ADVENT

HOPE | PEACE | JOY | LOVE



NOVA
COMMUNITY CHURCH

This Christmas at
NOVA Community Church

Worship Service Every Sunday

9:30 a.m.

NovaKids and Nursery available

Campfire Christmas

Sunday, December 13th - 6:00 p.m.

Choir Christmas Concert

Sunday, December 20th - 6:00 p.m.

Candlelight and Carols

Thursday, December 24th - 6:00 p.m.

For more information visit novachurch.org.

Dedication

HOPE

Monday, November 30

Tuesday, December 1

Wednesday, December 2

Thursday, December 3

Friday, December 4

Saturday, December 5

PEACE

Monday, December 7

Tuesday, December 8

Wednesday, December 9

Thursday, December 10

Friday, December 11

Saturday, December 12

JOY

Monday, December 14

Tuesday, December 15

Wednesday, December 16

Thursday, December 17

Friday, December 18

Saturday, December 19

LOVE

Monday, December 21

Tuesday, December 22

Wednesday, December 23

Thursday, December 24

CHRISTMAS DAY

Friday, December 25

The people of Nova Community Church present to you the 2026 Advent Devotional.

One of the songs I look forward to singing at Christmas is Silent Night. The lyrics open with, "Silent Night, Holy night. All is calm, all is bright." Yet as I think about those ideas, I know that not everything is bright these days. I don't think everything was bright in those days either, the night Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And it would probably be safe to say that not everything was calm. Jesus was born into a world riddled with turmoil, yet into that night, Christ the Savior was born.

Sometimes, what we put into song goes beyond our actual, personal experience. And so we worship even when things are not always calm and bright. We praise God even in the storm. We shout praises from our hearts, even when something seems dark. We lift up His name because our faith is stronger than our fear. This is because we find rest in the peace of God that surpasses understanding, a peace that only comes from Jesus. This is what can actually allow you to sleep in His heavenly peace.

Some have noted, "It's always darkest before the dawn." On that night in Bethlehem those many years ago, Jesus entered into the story – the Savior of mankind, Lord at His birth! Arriving with the dawn of redeeming grace. That is what the world waited for throughout that first Advent – the grace and redemption that came with our Savior Jesus!

Throughout this Advent season may you read, meditate, and reflect on the Scriptures and the writings from the Nova family. And may you come to know more deeply the grace and redemption that comes through Jesus.

In His love,
Pastor Adam Duchin

Hope

Monday, November 30, 2026

by Haley Rupert

Read Jeremiah 17:7-8

"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

Jeremiah 17:7-8

ROOTED IN TRUST

There was a period of my life when I felt like I was constantly fighting a battle within myself. I struggled with anxiety and depression, and it often felt like I couldn't escape my thoughts and worries that consumed so much of my time and energy. I was constantly overthinking, worrying about things that haven't even happened, and trying to figure out every single thing all at the same time. I felt like if I could just think things through enough, find the right answer, or somehow get everything under control, I would finally be at peace. But the harder I tried to make everything "right", the heavier everything became. I was focused on finding a way out of my struggles that I didn't realize how much I was letting it control my life.

Eventually, I reached a point where I realized I couldn't keep living that way. I slowly began to open up to my close friends and family about the weight I was carrying. I allowed myself to lean on the people around me instead of bottling everything up. More importantly, I began learning what it meant to truly surrender my worries to the Lord. I had to come to terms with the fact that I wasn't going to be able to control what people think about me, every situation or outcome, or have the answer for every problem. And I didn't have to. For so long, I had been carrying the weight of things that were never mine to control in the first place. There was something so freeing about finally letting go and trusting God could carry what I couldn't. It didn't mean every struggle suddenly disappeared, but I no longer felt like I had to face every one of them on my own.

Looking back at the verse, I think this is exactly what Jeremiah 17:7-8 is reminding us of. The passage describes trusting the Lord as a tree

planted beside water. Even when heat comes with a drought, its leaves remain green and it continues to bear fruit because its roots are connected to a constant source. The tree also doesn't avoid the heat or the drought. It still experiences a difficult season, but it isn't overcome by it because of how rooted they are beside the water. In the same way, trusting God doesn't mean we will never experience anxiety, uncertainty, disappointment, or hardships. It means that even though life feels overwhelming, we have a source of strength that doesn't change with our circumstances. I used to think that finding peace meant having everything figured out. But I've learned that peace doesn't always come from having answers. Sometimes, it comes from knowing who we can turn to when we don't have them. When our trust is rooted in the Lord, we don't have to let every difficult circumstance determine how we feel or how we move forward. We can still experience difficult days without losing sight of the One who carries us through them.

REFLECT

In this time of advent, choose to root yourself in the Lord rather than in the things you can't control. Just as a tree remains strong through drought because its roots are planted by water, we too can find strength by trusting God.

DISCUSS

What areas of your life do you need to surrender to the Lord? What does trusting God through difficult seasons look like in your life?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for being a constant source of strength, especially during the seasons when life feels uncertain or overwhelming. You are working even when we cannot see it. Teach us to grow deeper roots in you. Remind us that we don't have to carry everything on our own because we can always turn to you. Amen.

BIO

Haley Rupert is a high school student athlete, plays soccer and volleyball, and enjoys spending time with friends.

ADVENT: **HOPE** | PEACE | JOY | LOVE

Tuesday, December 1, 2026

By Susan Whiteside

Read Romans 12:2

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Romans 12:2

RENEWING YOUR MIND

Many years ago I struggled within myself. As a middle schooler, I remember mentally beating myself up over every awkward or inept moment of my day. I was highly critical of myself yet was quite accepting and forgiving of the people around me. Although I earned good grades, they were not straight A's. I did okay and was even pretty good at the things I tried to do but I was never the best in any area. My face and body were not attractive at all. My hair and glasses were impossibly not in style and my lenses were so thick people rarely looked me in the eye. I enjoyed music and playing oboe and later bassoon in the band but it didn't seem important or particularly helpful to anyone. Maybe this phase of life and self conscious awareness is common. But the negative self talk running in my head was rampant and continued well into adulthood.

As a young mother I found that exercise helped me stay in a functional frame of mind and relieved the stress of disciplining my two sons. But constant exposure to the highly attractive people who also frequented the gym led to comparisons. I always felt dissatisfied with the body God had given me. Why do my arms lack definition? If I work them extra hard maybe they will change shape. Maybe if I lose some weight it will help my stomach flatten out, etc. Eventually I realized my dissatisfaction pervaded all aspects of my life. I did not feel that I was good at anything. What was the point of this life? I was bored, frustrated and had lost sight of my purpose and identity as a child of God. Where was my hope?

I sought counsel with a women's ministry leader and she assigned me the task of memorizing Romans 12. Memorizing has always been very

hard for me. But I took on the task and would focus on a verse or two each day while doing my cardio until I could recite the entire passage. It took me a long time to complete this task. As I slowly learned the verses I found myself applying them to my life. Paul's instruction and reminders of how I should be living as a child of God filled my mind and kept the comparison to others and coveting their beauty out. It worked! I found renewed purpose in doing the mundane tasks of a wife and mother "as unto the Lord". God was so generous and good to me all along. I needed to immerse myself in his Word to realize I was already on his path for me. God opened more doors for me to develop my talents and to help more people. God's blessings in my life have been abundant. My hope is in the Lord Jesus who has saved me from my sins, paid the penalty for my transgressions and daily renews my mind. I Praise God for this Gift of Hope born in Bethlehem!

REFLECT

In this time of advent, seek Godly wisdom instead of worldly wisdom for all your concerns. Only by God's grace and mercy can we be forgiven. When can I pause daily to ask for His guidance and direction in every area of my life?

DISCUSS

Where is your Hope found? What area in your mind do you need to fill with God's Word?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this Advent season, and for the Hope you provide through your Son, Jesus. May I take the time to seek your wisdom and not let my mind be filled with worldly thoughts and foolishness. Help me to receive your instruction through your Word and apply it in every area of my life. In Jesus' precious name I pray, Amen.

BIO

Susan Whiteside is a realtor, a wife, and mother of two men. She enjoys her family, singing in the Nova Choir and The Bonner Singers, and gardening.

Wednesday, December 2, 2026

by Amanda Todd

Read Psalm 62:5-8

My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation; He is my defense; I shall not be moved. In God is my salvation and my glory; the rock of my strength and my refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, you people; Pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

Psalm 62:5-8

A REFUGE OF HOPE

The theme for this devotion is hope. David wrote these Psalms as his enemies are coming at him from all sides with both physical and character attacks. David's description of hope & deep trust in God while facing such affliction is an incredible testimony for us. How amazing that as believers we know that we can place all our hope in God; He is with us in life's battles and we can come to him in our most vulnerable and frenzied times and pour out our hearts. Like David, we are reassured and strengthened by taking refuge in God.

A household move is considered one of the most stressful life events. Anyone that has moved with kids can confirm the uncertainty, fear, anxiety, prayers, and hopefulness that is involved. We moved around a lot as a family which began when Matt went to graduate school and we left our families in Oregon for a small university town in Utah. Our kids were young and we moved every 2-3 years after grad school with Matt's various job opportunities. Over the course of these moves our oldest was in 5 different school districts. The stress, chaos, and vulnerability leading up to each move is overwhelming; especially when it impacts young children. Life events like this can feel frightening but as believers we know He has a plan for us and we have the foundational & steady hope of God's sovereignty. It is so comforting to prayerfully come to God and ask for His wisdom and discernment while we pour hearts out to Him regarding our hopes and fears for what the future holds. Of course, it's not always easy to say in the midst of life's noisy chaos but when you are in the middle of a challenge it is so valuable to break through the noise and have a quiet, silent time with Him to reconfirm our foundation and hope in His refuge.

In Isaiah 45:2 God says “I will go before you and make the rough places smooth.” Verses like these have meant a lot to us as a family; each time we arrive at a new destination we have the hope of knowing that God has gone before us and has prepared a path for us and that regardless of the uncertainty around us our foundation is in Him. This knowledge and belief has been a core pillar for us through our household moves and has gone a long way to relieve the stress, uncertainty, and anxiety. We can point to multiple examples of God coming through for us, and oftentimes in unexpected ways that just prove and highlight His care, grace, and providence. The Psalmist gives us hope in God being our refuge and strength and we can give our cares to Him. It's our calling as Christians to take a step back from the chaos and look for moments of peace and hope. When life is hectic and change feels overwhelming it is so critical to take the time to be with God in silence so He can break through the noise around us with His hope and refuge.

REFLECT

Are there things causing you stress in your life that you need to bring to God in silent communion with Him? He is waiting to have your attention and your heart. What hopes do you have as we enter a new year?

DISCUSS

God’s character remains the same for eternity. How does your character change when you are at peace vs. when life is chaotic? How can you better rely on God’s unchanging promises?

PRAY

Father in heaven we are so thankful that you are fighting our battles. Thank you for filling us with hope in times of challenge, we know as believers you will get us through. Let us be diligent in coming to you with our cares and worries. Amen.

BIO

Amanda is a wife and mother of 3 kids, 2 of which are adults. In her spare time she likes to read, cook, and travel.

Thursday, December 3, 2026

by Tom Dubas

Read Hebrews 6:19

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
Hebrews 6:19

JESUS, THE HOPE OF THE WORLD

This hope for the fulfillment of God's salvation promises is the "anchor of our souls," keeping believers secure during times of trouble and turmoil. The verses preceding this passage assure us that we have this hope because God promised it and we know it is impossible for God to lie.

As I look back on my life, hope has played a large part. As a child growing up in a poor family and having a birthday a week before Christmas, I hoped there would be presents on both days. I hoped to be on the varsity basketball and baseball teams. When I left my small town in Washington state and drove to Los Angeles to go to college, I remember coming over the mountains and hoping I could find Pepperdine in that sea of lights. I hoped to find a wife, a job, and have a family. God graciously fulfilled all those hopes, but they were more like wishes. The word for hope found in Hebrews is a word that contains no uncertainty. It speaks of something that is certain, but not yet realized. Romans 8:24 says, "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already has?"

Unlike those with no hope, we are blessed with the assurance that the Savior died that we might live. Our hope is embodied in Christ Himself who has entered into God's presence in the heavenly Holy of Holies on our behalf. As Acts 4:12 says, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

God has always had a plan for each one of us and the Scriptures are filled with mentions of hope. Romans 15:4 says, "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Perseverance means that every day we must continue to seek God's plans for our lives and through the power of the Holy Spirit carry them out. Our encouragement comes from God's Word and from the support of fellow Christians.

Hope and despair are found in the hearts of people and not in circumstances. Love is so important because it causes hope to triumph. When things are at their darkest, hope rises through love to light the darkness of night. There is no room for despair, God has enough love to avert it. He has woven hope into the nature of man so that we can trust the future . The older I get, the more I cling to the hope of eternal life. I'm often reminded of a line from one of my favorite old hymns, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."

REFLECT

Do you know the story of Melchizedek and Abraham? If not, refer to the next chapter in Hebrews 7.

During the Advent season, are you focused on the hope you have in Christ rather than the commercialism that surrounds us?

DISCUSS

Is there someone in your life who is in despair over the cares of the world? How can you share the hope you have as a result of your faith in Jesus?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Jesus to provide for the forgiveness of my sins. Please remind me often that you can always be counted on to fulfill your promises, and be the anchor for my soul.

BIO

Tom and his wife, Arlene, have been married 57 years. They are both retired school teachers and they have one son, Ed, who lives in Murrieta. Tom is in the middle of his 55th season as a basketball referee. He enjoys numismatics and collecting sports memorabilia.

Friday, December 4, 2026

by Tyler Hellinga

Read Zephaniah 3:16-17

"The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves."
Zephaniah 3:17

HOPE THAT HOLDS

There are days when fear seems to smother all hope. There are days when exhaustion feels as if it is going to overwhelm hope. When you are so burnt out your "hands hang limp," or you are so uncertain of the future that you think all is lost. Fatigue wears on you like a 100 lbs vest, fear whispers that God has stepped back, that the weight is ours alone to carry. Zephaniah speaks into this fear and burden.

This is not a soft, vague encouragement. It is a direct command rooted in who God is: "Do not fear... do not let your hands hang limp." The reason is not our strength or our circumstances. The reason is His presence. "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves."

Hope does not begin with us trying harder. It begins with the reality that the God who fights for us is already near. He is not distant, waiting to see if we measure up. He is in our midst—strong enough to save, close enough to quiet the storm inside us.

As a father of two boys, the daily reality of raising them leaves me both exhausted and afraid. I see how far short I fall of the example they need, and I watch the world press in on their minds with forces I cannot control. This weight sits on me every day. In one way or another, it sits on all of us. Fear and exhaustion saturate the human experience. Yet the circumstances, whatever they are, do not change the answer. There is still hope—and that hope rests in the One who saves.

This is the ground of Christian hope. Not that everything will go the way we planned, but that the One who holds the future holds us with joy and delight. When our hands feel limp, His do not. When our courage falters, His does not. When fear rises, His love is already quieting us, but we have to let go of what we are holding onto in order to put our trust and hope in Him.

The best part? He does not merely tolerate us, He takes great delight in us! Hope is not the absence of struggle. It is the presence of a God who has already decided to stay and is "rejoicing over you with singing".

REFLECT

What fear are you holding onto today that is preventing you from experiencing the hope and love God has for you?

Is there a task or burden you are not willing to give up to God and continually carry the load?

DISCUSS

Why is it difficult to let go of fear and try to do everything ourselves?

PRAY

Father, when my hands grow weak and fear presses close, remind me that You are with me—the Mighty One who saves. Quiet my heart with Your love. Let me hear, even faintly, the song You sing over me. Restore my hope not in better circumstances, but in Your nearness and delight. In Jesus' name, amen.

BIO

Tyler is a husband and father who enjoys dinners with his wife, surfing with his boys, and spending time in God's beautiful earth.

Saturday, December 5, 2026

by Garrett Koch

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

"We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."
2 Corinthians 4:16-18

LIGHT AND MOMENTARY?

Light and momentary troubles…

Really?

Are you serious, Paul?

I don't know about you, but sometimes my troubles seem lightyears away from being light or momentary. Sometimes they feel like they are heavy and seemingly neverending.

Melodramatics aside, I'm sure this is the case for many of us, yes? It is very easy for our problems to overwhelm us, and oftentimes for good reason. In all honesty, they really are overwhelming at times.

I've mentioned this in a sermon here or there before, but I have clinical Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. That can look like needing to perform certain daily rituals in an exact way, a la the TV show *Monk,* for those of you who have seen that show. But far more often, it manifests as my brain coming up with the worst possible thing it can think of, and then holding it in there for an entire day, days, or even a week.

As an example, I have a hard time watching TV shows or movies that aren't light hearted and silly. Why? Well because if I see something distressing, it doesn't exit my head. I've only ever seen one horror

movie in my life, *Scream,* and it will be the only horror movie I ever see because it took weeks for some of those scenes to exit my mind.

And this is not something that can just go away with therapy, mindfulness, or medications. It's actually one of the only mental disorders that is physiological. Believe it or not, it's hereditary. It runs in my family. According to my doctors, my brain literally is structured differently than most people in this way. And what that also means is that this will be with me to some extent my entire life.

Light and momentary troubles, huh, Paul?

Now, while I will never be rid of OCD this side of heaven, I have learned how to manage in significant ways. Genuinely! But on a far more significant level, this actually is only a light and momentary trouble. Also, genuinely!

As Paul mentions, "eternal glory far outweighs them all." One day, all will be made right. All pain is temporary. Therefore, one day I will not have OCD. But not just this, I have an eternity of an OCD-free brain to look forward to! I don't know if you are aware of this, but eternity is a verrrrrrry long time. And in the scope of eternity, this life with all its troubles, no matter how significant, really is light and momentary.

It does not eliminate the troubles we experience now, but boy oh boy does it lessen the sting of them. And we can have confidence in this because it is something that God has promised to us, and he never fails - never has, and never will.

REFLECT

How does 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 help you cope with your present anxieties and difficulties?

DISCUSS

What is one specific thing that you are especially looking forward to being "done with" when God makes everything right, once and for all?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for the promise of renewal and restoration. Help me to not lose heart, but to keep my eyes fixed on you and not on the temporary things of this life. I need help and ask that you give me the strength and grace to not lose heart when my life becomes difficult. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.

BIO

Garrett Koch is the Director of Youth Ministries and Local Missions at Nova. He enjoys good coffee, playing softball, and spending as much time with loved ones as possible.

Peace

Monday, December 7, 2026

by Carla Conte

Read Isaiah 26:1-4

“3 You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.
4 Trust in the Lord forever,
for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.”
Isaiah 26:3-4

PERFECT PEACE

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines peace as “a state of tranquility or quiet.” Wikipedia says, “Peace is a state of harmony in the absence of hostility and violence.” I think most people think of peace in that broader absence of war or conflict in our world. In the Bible, peace means feeling like all is functioning as God originally designed. Peace is wholeness and well-being in all areas of life. It is a state of being where we are in communion with Him. The Hebrew word for peace is “shalom.” This was a basic greeting in the Old and New Testament times. Often, Paul begins his letters to his disciples by referring to peace from God our Father. Peace is not the absence of war or conflict around us or in our relationships. In Ephesians 2:14 Paul says, “For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”Later in the chapter in verse 17, he goes on, “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” This peace was for ALL – Jews and Gentiles alike. God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take away those things that divide us.

I often pray for the world to be at peace – no wars or conflicts – everyone living their lives without fighting. I don’t think of peace in relationships or a state of being in my faith. For me lately, it is the absence of worry and feeling a calmness that all will be well in my life. I struggle to <u>feel</u> at peace. My family is going through a difficult time. It seems like everyone is on the edge of anger all the time. We lash out at one another over minor issues. That’s not to say we aren’t experiencing

real hardships. We have had to replace two cars in one month due to accidents (both our fault), one of us has been without a job for over a year, one of us is retiring at the end of the year, and one of us explodes whenever something doesn't go his way. We are not communicating well and do not show grace to each other. I am afraid we won't be financially secure, and I am the major breadwinner for this family.

While reviewing this passage and writing this devotional I realized that I have not trusted in my Heavenly Father as verses 3 and 4 tell me that I should. He is "the rock eternal". I need to remind myself of that. Then peace will come to me. I have had many periods in my life where God took care of me far beyond my expectations. I had not worked at any job for longer than five years before I started with my current company in 2015. I am still with that company, and it has been the biggest blessing (more than 26 years!). I KNOW that He will take care of me, our family, and our finances ALWAYS if I trust in Him. A while back, I was out of work for over a year, and God made sure we could handle everything financially, even with small children and a new home.

REFLECT

What is "peace" to you? Reflect on the verses in Isaiah and other passages where God speaks to us about peace. See Romans 5:1, Philippians 4:7, Colossians 3:15. Remember, peace is a free gift from God – trust in Him and He will be your rock. John 14:27 "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Are you trusting in Him every day and steadfastly?

DISCUSS

Share your thoughts on peace with someone else, a friend or a fellow small group member. See if their definition is different than yours or if they FEEL at peace with Christ.

PRAY

Dear Heavenly Father, I need to feel Your peace. This Advent season help me to focus on what the coming of your Son did for all of us. Help me to trust in YOU my rock and to remember that you are eternal and forever! I pray this today and always in Jesus Christ. Amen.

BIO

Carla Conte is a wife, mother of 2, aunt to many, and sister to 2. She loves singing in the choir and serving in the nursery. In her free time, she enjoys reading and traveling (especially to Disneyland).

Tuesday, December 8, 2026

By Celia Kida

Read James 3:13-18

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

James 3:17-18

WORLD PEACE CHRISTMAS WISH

I often think about Peace at this time of the year. An early Christmas memory involved a wish for Peace. When I was six, I had written my Christmas list and asked for "World Peace." My older brother who was a teenager read my Christmas list and then just teased me (to no end) about how that isn't going to ever happen. He laughed and said that I need to list out 'stuff' for Santa Claus to bring on Christmas. My merry prankster brother also convinced me that reindeers had landed on our roof. Years later, when we revisited that Christmas memory; my brother did have regret because he later realized that I was serious and meant my wish for Peace. It's not a stretch on how a kid could make that wish. As during that time and even now, the images of war are prominent and daily. A wish for Peace just makes sense. It became personal. I longed for it.

Where to start true Peace. As guided by James 3:17-18, I believe that I should pray and listen to God who is the source of all wisdom. Proverbs 2:6 (NIV), "For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." We are reminded that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Proverbs 9:10 (NIV), "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

So, when I am feeling turbulence or in a tough moment, then I work to focus on God's peace and what flows, such as kindness, patience, and goodness. Since the pandemic and in difficulties, I take a moment to pause, be still, and breathe with no judgment. This is not always easy

for me as I tend to want quick resolutions. Then I reflect and pray often on Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV) "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." I also go to weed out my own envy, cruel response, anger, unforgiveness, or self-defeat. I find that Galatians dovetails with James 3:17-18 that supports this way of life as core to the Christian journey.

As God's wisdom molds us, I feel that it changes how we react to disputes, how we value others over ourselves, and how patient and kind we become in everyday moments. Only through Jesus Christ, we connect with God's righteousness. We reflect God's heart to a world in need of peace.

We can become peacemakers.

REFLECT

"Peacemaker is a noble vocation...to be a peacemaker, you must know the Peace-Giver."
Billy Graham

DISCUSS

What spiritual practices help you navigate turbulent times and bring you peace? What Bible verses reassures you? What are some ways we can be peacemakers?

PRAY

Lord, in our difficult moments, and throughout our days, help us to take moments to pause, be still, and trust in You, the source of true wisdom and true peace. Help us to reflect Your heart today to a world in need of peace. Amen.

BIO

Celia Kida, happily married to David for 30 years and feeling quite fortunate to recent retirement while still goofing off with three brothers, a sister, and extended family. Yes, the older brother remains a well-known prankster and an accomplished humanitarian.

Wednesday, December 9, 2026

By JoEllen Eisenhour

Read Philippians 4:6-7

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayer. God knows your concerns."
Philippians 4:5-6

EXPERIENCING TRUE PEACE

When Peace like a river, attends my way. When sorrows like sea billows roll. Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, "It is well with my soul." (H. Spafford, 1873)

What is peace? Some might say it is the absence of conflict. If that is true, is it even possible to have peace?

GOOD NEWS!

Our God is the only source of true peace! Do we understand how He does it? No. But He is the authority over all things. Only God can give us true and everlasting peace. Maybe this will help you remember:

PRAYER: Talk to God not yourself. Be honest. He already knows more about you than you know yourself.

EVERYTHING: That is what you bring to God. When you give Him your worries and fears, leave them with Him, don't take them back. Thank God for the blessings He has given you. Thank Him for the things He has spared you from.

ASK: Him anything. Form your worries into prayers. Everything will come together, for the good, at the right time.

CHRIST: is the solution to every problem, fear, and worry. Nothing surprises Him. He will hear your prayers and give you that peace that is beyond understanding.

EVERYWHERE: Where you are doesn't matter. You can always talk to Jesus. He will hear your prayers and give you peace.

REFLECT

God is waiting for us to go to Him. He is more than ready to be our guide in every area of our lives. His grace will be your peace.

DISCUSS

In your life, what areas do you need peace? What can you do to find it? Does worry help the situation?

PRAY

Be still my soul! The Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul! Thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Thro' thorny ways leads to joyful end.

BIO

JoEllen Eisenhour, aka Rex's wife, is a retired school teacher. I enjoy reading (I still read kids' books) and napping. Spending time with my grandkids is a blessing and a joy.

Thursday, December 10, 2026

By Emily Welch

Read John 14:25-27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.
John 14:27

INTO THE UNKNOWN

I crave vacations – a chance to get away from work, a break from the mundane, and an opportunity to see new sights and old friends. Yet every time I take a vacation, I'm a nervous wreck. The first time I travelled by myself was for a work trip to the East Coast. I was not only going alone but would be in a different time zone from my family and friends, solely responsible for getting to my destinations while navigating the unknown. I meticulously prepared for this trip: printed multiple copies of my itinerary, complete with the phone numbers of a dozen "emergency" contacts. I even saved the route from the airport to Avis, from Avis to the hotel, the hotel to my work location, and every other route I could possibly take. However, no matter how much I prepared for this trip, I only grew increasingly more nervous.

Driving to LAX, I was constantly checking to make sure I had my ID and all the necessities. At that moment, I just wanted to be back among the familiar, I'd even take going into work rather than face travelling alone. I wish I could say that once I got through TSA, I wasn't nervous anymore, but I was just as anxious the entire trip. Navigating various airports with connecting flights scared me. Driving on unknown freeways in a new car made me a nervous wreck. Here I was in a state I had never seen before, staying in a fantastic hotel, access to great restaurants, and I was worried about all the little things, all the things that had to work just right for me to have a "successful" trip.

It is so easy to get caught up in worrying about things out of our control. And that worry pervades all aspects of our daily lives. I did not

enjoy that trip as much as I should have. My worry took up time and space in my head that prevented me from fully enjoying the present. Here I was getting paid to meet new people in a new state in a unique opportunity, and I'm stressed about accidentally leaving something behind in the hotel. God does not want us to be so caught up in the minutia like this. In fact, He even provides the Advocate to do life with us and directs us to bring our worries to Him in prayer.

In today's verses, Jesus speaks about how the Holy Spirit will be with us, teaching and reminding us about God's words. This is a huge source of peace. God has not left us alone, but rather He is with us always. He was with me when I was waiting in line at TSA. He was with me when I was trying to figure out if the navigation told me to turn right at this intersection or the next. And He is with us now as we decide where we will be celebrating the holidays and as we make shopping lists for presents and parties. While this time of year can be stressful, we need to remember to lay our worries before God. He is with us all the time, waiting for us to share our burdens with Him.

REFLECT

What is causing you worry or stress in this season? What good things are you missing out on because of your worry?

DISCUSS

What are ways to remind you to turn your worries over to God?

PRAY

Lord, Thank you for the Holy Spirit. Thank you for being with me always. Please help me to pray continuously and to reach out to You when I start to feel overwhelmed.

BIO

Emily Welch is an engineer. In her free time, she enjoys reading, baking, and chasing after her puppy with treats and a bottle of Resolve in each hand.

Friday, December 11, 2026

by Katie Dudgeon

Read Ephesians 2:14-17

"For he himself is our peace…"
Ephesians 2:14

ACHING FOR PEACE

I went on a retreat this summer with a group of women from San Francisco who were new to me. Nestled in the hills of Sonoma, away from the distractions and technology of the city, the retreat centered on the theme "Ease and Effort". Together, we explored what it means to hold both at once: to give ourselves fully to what matters while discovering a place of rest where effort does not become struggle.

As I got to know the women attending, I heard pieces of their stories: a difficult marriage, caring for a parent with dementia, infertility, job instability, financial pressure, and the adjustment to an empty nest. These were the most perceptible challenges. Beneath them were quieter realities—loneliness, isolation, questions of self-worth, abuse, and worry about the future.

There was not a woman there whose story matched mine. The circumstances of our lives were dramatically different. Yet as our stories unfolded, it became clear that we were longing for the same thing: peace.

I am thankful that I know Peace. Through Christ, I have been reconciled to God. But knowing Peace does not mean that I am insulated from the pressures, challenges, or hardships of life. In Christ, I have been given peace with God—and the promise that one day we will live in complete harmony with God, one another, and all creation.

I find that most others are searching or hoping for peace on some level. Rarely do I meet someone in the city who is satisfied with the current state of the world or human relationships. Most of us are troubled by what we see and want it to be different.

That shared longing for harmony gives us a place to meet. It helps us listen to one another, build trust, and recognize our common humanity. The discord we see around us does not prove that peace is impossible; it reveals how deeply we need Peace.

As we celebrate Christmas and reflect on Christ's coming, may we meet friends, neighbors, and family members with compassion for the peace they seek. May we recognize and share in the hunger we feel for a world that looks different—a world marked by harmony with God, with one another, and with creation.

Even as Christians, we continue to live in a world where peace is incomplete and harmony is fleeting. We see it in the discord around us, and we feel it in our own lives. Yet because we know Peace, we are able to name what is missing and what is to come. Our longing is not naïve, and it is not misplaced. It points to the reality for which we were made and to the day when Christ's peace will be fully revealed.

REFLECT

"For he himself is our peace." —Ephesians 2:14

DISCUSS

Where do you see the absence of peace and harmony in the world around you? Where do you notice others sensing that something is "off"?

PRAY

Lord, help me lament the lack of peace and harmony in our world. Deepen my awareness of the peace for which humanity longs, and help me recognize this shared longing in others. Give me opportunities to affirm their sense that the world is not as it should be, while holding onto this truth: Christ is the ultimate Peace, and the world is not yet at peace.

BIO

Katie lives in San Francisco and leads Proxima, an organization in the city that helps people explore questions of faith, meaning and purpose. In her free time she enjoys movies, trying new restaurants, and staying up late.

Saturday, December 12, 2026

by Ken Demshki

Read Psalm 34:11-14

"[11] Come, my children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
[12] Whoever of you loves life
and desires to see many good days,
[13] keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from telling lies.
[14] Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it."

Psalm 34:11-14

ABOVE ALL, PURSUE PEACE

When I first read the passage and the accompanying recommendation that we should choose one to three verses, I was tempted to drop the "fear of the Lord" verse as it did not fit with the rest of the text that reads like a checklist for those that "love life and good days." Who doesn't? As I prayed about it over the next couple days I realized the first line is critical to the overall subject of Peace.

Jesus taught us many things about salvation, redemption, the kingdom of the Lord, and simple spiritual truths. Jesus also asked us to emulate him. As we retain stories better than a list of rules, Jesus often taught with parables. Jesus used examples meaningful to the people of his time. Please forgive me for my amateur attempt to emulate Jesus. Following is the parable of the three automobile drivers.

There were three drivers. The first driver had little interest in authority figures and drove his vehicle as he wished with little regard to the posted speed limits. When asked what he would do if things went bad, he simply replied that he would just deal with the ramifications.

The second driver obeyed the speed limit. When asked why he said because I don't want a ticket, my insurance to increase, or my car impounded.

The third driver respected the speed limit as well. When asked why he said because I want to be safe for the benefit of myself, my passengers, and other drivers I don't even know. I do this out of love and respect. This is a philosophy that has never failed me.

Jesus would sometimes explain his parable so let me give it a try.

The first driver is the person that uses his free will to reject the Lord and simply deals with the ramifications even if he has no way of knowing what those ramifications might be.

The second driver is the one that follows the Lord as he understands the Lord's expectations and out of respect for the Lord's authority.

The third driver also follows the Lord but out of love and a deep dependence on his relationship with the Lord that has never failed him.

So the theme of this devotional is not driving, but rather Peace. So I ask you which driver enjoys the most inner peace? The second and third driver both follow the rules and receive an equal reward, but do they have equal peace?

REFLECT

We all have free will. Often there are equally appropriate reactions to things that happen in life. Do we pick the option that brings us peace? I know that when it comes to disappointments related to politics, my wife often asks me if getting upset changes anything? She has inner peace during troubling times, so as usual she is wiser than I.

DISCUSS

As you follow after Jesus, what is one thing that you can do today to seek peace and pursue it?

PRAY

Lord, you love me and want me to enjoy the peace only you can provide. I know all things are in your control and unfold according to your plan. Please help me to above all, pursue peace.

BIO

My name is Ken Demshki. I am married to an amazing woman and have two children and three grandchildren. Many years ago, my wife let me go through my sports car(s) phase so there was a time when speed limits were a challenge. Now I drive a truck and I am told that I drive like a little old lady. Praise the Lord.

Joy

Monday, December 14, 2026

by Dean Mayeda

Read 1 Chronicles 16:7-36

[8] Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
[9] Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
[10] Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
[11] Look to the Lord and his strength;
seek his face always.
1 Chronicles 16:8-11

JOY IN GOD'S PRESENCE

For the past 3 years my wife Janet and I have been praying daily for a good friend who was diagnosed with cancer. We have prayed for her – through surgeries, radiation treatments, chemotherapy regimens – and last week, we heard the news that she received the results from her recent PET scan that she is cancer free! We felt instant gratitude, happiness, and joy! I really liked feeling joy and happiness. I could get used to feeling that on a daily basis.

Our scripture reading today, 1 Chronicles 16:7–36, is a song of thanksgiving and praise delivered by King David to the Levite worship leader Asaph to celebrate the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant is the tangible symbol of God's personal presence, power, and faithfulness among His people.

As you read through 1 Chronicles 16, you will notice that:

- Verses 8-22 (identical to Psalm 105:1-15), focuses on Israel's history and identity. It calls on the people to remember the miraculous works of God and honors the unconditional covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Singing this as the Ark arrives reminds the nation that God has been completely faithful to His ancient promises.

- Verses 23-33 (identical to Psalm 96), shifts the focus outward. This section of the song proclaims God's supreme authority over the nations, declares that worldly idols are completely worthless, and commands all the Earth to rejoice.
- Verses 34-36 (Psalm 106:1;47-48), is all about God's loyal, steadfast love and pleads for salvation and gathering from all nations. This is a song of victory, but also a song of comfort for people through the centuries who are coming back to relationship with God.

If we were to map out our lives and document our starts, stops, and waypoints, we would probably find a twisted and windy road filled with unexpected narrow turns, and steep dropoffs. In our minds we think mostly in safe, straight lines (think: point A to point B). But our lives are rarely pictured in straight lines. And yet, God has a joyful path for you! God did not design your life-path for comfort or ease. Your life was designed that you would know Jesus and trust him. In the terrifying moments when tragedy strikes or when sorrow seem overwhelming – the presence of God is with you. And his strong and comforting presence will fill you with joy, whatever your situation or circumstances are!

[2] Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, [3] because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. [4] Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
James 1:2-4

REFLECT
How is "considering it pure joy" different from pretending to feel happy about painful circumstances?
Think of a difficult season from your past. How did enduring that trial make you more "mature and complete" today?

DISCUSS

Are joy and happiness the same? What are their similarities? What are their differences?

How about your current season of life – are you more joyful or more happy, today?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, we give you praise! Lord, today, give me an opportunity to tell someone what you have done in my life. We glory in your holy name as we joyfully seek you. We look to you and your wisdom and love. Give us strength to seek you always. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

BIO

Dean Mayeda is a retired pastor. He is a husband, father, grandfather, and friend. Dean loves to take long walks along the "Avenues," consult with church leaders, and cook delicious and healthy dinners.

Tuesday, December 15, 2026

by Denise Helinga

Read Luke 15:3-7

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he is found.
Luke 15:4-5

HIS LOVE NEVER GIVES UP ON US

I recall first reading this story while in high school, though I'll skip how long ago that occurred! The memory persists each time I read it because I felt sad reading it. I was focused on the 99 and the sadness of being left. I had much to learn in my teen years.

In this story the shepherd leaves his home, his comforts and goes out looking for the one who wandered off.

He doesn't give up because the journey is difficult because the sheep has wandered too far, or because the sheep has gotten itself into this trouble to begin with. Nothing will stop his search. His heart is set on bringing that lost one home.

That is the heart of our Heavenly Father.

Sometimes we are the ones who have wandered.

Sometimes we are lost in grief, fear, disappointment, sin, or circumstances we never expected. We might feel forgotten, unworthy, or too far away to be rescued.

This verse shows God's amazing love and grace for us. God never measures our worth by how far we have wandered off.

He sees us. He knows us. He loves us. And He comes looking for us.

And a part I really treasure...the shepherd doesn't scold the sheep when he finds it.

He joyfully places it on his shoulders, he shows his love deeply and carries it home. Carries it home! What a picture of joy He gives us.

God doesn't simply show us the way back; when we don't have the strength to make the journey ourselves He carries us.

And what about the ninety nine I was concerned for?

They were not forgotten or less loved. They could take comfort in the fact their shepherd would rescue them just the same if they wandered off. Once I discovered that I began to see this in the light I believe He wanted me to. His love and grace for us.

Like every beautiful Bible story He has given us, there is also an example He wants us to follow. To not become so comfortable with those who are already around us while someone nearby is hurting, lonely, struggling, or searching for help.

I believe God wants me to be mindful of the one who is hurting, lost or wandering - the person who feels they no longer belong - to love beyond my comfortable place - to reach out without judgement as our Savior does for us.

REFLECT

You may be one of the ninety-nine today, safely resting in the Shepherd's care. Or perhaps you know someone who is the lost one.

Either way, every one is someone He loves.

DISCUSS

Sometimes the greatest expression of God's love through us is simply being willing to go after the lost one. Is there someone nearby He might be wanting you to reach out to? Ask Him to show who that might be.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

Thank You that Your love is not limited.

Thank You that none of us is just one of many.

Please put others on my heart; to simply love them and help bring us both closer to you. Thank you, loving savior.

BIO

Denise and Paul have lived in Redondo Beach for their entire married life. They loved the great adventure of raising 3 children to married lives of their own now in Redondo. The adventure continues with 7 grandchildren who attend the great Nova Youth Group!

Wednesday, December 16, 2026

by Shantel Duchin

Read Psalm 30:4-5

"Sing the praises of the LORD, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

Psalm 30:4-5

THE JOY THAT REMAINS

The holiday season is often described as the most wonderful time of the year. We see the lights, hear the Christmas music, gather with family, exchange gifts, and celebrate traditions. But for many, the holidays can also bring a mixture of emotions.

For some, Christmas brings back memories of loved ones who are no longer sitting around the table. For others, it may bring loneliness, broken relationships, financial worries, disappointment, or a season of life that looks nothing like they once did. Sometimes the very season that is supposed to feel joyful can remind us of what is missing.

But Psalm 30:4–5 reminds us that even in the middle of life's hardest moments, we have a reason to rejoice.

David reminds us to sing to the Lord and give thanks. Notice that he doesn't say to give thanks only when everything is going right. He encourages us to remember God's goodness and faithfulness.

Joy is not the same as happiness.

Happiness is often connected to what is happening around us. Joy is rooted in who God is. Happiness can change with our circumstances, but the joy we find in Christ can remain even when life is difficult.

Choosing joy doesn't mean pretending we aren't hurting, ignoring our struggles, or putting on a smile when our hearts are heavy. It means

choosing to trust God in the middle of those feelings. It means remembering that our circumstances do not determine God's faithfulness.

And what better time to be reminded of this than Christmas!

Over 2,000 years ago, the birth of Jesus brought a message of hope to a world that desperately needed a Savior. In Luke 2:10, the angel announced, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." Jesus was born, and with Him came the promise of hope, salvation, and everlasting life.

The world didn't suddenly become perfect when Jesus was born. There were still struggles, uncertainty, and hardships. But everything changed because the Savior had come.

That is the beautiful reminder of Christmas: our joy isn't found in perfect circumstances, perfect families, perfect celebrations, or perfect lives. Our joy is found in Jesus.

Psalm 30:5 tells us, "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

I love that promise because it reminds us that our difficult seasons are not our forever seasons. The night may feel long, the tears may be real, and the answers may not come when we want them. But God has not forgotten us. His love remains, His promises remain, and His light still shines.

Sometimes joy comes when our circumstances change. Other times, joy comes when our hearts remember that God is still with us.

This Christmas, let's make a choice to look beyond what we may be missing and remember what we have been given: Jesus.

We can choose gratitude over comparison, hope over despair, forgiveness over bitterness, and faith over fear. Not because life is always easy, but because we serve a God who is always good.

And when the night feels long, remember: morning is coming. And because of Jesus, we always have a reason to find joy.

REFLECT

Are there areas of your life where you have allowed your circumstances to steal your joy?

What is one intentional way you can choose joy and gratitude this Christmas?

How can you be a reminder of God's joy to someone who may be struggling this season?

DISCUSS

What emotions does the holiday season bring up for you?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus. Thank You for reminding us that even in our darkest moments, we are never without hope. Lord, You know the emotions we carry, the memories we hold, and the struggles we don't always share with others. Help us not to let our circumstances steal the joy You have placed within us. Teach us to choose gratitude, to trust Your promises, and to find peace in Your presence. This Christmas, help us remember that the greatest gift was never found under a tree, but in a manger. May we carry Your joy into every room we enter and share Your light with those who need it most. And when the nights feel long, remind us that rejoicing comes in the morning.

BIO

My name is Shantel, and I am a wife and a mom of three. I love being creative, enjoy all types of crafts, and also have a passion for baking.

Thursday, December 17, 2026

by Michelle Moore

Read James 1:2-4

"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."

James 1:2-4 NIV

A RIPPLE EFFECT OF JOY

I recently spent time with a family friend that flew in from the East Coast to be a groomsman for my brother-in-law, James' wedding. As the days went by and our small group was involved in all the pre-wedding activities, it became apparent that our friend had been through a time of personal growth and reflection. He was constantly in a state of gratitude, and he was not shy in expressing his thankfulness for all things, small and life-changing alike. There was a moment when someone in the group brought up a negative aspect of the Airbnb where we were all staying and then quickly shifted into a second complaint. Our friend stopped this person mid-sentence and implored them to "now tell us three positive things off the top of your head." His request for this person to change their attitude made them pause and move onto another topic, but that interruption stuck with me. There was another conversation during a car ride in which he expressed his gratitude for his wife and young family, and how his wife's nurturing and kind spirit has made him a better man. Their love grows deeper and richer every day, and he couldn't wait to be at her side again after the long weekend. His earnest confession was unprompted; his wife was simply on his mind, and he wanted to share the moment of joy and love with us in the car.

These words of thanks may not seem remarkable on the surface, but this man has suffered in his lifetime more than most. He was born into and raised in an environment of uncertainty that no child should have to face – not knowing when a parent might be coming home, when the next meal might be available, and surrounded by unreliable adults who may or may not pay attention to him. Our friend has endured

heart-shattering losses in the last handful of years. But despite his sorrow, he chooses to forgive the deep hurts at the hands of those he's lost, and he speaks fondly and lightly of the good memories to anyone who will listen. During this recent visit, I was able to see that he has matured in a way that he not only accepts and trusts God's plan for his life, but he is tapping into the joy that God provides with the steadfastness and perseverance of faith as we read in James 1:2-4.

So what do we do with the joy we receive and when our cup is overflowing? We rejoice in the Lord, and we praise His name with our worship. We pray and give Him our thanks for what He provides, even when we are amid trials and discomforts and sorrows. We share our testimonies with our loved ones about the joys in our lives so that they may also experience the same. We encourage those around us to adopt a mindset of thanksgiving and gratitude to change our hearts and see our troubles through a new lens. I am inspired by my friend. He spoke his joy into every conversation, sang his joy into every karaoke song that weekend, and the lasting effects have touched my heart. I pray the same is true for everyone that had the opportunity to spend that weekend with our friend.

REFLECT

How is your faith being tested and how are you responding to your trials during this Advent season?

DISCUSS

Can you share three positive things happening in your life right now?

PRAY

Lord, I pray for your peace during this difficult trial. I pray for wisdom and steadfastness to understand that your plan will be revealed in time. I pray that your joy will flow in me, and that I may share that joy with those around me.

I'm trading my sickness,
I'm trading my pain,
I'm laying them down for the joy of the Lord.
Amen.

BIO

Michelle Moore is a music enthusiast who currently serves on Nova's sound board and broadcast team. She enjoys reading fantasy and science fiction, listening to music from all time periods, cross-stitching, and experimenting with new recipes in the kitchen.

Friday, December 18, 2026

by Phyllis Jew

Read Acts 16:16-34

About Midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them.
Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors were open & everyone's chains came loose.
The jailer woke up and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.
But Paul shouted "Don't harm yourself! We are all here.
Acts 16:25-28

PUTTING JOY IN OUR LIVES WITH GOD'S HELP

Before Paul and Silas were put in prison they were stripped and beaten with rods. Would you be able to pray and sing hymns to God and be joyful if this happened to you? To be quite honest I don't think I would be able to. I would try to be positive during the time of what was going on because that is the type of person I am, but it would be extremely hard. But knowing God is with me in the moment and the situation I would be able to go on and praise him knowing that he has something better planned for me going forward. God uses us all in different situations especially very hard ones.

When I was younger, I lost my dad in a car accident. It was a very difficult time for me and my family and friends. I moved forward with life, eventually. About a year or so later I met someone who had lost their dad when they were young too. I was able to talk with them and show them we could go forward with life and have God help us through it. It was ok to still be sad, but we could have joy in our lives too. I believe God put this person in my pathway to be able to help them through this hard time in their life. I don't think this person was a Christian and I was there to help plant a seed in their life. We need to be willing, able, and available to witness and minister to all kinds of people. God wants us to be joyful and positive even through our hardest times in life.

REFLECT

In this story God arranges an earthquake in order to reach the heart of just one man – a man who, having just recently beat two of God's servants, could not have seemed a less likely candidate for the love of God. But we are all unlikely candidates for that love. Give thanks to God and with great joy and let that joy lead you home. God's grace is not restricted by social status or background. The jailer's question "Sirs what must I do to be saved" is met with a simple invitation. "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

DISCUSS

Are you fighting a closed door right now or are you willing to let God pivot your steps toward the path He has opened for you? Sometimes closed doors feel like failure of wasted effort, but God often uses them for redirection. A "no" to a good plan is frequently a setup for a God sized plan.

PRAY

Dear Lord,

Thank you for always being available for us even through the hard times. Help us to have joy even in the tough times. I pray for the people going through tough situations right now. Be with them during this time in their lives. In your name. Amen

BIO

Phyllis Jew, wife, mother, and now part of the retirement community and looking forward to many fun adventures ahead. I enjoy reading, spending time with my family and friends and traveling.

Saturday, December 19, 2026

by Joshua Sanders

Read Luke 2:8-15

"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies … because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you … to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation…"

Colossians 1:21-22

THE ENEMY, THE ALIEN, AND US

Like most modern Americans, you probably don't spend a lot of time thinking about shepherds. Every Christmas, you're reminded of them as they populate children's pageants, appear on people's lawns in Nativity displays, and get a few shout-outs in the occasional Christmas carol. Even when they're mentioned, though, they're little more than background characters in the unfolding drama of the season. We simply don't pay much attention to them.

Things weren't very different in first-century Israel. People looked down on shepherds, or worse, simply overlooked them completely. Herding animals was a dirty and dangerous job. Lonely and low-paying, it held little appeal for most. Because they spent long stretches living in the wilderness, apart from towns and villages, shepherds were further ostracized, and had little or no place in the life of the communities they served. They were the epitome of "marginalized," to put it in today's terms.

What's worse, the rough work they did made it nearly impossible for shepherds to live up to the strict standards of ritual purity demanded in traditional Jewish laws. Because they were in constant contact with dirt, manure, and the blood and carcasses of dead animals, shepherds were almost always ceremonially unclean, and couldn't participate in the life of worship prescribed by Moses. Some ancient Jewish teachers list shepherding among the most distrusted and even disreputable

trades. Incredibly, according to some rabbinic traditions, shepherds were even forbidden to serve as legal witnesses in court. Their word meant nothing. One could hardly be more marginalized than these laborers were. In light of all of this, it's simply incredible that shepherds are some of the first to hear the news about Jesus.

And that's the point of Christmas. At every turn, this familiar story is about God reaching out to the lowly and outcast. He chooses Bethlehem, a boondock backwater – a total hick town! – to be the backdrop as He launches His plan to save the world. Shepherds shunned by society are honored with an angel choir and an unbelievable announcement. An elderly childless couple become the parents of the prophet who will herald the arrival of the savior of the whole world. God makes a poor, unwed peasant girl the mother of that Messiah. And way back before any of this, pagan astrologers, the Magi from the East, were seemingly the very first to figure out that God was on the move. Mary herself says it best in her song of praise recorded in Luke 1: "...the Mighty One has done great things... He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts ... brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things..."

Great for shepherds and these others, sure, but what does this have to do with us? When read correctly and honestly, ours too is a story about being on the outskirts. We moderns are pretty good at excusing our flaws, failing to see how desperately we need God's goodness and grace, but scripture makes it abundantly clear that, in the words of C.S. Lewis, we're not just imperfect creatures who simply need a little improvement here and there. This is what Paul is driving at in the above verses from Colossians: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies..." What the apostle is describing in Romans 5, though, is the message of Christmas: "God shows His love for us," he writes, in Christ coming to save us, even though "we were enemies," despite that we "were still sinners."

Once when explaining himself to a crowd of listeners, Jesus chose to identify with the alien and the enemy, the filthy and forgotten of society, and incredibly the label he gave himself is one of those we most

remember: "I am the good *shepherd*," he says in John 10:14. And Jesus chooses to identify with all of us, as well, and in all of our brokenness. Perhaps the best way to understand Christmas is to see it as the story of God in Christ taking on the mess of humanity. Dorothy L. Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, once famously wrote that in coming to earth, our Creator "had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine," confronting the full range of human suffering, even death.

Maybe we'll only experience the "great joy" for "all the people" that the angels announced to the shepherds when we grasp how utterly on the outskirts with God we once were: lost in our sin before He saved us, and lost in our day-to-day lives without His direction. In a popular Christmas carol (one that doesn't mention shepherds) we sing over and over of "good cheer." In yet another, we're invited to enjoy a drink of it, whatever that means. ("I don't know if there'll be snow, but have a cup of cheer!") Speaking of cheer himself, Professor Jack Miller of Westminster Theological Seminary once wrote that "the Bible can be summed up in two sentences: 1. Cheer up, you're a lot worse than you think you are, and 2. Cheer up, God's grace is a lot bigger than you think it is." This is why we rejoice – why we're joyful! – during this season, the *real* reason for Christmas cheer.

REFLECT

Does the truth of Professor Miller's words resonate with you? Why or why not?

DISCUSS

Why do we find it difficult to identify with the down-and-out of the Christmas story? What does this say about the flawed ways we're prone to see ourselves?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for drawing near to us in Christ. Teach us to grasp the incredible truths communicated in this familiar story. We confess that we've heard it so often, we sometimes miss what you're still trying to get across to us.

BIO

Joshua is discovering that there are certain things about Christmas he seems to love more the older he gets. His favorite holiday movies are *It's a Wonderful Life* and whatever version of *A Christmas Carol* happens to be on. He has two terrific, talented adult kids, and an amazing wife who's been his best friend since they were teenagers.


Love

Monday, December 21, 2026

by Brian Gilman

Read Romans 8:31-39 and Galatians 2:20

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."
Galatians 2:20

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers. Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord."
Romans 8:38-39

INSEPARABLE LOVE

When my wife and I were first married, and especially during the honeymoon period, we didn't want to spend any time away from each other. We would cook together, clean together, eat together, shop for groceries, and other household items together, and do all the regular household things together. We were inseparable. Over the last 25 plus years our love for one another has grown, deepened, and matured to where our love for one another is present, no matter where we are. We no longer need to be right next to each other to experience the love we have for each other. Similarly, when my son was born, and again when my daughter was born, these were times of inseparable love. Times when a near overwhelming sense of love prevailed in our home. This is not to say that things weren't tough at times, financially, emotionally, physically with the lack of sleep newborns bring and chores left undone. Yet through it all, our love for each other prevailed because of Him.

In reading today's passages, I can't help but celebrate! Nothing can separate me from God's love. Sometimes it might feel like God is not present and therefore not loving. We are reminded in Galatians 2:20, in Romans 8:31-38 and in Romans 3:21-24 that God loves us and gave himself for us in the form of Jesus dying on the cross and rising from

the dead to conquer death for all who believe. How can we measure or comprehend His love for us? Does the height of Mount Everest separate us from God's love? No, it does not. What about the depth of the Mariana trench? Does that depth separate us from His love? Again, no it does not. How about the distance from us to Earendel (29 billion light years away)? The script tells us that nothing will separate us from His love through Christ Jesus. His love is greater than all of these. May we turn and worship Him in response.

REFLECT

Think about the one thing in your life right now that feels like it's putting distance between you and God—maybe it's exhaustion, a financial strain, a lingering regret, or a fear about the future. Picture holding that thing up next to the cross of Christ and remind yourself: *'Nothing in all creation can separate me from His love.'* What would change in your week if you truly believed that?

DISCUSS

When you are going through a season where God feels distant—whether due to exhaustion, stress, or hardship—what helps you hold onto the truth of Romans 8:38–39 rather than relying on your feelings?

PRAY

Dear heavenly Father, thank you for your inseparable love. Through good times and bad I am comforted in knowing you are there with me. Thank you for this Advent season and the reminder of your love for me through your Son, Jesus. In His holy name I pray, Amen.

BIO

Brian Gilman is a husband, and father of two. He enjoys camping, backpacking, and going on long walks with his bride.

Tuesday, December 22, 2026

by Lori Hall

Read Lamentations 3:22-26

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."
The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;
It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord
Lamentations 3:22-26

CHRISTMAS IS GOD'S BEST NEW MORNING MERCY

It was 586 BC and the kingdom of Judah had been conquered and destroyed by Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar II. Solomon's Temple, the royal palace, and all major structures were burned to the ground. Judah's king, King Zedekiah had to watch his sons be executed and then he was tortured and taken to Babylon in chains, along with a large portion of the population. The people of Judah were exiled due to their own sin.... the sin of ignoring God and doing what they wanted. God had had enough of their rebellion against His ways. Not only were they completely ignoring His commandments, but they also tossed him aside and substituted other 'gods' for the real One. The One who had spent decades loving them and having mercy on them over and over again through all the many times of their unfaithfulness.

Paul David Tripp, in his Everyday Gospel Bible devotion book, reminds us that there have been three major exiles - "the first one was Adam and Eve being taken out of the garden due to their sin of disobeying God, the second is the exile of Judah in Lamentations, and the third is Jesus, the Messiah, being driven out of the walls of the city and nailed to a cross so that exiles from every nation, tongue and tribe may finally be brought home to him." Every time our own sin drives us away from God, he is the one who makes a way for us to come back. The author of Lamentations, likely Jeremiah, knew that in chapter 3, verses 22-23

when he said, in the midst of great suffering and despair, “because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Even though God’s people had completely rebelled against him, he would still show them love and mercy and eventually bring them back home.

I am thankful that God shows us those mercies when we most need hope and reassurance. These last few years have been challenging ones for our family. Some hard decisions had to be made regarding boundaries with 2 other family members. I have struggled mentally and emotionally with these issues, and even after seeking wise counsel from multiple sources, I was still worried that God may not agree with the decisions I had made. Last week as I sat in our sunroom doing my morning bible study, I was telling God that I really needed some kind of reassurance that I was not doing the wrong thing, that I was not going against his Word. It had been raining, but now there were beautiful gray and white clouds floating across the sky. As I sat watching them, within seconds of my request to God, a perfect rainbow suddenly appeared right in front of me (I took pictures so I could reassure myself I wasn't imagining it!). My first thought was to remember how God said he made the rainbow to assure us of his covenant of grace with us, and that has helped me to remember God knows I have done my best to make a wise decision, and even if it's not the perfect one, he still offers me mercy and grace. That rainbow was a new morning mercy that I still treasure.

As Christmas is quickly approaching, I had the thought that Jesus is truly our best ‘new morning mercy.’ Because he was born, if we believe he came to save us from our own sins, we don’t have to worry that we might be exiled from God’s Kingdom if we mess up. “The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

REFLECT

Sometimes we can feel a little ‘exiled’ from God when he seems distant or quiet. It is good to know those times are just our feelings and not the

truth, and that he is always offering new mercies. Thinking back on the last few weeks... see if you can recognize and name a few mercies that God has provided for you and thank him for those. If you are going through some hard things, what mercies would you like to ask God to show you?

DISCUSS

Think of someone who knows you well and ask them to share what they have seen God doing in your life and theirs. It is encouraging to hear what others see God doing!

PRAY

Father, we thank you this Christmas for giving us your Son so that we don't ever have to fear being exiled from you and your Kingdom. Thank you that because of your great love for us, we can always have hope and know that your mercies are new every morning. Help us to remember every day that you are our portion, not ourselves or the world.

BIO

Lori Hall is a wife, mother, and grandmother. She loves spending time with her family and golden retriever, cooking/baking, quilting, listening to waves crash, and hiking the Eastern Sierra.

Wednesday, December 23, 2026

By John McGady

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

GOD'S LOVE NEVER FAILS

These are some of the most well-known verses in the New Testament. Both Christians and non-Christians have probably heard these verses at either weddings or funerals. My first vivid memory of this part of 1 Corinthians 13 was shortly before my own wedding to Sandy. My future sister-in-law, who was a Buddhist at the time, gave Sandy and I a decoupaged plaque with the above verses beautifully inlaid. That's how impactful 1 Corinthians 13 can be across cultures and religions.

It resonates because everybody experiences love. Something that is so personal that it is difficult to define, Paul defined it perfectly - inspired by the love that Jesus has shown to all of us. But Paul was writing it as a correction and guidance for the church in Corinth. Members of the church were in-fighting, prideful, and selfish; and this was causing division in the church. Paul wrote this letter as guidance on how they should be treating each other.

Have you ever thought how the world might be if we loved each other this way? For mere mortals, it seems next to impossible. We know and experience love in our hearts, but we all too often express that love as conditional or transactional. It is part of our fallen nature.

"I love you, if you love me back."

"I love you, as long as you're not angry at me."

"I love you, and I expect you to be patient with me."

"I love you, but I remember those times where you did something that angered me or didn't treat me well."

"I love you, as long as you agree with me politically."

The list can go on and on and why love so often becomes conditional and transactional.

Real love is something deeper: a person's value to us cannot be reduced to a list of qualities, accomplishments, or benefits. People give and receive love in different ways; ways that I don't believe we can ever fully understand. Yet in our hearts, we have all experienced how profound the feeling of being genuinely loved by someone is. There's nothing like it.

But there is hope in Jesus. Jesus, is always patient with us, will always be slow to anger, his love is always kind, he is never envious of our genuine love for each other - in fact he rejoices when we love others as he loves us. We can always have hope in his love, and His love protects us always. His love never fails! This is how God loves us and how God would love for us to love each other.

The Bible references the word love about 310 times, 131 times in the Old Testament and 179 times in the New Testament (by some references). When tested by the Pharisees, Jesus responded that the two most important things were to love your God with all your heart and all your mind and to love your neighbors as yourself (Matt. 22:37 and 22:39). When dining at the house of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus was approached by a weeping woman well known for her sinful life. She anointed his feet and he forgave her sins. Simon questioned Jesus' legitimacy for allowing the woman to touch him and Jesus responded with the parable of the two debtors and told Simon, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much" (Luke 7:47 KJV). These are just a few of many examples where Jesus showed love and compassion.

Jesus' profession, expression, and unselfish acts of love were central to his ministry. We should all emulate that kind of love.

REFLECT

From what the bible tells us, it is apparent that during the time of Jesus' ministry there was division, politics, fighting, economic problems, and persecution. Jesus approached all of this with love and kindness. Take time to consider how your own expressions of love, compassion, and caring might help change relationships in our families, cities, states, and our country.

DISCUSS

Discuss with a spouse, sibling, parent, friend, or neighbor what love means to you and how it might be expressed and received!

PRAY

Jesus, thank you for showing us how to love and for demonstrating Your love for us throughout Your ministry and sacrifice on the cross. Lord, we pray for softened hearts that express that kind of love to those that we meet throughout the day and to our families and our friends. Open our eyes and help us to recognize those in need of prayer. Help us to see the power of our prayers in bringing people to understand the love they can experience through You, Jesus. Amen.

BIO

John is a Husband to Sandy, Father to Kim, Father-in-law to Jimmy and Grampy to McKenzie and Jeremiah. As a Pharmacist, I receive great satisfaction in helping my patients physically and sometimes spiritually - and the spiritual part often goes both ways.

Thursday, December 24, 2026

by Dan Hall

Read John 15:9-13

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be full.
John 15:11 (ESV)

LOVE, OBEDIENCE, AND US

The night before Jesus went to the cross to die and glorify the Father, he shared a Passover meal and his heart with his twelve disciples in the upper room of a home in Jerusalem. Knowing he would be betrayed into the hands of the Jewish leaders and face the scourge of physical punishment and death, he chose to spend his final meal with his closest friends and demonstrated personally to them how much he and the Father loved them. John wanted the world to see in chapters 13 through 16 of his gospel the depth and resolve of Jesus' love so he deliberately slowed everything down in his writing to record with sharp detail all the events of this important evening, noting in John 13:1 … *when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*

As people living in modern times in the US, most anyone you ask will tell you that love is a warm feeling of affection for another. It's a feeling (!) and we all know that feelings come and go with times, circumstances, moods, and relationships. Our culture bathes us with this inaccurate description, and often it haunts us as individuals. At our heart level there is, it seems - a longing desire built into every one of us to be loved. If we misunderstand that we were made to be loved and to give love, then we put ourselves and our relationships in peril. Many spend their lives attempting to earn the love of someone, and if it doesn't work out there is pain and suffering. More importantly, if it *does* work out, how do we keep it from changing? As with most important things in life, we turn to the Bible to explore what authentic love is and what it looks like.

The great Puritan and revivalist Jonathan Edwards wrote about the love shared by the persons of the Godhead in his classic work - Heaven - A World of Love. In it he showed that before creation the uncreated Father, Son, and Spirit shared heaven together in perfect, mutual, holy love for one another. The Father, Son, and Spirit sought to bring a taste of this heavenly love to the world so we could share in it and it's joy.

Here are some general things to remember from the Bible about the Father's love for the Son. The Father loved the Son with a love:

- That has no beginning or end.
- That is close and personal.
- That is without measure.
- That is unchanging.

It's clear that God's love for Jesus is much more than a feeling. Actions and commitment backed by the Father's divine attributes and character work together to form a powerful and intimate relationship between them.

From our passage John 15:9-13 we can see many aspects of Jesus' love-

- He was loved by his Father, v. 9
- He loved his disciples as the Father loved him, v. 9
- Jesus lived in his Father's love, v. 10
- He gives the way for the disciples to live in Jesus' love, vv. 9-10
- The reason for loving- joy, v. 11
- The commandment to love one another, v. 12
- The measure of the permanent authenticity of his love, v. 13

A simple reading of John 15:9-10 seems to imply that it is by a result of keeping the Commandments that we will be loved both by the Father and Jesus. But I ask you - *Which came first - the love of the Father or the Father's commandments to be kept?*

Answer - The Father's love. The order here is extremely important! Remember that 1 John 4:19 says - *We love because he first loved us.*

Therefore, keeping the Commandments of the Father is *a result and a desire* of one who has received and believed in God's perfect love. First the Son was loved by the Father before the Son obeyed the Father and came into the world to save it. In the same way, the Son loved us first and then our obedience follows.

So our obedience is a fruit of the love relationship - a commitment to keep the Commandments out of love for the Father and the Son - who have showered us with their perfect love. This is why in v. 9 Jesus *first* calls us to abide in his love and spotlights abiding in Him as an extension of the true vine/branch image of John 15:4-5.

Our commitment to obedience to Jesus is only as strong as our abiding in his love. As his love is perfect and we are not - a tension can develop inside us. We must remember that the ability to overcome our lack is gracefully provided yet again by *the helper, the advocate, the Holy Spirit*- sent by the Father at Jesus' ascension (John 14:16-17, 26). The Father and the Son gracefully provide everything we need to flourish and succeed in their love.

Jesus then tells the disciples (and us) that the result of this love relationship is joy - joy in them, us, and *joy in Jesus*. In a 2011 sermon called *The Love of God*, Tim Keller observed that *"Nothing brings greater pleasure to us than to give pleasure to someone we love"*. This service aspect of authentic love reveals the source of joy felt as we abide in Jesus' love. When we truly love someone, we desire that through us they could flourish and be happy. Our actions and commitment backed by the Father's love for us work together to form an authentic relationship between ourselves and those whom we love. As v. 11 states: *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* Our love for Him brings Jesus joy!

It is only through the coming birth of Jesus that we can see behind the scenes in heaven - a world of love - and that love was followed by an unsurpassed obedience of the Son to the Father's will to make a way for us to possess that same love and an eternal salvation to make us at peace with God. Mere words are insufficient to commemorate and celebrate this penultimate gift of grace to mankind.

REFLECT

It takes a lifetime to learn to love the way God does. Perhaps a good example of this is when a baby is born - parents must sacrifice time, talent, sleep, and treasure to care for an infant that is incapable of returning love. It is only over time with care and commitment of the parents that the child will grow and flourish in their love. Perhaps this is one reason among many why Jesus came as an infant....

Review your life experience and try to identify moments where Jesus' love changed the way you see things - circumstances, relationships, events, etc.

Was joy present in any of these moments?

DISCUSS

Discuss with someone how love and obedience go together. What are some things that get in the way of your obedience?

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for showing us the love you have for your Son Jesus and for all who believe in you. Your authentic love spans from Heaven to earth and beyond, and by your grace it has landed in our hearts. Help us to absorb the connections between your love, our obedience, and the joy Jesus spoke of in your Word. Help us to embrace the coming of Jesus this season. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

BIO

Dan Hall is husband to Lori, Dad to Jenn and Jeremy, and Grandpa to Michael and Amy. He loves the outdoors, is a retired mechanical engineer, woodworker, handyman, car enthusiast, and cyclist. Most days he can be seen walking their golden retriever, washing a car, or working in his shop.

Friday, December 25, 2026

By Ron Graff

Read the following Scriptures:

"These are the facts concerning the birth of Jesus Christ. The virgin shall conceive a Son, and he shall be called 'Emmanuel' (meaning 'God with us.')"
Matthew 1:28, LB

"In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. The Word became human and lived here on earth among us."
John 1:1-2, 14, NLT

"Christ was truly God. But he did not remain equal with God. Instead, he gave up everything and became a slave when he became like one of us."
Philippians 2:6-7, CEV

"You have everything when you have Christ,"
Colossians 2:10, LB

JUST GIVE ME JESUS

"God clothed himself in human flesh. He came where we are so we could go eternally where he is. He came to give us what we never deserved and not to give us what we did deserve. At Bethlehem we see God with us. At Calvary we see God for us. At Pentecost we see God in us." (O.S. Hawkins)

"*Just give me Jesus.*" I borrowed that title from Ann Graham Lotz (daughter of Billy Graham) from her book by the same title. In her book she describes a time when she went on a walk with her father. As they walked, he inadvertently stepped on an ant pile. Looking down he saw panic setting in as the ants scurried in every direction, confused as to what just became of their world. Out of compassion, her dad bent down scooping away the dirt to find the tunnel to their home to no avail. His fingers were too big and the ants too small. Out of frustration, he mused, if I could only become an ant, even temporarily, I could tell them what was wrong and how to fix it. The problem was,

Anne said, “There was an impassable barrier. Dad was a big man and they were tiny insects.”

This perfectly illustrates the impassable barrier between God and us. He looked down and saw us scurrying around in panic trying to find answers in the chaotic world in which we live. And so, out of his great love and compassion, he came down and became a man through a miraculous birth given the name *“Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins,”* (Matthew 1:21, LB), In John 10:10, Jesus described a further purpose for his coming to earth: *“I came so that you can have real and eternal life, more and better life, than you ever dreamed of,”* (John 10:10, MSG).

This was the testimony of Cassie Bernall, a 17-year-old student at Columbine High School, known for her love for Jesus. In 1999, two young men went on a shooting rampage at the school. One of those young men pointed a gun at Cassie and asked her if she believed in God. Knowing the consequences if she said yes, she unhesitatingly replied yes and lost her life because of her faith. While she lost her life - she did not lose Jesus.

Jesus is the one who cannot be taken from us. Our health could be robbed by illness, our house could burn to the ground, our mate could suddenly drop dead, the stock market suddenly crash and our portfolio becomes worthless, and maybe, someday - even lose our life because of our faith. Just like the shooter could take Cassie’s physical life, he couldn’t take away the Jesus she loved and the One to whom she was committed, regardless of the consequences.

In my own life, I’ve had some traumatic experiences that were devastating. While I didn’t lose my physical life like Cassie did, I felt, at the time, that I was dying internally. While these experiences were hellish - looking back I see that they were heavenly in that I experienced the special and real presence of Jesus like never before.

As the Apostle Peter said in John 6:68, *“Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words that give eternal life. We believe them, and we know that you are the Holy One of God.”* Amen! to that.

Jesus is Immanuel, (God with us), he is the Word (the eternal expression of God), who became flesh. As O.S. Hawkins said, "He came where we are so we could go eternally where he is. He came to give us what we never deserved and not to give us what we did deserve."

"JUST GIVE ME JESUS"

"YOU HAVE EVERYTHING WHEN YOU HAVE CHRIST"

COLOSSIANS 2:10, LB

REFLECT

If Jesus came to your house to live with you, what would you do? Are there any changes you would make? If any, what would those changes look like? (Actually, he lives in your house because as he promised, he lives inside of you as a believer in him. Just think of it, you take Jesus with you everywhere you go!)

DISCUSS

What reaction did you have as you read and pondered that Jesus is "Immanuel, God with us?" Why did you have this reaction?

Are you experiencing Jesus' promise to give you a "more and better life, than you ever dreamed of." (John 10:10, LB) How?

PRAY

O Jesus, blessed Redeemer called Immanuel (God with me), My heart bows in worship to you for all you did to give me a life better than I could have ever dreamed of. I truly have everything when I have you. Forgive me for the times in my life when I tend to forget that. Thank you for reminding me that you are "God with us." Thank you that you are a God who never leaves or forsakes us. On this Christmas day, I surrender all to you. Take my hand and lead me in the path of righteousness. Let me not go astray but always follow you as the Shepherd of my life. I love you Jesus. In your name, I pray, Amen.

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME!

BIO

Ron Graff is retired but still very active as an Associate Pastor at Nova Community Church in Torrance, CA. He is also a retired police chaplain after 33 years of service. Among other family members, he has also had the joy of officiating the weddings of grandchildren, and baptizing grandkids and great grandkids. He loves spending time with his wife Millie, family gatherings and going out to eat; especially Mexican food. He is also an avid sports fan.

Thanks for reading!

Merry Christmas!