pain we experience will be taken away, and we will live a new joy filled life with Him forever.

Even though we may be weary, let us rejoice in the hope He brings.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: VARIOUS TEXTS

To understand more about the peace of God and the impact it has on the real world.

Christmas Chaos

If there is one word that adequately describes the tone of city life during the Christmas season, it's *chaos*. Shopping anywhere is more difficult. Grocery stores contain less of the items you need and more people to navigate around in the aisles. Shopping mall parking lots are a sea of vehicles. Going to Walmart (an already chaotic store throughout the rest of the year) becomes an adventure, and a not necessarily a good one. And it's a progressive kind of chaos, too; the closer you get to Christmas Eve, the worse it gets. Highways become more backed up. Traffic is worse. Restaurants have longer waiting lists. Somehow, the season that is supposed to be full of peace and joy inevitably feels chaotic and hurried. I often feel like I need a vacation after Christmas.

It is for this reason, among a number of other reasons, that we need peace. And not just any kind of peace. A "peace that surpasses all knowledge," or what Paul simply calls "the peace of God" (Phil. 4:7). Recall last week that we discussed this very passage, and we discovered that Philippians 4 is the only place in all of the Bible where the phrase "the peace of God" is found. However, though the phrase might only be found one time, the concept of the peace of God is woven throughout Scripture. And so during this third week of Advent, let's consider other passages that speak about the peace of God, and how it might help us navigate this chaotic season.

Read the Text:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23, ESV)

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all. (2 Thessalonians 3:16, ESV)

Study the Text:

The Peace of God from the God of Peace

In both of his letters to the church in Thessalonica, Paul's benediction begins by ascribing *peace* to either the Father or the Son. In the first letter, he says: "May *the God of peace* himself sanctify you completely." In other words, he's asking that God, who is Himself the source of peace, make *all of* you holy at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In his second letter, he says: "May *the Lord of peace* himself give you peace at all times in

every way.” It’s an interesting development of thought. Paul is first interested in God the Father’s sanctifying work in our lives, and that he refers to God as “the God of peace” suggests that part of this sanctifying work includes giving us peace as we await the Son. And in case that was not evident enough, he follows that up in his second letter by asking the Son to give us His peace as well, “at all times in every way” (2 Th. 3:16). Both of these benedictions, or closing prayers, are similar to the well-known prayer in Numbers 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; 25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; 26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you *and give you peace.*” Paul, in keeping with the tradition of the Old Testament, is asking for God to shine His face upon the church, to bless us, to keep us, and to give us peace.

...but what in the world does any of that *really* mean? It’s important to define what peace is, because for the biblical context it is almost certainly different than what you have in mind. Typically, people equate peace with “an inner tranquility.” Peace is usually thought of as “an emotional state of calmness” wherein I am not bothered by anything. But this falls short of the biblical understanding of the term. The peace of God is not an inward-focused, abstract concept, but something that has a real impact on real people in real life. It sometimes is used to describe the state of a nation (Acts 24:2). Peace is the result of political maneuvering that results in the ending of actual conflict. In a more general sense, however, it simply describes the end of relational conflict between people. New Testament scholar Gene Green adds: “In the social sphere it consists of the absence of discord and conflicts between citizens. As such it was the key term used to describe public order or social concord.”¹ Given the context of persecution in both 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul likely has in mind a kind of peace that ends persecution.

So for our purposes, we can think about peace in the midst of a chaotic Christmas season as the alleviation of relational turmoil. It might not directly address the traffic problem or the crowded grocery stores, but it does indirectly affect those things. The peace of God is mediated to me as I keep my mind fixed upon Him.

Read the Text:

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. (Isaiah 26:3, ESV)

Study the Text:

Where Is My Mind?

This is the exact point that the prophet Isaiah makes in Isaiah 26:3. When our minds are “stayed upon” the Lord, He keeps us in “perfect peace.” So rather than thinking about all of the things that frustrate me during (e.g. bad traffic, crowded stores, rude people), I am instead to think about the God who loved me and saved me from my own sinful, self-destructive thoughts and actions. And when I do this, I can live in the midst of chaos with peace, which has actual benefits to the world around me. Why? Because I am not only the recipient of God’s peace, but I am to mediate it to others as well as far as I am able (Rom. 12:18).

Read the Text:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called of sons of God. (Matthew 5:9, ESV)

¹ Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 357.

Study the Text:**Blessed are the Peacemakers**

In the well-known *Beatitudes* of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says in verse 9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called of sons of God.” Why are those who seek to make peace called “sons of God?” Because they are mediating the very peace of God they’ve received as children of God. This is the business of God in the world; *to make peace*. Of course, making peace often means entering conflict. Jesus doesn’t say, “Blessed are the peace keepers,” but “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Peace is only achieved through entering into and settling conflict. God routinely settles conflict through war in the Old Testament. He enters into conflict in order that He might end it. This is exemplified in no clearer manner than Christ on the cross. Jesus settles the conflict with sin by “nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:14).

In the same way that God enters into conflict to end it, we as children of God are expected to do the same. This means confronting discord with a spirit of gentleness for the purpose of making peace. Hebrews 12:14 reinforces this: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”

Putting It Together

How do we wade through the chaos of the Christmas season? We recognize that the peace of God emanates from the God of peace, and He gives us this peace to mediate to other people. Rather than being distracted by the things that frustrate me, I am instead to keep my mind fixed on Him who has left us His peace through the Spirit (Jn. 14:27). When I submit to the Spirit, I am able then to enter into conflict with others, not with harshness or anger, but with the fruit of the Spirit for the purpose of making peace. In this way, when I am yielded to Christ, the peace of God becomes tangibly present in the world around me. Christians, living in this chaotic world, ought to be peacemakers. There ought to be a realized peace wherever Christians live. But this only happens insofar as I am submitted to Him and His way, not my own. This Christmas you will either be an ambassador for peace or chaos. It all depends on who you serve.

Study Questions**Day One**

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23. What does Paul pray that the God of peace will do for us? What parts of us does Paul pray will be “kept blameless?”

2. Which person of the Trinity is “the God of peace” in this context?

Day Two

1. Read 2 Thessalonians 3:16. What does Paul pray that the Lord of peace will give us? What is the biblical understanding of this peace? (Hint: See above notes)

2. Which person of the Trinity is “the Lord of peace” in this context?

Day Three

1. Read Isaiah 26:3. What does God do for those who keep their minds stayed upon Him?

2. How does trust in the Lord translate to a life of peace?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 5:9. What does it mean to be a “peacemaker?”

2. “God enters into conflict in order to end it.” Do you agree with this? If so, what does this mean about Christians and conflict today?

Discuss the Text!

Week 3 Discussion: Make Peace

In the above study, we learned that God enters into conflict in order to end it. Conflict is not something that God ever avoids, and neither is it something that Christians should avoid. Conflict is the fruit of the enemy, and therefore must be addressed. Talk as a group about how you handle conflict, and what you need to do to become a “peacemaker.”

1. Icebreaker: Do you handle conflict well? Why or why not?
2. How does the chaos of the Christmas seasons create relational conflict? How are we as Christians to mediate the peace of God in those scenarios?
3. Do you find yourself focused more on the God of peace or the chaos of your circumstances? How does that focus impact your attitude and actions?
4. What characteristics are necessary to end conflict in a Godly manner?
5. What conflict do you currently face? How can the group pray for you? What steps do you need to take to enter that conflict and bring about peace?

Takeaways:

1. Peace emanates from God who is “the God of peace.”
2. We are given God’s peace the more we fix our minds upon Him.
3. We mediate that peace in real life by entering already existing conflict in order to end it.

DEVOTIONAL 5: PEACE

BART CASTLE

Peace? In this World? Really?

When was the last time you had peace? When was the last time you felt like the world was at peace? When was the last time you heard a co-worker or family member say about the office or your home, "What I like about this place is how peaceful it is?" Days ago? Months ago? Ever?

Was a teenage Mary pregnant and bouncing down a dirt path to have her family counted, at peace? Her family. The reality of a family, sitting atop the donkey, under other worldly circumstances, may have been an emotional grenade in her head and heart. Joseph, a boyfriend, yes, but a husband? A dad? Her, a mom? The mom to their son - on loan from the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob?

Regardless her feelings, shortly after the ride into Bethlehem ended, Jesus' life into a broken world, began. His appearance began as angels said to frightened shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." - Luke 2:12 (ESV)

Peace a tangible reality in Mary's world? In 2024? Really? Come on. "Get real," I have said in my head. Until somewhat recently, peace was hard to come by and slippery at best. However, peace can be a present, lasting reality!

Look at the angels' statement again. Do you see the clue? A clue to what? A clue to how the angels could sing about peace and a broken world ("on earth") in the same sentence. A clue to how we, you and me, can find and experience peace in 2024, and beyond. All these years, I missed it. Peace is available when I accept that peace is a by-product of something, rather than something on its own. The distinction is critical.

Peace pursued by any means other than one is an allusion. Peace is available to those "...with whom he is pleased..." Peace is a gift from the ultimate gift (Jesus). To receive the second gift, peace, I must choose to take God at His word - that He, rather than I, knows what is best for me in every circumstance and interaction. I must surrender my wishes to Him.

This Advent season, if peace seems unavailable or far away, might it be you have mistaken the importance of receiving the first gift? GREAT NEWS - there is no time like the present to be able to say, this Christmas, I accepted and will embrace the greatest gift of all, Jesus as Lord - and the wonderful stocking stuffer of peace.

DEVOTIONAL 6: PEACE

WILL REYNOLDS

When you think of peace do you think of green meadows or a waterfall or a walk on a beach? Are you in charge of ensuring peace in your life? In the Bible we see David's kingdom at peace and we attribute it to his physical strength and skill in battle, providing security. We see Solomon's kingdom at peace and we attribute it to his wisdom. But as we read about these kingdoms we find verses that start to show us where peace really comes from:

"Behold, a son shall be born to you who shall be a Man of rest. I (the Lord) will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies. For his name shall be Solomon, and I (the Lord) will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days." 1 Chronicles 22:9 ESV

We attribute Peace in our own "kingdoms" as the security of a house, the dependability of a car, or to the stable position we hold at work. The characteristics (like wisdom or athletic ability) that we trust in give us some level of peace but they can be quickly taken away without any reason at all because they are typically based on what we can do with little trust in what God is doing.

As we read that Solomon and David's kingdoms were at peace because the Lord gave them peace, we need to understand in our own lives how the Lord provides peace. Often the Bible associates peace with trust.

"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." Isaiah 26:3

"Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God."
Psalm 20:7

The Bible tells us Jesus spoke of a kingdom of eternal peace (whose king we celebrate the birth of this time of year). God sent His only son to earth as a baby, and although the world was not at peace, Jesus was at perfect peace not because of riches, for He became poor for us (2 Corinthians 8:9), or the security of a house, for He did not have a place where He may lay His head (Matthew 8:20), nor His education, for the Jews marveled saying "How is it that this man has learning, when He has never studied" (John 7:15). As humans we naturally put trust in the things we can see or place value on, but Jesus trusted in God.

This Advent season, put your trust not in the security of your job or the things you can buy or the house you store them in, but put your trust in the Name given to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who is the Prince of Peace, and you will have true peace.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."
- Luke 2:14



SESSION OBJECTIVE: ROMANS 8:18-25

To understand more about the peace of God and the impact it has on the real world.

It's Hard Living Here

Gallup reported in 2023 that depression rates had risen to a new height in the United States. 29% of adults have now been diagnosed with depression, a figure nearly 10 percentage points higher than in 2015. The numbers are slightly better for men, at only 20.4%, comparative to the 36.7% of women. Clinical depression had been slowly rising prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has significantly increased since. The world is apparently, at least in an American context, a difficult place to live.

It's worth nothing that Scripture agrees with such an assessment. In Romans chapter 8, the apostle Paul spells out the conditions of creation in light of its "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). The world is a difficult place to live, and it knows it. It cries out for relief along with all of its inhabitants. However, there is an answer to this hopelessness we face. God has given His people a real, tangible hope in the face of despair. So this week, as we round out our Advent study, we will consider what biblical hope looks like in the midst of a hopeless world.

Read the Text:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we await for it with patience. (Romans 8:18-25, ESV)

Study the Text:

Suffering, Hope, and the God Over All

Paul lays out the hopeless reality of a fallen world and the promise of a hopeful future. Below is a breakdown of some of the key terms and concepts.

PERSPECTIVE MATTERS ONCE MORE

One theme that has repeatedly surfaced throughout our Advent series is the need for a shift in perspective. Instead of being resentful of those who hate us, we are to love those who hate us “because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). Instead of “being anxious about anything” we are to rejoice in the finished work of Christ and make our requests known to Him (Phil. 4:4-7). Instead of allowing the chaos of the Christmas season to irritate us, we are to mediate the peace of God to others as it is given to us. Each week, the Scripture has demanded from us a shift in perspective away from selfishness to a selfless love for God in Christ. And here, yet again, there is a demand for a perspective change. Paul says in verse 18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” He does not discount the reality of suffering in this present age.

It’s sadly not uncommon to see Christians act as if suffering isn’t real or doesn’t affect them. This is a suppression of truth. Suffering is real and present in this world. Paul makes no claims to the contrary. Instead, he asks us to shift our perspective. Instead of focusing on the present suffering, he suggests there is a better thing to think about, something so glorious it isn’t even worth comparing to the present state: the future glory promised to us in Christ. Part of the Christian’s responsibility in living in a hopeless world is bearing in mind that this present suffering, as bad as it is, can’t possibly be compared to the glory we will one day receive. So we live in the midst of suffering and are not to pretend as if it isn’t real. But we also bear in mind that as bad as it may be, it will pale in comparison to the goodness that awaits us.

CREATION AWAITS REDEMPTION

Paul also suggests that isn’t just people who suffer in the bondage of corruption, but all of creation! He says, “creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19-21). He goes on to say that “creation groans” for the return of Christ (Rom. 8:22). This is an aspect of redemption we often fail to think about. Christ will one day return to bring the fullness of redemption to all things created; not just people, but *everything*. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians that Christ will come back at the “fullness of time,” according to His plan, to “unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10).

It isn’t just people that are broken because of sin. Creation is broken because of sin. Creation fails to operate in the manner in which it was designed. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters as well as droughts and crop blights are not the way in which God’s creation was intended to act. The world as it currently is experienced is in bondage to corruption. It is decaying. But one day, Christ will bring redemption to it all.

BORN-AGAIN BELIEVERS AWAIT REDEMPTION, TOO

There is a tendency to assume that while the world and non-believers suffer the hardships of living in a fallen state, Christians do not because we possess the Spirit and therefore live in the peace and joy of Christ. However, Paul states very clearly in verse 23: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Though it is true that we do love those who hate us and rejoice in all things and mediate the peace of God to others, we ourselves are also affected by the fall. Our bodies fail. We get sick. We are impulsive. We do things we regret, though we do not want to do them (Rom. 7:15-20). Though we are born-again and redeemed in our spirit, we long for that day when Christ brings redemption to our bodies as well. Paul says that Jesus will “transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:21). The final resurrection will mean we are raised into a heavenly body (1 Cor.

15:42-44), transfigured just as the Lord Himself was on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:2). This is the hope we have, but it is a hope anchored to the future, not the present.

HOPE IS FOR THE FUTURE

In verse 24, Paul asks a question that has struck me since the day I first read it: “For who hopes for what he sees?” In other words, Paul is saying, “Hope only exists in a world where you don’t get what you want.” You don’t hope for things you already possess. You hope for things you do not possess. You hope for things you cannot obtain right now. And thus, hope requires patience.

PATIENCE IS KEY

Paul concludes in verse 25: “But if we hope for what we do not see, we await for it with patience.” Currently, we do not “see” the benefits of the fullness of Christ’s redemption, but rather we “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). Because of this, we must wait with “patience” or “endurance” for this hope to materialize. The word “patience” is the Greek term ὑπομονή (hypomonē), a compound Greek word that means literally “to abide or remain under,” or “to stand under.” It’s a term that implies not only a waiting period, but a waiting period under duress or pressure. In other words, the patience we must exhibit is difficult. We must “remain under” the crushing weight of a hopeless world, and yet we are able to do this because we have hope for the future relief of redemption.

What About Now?

One of the main takeaways is coming to terms with the fact that the world and everyone in it (including yourself) suffers from the corruption of sin. There is no escaping this reality. We must not ignore this. Rather, we wait patiently under the pressure of this depraved world with the hope of something that has not yet come to pass, but that will come to pass because He who has promised it is faithful (Heb. 10:23). So, while living in the world today will give you every reason to feel hopeless, the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope that we too, one day, will be raised anew and remade along with all of creation.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Romans 8:18. How does our present suffering compare to that future glory we have been promised?

2. Read Romans 8:19. What awaits with eager longing?

Day Two

1. Read Romans 8:20. To what was creation subjected?

2. Read Romans 8:21. What is the hope for creation?

Day Three

1. Read Romans 8:22. What is the whole of creation doing presently? Why?

2. Read Romans 8:23. What else, other than creation, groans for the return of Christ?

Day Four

1. Read Romans 8:24. In what were we saved? Is this hope seen or unseen? Why does this matter?

2. Read Romans 8:25. What is the significance of the word “patience” in this verse? (Hint: See above notes) How does this play into Paul’s main point?

Discuss the Text!

Week 4 Discussion: Hope During Hopeless Times

One detail in Romans 8:18-25 that has always stuck with me is the fact that hope only exists in a world where you don’t get what you want. That’s a stone cold fact that we want to forget about most days. However, the sooner we can come to terms with that, the sooner we can understand and embrace what biblical hope is all about: enduring difficulty with the end in mind. Talk as a group about how your future hope of full redemption has helped you traverse the difficult seasons of life.

1. Icebreaker: Are you more optimistic or pessimistic about life?
2. How often do you think about the future resurrection in light of your current problems?
3. Is life currently hard for you? If so, how so? If not, why not?
4. When you think about Christ’s return, do you think about Him bringing redemption to all of creation, or only Christians? How does this shift in thinking change the way you think about the end?
5. What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever faced in your life? What does future redemption look like for that circumstance?
6. How can your local church better help you endure the present age?

Takeaways:

1. The corruption of sin has affected everything.
2. Creation longs for the redemption Christ will bring at His second coming.
3. Believers long for the redemption of our bodies in the final resurrection.
4. The reality of Christ’s redemptive return provides hope for us in the midst of hopelessness.

DEVOTIONAL 7: HOPE

JUNE BARKER

My Hope is Set on Jesus

This time of year I always find myself thinking of what life might have been like before Jesus was born. For Mary, just a young and confused girl. For Joseph, an anxious man trying to do the right thing. For Bethlehem, a sleepy town about to go down in history as the best birthing center in the world. They had their own hopes, but did they really even know what they were hoping for? They did not know what having a personal relationship with Jesus would be like. How could they know what to hope for?

I know that those who knew God were anxiously awaiting the Savior that would change the world, but really they could not have grasped what was to come. They were more guessing. Assuming that Jesus would come in all of His glory, and wipe out evil and that would be it. Can you imagine how shocked they were when things turned out quite a bit differently? Yes Jesus did end evil once and for all, but he did it in an entirely different way than was expected. So much so that some did not even believe Him.

That is often how life is for each of us. We throw around the word hope. "Oh I hope I get that new job!" "I hope this relationship works out the way I want it to." "Man, I really hope that this pumpkin pie does not go straight to my hips." And for some we have big hopes, they completely overrule our minds 24/7. Similarly to those who were awaiting Jesus, we have things in our life we are hoping for. Big meaningful things that we are praying in the direction of, and often those answers we get from God come in the form of a quite birth in a stable, not a king coming down on a white horse. Sometimes our hopes are met with a no, and sometimes just a different answer.

I would argue that hope is really just trust in a patient form. You can not have hope without trusting in God's plan and His words. The Bible tells us often we have nothing to worry, nothing to fear, only good to hope for. (so often what is written is easier said than done am I right?). We complicate what is already so simple. We know what to hope for, because it has already been won for us. The day Jesus was born was the day the clock started on what we have to hope for, an eternity spent in His presence. His birth was the answer to any prayer we could pray, it was the start of the end of all of our pain. It was the answer to all our hopes.

DEVOTIONAL 7: HOPE

JUNE BARKER

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says, " So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." I don't know about you, but if a man who endured being beaten, being put in prison, being on house arrest, and dealing with a never ending sin struggle can write that he finds his hope in the unknown, I can cling to that as well.

So many things on this earth are pointless to cling to and hope for. There are no guarantees. But we as believers get the ultimate gift and privilege to put out hope in the one who created hope for us. The one who sent his son to die and give us a source of never ending assurance. Whatever it is you are hoping for this Christmas season, Jesus sees it and He knows the desires of your heart. Surrender those things to Him, and replace them with the hope we have. "We look to what is not seen...that is what is eternal."

DEVOTIONAL 8: HOPE

BRAD MARVINE

I recently heard the phrase, “unspoken expectations are premeditated disappointments,” and man, did that hit home for me! How often have my hopes and expectations not been aligned with reality and I am let down yet again? Expectations for the way other people should behave around me are too high, and people fall short. What is even worse, I daily fall short of the expectations I have for myself! Maybe putting my hope in stuff will deliver? The iPhone with AI features will finally feel like the last phone I need to buy...until the next one comes out.

Living in a world that is marred by sin, sickness, and death, we either try to find hope in things that will not deliver, or we learn to lose hope and begin to despair altogether. Why is it so hard for us to align our expectations and hopes with the reality we live in? Could it be that God has built something into our eternal hard drive that is meant to hope for something that goes far beyond the broken things of this world? I think of the words of CS Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* as I reflect, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”

This Advent Season, we are invited to not give up on hope. There is only one place in this broken world where we do not have to temper our hopes for fear that they will not align with reality! Our hope is in the return of Jesus Christ, who is on a promised trajectory of making all things new! Yes, that little vulnerable baby who was being hunted by an insecure government leader, born in a manger, in a podunk town, to a virgin teenage mom, was a glimpse into why we should have hope in God without limits. The most unsuspecting person in history laid down his life as a sacrificial savior to the world. The incarnation of God tells us there is not a single part of our lives that He cannot enter into and save. He promises to come again, but this time, there will be nothing unsuspecting about him. He will return to us as a warrior and as a king. He will deliver upon all his promises. The deepest desires of those who place their hope in him will be fulfilled above and beyond expectations!

This year, as the newness wears off of gifts we receive and the lights and Christmas trees begin to be taken down, remember. The love, safety, peace, joy, and contentment that we so deeply crave will never fade in Jesus Christ. Put your hope in Jesus, full stop. Let’s say with the David the Psalmist,

Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord. (Psalm 31:24 NIV)

The question is not, “Are you putting too much hope in Him?” The question is,
“Are you putting enough hope in Jesus?”