



INCARNATION
ADVENT BOOKLET

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ADVENT 2020 | incarnation

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THE PURPOSE OF ADVENT

The word **advent** means *coming* or *arrival*. At the time of Jesus birth, the Jewish people were waiting with anticipation for the Messiah. And they had been waiting a long time. Through years of exile and captivity, they had held tightly to the promise of the one who would come to establish God's kingdom forever. The coming of the Messiah was an event that was defined by excitement. For many of us, Christmas has lost that sense of joy. The overwhelming anticipation for the Savior has been replaced with the stress of making last minute purchases, the preparations for awkward family interaction, and this year, the worry of what is even going to happen. Even if we reflect on Jesus, it is too often nothing more than recognition of an event that happened 2000 years ago. But this was not just some event; this was the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Jesus was coming to earth to establish Himself as the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.

That established kingdom is what we live in. Christ rules on His throne. So as we think of the Christmas season, we remember how Jesus came to earth, and we anticipate with joy that He is coming again. We reflect on the incarnation (which means *taking on flesh*), remembering that God chose to come down to earth. The Creator came down to be with a creation that had rejected Him. And He came not with the sword of justice (that is how He will return), but wearing the clothes of humility and grace. He came to reunite His adopted sons and daughters to Himself. He came to bring us salvation.

Advent is about the anticipation of Jesus coming (**HOPE**). It is about marveling at the way that He came, and what He came to do (**LOVE**). It is about remembering what part we play in this story, as the sinners that made His death necessary. It is about preparing our hearts for His coming (**PEACE**). More than anything else, it is about celebrating how great our God is (**JOY**).

HOW TO LEAD YOUR FAMILY IN WORSHIP

This book is put together to help you establish a tradition of celebrating advent as a family. To get the most out of this, you must be willing to take the time and make the effort. No spiritual discipline comes naturally, and there is a good chance that the first time you sit down to do family devotions it will be awkward, difficult, and maybe even a bit painful. But it will also be beneficial. Here is how to lead your family in advent:

1. Come to church every Sunday of advent (or participate online). The sermon series will go along with this booklet and will help encourage the conversation.
2. Candles are optional, but the tradition of lighting a separate candle for each week of advent (hope, love, peace, joy) as well as a large pillar candle on Christmas Day (Christ candle) can help the children to understand the different aspects of advent.
3. Carve out a time to sit together as a family, and stick to it. In our busy schedules, we must fight for this time.
4. This booklet provides 2 different means of celebrating advent.
 - a. There are daily readings that allow you to walk through the anticipation of Scripture (this can be done as a family devotional time or personal reflection).
 - b. There is also a weekly reading with kid's story*(including Christmas Eve and Christmas morning). This is intended to done as a family worship time with singing and prayer. The weekly reflections are placed in the readings at the beginning of each week.

* The Kid's story is reprinted from the book: *The Lightlings* by RC Sproul and can be purchased (the artwork is fantastic) as a helpful aid.

Hope

A LIGHT bright enough to shine back

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. | John 1.1-3

In order to experience the anticipation of Jesus coming, we need to find our HOPE firmly rooted in what this world was created to be, and the perfection it is returning to. To do this, we go back to the beginning, to look at how God prepared a world bathed in light for us to enjoy. He gave us creation as a picture of His goodness. As we prepare for the light to enter into the world, we look to the world around us as a picture of our God?

Take a moment to think about the created universe. Notice its complexities. What does this beauty and order tell us about God?

KID'S STORY |

Once upon a time, there was a great King, who was the King of Light. He lived in the light. He made the light, and His light was so perfect and so pure that He was called 'the King without a shadow.' This great King of Light made a group of people, and He made them so that they could shine brightly, just as He did. He called them His little lightlings. He set the lightlings in a beautiful garden that He prepared for them – a garden that was full of bright sunshine. The sun bathed the garden every day and helped the flowers, plants, and fruits grow in great abundance. The bright light of the sun helped keep everyone warm in the garden. The lightlings loved it when the king came to visit them at the end of each day.

SONG | Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence

DECEMBER 1 | GOD CREATES OUT OF NOTHING

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Hebrews 11.3

Human beings have the instinctive ability to be creative. You create by replicating the example set by the Creator. The difference is that you create out of something; He creates out of nothing. You are subject to the properties of your medium, while He spoke into existence the method, system, and structure by which all things exist.

Accepting that God created all things out of nothing leads to three conclusions:

First, it means that He is separate from the created universe. All things are from Him.

Second, it means that all things are defined fully by Him. All things are through Him.

Third, it means that all things point to the creator. All things are to Him.

All of the things that you can see are created. This means that your truth is defined by things that have just a small part of God's fullness in them. You take your short life, narrow view, and small scope to characterize (and sometimes judge) the world that God made. You must not allow your limited experiences and knowledge to define the creation. God's creation exists to reveal His goodness and to bring Him glory. This includes you.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11.36

DECEMBER 2 | GOD CREATES PERFECTLY

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. 1

Timothy 4.4-5

God created the whole world. When He created it, He did not create good things and bad things. He did not create things to be used and things to be avoided. He did not create anything useless. He created perfectly. Everything that He made served its purpose and served it well.

Things are not perfect anymore. Sin corrupted everything when it entered the world. But this does not mean that there is no good left. The good in the world stems from the good that God instilled in the beginning. Our God is good, and the good in the world still reflects His glory. Things did not go from being completely good to completely evil. Instead, all things have been skewed; tainted with sin. This means that all things bear fingerprints of the Creator as well as the impact of sin.

Your job as a Christian is to seek out the good that is in the world; to receive with joy, those things that God created for your joy. You are to approach the world as a miner panning for gold, sifting through the debris to find the glimpses of God that shine through and point you to His greatness.

DECEMBER 3 | GOD CREATES ORDER

*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew. **Proverbs 3.19-20***

There has been a tendency for Christianity and Science to be at odds with each other. At times throughout history, the church has made the mistake of demonizing scientific discovery. Instead, as the scientific community reveals a breakthrough in the order of the universe, they are adding depth to the wonder of God. They are revealing a new layer to the care and concern that God has for His creation.

God did not create the world in chaos. He created a beautiful and complex system that we continue to explore and be in awe of. The world works because He created it to work. The reason that scientists have not figured it all out is because He created it amazingly complex, and the only reason that they can continue to go deeper is because of its order. Rather than fighting against the scientific system, Christians should be worshipping the God who created it.

When the medical community discovers a new aspect of the human body, you should thank God. Not only for creating the system, but for designing the human brain to understand and comprehend what it is seeing. God has created how you experience Him, and you can only know Him as He chooses to reveal Himself. He is in control of all things, even the way that you see Him.

DECEMBER 4 | GOD CREATES FOR A PURPOSE

*Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.*

Revelation 4:11

What is the purpose of life? This question has perplexed philosophers, dignitaries, and bums alike. It is the question that underlies each and every day of human life. Why am I here? How do I find meaning in my existence?

The answers that have been given are less than satisfactory. They are frustrating because they ultimately terminate back on you. Go do this and you will find fulfillment. Get this and you will be complete. Accomplish these things and you will feel successful. You can create the purpose for your life. The problem is: you can't do it. No matter how much you do, get, or accomplish, you will always be left with a desire for more. You will be left with a feeling that you just need one more conquest, asset, or task crossed off the list, to ultimately justify your existence.

But God does not ask us to prove ourselves. He did not put us on earth with the goal of figuring out why we are here. He did not put us here so that we could find our own personal reality. It is BY His will that all things exist, and it is FOR His will that all things happen. The fact that you exist as the person that you are in the place that you are is because He has made it so. Your life is not a mistake or empty vessel that you somehow need to fix or fill with importance.

Your life has a very specific purpose: to give glory and honor and power back to our God, who is worthy of all praise.

DECEMBER 5 | YOU ARE CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1.26-27

You are not a cosmic accident. When God created the world, He made everything perfect. He made everything with a purpose. All things were made by Him, for His glory, and ultimately to reflect sovereign control. But when God came to His final creation, He proclaimed that it was different from the rest. This was not just something that revealed His control; it was a creation that revealed His image.

God's image is found in every human being. It is found specifically in the substance of humanity. People are like God because they can reason, love, and worship. They are like God in their essence.

God's image is also found in the relational aspect of human beings. God is triune, meaning He is three persons in one God. The trinity represents the perfect relationship, three parts coexisting as one. Humans are also given this ability to become one (though in a different form than God) in spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship.

God's image is found is also found in dominion. God placed people as the ruling class of this earth. Humans are responsible to rule and care for the earth in a way similar to how God does.

What does all of this mean for you? Your value is not in your hands. You have value because God gives it to you. But this value does not exist to be hidden. You are created in the image of God so that you can image Him. Your life is to be one of proclaiming God's glory through the essence of who you are (as a new creation in Christ), through relationship (loving because Christ has loved you), and through dominion (being a steward of the wonderful blessings that God has given us).

DECEMBER 6 | YOU WERE CREATED GOOD

See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Ecclesiastes 7.29

As we have seen, God created the whole world perfectly. This means that in its original design the world was formed in perfection, but also operated in perfection. In the words of God, *it was good*.

In this we see that all of creation was good, but more specifically, human beings were good. The human race (both of them) knew nothing of sin. They were protected from every negative impact of sin by God. *God made man upright*.

This did not last. In your life, you have a much more complete understanding of evil than you do of good. Your natural tendency is to *seek out many schemes*, rather than to draw near to God as your ultimate fulfillment. But the reality is that the many schemes that you seek will not bring you back to good. The good that God created you as is only attainable through the work of Jesus Christ. He is our new standard of good: defined by His perfect life and perfect sacrifice in perfect submission to the Father.

You are not good, but this is not because God did not create you good. It is because you, like the first man and woman, have chosen to follow your own idea of good rather than God's way. You have decided that you can discover good without Him. But you never will. Instead, God calls you to stop scheming and submit to Him. Stop trying to be good and come to Him, because He is the only good you will ever know, and the only way you will ever know good.

Peace

A LIGHT bright enough to outshine darkness

[4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. [5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. | John 1.4-5

In order to experience the anticipation of Jesus coming, we have to know the PEACE that comes from being rescued. It is too easy to get used to the darkness; to assume there is no other way. When this happens we run from God as we pursue our own answers to the difficulty of life. Knowing why we are in darkness helps us to see that this is not inevitable. Knowing we have a God who is more powerful, allows us to see another way. As we prepare for the light to enter into the world, we look at our sin as the reason He had to come?

Think about the many areas in your life where you are acting against God. Do they make sense? Why do you do them?

KID'S STORY |

But one day something terrible happened. The lightlings decided to do what they wanted instead of what their King commanded them to do. So they disobeyed the King and sinned against Him. The very moment they sinned, their lights became dim and they were filled with shame and great embarrassment. They ran as fast as they could to get away from the King. They didn't want the King of Lights to see them. They ran out of the garden and into the woods, and hid themselves in the darkest place they could find. From then on, they were afraid of the light, because they knew that where the light was, the King would see them in their shame.

SONG | Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

DECEMBER 7 | YOU WERE CREATED TO BE IN COMMUNION WITH GOD

*For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. **2 Corinthians 5.1-5***

In Genesis, God created humanity to exist in communion with Him. We see Him walking in the garden and talking with Adam and Eve. He created a system in which people would exist in community with Himself.

In Revelation, we see the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth. The central theme is that God's people will once again be with God in proper relationship, with Him as God and His people as happily submitting disciples. *Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God (Rev. 21.3).*

You do not live in the Garden of Eden, and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (**Rev. 19**) is not ready to serve, so what are you supposed to do? The Bible reveals to us a God who is always making new ways for His people to dwell with Him. From the Tabernacle in the desert and the temple in Jerusalem, to the point in time when God came to earth and actually dwelled in the midst of His people. The communion of God through Jesus Christ is what allows you to have fellowship with God. Through the work of Jesus, you have reconciliation with God and are able to return to the relationship that you were created for.

All of the pain, struggle, and difficulty of your life is wrapped up in the fact that you desperately need God. You need His gracious presence in your life. He has done the work to bring Himself to you, now you must seek Him with the urgency that this longing merits. Cast off all of the temporary, fading aspects of this life to unapologetically pursue the life that God has prepared for you.

DECEMBER 8 | YOU WERE CREATED TO BRING GLORY TO GOD

*Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.*

Isaiah 43.6-7

The most frequent description that people give for their lives is 'busy.' Looking at a calendar is enough to overwhelm. Life becomes about balancing the many things that are going on. God becomes one more thing on the schedule: an hour on Sunday, with a few scattered blocks throughout the week. In this, God becomes one of the many things that you worship; one of the many things that you give glory to.

But your life is entirely for one thing! You were *created for [God's] glory*. It is why you were *formed and made*. This glory comes through becoming more and more overwhelmed with who God is. Your awe of God is built by being continually in communion with Him and with other Christians.

You commune with God by reading the Bible. God has brought Himself to you by putting His grandeur into words. He speaks to you in a way that you can comprehend (though incompletely) how wonderful He is.

You commune with God in prayer. Prayer is not just telling God what you would like Him to provide for you or how you would like Him to use His control over creation to do the things you want. Instead, prayer is the acknowledgement that He alone can and will direct reality. When you pray, you are submitting yourself to the truth that He is God.

You commune with others to be reminded that God is working in and through *everyone who is called by [His] name*. In others, you are reminded that God is working in ALL things. It is with others that you can explore how ALL parts of your life can be reoriented for God's glory.

This is the life you were created for. A life that begins with Jesus and views ALL things through the lens of God's glory. *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10.31).*

DECEMBER 9 | SIN BREAKS THE COVENANT WITH A HOLY GOD

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Genesis 2.17

When God had finished creating the world, the first thing he did is made a covenant with the people He had created. This covenant had enormous benefit and just one stipulation. Adam and Eve were to live in the garden and enjoy the multitude of blessings contained within. The one command was: do not eat the fruit from one tree.

But they ate. When Eve took the fruit and gave some to her husband, they had done much more than make a mistake. They had not just done something that God had asked them kindly not to. Adam and Eve had broken the covenant. They had brought sin into a relationship that previously had been free from sin. In doing the one thing that God had told them was forbidden, they had severed the possibility of remaining in the presence of a God who cannot be in the company of sin.

Sin is more than just doing bad things. When you view sin as nothing more than a blunder that you stumble into, than it is difficult to understand why you need a savior. If sin is something that has been thrust upon you by your parent's mistakes, the difficult neighborhood you were raised in, or culture's need to produce video games and movies of questionable content, then all you need to do is unlearn, move away, or avoid. If this is all that sin is, then you can take the steps to make yourself right.

But sin is an offensive rejection of the deal that God made with us, so only He can make it right. Sin is the conscious breaking of God's covenant. It is the denial of God's plan for the world, and thus a dismissal of God Himself. When you sin, you snub a God who offered everything (including HIMSELF) but one tree, because you think that you are better off with the 'freedom' of your own plan.

DECEMBER 10 | SIN BRINGS THE PENALTY OF DEATH

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6.23

Sin not only deserves punishment, but it earns a very specific penalty. Even if you grasp the fact that you are a sinner, and that your sins needs to be addressed, you probably do not think of your verdict as death. Why? Because death is a harsh response. It is a result reserved for the scum of society. Death is a final, irreversible, absolute sentence that has eternal implications. You can't come back from death. You don't work your way out of death. There is no second chance.

There is something completely unsettling about this. It means that either God is entirely unfair in His reaction to sin (which is impossible because He is just), or that your reaction to sin is incomplete. That you view sin as something less than what it is. That you believe that your sin is not really that bad. It means that your view of sin is different than God's, since He is the one who attached the penalty to the crime.

If sin, any bit of sin, earns a punishment as severe as death, then sin is more offensive than you think of it. Sin is enough to earn for you eternity separated from God. And if sin is that bad, then you as a sinner are equally tainted. You are not a good person. You are the worst person you can imagine: rapist, child molester, murderer...whatever it is that you think deserves death; that is you.

This is not to drive you into deep despair, but to help you to recognize the depth of grace. If the free gift is eternal life, imagine what had to be done in order for this gift to be offered. It is a free gift to you, but the debt still had to be paid.

DECEMBER 11 | SIN CONDEMNS ALL PEOPLE

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 3.23

The Bible tells us that all people have chosen to act out of their own desire. All people have decided that serving their own ends is a better choice than pursuing the glory of God.

I'd rather rule in hell than be a servant in heaven. This is a quote that I read some time ago that sums up the heart of EVERY human being. While it is easy to sit back and cry, *not me*, the reality is that each and every day you make this choice. Maybe not in hell specifically, but you desire to rule in this broken world rather than serve the God who made it. You believe that you are justified in pursuing your own glory above God's.

There is no distinction: there are no good people. God does not look down from heaven and see anyone using their life to bring Him the glory that He deserves. Adam was a worthy representative of human beings, because each and every human being since Him has made the same decision that he did. Adam may have been the first, but He was by no means the last to choose himself over God.

But you have hope, because thought God did not see anything worth saving, He chose to act on your behalf. Not because of you, but because of Himself. Jesus did not fall short of the glory of God. And it is because of His willing sacrifice that you are able to come back to Him.

DECEMBER 12 | SIN SEPARATES YOU FROM THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

2 Thessalonians 1.9

Sin has a relational affect. The results of sin are not all to be experienced in the future. You are, right now, reaping the result of sin in the world.

When Adam and Eve sinned, things changed. They not only were opened up to physical and spiritual death, but they were also kicked out of the garden. They could no longer be in the beautiful home that God had made for them. They could no longer be with God. The relationship of man and God was separated by their sin. It doesn't just make relationship with God difficult, it makes it impossible.

As we have seen, God is holy. This means that he is entirely separate from sin. As a sinner, this means that he is separate from you. You can do nothing to make yourself righteous. You can not become holy. As a matter of fact, each and every day we get further away from a clean slate on our own merit.

As we have also seen, you desire relationship with God; it is what you were created for. So that which you desire and need more than anything in the world is impossible for you to ever reach out and attain on your own. This would be reason for despair if God did not choose to intervene. This would be the worst possible news if it were not for the gospel.

DECEMBER 13 | SIN POLLUTES EVERY ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Romans 8.22-23

Your life is not only full of 'sins,' it is full of sin. It is easy to reduce the sin in your life down to the things that you do, but doing this takes away the reality of sin's effect. Sin permeates every part of your life, making even the good things bad.

If you reduce your problem to 'sins,' than all you have to do is overcome the things that you do. It is just a matter of reorganizing your priorities, creating new habits, and trying harder. 'Sins' can be overcome. Sin is something else entirely.

To illustrate this I would like you to imagine a room that contains a trophy for each of your sins. There might be that big one that you struggle with on a daily basis, the one that that you have struggled with forever, and a trophy for that one that you used to be bound to, but now just creeps up every once in a while. These trophies have their own little alcove and backlighting and are the things that you think of when people mention sin. They are visible to you. They are the sins that that you hope desperately to overcome. The error is when you believe that these are the only trophies in the room. Because if the lights in the room are brought up, you will see that it is filled from floor to ceiling with every manner of trophy, big and small. You will find that the sins in front of you and obvious to your perception are just the tip of the iceberg. You will find in time that no matter how many of these sins you defeat, there is another stack to take their place.

This is the recognition of total depravity: that every part of our life is experiencing the brokenness of sin. That everything, even the earth under our feet has been tainted from its original glory. We will only experience the restoration of these things when we stand before Jesus in glory. Until then, *we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly* and fight for the glory of He who has made possible *the redemption of our bodies.*

Love

A LIGHT bright enough to provide warmth

[9] The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. [10] He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. [12] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, [13] who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. | John 1.9-13

In order to experience the anticipation of Jesus coming, we have to know the LOVE He has for us. Without the love of God, the things that we go through in this life are unbearable: they have no purpose and they are out of God's control. His love shows us that all that is happening is for redemption; all things work together for good. As we prepare for the light to enter into the world, we look at our how His love is revealed through Jesus.

Think about how God chose to show His love. What, to you, is the most overwhelming aspect of God's love?

KID'S STORY |

After the lightlings left, the King began to remove His light from the garden. It soon became cold and covered with weeds, thorns, and sticky briars. The lightlings moved further and further into the woods, until they lived in a place that was almost completely covered in darkness. It was so dark, they had to grope around as if they were blind, feeling their way through the forest. Often they would trip and fall, scuffing their knees and bruising themselves. It was awful living in the dreadful darkness all the time, where the only light they ever saw was in barely lit shadows that danced in the forest. In fact, they couldn't tell the difference anymore between night and day.

SONG | O Come, O Come Emmanuel

DECEMBER 14 | SIN PREVENTS YOU FROM BEING WHO YOU ARE

*His divine power has granted to us **all things that pertain to life and godliness**, through the **knowledge of him** who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become **partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they **keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.** 2 Peter 1.3-9*

Sin not only separates us from the presence of God, but it also separates us from the truth of God. The creator God, made this world, and us to live in a specific way in relation to one another. When sin came into the world, we not only lost the ability to fulfill this relationship, but we also skewed what the original goal was.

What this has led to is a constant reinvention of right/wrong. A foundation of shifting sands, constantly in search for what it is that you are supposed to be. Lost and misguided, you are like a boat in a storm, with no ability to steer, and no idea where to go if you could. This is how the Bible describes you: *children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4.14).*

Sin has damaged your ability to discern what you are supposed to be. It has replaced God's original design with cheap counterfeits and unfulfilling pleasures. But God does not leave us in this hopeless state, He grants us *all things that pertain to life and godliness*, which comes in the *knowledge of Him*, and allows us to *become partakers of the divine nature*. Through Jesus, you were reintroduced to the truth of God, which keeps you *from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

DECEMBER 15 | JESUS REDEEMS YOU ACCORDING TO HIS PLAN

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Ephesians 1.7-10

The world is full of variables. There are a multitude of outside forces that have an affect on the way that your life plays out: other drivers on the road, a worldwide pandemic, or even politicians. This multitude of parts in flux can lead you to believe that it is all chaos; that there is no plan.

This is true in your physical life, but it is just as true in your faith. There are so many conversations, experiences, and perspectives that lead you to believe what you do. It would be easy to put the weight of faith on these things. To trust that faith comes from seeing, experiencing, and reason.

The Bible claims otherwise. God tells us that the *riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us, in ALL wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of His will*. In other words, the faith by which we are redeemed is given to us by God. And this is the great mystery: Jesus Christ lived the perfect life and died in our place in order *to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*.

Redemption, the great trade of our life for His (our sin for His atoning sacrifice), is not IN ANY WAY dependent on us. If this is true, then Jesus did not redeem us to help us write our story. Instead, we are part of His story; a piece of His purpose and plan. Salvation has more to do with His glory than it does with our happiness.

Yet...God created a plan that would bring us great benefit. In His love, He made a system that would be our ultimate joy, so that it would continually humble and amaze us with His greatness.

DECEMBER 16 | JESUS HUMBLING HIMSELF ON YOUR BEHALF

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. **Philippians 2.5-8***

There are a million little promises that you make with yourself. Promises that control your actions and determine your steps. One of the common ones is: I will not allow myself to be humiliated. When you make this promise, it means that everything you do will be driven by your desire not to look like a fool. Your decisions become a defense against anybody or anything that will cause you shame.

Jesus did the exact opposite. Rather than fighting against and hiding from humiliation, He embraced it. Knowing that He would be marginalized, ignored, and poor, He came to earth in the form of a human being, and one with *no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him (Isaiah 53.2)*. He then went further and *humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*. He could have stayed in heaven. That is what He rightfully deserved. But He chose not to hold on to what He was entitled to. He chose instead to empty Himself and be humiliated. He chose to die.

As you fight for your rights, Jesus gave up everything that was rightfully His. As you worry about your reputation, Jesus allowed Himself to be humiliated (you could even say humiliated Himself). As you care about yourself above all, *God so loved the world that He gave His only Son (John 3.16)*.

DECEMBER 17 | JESUS ACTS OUT OF HIS LOVE

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4.9-10

The best friends that any person has in this world are the people who are there when you need them; something happens and you need a person on the other end of the phone, or a person to share a cup of coffee with, or a shoulder to cry on. It is comforting and wonderful to have these people in your life. These people are friends because they love you as you are and give you the love that you want from them.

Like a good friend, God is always there ready to talk to you when you come to Him. But the much more amazing aspect of God's love is that He did not wait for you to make the call, and He doesn't just love us as you are. God doesn't love you because He cares about your friendship or because He thinks that you are a really great person. God loves you because He is love. God's love is not a response to anything, it originates from Him and makes itself manifest so that you can know what love is.

Jesus makes the love of God visible to you. In Jesus, you can see how God pursued you, even as you sinned against Him. You can see how Jesus sacrificed for people who were unwilling to sacrifice their own glory for His. You can see how Jesus redeemed and forgave people as they beat, mocked, spit at, and eventually killed Him. He did all of this, not because any of us are worth saving, but because we have a loving God.

Although Jesus love is not because of you, it is aimed at you. Though you are not worthy of His love, you are the recipient. This is why God's plan of redemption is so exciting: you get to benefit from God being awesome!

DECEMBER 18 | JESUS CALLS YOU OUT OF YOUR SIN

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2.4-6

It has been said, 'everything in life is a process.' If you have ever tried to give up a habit, be it smoking or biting your nails, you know this to be true. You cannot just decide to be better and then be fixed. Cold turkey turns to relapse in a short time. Nothing good comes without your hard work.

Except one thing. Redemption is not a process. It happens the moment that God chooses to rip out your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. In one moment, you are dead in your sin; your life has no hope. In the next moment you have been made alive together with Christ. You have been raised up in order to share in His glory.

There are plenty of people that will give you a list of things that you need to do to be a Christian. Or a process to walk through. Or a system to ascribe to. This reinforces the idea that you need to make yourself right before you can come to God. But God does not want you to come to Him in your worthiness, listing out all the reasons why He should accept you. God accepts you because He is *rich in mercy*. It is by His *grace you have been saved*. Rather than listing your accomplishments, you must come to Jesus wearing your sin on your sleeve, crying out, *be merciful to me, a sinner!* (**Luke 18.13**)

Seeing the saving grace of Jesus will transform you. There is a process to be done, but it happens because you have been redeemed, not so that you can be. You are a sinner. And you have been saved by grace.

DECEMBER 19 | JESUS SETS YOU FREE

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8.2-4

The differing ideologies of the people who founded America can be summed up in one word: FREEDOM. For some this meant political freedom, for others religious freedom, and for some a chance to start new, unhindered from their past. And yet for all of the freedom, most people still feel trapped, unable to achieve a greater sense of liberty. You seek freedom, but you feel burdened.

Every person is under the weight of bondage. This bondage comes from the weight of sin which presses down and traps us. While doing whatever you want seemed like it would bring a sense of freedom, it is instead accompanied by an overwhelming sense of darkness. This 'freedom' to sin has brought with it the penalty of death.

Sin is bondage. But Jesus Christ frees you from that bondage. Not by just pretending that sin does not exist, but by paying the penalty that you had earned. Your freedom has been purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ.

You now are free from the burden of shame, but much more than that, you are free to live as God created you to be. You are now able to freely live for Jesus, a life of worship and praise. Freedom does not mean that you live unhindered, but that you live as a slave of righteousness, able to finally find the freedom that exists only in relationship with God.

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. **Romans 6.17-18**

DECEMBER 20 | JESUS RECONCILES YOU TO THE FATHER

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1.3-6

Sin has separated us from God. It has made it impossible for us to have a relationship with God. It has made us enemies of Him. Hostile created beings who seek their own glory at the expense of His. We were hopeless.

So God sent us hope in the person of Jesus Christ. As we have seen, our sin has created a separation that we can in no way rectify. As much as we desire it, as much as we work for it, reconciliation is outside of our ability. God knows this, and in His love, set forth a plan for reconciliation.

As a Holy God, this meant not only forgiving the legal debt, but also blanketing us in purity. In order to be His, we had to be blameless and pure. **WE ARE MADE HOLY AND BLAMELESS BEFORE HIM.** This means all of the shame and guilt that we carry around with us will be gone. And it has to be gone, because holy is the only way that we survive the all-consuming presence of God. So how are we made pure?

We are washed in the blood of Jesus Christ (**Revelation 7.4**), clothed in white garments (**3.5**), and glorified (**Romans 8.30**). Jesus gives us His glory so that we may experience the greatest glory: living in the presence of Him. Our ultimate joy is found in bringing glory to God. While we may not see this as the greatest source of our enjoyment now, it is because we have not been witness to the fullness of His glory.

But one day soon, because of His work, we will experience Him fully, and our perspective of joy will be transformed. *For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then **face to face**. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.* **1 Corinthians 13.12**

Joy

A LIGHT bright enough to shine today

[14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. [15] (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") [16] For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. [17] For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. [18] No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. |
John 1.14-18

In order to experience the anticipation of Jesus coming, we have to be excited for Him to come. It is easy for us to get excited about the temporary things that are right in front of us; things that are easy to get and that offer an immediate gratification. In Jesus, we get the gift of eternal satisfaction. It is no longer about finding the next searching out the next moment of happiness, but exploring the depth of what we already have been given. As we prepare for the light to enter into the world, we look at the gift that was given to us.

How do you find joy in Jesus? What are some ways that you are neglecting?

KID'S STORY |

The one night, or perhaps it was day, far off in the distance they saw a blinding light shining through the trees. They could see the light coming from miles and miles away. They were frightened by it. They thought the light meant that the King was coming to punish them for their sins. So most of the lightlings began to stumble quickly away from the light. But some of the lightling children were so amazed by the light and curious about it that they decided to see from where it was coming. They set off and traveled for miles and miles. It took them a long time, but as they moved, they saw the light shining brighter and brighter.

SONG | Hark the Herald Angels Sing

DECEMBER 21 | JESUS GIVES YOU A NEW IDENTITY

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. **1 Peter 2.9-10**

You care what other people think about you. Maybe it isn't your biggest concern, and maybe other people care more than you do, but if you are honest with yourself, you would have to admit that your identity matters. It isn't only important what others think of you, but also what you think of yourself. Self-esteem, peer recognition, and respect drive everything from how you make decisions to what kind of food that you eat. You are a slave to the task of defining yourself.

Jesus frees you from the bondage of your own importance. He takes the weight of your sin off of your shoulders, but He also removes the responsibility of making something of yourself: you no longer have to show the world that you are worthy; you no longer have to accomplish the things on your to-do list; you no longer need the approval of those around you. He has made you a new person.

The gospel not only shows you that you are saved by grace alone, but through that grace it releases you from your struggle with insignificance. You don't need to achieve anything; it has been given to you:

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

You have a new identity. You are now a child of God. When you do wonderful things, you are a child of God. When you fail miserably, you are a child of God. When people dislike you, you are a child of God. When people tell you how great you are, you are a child of God. There is nothing that balances your life more completely than the truth that Jesus has loved you because of who He is, and will keep on loving you because of who He is.

DECEMBER 22 | JESUS GIVES YOU A NEW PURPOSE

How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Hebrews 9.14

Jesus does not give you a new identity so that you can take joy in your salvation as you sit and get spiritually fat. Jesus has saved you to a new mission. Your new mission is *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12.1).*

While you were dead, you attempted to do works to gain favor. Now that Christ has made you alive, your works can actually have power. In your former life, your works were done to honor yourself, but now, because of the grace of Jesus, those same works have been purified. As your life was won back to God, your actions have also been reconciled to Him.

Jesus has done the work of redeeming you; He has given you a new identity, and now He gives meaning to the life that you live. This is the answer to philosophies greatest question: what is the meaning of life? It has now been made clear: it is to live lives that glorify God. You can now do the works of God, follow His law, serve others, love, and it is actually pleasing to God!

The presence of the Holy Spirit in your heart changes your motivation to do good, AND the Bible says, changes the nature of your work itself. The work you now do is God's work. Your entire life has been transformed from dead end, task-oriented, temporary duty into joy-filled, rewarding, eternal worship. It may not always feel that way, but it has been redeemed, along with your life, for the glory of God.

*For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, **the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.** Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory. 2 Corinthians 3.9-11*

DECEMBER 23 | WORSHIP BY DELIGHTING IN HIS WAYS

Delight yourself in the Lord,

and he will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37.4

David, the man after God's own heart (**Acts 13.22**), is continually talking about his delight in the Lord. To him, God is not a dictator laying out the rules or a weak god without the power to care what you do, He is a father loving (**Psalm 68.5**); He is a shepherd leading (**Psalm 23**); He is a fortress protecting (**Psalm 18.2**). God is David's all. This is not to say that David held on to this truth all of the time (see **2 Samuel 11**), but his life consistently reveals a joy in the Lord. This delight is not a pipe dream or something that can only be had by Old Testament saints and professional clergyman. YOU can find your truest delight in the God of the Bible. How?

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act (37.5).

You can delight in the Lord by delighting in the Lord. I am not attempting to be coy or mystifying, but the truth is, your delight is, at least in part, controlled by your own will. You choose to like one sports team over another. Your musical choices are made because you like one kind of music better than another. You also have the ability, then, to search out the beauty of the sovereign God of the universe and replace your idolatry of this world with Him. YOU can find delight in Jesus Christ.

When you do, God will give you the desires of your heart. As your desires become for God, you will see how your whole life has always been in the care and concern of the Almighty. You will receive exactly what you desire: Him. You will recognize His constant grace in your life when you seek Him. When you do, your life will open up to the reality that He has been there the whole time. He has been loving you like a Father, even as you refused to be a son. He has been leading you as a shepherd, even as you walked into ditches like a dumb sheep. He has been protecting you, even as you throw yourself headlong into trouble. God is delightful; turn your heart toward His grace.

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.

Psalm 37.23-24

Christmas Eve

The LIGHT of the world has come

[1] In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. [6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. | Luke 2.1-7

Talk about Jesus' incarnation. What strikes you as the most amazing part of 'God made flesh?'

KID'S STORY |

Finally, they came to a clearing in the forest. In the middle of the clearing, they saw a father lightling, a mother lightling, and a baby who was shining like the sun. The blazing light seemed to be coming right out of the baby Himself. The lightlings who saw it were shocked and surprised. They asked the father lightling, 'Who is this baby? Where did He come from?' The father answered, 'He is not my son. He is the son of the King of Light. The King has given Him to us a special gift. He has been born for us. When He grows up, He will be called the Light of the World. There will be no darkness strong enough to hide His light, no darkness deep enough to send His light away.' When they heard this, the lightling children knelt down at the baby's feet and began to worship Him in fear and reverence.

When the children stood up again, their own faces were shining. But the light that was shining in their faces was not coming from inside them; it was a reflection of the light coming out of the baby. The lightlings were now surrounded with the light of the child they had visited.

SONG | Silent Night

God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen

DECEMBER 24 | WORSHIP BY BEING THANKFUL

I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. Ecclesiastes 3.9-

13

If there was a word that could sum up the current generation it would be: DISCONTENTMENT. No matter how great things are, no matter how much you have, or how clearly God has worked in your life, there is still that desire for more. That there has to be something else; this can not be IT.

The spirit of discontentment comes from the belief that there is something out there that will satisfy you. Something that once owned, consumed, or experienced will replace this longing with accomplishment. But there is only one thing in the world that can produce such finality, and if you are a Christian you already have it. It is God standing up and declaring that you are HIS!

Once you have this, then everything else becomes enough: your possessions are enough, your position is enough, your prestige is enough, because ALL OF IT pales in comparison with the eternity that you have been given through Jesus Christ. The treasure that you have inherited by grace, is more than this earth could ever provide you with. You do not need more, you need a better view of what you already have.

In this new view, what you have becomes a testament to God's goodness. You deserve nothing, yet get to feast on great food. You should be suffering the results of your sin, but you get to go home to your family. Your work should bring you nothing but pain, but God allows it to provide you with satisfaction (to an extent). What you have been given is not a springboard for your future betterment. Your life right now is a gift from God to proclaim how wonderful He is. Be thankful and recognize that you have been given more than you can imagine.

Christmas

The Gift of LIGHT

[8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. [10] And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*[14]"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" | Luke 2.8-14*

How has your life been altered by this moment? How has the Light of the World brought peace to your life?

KID'S STORY |

They rushed back to their homes, their friends, and their families as fast as their feet could carry them. When they got home, they were still shining. The other lightlings were frightened at the sight of them. They asked, 'What happened to you?' so the children told their story. 'We saw a baby who was shining with light. He is the son of the King of Light. The King has given us a child. He has given us His own son to be the Light of the World.'

The lightlings noticed that already there was more light in the forest. Now they could begin to see where they were going. They could walk without falling. They could run and play without bumping into trees and rocks a getting bruised. Some still hid from the light, but others realized that they didn't need to be afraid anymore. They saw that living in light was much better than the darkness they were used to.

SONG | Angels we have Heard on High

DECEMBER 25 | WORSHIP BY WONDERING

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. Luke 2.18-19

The gift of Jesus is the gift that keeps giving. We are used to presents that are given in fullness, only to break and decay over time. We are used to things that present their best, and then reveal themselves to be less. The mysterious beauty of the incarnation does the opposite. In Jesus we are given a living God. In faith, we are gifted something that is not meant to stay static. Instead, what we get in Jesus is an endless treasure.

We access this treasure by wondering. We have heard the Christmas story so many times that we have lost some of our child-like sense of excitement. The truth of God coming to dwell with His people is not something that can lose luster. Instead, it is a truth that can be applied and reapplied to all of life's situations and experiences. Our HOPE is established and unmovable the more we know Jesus' promises. Our PEACE in a broken world is given confidence as we see Jesus power. Our LOVE becomes rooted into our identity the more we know how we have been loved by Jesus. Our JOY can be eternal rather than temporary as we get to know He who will reign over the New Heaven and the New Earth. In all of this, Christmas is not a destination as much as the guide. It is the moment that allows other moments to make sense.

Our part in this is to seek this sense; to wonder toward understanding. Pastor James Boice says this about how we should celebrate Christmas:

Begin by wondering – wondering at the fact that you have not suffered the just punishment of your sin, that God has loved you, that Jesus came and died for you, that God called you to faith in Himself when you were yet without hope of salvation, and that you are now God's child and are secure in His love. Continue by thinking upon those things. Ponder the great doctrines of the Christian faith – doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, grace, sanctification, heaven, perseverance, and others – so that you begin to grow strong in doctrine. Glorify and praise God for what you know. Sing God's praises. Then, when you are qualified to speak, go back and tell others.

Don't take this gift for granted, but use it. To use it is to wonder about God's goodness, to praise Him for it, and to tell others about it.



