



Advent

DEVOTIONAL STUDY GUIDE

CITY HOPE CHURCH 2022

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What is Advent?

The History of Advent

Whether it's climbing to an overlook to catch the sunrise or preparing for a "rope drop" at a theme park, or even blocking off that perfect spot to take in a parade, we humans have quite the habit of positioning ourselves for a special moment, don't we? Something within us knows the moment will be that much more meaningful if we do more than just "show up" for it...and it's with that same principle in mind that we point ourselves towards Advent.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, which simply means "arrival." Advent is the coming and the arrival of God Himself—God with us. For centuries now, followers of Jesus have set aside the four weeks leading up to Christmas as a beautiful season of celebration and anticipation.

The History of Advent

Advent is something that really happened, but Advent will happen again. Jesus is coming back. At His first coming, the future kingdom of God burst into the present with Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Our spiritual enemies were disarmed.

Yet our world is not what it will be as we await the reign of our good king. We live in the “already but not yet” of Jesus' kingdom.

At Advent, we give voice to “kingdom come” prayers of our own— looking expectantly for Jesus' return. In that way, this is a season of both celebration and anticipation.

Advent allows us to be honest about what's wrong with our world and to freely celebrate Christmas as good news—King Jesus has come; King Jesus will come again!

Participation

Beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, each of the four weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas Eve will focus on a different theme of celebration and anticipation—each drawn from Isaiah's prophetic words in Isaiah 9.

Jesus said, “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with Me” (Revelation 3:20). Encountering God is not only possible this Christmas season, Jesus said it's a matter of opening the door. Will you let Him into your home? He's waiting.

About This Advent Guide

If the whole idea of celebrating Advent is new to you, you're in good hands. This book will guide you through the season of Advent, as well as a series of Sunday night candle lighting moments to do together with your family and friends. In addition, we've also crafted daily devotionals written to immerse you in the wonder that was (and is) the coming of the Messiah.

Weekly Gatherings

This Christmas season we want you to consider connecting with a few friends or family members once a week (Sunday evenings if you can) to enjoy community and encounter God together.

There's a pattern you may have noticed most people tend to fall into during the Christmas season. We spend more, consume more, eat more, and do more in December than any other month of the year.

For this reason, Christmas can be one of the least healthy (on many levels) seasons of the year. But we believe it doesn't have to be. In fact, we're inviting you to resist that pattern. As the famous Christmas carol proclaims, "Let every heart prepare Him room." Make room for these Advent Gatherings. You won't regret it.

Candle-Lighting Liturgies

This Advent guide will walk you through how to prepare for your gathering, and it will give you step-by-step directions for how to participate in each Advent Candle-Lighting Liturgy in your home (liturgy is just a word for a thoughtful order of worship). The Advent Candle-Lighting Liturgy itself will take 10–15 minutes. The duration of the rest of the gathering is up to you.

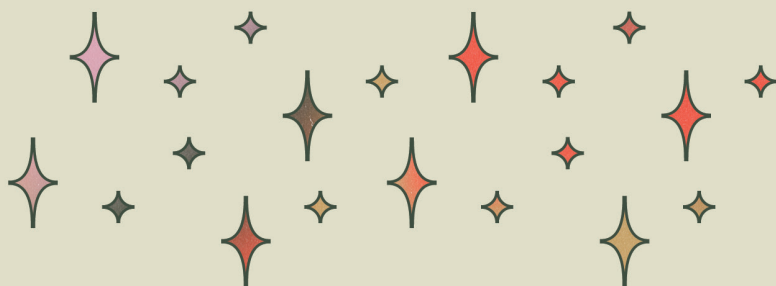
As you begin this journey with us, note that we intentionally crafted our approach in a way that takes the reader throughout the whole of Scripture. In this way, as we approach Christmas Day, our prayer is that something beautiful becomes plain: All of history was pointing to this momentous moment.

*“For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called: Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace will never end. He
will rule with fairness and justice from the throne
of his ancestor David for all eternity.”*

Isaiah 9:6-7

WEEK 1

Wonderful Counselor



Instructions Before Beginning

1. Purchase 5 Advent Candles, the 5th larger than the rest. These will be the candles we will light together every Sunday night.

2. Have all 5 candles centered on your dining room table.

3. Encourage your children to be the ones that will help decorate and set them up.

4. Grab your Bible and have Amos 8:11 and Isaiah 9:6-7 open, and John 1 marked. Delegating reading assignments amongst your family would be a great idea!

5. For today's challenge, find an analog clock.

6. Finally, take time to share a meal together as a family, then begin the following.

Silent Years

Over 400 years had passed since the Word of the Lord was spoken through His messenger, Malachi, & since then, nothing. The Israelites attempted to recall instances in their history when the Lord went without words for such a long period of time, but to no avail. This level of silence was unprecedented. With every recollection, the Lord always seemed to be speaking to them - reminding them of His unending love, calling them to repentance, encouraging them on to hope, or instructing them with bittersweet counsel. For so long, prophecy had been their sustenance, & with every passing day, they worried that they had taken their supply for granted & had it completely cut off. Agony filled their hearts as they wrestled with the possibility that the God of the universe was giving them the silent treatment of the ages.

Questions harassed their minds, especially at night when their thoughts weren't being drowned out by the busyness of their days. What about all the prophecies He had spoken, predicting the Savior to come? What about all of the promises made to the patriarchs long before them? Had God forgotten His covenant? Or worse, had He given up on it due to Israel's perpetual unfaithfulness? It tormented them to think that their consistent infidelity could be the undoing of everything the Lord had uttered. The meantime had their hearts & minds playing a tortuous game of tug-of-war; they could either doubt or trust the very claims He had made about Himself time & time again - that He is Who He says He is & will do what He says He'll do.

Little did they know that the Lord had no intention of depriving the world of His word forever. The silence did not speak to His stillness, for His hands never ceased from their work. In these some 4,800 months where His word seemed to cease, the stage was simply being set for it to be sent in an entirely new way: wrapped in flesh. Soon, the famine would end, & the world would meet His Word face to face.

Scripture Reading

Amos 8:11

John 1: 1-18

Candle Lighting

Light the Wonderful Counselor Candle in Silence. (Each of the following Sundays will have music during candle lighting. Prepare your speakers.)

Prayer

Father, You are our Wonderful Counselor. We praise Your holy name for Your wonderful plan of salvation. Thank you for sending Your Son, Jesus, the Word, who was with You before the world began. He lowered Himself, becoming human, so sinners like us may be redeemed by His precious blood. You go before us as Your sovereignty reigns supreme. Thank you for your goodness and grace!

Challenge

Time is perpetually moving, like the hand of a clock. Using the analog clock, have everyone gather around to watch the second hand for 30 seconds. As the clock strikes 30, imagine what it would be like to anticipate the coming of Baby Jesus. During the Christmas season, many of us are eagerly anticipating the arrival of Santa. Well beyond a Santa that is reputed to bring good gifts, Jesus came as the ultimate gift for all at the perfect time. Bringing the gift of salvation and forgiveness of sins to those who believe!

Austin's Story

A fellow Christ-follower's story of how a Wonderful Counselor saved more than just Christmas...

Isn't the Christmas season supposed to be joyful? Until this Christmas, Austin and his siblings have yet to experience Christmas in the way we all yearn for. At their gatherings, any anticipation, joy, or love was drowned out by the yelling, strife, and affliction. Hatred seemed to be the customary banner for the holidays. One can only imagine the hope these children had each and every Christmas, "we're supposed to carol, not quarrel." White noise Christmas music rippled down the halls. Fake smiles smeared everyone's faces. Eager to get through the season themselves, the kids sensed an aura of pain engulfing both their mom and dad. Not wanting to wake up another storm, the boys just hid themselves in their rooms.

Jesus oozed into conversations, but it clearly was a formality. "How could I enjoy the season of my Savior's birth with so much animosity?" Growing up in this environment couldn't be easy. As conversations of divorce found the ears of the boys, brokenness set in. Austin flung

shut the door to his heart and became timid and indignant. "Is this my fault?" pulsated as he overheard story after story of how cheerful Christmas was for his classmates. In January of this year, neither parent was involved in church, their marriage was hanging on by a single thread, and their relationship with their kids followed a "just in passing" standard.

The Lord was cultivating something underneath all the dirt. The seed sown in Austin began to be stirred about and flourish. Austin committed to place Jesus on the righteous throne of Wonderful Counselor in his life, entrusting Him to not only listen and answer his prayers, but to guide him in the ways he needs to love his family. Knowing God as our Jehovah-Rapha.

("God, our Healer"), his prayer wasn't simply for a good Christmas. No, his prayer was for RESTORATION, "Your Word says if I pray by faith and believe, it will be done for me. Heal and restore my family, Lord. I know You can!" Slowly but surely, God began to reverse the infectious disease of strife and bitterness that plagued his family. After many tears and moments of humility, God's love has permeated the hearts of this delightful family. What the enemy tried fervently to demolish, the Lord graciously mended. This Christmas will be distinct. New traditions have been instituted. Eagerness fills their hearts again and Jesus, our Wonderful Counselor, is back in the middle of it all.

Scripture Reading

Mark 11:22-25

Challenge

Many times in our lives we feel as though God is not near, as if His council has ceased. However, we know waiting on God is an invitation to faith, trust and hope. Don't stop praying. Don't stop believing for what seems impossible. When we feel like God doesn't hear our prayers, He does. We can know this is true, because Jesus says so himself in Mark 11. Take a journey down memory lane. Has God ever seemed distant in your life, yet showed up big time when you needed Him? Share amongst your family.

Prayer

Father, we pray Psalm 62 today. "For [You] alone my soul waits in silence...my hope is from [You]." We know you are a loving God and see through to the end. We place our whole trust in your plans for our lives. Give us patience and endurance as we lean on You as we wait. Engrave within us confidence in Your healing power. Navigate us in all our doings as we tune our ears for your wonderful Counsel.

Ruth/Boaz

Chatters about a Moabite woman echoed in the town square. Naomi, the widow of Elimelech of Bethlehem in Judah, returned to her hometown with her loyal daughter-in-law. Ruth seemed to be energetic, clothed in splendor and joy. Naomi, or some called her Mara, on the other hand seemed to be stricken with heartbreak when she was about. Ruth could have tossed her past away and went back to her mother's house, afterall she was a free woman. However, Naomi's counsel was strong and the only family she knew at this point. Naomi wasn't carrying the loss of her husband and her sons well, no way Ruth could leave now. Naomi urged her to go restart her life, but Ruth pledged, "I will go with you. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God." Why? Their leaders were wretched and their God seemed non-existent or absent at best.

The barley harvest had just begun and Ruth was a gatherer. She found herself gleaning in the field of a relative of Naomi, Boaz. Boaz had stopped by his fields on the way home to check on workers as he often did. After some shared blessings, Boaz notices a new face among his workers and inquires. The generosity of Boaz exudes as

he offers her the standard of his servants, "what's mine is yours." Astonished by the favor and sympathy of Boaz, both Ruth and Naomi were reassured of the lovingkindness of the Lord. It was Naomi's, and now Ruth's, God who was Israel's Redeemer, the One who promised to defend and vindicate His people. He proclaimed to buy all of humanity for Himself out of the curse and destitution by making them His bride. Levitical law had a comparable redemptive clause for its people. It was clear at this point, Naomi wanted Boaz to redeem Ruth, afterall he was Christ-like, a relative and the most eligible bachelor in town. It seemed as though everywhere he went Ruth's noble character was tickling his ears.

Weeks went by, Ruth whirled through Boaz's mind daily. "Could this woman indeed be my better half?" Yes, in fact. Witnesses upon witnesses gathered in the courts as Boaz joyfully proclaimed the legal sealing of the transaction. Boaz and Ruth, the match made in heaven. He is to redeem both the property and posterity of Elimelech, and best of all, to take Ruth to be his lovely wife. Leaving the courts in their getaway caravan, blessings were flung towards them and to Naomi. Months later a child was conceived. His name? Obed. The grandfather of David. Boaz, acting as kinsman-redeemer, preserved the holy family line.

Scripture Reading

Isaiah 54:4-8

Leviticus 25:47-49

Challenge A:

(for the married):

From eternity, God planned to bring Ruth and Boaz together. This matrimony signals the establishment of Bethlehem as His entrance point for the coming of Jesus as our true Kinsman-Redeemer, fully God and fully man. Today, we need to “come to Bethlehem” and let Jesus redeem us. Grab your wedding rings. Rings symbolize unending love. Imagine your marriage as the lifeline which kept alive the family line of the One who would come to change the course of human history.

Challenge B

(for the unmarried):

This story of redemption is a “branch” in the integral lineage of Jesus. Break off a branch from outside and discuss the tree life cycle: seeds beget roots, roots beget branches, branches beget flowers/fruit, fruit begets seeds.

Prayer

Jesus, you are our kinsman-redeemer and this is why You became a man. Only in You, Jesus, the eternal God, is our kinsman and the redeemer for all of mankind! By this beautiful story, we recognize your provision in the mundane joys and sorrows of life. May we be reliant on your Wonderful Counsel in the ebbs and flows of our existence. Fill our cups today, Jesus!

Jethro/Moses

“What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?” The Israelite’s questions temporarily stopped as Jethro approached his son-in-law, Moses, with his own question. Jethro could immediately tell that his questions were like punches to Moses’ gut. He followed Moses’ eyes as they compassionately scanned the crowd of Israelites surrounding them, now watching the familial discourse in a miraculous silence. With Egypt in the rearview mirror, the people now looked to Moses daily to settle their disputes – which were many. Turns out, wherever there are people, there will be problems. Jethro had hardly been with Moses for 24 hours, yet he could feel the weight that he was carrying on his shoulders – a weight that no human could carry solo.

Jethro understood where Moses was coming from, all things considered. Most normal humans would avoid at all costs leading millions of vocal, opinionated, complaint-filled people, yet God had appointed Moses to do just that. It was therefore understandable, Jethro thought,

that his son-in-law also considered it his duty to assume the role of legal mediator. After all, leaders have a tendency to... lead. Jethro, with loving concern, explained to Moses how assuming this role wasn’t the issue, but him doing it by himself was. “What you are doing is not good. You & these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone..”

Moses listened intently, nodding as his father-in-law’s wise counsel clicked. Work smarter, not harder – teamwork makes the dream work. Though the advice initially made Moses feel guilty, as if he was failing, he knew that wasn’t the truth; in reality, burdens are made lighter by the presence of many capable, responsible shoulders. Treating Jethro’s words as if they were inspired by God Himself, Moses promptly implemented everything Jethro had advised by forming a team of God-fearing, trustworthy men to aid him in settling the people’s disputes. At all times, they would serve as judges for the people, settling simple cases on their own, & bringing the difficult ones to Moses. With the weight lifted & energy revitalized, Moses sent Jethro on his way, thanking him for sharing his invaluable counsel in such a simple, yet divine way.

Scripture Reading

Exodus 18:13-27

Challenge

The moral of this story: God used someone greater than Moses to redeem the Israelites from the dominion of sin, death, and the devil. Thankfully, through God's redemption, He has given us one another to work through disputes and to care for one another in moments of prosperity or conflict. Pastors and elders aren't the only ones called to this kingdom work. He has empowered us by the sealing of the Holy Spirit to honor Christ by serving each other. Take time today to meditate on a former moment where wise counsel was timely in your life.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, as Jethro was timely in his recommendations, and as we are called to live as a community in unity, grant us wisdom in our personal interactions. Surround us with Your reverent people who will encourage us and assist in pointing us back to You. Furnish us with discernment of those who have a voice in our lives. You are our refuge and strength, the God in whom we trust! Lead us, Jesus!

Simeon/Anna

Faces upon faces perched the Temple steps. Travelers came from afar to see “Herod’s” Temple in its wonder. Yet, to the stranger’s nose the stench of animals, feces and sackcloth filled the air. There were hundreds of people grazing about in the Court of the Gentiles. The sun was glimmering off the inscription above the Gate Beautiful, “Gentiles Proceed No Further.” Inquisitively, Gentiles observed the sacred spaces allotted only for Jews. Gossip of a Savior being born trickling into every conversation. The flow of traffic all seemed to follow a certain pattern. Everyone stopped by a sweet old lady named Ms. Anna to say “shalom.” She practically lived there. She was a gentle prophetess as she exclaimed often, “A child is coming to redeem our city, the King is coming!” At 84 years old, Anna was reputedly bright eyed and energetic, even though she fasted and prayed night and day.

Another popular elder in the community, Simeon, was also eagerly awaiting the arrival of the redemptive King this day. He was confirmed by the Holy Spirit that he’d not die before he had seen the Messiah. Chanting praises alongside his compadre Anna, stood Simeon as they surveyed the crowds for a certain baby boy. On the 8th day of life, it was required to dedicate first-born sons to the Lord. The husband typically acquired a lamb or two turtledoves which were used in the sacrifice for the purification and consecration ceremony.

Simeon spotted a man waiting in line with his wife and son at the merchant’s table. Something was off...in a wonderful way. The ambiance seemed to have shifted. The temple courts shimmered as if it were actually Solomon’s. Curiosity was literally killing him. Is it Him? Simeon gently takes hold of the baby boy and instantly proclaims, “It is He! The Messiah is here, surely I can rest now.” Anna finally shuffles over to the family of 3. Giving thanks to God for sending the Redeemer, she pointed to a new era dawning. An era where the living voice of God will continue to speak about the Messianic One.

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:21-38

Colossians 4:3-6

Challenge

Play “Go Tell It On The Mountain.”

Moses spoke about the need for two or three witnesses in order to validate an event. Here two eager reverent followers of God confirm the sighting of the Son of Man right there in the Lord’s Temple courts. Luke reiterated that the Holy Spirit was with Simeon. Anna becomes the first-in-line prophetic disciple of Jesus! Why is it important to Go Tell It On The Mountain? How can “[be-being] filled with the Spirit” of Ephesians 5:18 help with proclaiming the Good News of our Savior?

Prayer

Wonderful Counselor, we praise Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Open doors for us as we boldly proclaim your Name to those near and far. Clothe us in Your wisdom so our speech is precise and timely. Fill us with gentleness and grace to meet people exactly where they are. With Your Son’s coming the least are the greatest, the last are first, the lost are found. Inscribe in us this very understanding. Father, all glory and honor is Yours.

Light & Darkness

“In the Beginning” launches us into a cosmic journey. Echoing from the control center of all of existence comes an utterance as God sets creation perpetually in motion by dividing sky from land. From the naked eye, if there were such a thing at this point, the world would be certain as unfathomable nothingness. Imagining a day without light is quite impossible and spine-chilling. Lucky for us, He didn’t stop there. There above the waters of the deep abyss of chaotic darkness was the Spirit of God. The very Spirit in our hearts was there in the beginning of time. God’s new world was formless and yet His vibrant life-animating and sustaining Spirit was present.

“Let there be light” reverberated off the walls of the water. Although His Son would be a carpenter, there was no need to fashion light with His hands. God simply spoke and it was. Wait? Were not the sun

and moon established on the fourth day? How could there be light without a source? In the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 22 there lacks sins, tears, sea/chaos, AND there is no sun or moon! This communicates a massive point...light is quite supernatural and much more than a physical substance. God Himself IS Light.

Nevertheless, utter darkness had set in; wars and rumors of wars were everywhere. Echoes of separation from our truest image ring out into existence. “Skotos” is the Greek word for darkness. Biblical writers use it to metaphorically represent the state of the secular world: death, wickedness, and sadness. Separation from the Father is quite literally killing us. Dominant forces, one after another, overtake God’s people. The gloom of anguish entrenches itself among the world. Is this all there is to life? Can we go back to the beginning yet? Little did they know, the oppressed, blood-drenched land of the shadow of death would soon experience a new Light. Light is coming into the world to dispel darkness once and for all.

Scripture Reading

Genesis 1:1-5

Isaiah 8:22

Isaiah 9:1-2

Challenge

Place yourself in the darkest room of your home and grab your lighter.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus said “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.” This feast was also known as The Illumination of the Temple. For centuries, God’s illuminating presence filled the Tent of Meeting and Tabernacle. Now Jesus encompassed light. “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper (Holy Spirit) will not come to you.”

Meditate upon this: How does the light shining in the darkness compare to the light, fire, Holy Spirit in you?

Prayer

Lord, thank you for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the upper room, as we became living temples to bless others. Ignite in us an all consuming fire as we remember the faithfulness You perpetually showed to Your people, O God. May Your light shine in us so others see and glorify You and You alone. Darkness will not overcome us, for You are with us!

Wisdom

Perhaps you've followed along this week and wondered, "Is He my Wonderful Counselor? How does He go about counseling me, today - here and now?"

Echoing in every town square is a voice like that of the wind. One resounding with power, righteousness, justice and understanding. Evidently comparable to the thunderous voice above the chaotic waters which God carved order from in the beginning of creation. The voice has a steadiness about it, like that of pillars which keep each cities' walls and gates upright and secure. She, yes...she, embodies the personification of God's "chokmâh" or wisdom. This lady, "Wisdom", eagerly awaits us at the crossroads of a glorious mountainous city called Life.

She utters a speech to us from the crossroads, "Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her." She proclaims to all that living by her instruction can lead to the most valuable things in life. By

heeding to her guidance life would be full of harmonious relationships, moral integrity, and a fruitful and stable life. Such commodities can't be purchased with any amount of gold and pearls. In her all kings reign, all rulers decree justice, and all princes rule, but only those who judge rightly. However, her decrees are not written on tablets for governments. Her decrees are woven into the fabric of creation itself.

Everyday, Lady Wisdom is found in the whispering of the wind. She is not a vapor or smoke which is here one minute and gone the next. No, she is the founder, president, professor and counselor of a university found on every intersection called "Choice." But not just for the scholarly, for ALL of humanity. Its location can be found by those who seek it and those who seek it, will find it. Those who are found patiently waiting at her gates and doorposts are considered blessed. In her, life and favor are found. Yet, to those who reject her only harms themselves and are lovers of death. There is One who was with her in the beginning. He's the perfecter of her ways and displays her counsel to all those who listen. He's coming into the world full of wisdom, humble and lowly.

Scripture Reading

Proverbs 9:10-11

Proverbs 8:1-11;22-36

Challenge

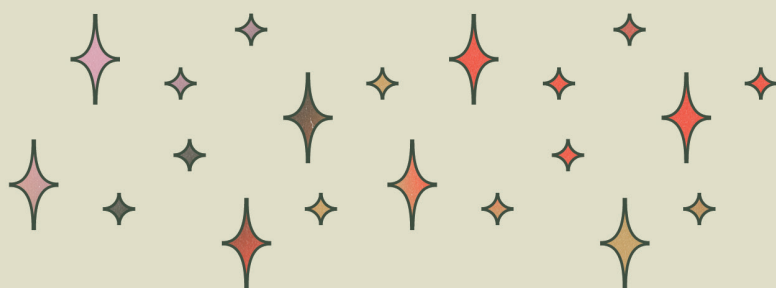
“Holy fear is the key to God’s sure foundation, unlocking the treasures of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.” – John Bevere. You may have heard it said, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Fear isn’t defined as being scared here. It is better described as reverence, which is a respectful and God-honoring attitude. God longs to be revered and known. Fear of the Lord is the entry point to knowing Him more intimately and the imparting of His wisdom and holy ways in us. The more we place our reverent fear in Him, the more we trust and obey Him. Do you truly revere the Lord? Do you regularly ask God for wisdom?

Prayer

Wonderful Counselor, I pray for constant reminders of Your glory that I might fear You. I want to tremble at Your presence. Help me to see that You are more than a Redeemer. You are our righteous Judge, in You is nothing but holiness. Lead me the way in which I should go. Instill in me a heart that serves You in reverence, and tremblingly rejoices. Give me ears to hear and Your grace to obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We praise You for what You have already sown in us and we praise You for being our guiding Light.

WEEK 2

Mighty God



Instructions Before Beginning

1. Prepare your speaker and queue “Noel” by Lauren Daigle and Chris Tomlin for the lighting of the Mighty God candle.
2. Have your Bible turned to Ephesians 5 and Galatians 2 marked and assigned to family members for reading.
3. Share a meal together as a family before beginning.

Mighty Good God

History is clear that power held in the wrong hands & driven by depraved hearts is a recipe for disaster. While many accuse power as being the problem altogether, that is not the truth. In reality, power doesn't corrupt, it simply exposes. Power - or might - is a double-edged sword depending entirely upon the character, or lack thereof, of the one wielding it. With that in mind, how comforting is it to know that the most powerful being to ever exist is also the most trustworthy One?

The Mighty God - His omnipotence is eternally unmatched. With His words, He formed the world, & by His Word, He saved it. He formed us out of the dust of

the earth & breathed His life into our very bones. Imagine, for a moment, what would happen if He ever decided to hold His breath - would we not lose ours? Our existence depends entirely upon His.

He displayed the magnitude of His might in the humblest of ways. Instead of leaving us to justly suffer the consequences of our sins, He willingly crafted a plan to take our place. A Child would be born for the cross, so that we would never have to see it; He would be born to die, so that we could live. "Why?" you may ask. It's simply Who He is & always will be: the mighty, good God.

Scripture Reading

Ephesians 6:10-18

Galatians 2:20

Candle Lighting

Play “Noel” as you light the Mighty God Candle as a family.

Prayer

Gracious and Mighty Lord, today I put on the full armor of God, so that I can withstand the wicked plots of the enemy against me. I know I do not fight against flesh and blood, but against evil spiritual forces. I stand firm, planted in you, my Savior. I put on the belt of truth around my waist. I affirm and believe in your truth alone, Lord, and will not fall into the trap of believing the lies of the world. Guide me in your truth, and to not lose sight of that. Help me to know your truth versus the deceitfulness of the enemy.

Challenge

We know from the Book of Job that the evil one, Satan, has dominion of the earth. However, there is a Mighty God who rules over ALL of existence in perfect and unlimited power. That same power that created the whole universe resides in those of us who are in Christ. Satan's time is short and he has been judged, AMEN! Sadly though, he still is the great deceiver and tempter causing a spiritual battle we are destined to face daily. James 4:7 tells us that by submitting ourselves to God and resisting the devil, he will flee from us. How can we resist the evil one? A great place to start is with the Full Armor of God. Discuss your favorite piece of armor!

Julie's Story

A fellow Christ-follower's story of how our Mighty God still works miracles...

The doctor's mouth seemed to move in slow motion as his words echoed through the hospital room: "We recommend that you have an abortion." The ultrasound originally showed two babies, but only one had implanted properly. Even in these still very early stages, the doctors left little to no hope for a successful pregnancy with the surviving child. Flashbacks formed, transporting Julie back in time to when she was 19 & inconveniently pregnant; she had different beliefs then, & therefore chose abortion as the answer. The resulting anxiety, shame, guilt, & "What if's?" flooded her memory as she found herself now faced with somewhat similar circumstances & options. Though abortion was now off the table for Julie, she & her husband, Ben, found their current pregnancy struggles bringing to light an internal battle. The taboo truth was that they had been wrestling with the news of this pregnancy since they found out; it was not planned & therefore not even remotely close to being on their radar. Having just sold their house, moved into a camper with their two beautiful daughters, & waiting

to build their new home - things were already very much out of sorts & in no shape to welcome a baby. How were they to handle an unexpected, unplanned-for child in their present condition?

Despite the doctors' verbal death sentences, the little one within Julie was continuing to survive. At ten weeks, after rushing to the hospital due to thinking she had miscarried, Julie saw her little one for the first time, still very much alive. Five weeks later, she found herself once again in the hospital after her water broke, leaving her surrounded by panicked nurses & countless high risk doctors. The situation was dire as Julie had no residual fluid, & without it, the baby wouldn't be able to properly develop. Life sentences joined forces with the doctors' death sentences as words like "special needs" & "down syndrome" were now part of the discussions. Weary from the turmoil & noise, & feeling the need to retreat from it all, Julie decided to have a one-on-one meeting with the Lord. Sitting alone in a chair in her mother-in-law's empty house, Julie gave Him an ultimatum: "I'll give You 24 hours. If this baby survives the next 24 hours, I'll know You're in this." Feeling as if God Himself pulled up a chair & sat down right next to her, He answered: "Are you going to listen to Me now? I am going to see this through to the end."

Up to this point, cultivating & maintaining an emotional distance had been her protection – shielding her from the doom looming over her situation. As the Lord’s words lingered in her spirit, Julie finally chose to commit emotionally to the journey & step through the threshold of trust she had been actively avoiding. From that moment forward, she never had another doubt over the future of her baby, for it was held in God’s faithful hands. Where death, destruction, & ruin had been the constant headlines spoken over their unborn child’s life, Julie & Ben now stood in faith boldly rejecting & renouncing those insidious claims inspired by the enemy. Just as God predicted, His forecast of life & hope won out when their precious, 4lb. 2oz. baby girl entered the world screaming at the top of her tiny lungs. In honor of the greatest, most impactful faith season of their lives, they named their living, breathing miracle Lillian Hope – meaning “Yahweh is my promise & hope.” Four years later, little Lilly is still the beacon of hope the Lord created her to be – serving as a constant reminder of Yahweh’s might to her family & everyone who meets her.

Scripture Reading

Psalm 18:6

Challenge

Even in the most difficult times of our lives, remember God sees and understands our pain. We serve a mighty God who sees, hears, and understands our pain. Psalm 18:6 says, “In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.” He is always near and attentive to our prayers. Today, let’s pray for those who are expecting or trying to start a family. Whether the baby is perfectly healthy, complications are present, abortion is in question, or infertility plagues a family. Join hands and pray for all of those who you know are in the midst of these seasons.

Prayer

Mighty God, we praise You for being One in whom we can cast our cares on. You sustain us and will never let the righteous be shaken. Fill those of us who are struggling with bad news or anxieties with steadfast strength and trust. We will not fear bad news because You are with us. As You proclaimed, “I am your hope,” so we trust You. Deliver us from the enemy and his plans. God, You are the author and sustainer of our lives.

Balak/ Balaam

Isn't it comical how politics makes strange bedfellows? Balak, the king of Moab, fearfully peered down on Israel as they swiftly dispossessed the Canaanites, Amorites, and Bashanites. It appeared to be that they had the blessing of victory. Not only that, the stories of "Yahweh's people" appeared to be real, and these chosen ones seemed to be heading straight to the very land Balak lorded over. Stricken with terror, he had to be strong and nimble on his feet for his people. Moab and Midian are natural enemies, yet they construct a contract to combine forces as sons of Israel trek towards the edge of Moab. "Come fight with us, these people will take over our land and all that is around us."

Down in the valley, God's people were worn out as echoes of "are we there yet?" rang from the back of the pack. Israel was coming up on year 40 of the journey to the land that was promised to them. Zeal and exhaustion seemingly became their identity. However, they reminisced of the glory days, the days of slavery... What? Why? Grumblingly, they recollect the marvelous meats of the days in Egypt. For 40 years, the sons of Israel had been

eating manna, a weird bread that rained down from the sky that rained down in their camp daily. Screams rang out, "Man can not live on bread alone! Give us some sustenance!" Army after army, battle after battle, they kept pushing toward the land promised to their patriarch Abraham.

God's people seemed mightier than ever from the vantage point of the now appointed king of Moab and Midian. Balak phones a friend, Balaam, the well known sorcerer and prophet of the region. Bouncing from mountaintop to mountaintop, Balak, in disgust exclaims, "I called you to curse my enemies, and look, you have bountifully blessed them these three times and now I'm not paying you anything!" Balaam starts his journey back to his homestead but as he does the Spirit of God comes upon him again. He rips around and utters a fourth message directly to Balak, "I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel. It will crush the heads of Moab's people, cracking the skulls of the people of Sheth. Edom will be taken over, and Seir, its enemy, will be conquered, while Israel marches on in triumph. A ruler will rise in Jacob who will destroy the survivors of Ir." Whilst Israel was in the valley cursing Moses, God's provision was going before them... proclaiming a day when the Messiah would come forth.

Scripture Reading

Numbers 24:1-18

Deuteronomy 31:8

Challenge:

Break out the construction paper, let's make crowns!

These days it seems hard to get behind nearly any leadership. Fractionally due to the wickedness of the world but partially because we know there comes a day when a better king will come. Here we get the image of not only a better king but the PERFECT King. The King we crown every Christmas, came 2000 years ago as a baby. Jesus IS the only King perfect in righteousness, justice, love, mercy, etc. Decorate your crowns with jewels and a worthy title, MIGHTY GOD. Punch some holes in those crowns and hang them on your Christmas tree!

Prayer

Jesus, King of all, we exalt You. Your dominion supersedes all the kings of the earth. You are the King over our lives as you saved us from damnation by forgiving our sins. Help us this day to follow your Kingship. Lord over our lives as we tell others about Your goodness. Transform the way we navigate each and every day from this point forward. May we trust Your provision for our lives even when it seems impossible.

Aaron/Moses: Exodus From Egypt

Endless amounts of frustration surged through Moses' body as he paced back & forth.

He knew that God had sent him to speak against Pharaoh, but things were not going according to plan. Ever since he opened his mouth, the circumstances surrounding his people had gotten progressively worse. His thoughts swarmed with mental images of the Israelites pointed fingers directed at him & Aaron, blaming them for the failed rescue attempt & increase in their already harsh treatment. Feeling wrongly condemned & as if he was set up for automatic failure, he turned to the One who sent him on this wild goose chase in the first place. "I did what you said!" Moses shouted. "I spoke in Your name & Pharaoh has only brought trouble - & You have not rescued your people at all!"

Divine reassurance was urgently needed to prevent Moses from imploding; the disillusionment of his fellow Israelites seemed to have already snaked its way into him, too. The Lord, undismayed, calmly yet firmly met his agitated cries: "Now you

will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go; because of my mighty hand he will drive them out of his country." Moses reported the encouraging words to his fellow Israelites but was met with apathetic stares & unamused responses. "Do you know how many times we've heard claims like this, only to have nothing happen? Why would we get our hopes up now?" The heavy discouragement mixed with the inhumane labor had caused their light to dim & jadedness to settle in their hearts. As a result of having Egypt as their home for so long, Egypt seemed to have also made its home within them.

Just when all hope seemed lost, signs & wonders of cosmic proportions began to plague Egypt one by one. With an unflinching heart to warning after warning, Pharaoh watched as his nation & its inhabitants suffered demoralizing losses to their water supply, crops, livestock, & even their own flesh & blood. Finally, Pharaoh's hardened heart yielded to God's determination, proving human stubbornness is no match for divine might. Pharaoh summoned Moses & Aaron, begging them & all of the Israelites to pack up their things & go. After exactly 430 years, the Lord made good on His promises to rescue His people, with an even greater kind of exodus still to come.

Scripture Reading

Exodus 6:1-12

Exodus 12:31-42

1 Corinthians 5:7-8

Challenge

Passover was established shortly after Exodus 12 as a perpetual remembrance of the time the Lord “passed over” the first born of their people due to the blood of the lamb and simultaneously took Egypt’s firstborn in their place. Christ is our Passover Lamb as stated in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8. This verse also speaks of leaven and it being symbolic of the influence sin and pride has on us as individuals but also in the church body. We are often hateful towards our brothers and sisters in Christ and don’t even realize it! Is there any hatred in your heart towards another fellow believer? Go make it right by asking for forgiveness. Remember to continuously navigate your day in love with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Prayer

Mighty God, the new life that our Lord Jesus purchased for us when He died on the Cross is meant to be like keeping a perpetual feast. There is a sense of joyful freedom in us as we keep on feasting upon Him, and enjoying the wonderful delights of living with Him and for Him. Guide us as we continually put away sin and hatred towards our brothers and sisters as we exemplify Christ to them. Lead us in the everlasting way. All honor and glory is Yours, our Mighty God.

Mary's Pregnant!

Whispers whirled around town, & understandably so. Judging & presumptuous looks now followed Mary everywhere she went. Pregnant? Didn't she just get engaged? The law strictly prohibited living together or having relations prior to the wedding ceremony, so someone had some explaining to do. Too bad there wasn't a "How To" guide for succinctly summarizing the supernaturally divine origins of the Child she was carrying.

She found herself constantly replaying the moment everything changed. She was minding her own business when she found herself face to face with the supernatural - an angel named Gabriel. The rest of the world seemed to fade away as he spoke into hers. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." In an instant, a mental tunnel vision took over Mary as she retreated into her own head, pondering what could possibly be the reason behind such an introduction.

Gabriel, picking up on her troubled spirit, continued: "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive & give birth to a son, & you are to call him Jesus. He will be great & will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, & he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Perhaps this was all a mistake - a misunderstanding? Maybe Gabriel got his Marys mixed up & ended up at the wrong house? Questions, comments, & concerns consumed all of Mary's thoughts, but the only thing she could seem to get out of her mouth was, "How?" - a fair question, all things considered. Her innocence was met with a gentle, reassuring response as Gabriel explained Jesus' heavenly paternity; He would be supernaturally conceived by the power of God through the Holy Spirit. She would carry & deliver the Son of God. As a result, Mary's world would never be the same, but neither would anyone else's.

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:26-38

Challenge

Gabriel brought the “good news” to Mary. Although this situation seemed unfortunate for Mary and her public image, it would mean everything to the world. Sure, the uncertainty alone might kill her, but she was instructed to name her miracle Son, Jesus. Jesus literally means “Jehovah is salvation” or “Yahweh saves.” Consider the feelings and emotions Mary may have experienced of being the talk of the town and carrying the One who would save them all.

Prayer

Mighty God, the miracle You completed through Mary is magnificent. I am thankful that I can rejoice with Mary for the sending of Your Son. By His blood we are redeemed and have become new creations in Christ. We glorify your Name!

John The Baptist

(Point of view from the womb)

Things were often quiet, although he was able to make out certain noises every now & then. It had been about six months, & he had grown quite comfortably up to this point. His days consisted of tossing & turning, stretching out his arms & legs, frequent kicking, & the occasional hiccups. It wasn't unusual for him to hear his mother, Elizabeth, talking to him - sometimes even singing; & occasionally another, more masculine voice would enter the atmosphere surrounding him, but never with words. For whatever reason, he would only hum as Elizabeth sang sweet lullabies, calming him to sleep. He noticed that fervent prayers also frequented his mother's lips as she spoke to him daily; apparently he was a miracle - whatever that meant.

One day, he was awakened by a muffled *thump thump* sound - a knock on the door, unbeknownst to him. The knock stirred his mother to get up & head to its source. With every step, he felt her movement, which soon came to a stop;

she had reached the destination. He heard an uncomfortable creaking sound as the door opened, causing him to scrunch his face in displeasure - not that anyone could tell. These movements & sounds were so far unfamiliar to him - what could be the cause of all this commotion?

He listened as the door once again creaked, signaling that it had been shut. Footsteps got closer when suddenly a new voice entered his ears. The new voice had a name, Mary, who was Elizabeth's cousin. Although unfamiliar to him, her voice carried heaven's power in such a way that it engulfed Elizabeth's unborn child in the presence of the Divine. He leapt as a smile lit up his face & joy burst through his limbs, causing even his mother to take notice & exclaim to Mary: "Blessed are you among women, & blessed is the child you will bear. But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." His inexplicable thrill began to make sense as awe & wonder filled the air; two mothers & their two miracle babies were in the same room! While the two children would be related, their connection would go much deeper than that; Elizabeth's miracle would soon pave the way for Mary's, shouting: "Clear the way for the LORD!"

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:39-45 NLT

Challenge

John likely leaped for joy in the womb as he now knew the One he was to be the forerunner for. This seemingly fulfilled what was spoken to his father by the angel in verse 15, “filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.” Take in the following quote: “Such comfort there is in the presence of Christ (though but in the womb) as it made John to spring. What then shall it be like in heaven?” -Trapp. Where does the challenging question take you mentally?

Write your response to the Trapp quote on a notecard. Stick it visibly in a place you find yourself often: bathroom mirror, car dash, lunch box, coffee table, etc.

Prayer

El Shaddai, our Lord God Almighty. We praise You for the joy shared through Elizabeth and its contagious effects. Give us the desire to do your will and the living hope exemplified in Elizabeth, that we may glorify You for all eternity.

David & Goliath

The seemingly perpetual enemy of Israel, the Philistines, encamped in the land of Judah ready to strike yet again. Israel had just soundly beaten the Philistines not long ago, so why such a quick turn-around? It is likely the Philistines heard of the falling out between Samuel and Saul, provoking them to conjure an attempt to recover what they had just lost. Enemies of God are always watchful for opportunities to steal, kill, and destroy. Saul had Israel positioned in the rolling hills of Elah; the evil spirit that God sent to torment Saul had ceased for a moment – giving David, his harp player, a rest. With the time off, David decided to return home to help tend his aged father’s sheep.

The Philistines, likely outnumbered due to previous battles with Israel, decided not to engage too much and suffer yet another massive loss. Instead, they resorted to another option: single combat. This consisted of two champion warriors coming forth to fight for the fate

of the people. The rules were simple: lose, and your whole nation loses; win, and your whole nation wins. The Philistines, having nothing to lose at this point, sent their mightiest of warriors to represent their side: Goliath. Standing at ten feet tall, Goliath towered over the battlefield cursing the name of God and defying Israel twice daily for 40 days. Jesse, David’s father, knew his sons had been without food for a bit, so he sent David into the battlefield with cheese and bread. As he ran through the valley of Elah with his hands full, he trotted across the front line like a mighty warrior himself as Goliath’s blasphemous utterances pulsed through the valley.

David heard Goliath and responded, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” David’s question found the ears of Saul, resulting in David being summoned. “David, you are too small, young and inexperienced. To fight is to throw your life away.” David declared, “I have killed a lion and bear with my own hands, this Philistine will be no different!” Saul, terrified yet impressed, gave the clearance as David stepped forward to

fight in boldness. “I come in the name of the Lord of hosts. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands and all the earth will know that there is a God in Israel!” Goliath roared with laughter, & like a predator stalking his prey, he readied himself to charge towards David & go for the kill. Before he could get in striking distance, David reached into his sack, grabbed a stone, and slung it into the forehead of the Philistine giant. As soon as the stone hit his skull, Goliath died immediately & crashed to the earth. With a single stone backed by the power of God, David had swiftly delivered all of Israel from the hands of the Philistines. His victory over Goliath became a “picture in advance” of the soon-to-come Son of David’s triumphs over Satan and all powers of darkness.

Scripture Reading

1 Samuel 17:36–50

Colossians 2:13–15

2 Corinthians 5:7

Challenge

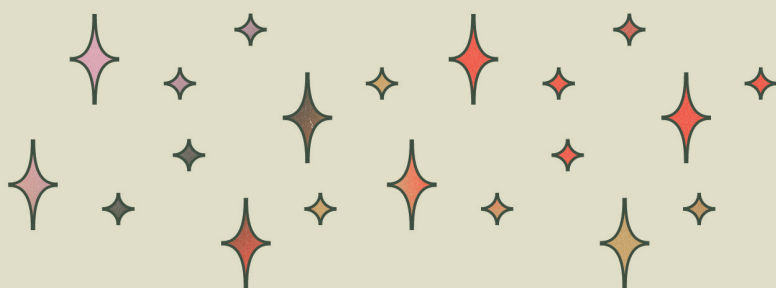
David tried to wear the king’s armor but it was unfamiliar to him. Instead of heavy metal that weighed him down, his weapon of choice was...a slingshot. Sure, he may have been a precise rock slinger, but faith in his Mighty God is what truly carried him to victory. He didn’t subjugate himself to the voices of those around him; rather, his heavenly perspective helped him conquer the “giant” problem before him. With faith in our Mighty God, we can overcome any situation!

Prayer

Mighty God, with You all things are possible. Today I pray Psalm 37:23–24, “The Lord directs the steps of the [faithful]. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the [Mighty God] holds them by the hand.” In my weakness, You make me strong. By my faith, Your power fills me. There is nowhere I can go without Your Mighty hand protecting me. Teach me to have faith like David!

WEEK 3

Everlasting Father



Instructions Before Beginning

1. Prepare your speaker and queue “Welcome to Our World” by Michael W. Smith for the lighting of the Everlasting Father Candle.
2. Have your Bible turned to 1 Peter 2 and Jeremiah 29 marked for today’s readings.
3. Have the children gather the cardstock paper, markers, and twine for today’s challenge.
4. Share a meal together as a family, but take it a step further this week - invite another family to share the meal with you and your family!

Exile

Exile - something the Israelites had become all too familiar with due to their disobedience. It hovered over them menacingly & surrounded them on each side with every intention of becoming their identity. Accusatory whispers began to infiltrate their hearts as the harsh conditions of their consequences gnawed at their perception. Pointed fingers shook at the sky as they shouted into the heavens: "You call us Your children yet treat us like this?! Egypt was better to us than You!"

The slander reached His ears, & it deeply grieved His heart. The children He had chosen to Father seemed to be steadfast in their desire to disown Him. Even with such backlash, His countenance - His disposition - was compassion as He desired nothing more than ultimate forgiveness & deliverance for His people. He had already determined within Himself that exiles & wilderness wanderings would not have the final say.

His plan was unheard of & risky - to have His compassion become incarnate. The Messiah to come would be the Everlasting Father's heart on full display. After all, what better way to communicate His love than to willingly wrap Himself in the skin He used to clothe them? While the time dragged by for those confined by their fleshly five senses, the supernatural was preparing to break into & forever alter their reality. Soon, & very soon, the world would look into the eyes of the Everlasting Father's love.

Scripture Reading

1 Peter 2:11-17

Jeremiah 29:4-7

Candle Lighting

As a family, light the Everlasting Father Candle as “Welcome to Our World” by Michael W. Smith plays in the background.

Prayer

O God, the lengths You went to rescue me. Your love was on full display as You seemingly split Yourself down the middle, separating Father from Son for a moment in human history. You did it all for us unworthy sinful humans, You died and absorbed our collective exile. Your Son took on the ultimate exile of all humanity in order to bring us home to the Father. He experienced the utter homelessness that plagues us as we live apart from God. Jesus, you did it all to bring us home. We praise You, our Savior!

Challenge

In Genesis, humans inherit and forfeit the entire world in a matter of a single chapter. We currently reside outside of the Garden of Eden, exiles of the present age. Yet the promise of a land still stands, a land flowing with milk and honey. Israel finds their “land” and it still lacks the serenity of a true home. When the fullness of time had come and the Kingdom was at hand, the Everlasting Father came in our very image. Jesus literally lived His 33 “human” years as a cultural exile. God calls us to live in this temporary world but not to be identified by it. Draw a treasure map starting at Genesis 2:25 with stopping points at: Genesis 3:23, Exodus 1:8-10, 2 Kings 17:23b, Jeremiah 29:7, and the treasure and redemption of humanity found in baby Jesus of Luke 2:76-79. Seal your map with twine and place it under your Christmas Tree.

Pastor Trey's Story

"Foster care is a beautiful picture of the gospel. You take in a child for the sake of the family to be made whole, & you endure the pain of losing a child for the sake of that family to be reconciled together." The pastor's words seemed to color a canvas with a world Trey & Laren had previously never considered. Early on in their marriage, they had felt a pull from God towards adoption, but it wasn't until they found themselves attending a conference that their eyes were illuminated to the great difficulty many children go through prior to adoption. Following this new yet relentless tug, Trey & Laren decided to sit in on one session that specifically highlighted foster care, & after only 6 months of marriage, they signed up for foster classes.

One night, Trey & Laren went to sleep for the last time as a family of two. The very next day, a knock on their door doubled their family in an instant! Twice as much joy & fun entered their home when DHR dropped off 12 month old twin boys. With their soft, dark eyes, curly hair, & wild spirits, it took no time at all for the boys to completely & totally win Trey & Laren over; their hearts seemed to burn with a new fire - one that was completely

incapable of ever being quenched. Upon the boys' arrival, Trey & Laren were already aware that they had a high chance of adoption due to their biological parents' struggles to accomplish goals given by DHR. Nevertheless, Trey & Laren vowed to battle for the benefit of the boys in the meantime. Ten different court dates about potential family placements & the termination of the biological parental rights were peppered throughout the next year & a half. At the final hearing, the biological mom & dad requested that Trey & Laren would become the adoptive parents of their twin boys. Harmony of rare & miraculous magnitudes resided in the courtroom that day, causing even the judge to comment on it, as cases like these are hardly ever resolved so peacefully. The faithfulness of God was on full display; the same God who placed the call on Trey & Laren's hearts to pursue adoption had fulfilled His plan before their very eyes.

After 581 days in foster care, those twin boys finally found a permanent home. God's provision and faithfulness persisted through the peaks and valleys of their journey. Even before the boys were born on this earth, our Everlasting Father had a redemption story in place. "God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure." Ephesians 1:5.

Scripture Reading

Psalms 68:5-6

Ephesians 1:5

Romans 8:15

Challenge

“Family is the link to our past and the bridge to our future.” Oftentimes when we glance back at our past, it’s easy to see the fault in the ways we were led. Many of us come from broken families. Hebrews speaks of our earthly father’s guidance going only so far due to their limited perspective. However, we have an Everlasting Father who knows the beginning and end. It is said that the bond that links families together is not of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s lives. The body of Christ, i.e. the Church, is a family unit where we can find people who will partner and walk lonely roads with us. Do you have special friends or family in your life who have helped you in testing seasons? Reach out to them today! Share your gratitude for their love, loyalty, and encouragement.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I want You to be an everlasting member of my family. I invite You to be my King of kings and Lord of lords. I stamp You as an integral part of my family. Jesus, we are cleansed by Your blood. As we traverse the journey of life, You are our constant companion. No mountain is too high, nor any valley too deep for Your saving grace. You are not just family to us, You are family with us. Strategically place people in my life as You do. People who are honest, edifying, and supportive. May I also live by Your instruction to love those who are in need of family.

Abram

Abram found himself repeatedly met with blank stares & pseudo-sympathetic nods when trying to explain his sudden departure from Harran. His response of, “God told me to leave my country, my people, & my father’s household for the land He will show me” just wasn’t cutting it. He was starting to realize that blind faith doesn’t translate all that well to those married to the familiar. He silently pondered if that had anything to do with why God chose to call him in the first place.

Uncertainty threatened to cloud his mind as he & his wife, Sarai, were saying their final goodbyes. The question, “What am I doing?” looped through his thoughts demanding a logical answer, but he didn’t have one to give. At this point, the only thing guiding his feet was faith – faith in the God who called him & the words He had spoken. Though they had no map, he had a sneaky suspicion that even if they did, it wouldn’t do them any good. The lay of the land would be forever changed in a matter of time.

As they started in the direction of the unknown, Abram watched children playing obliviously nearby. He marveled at their unending amounts of energy & couldn’t help but grin at the sound of their laughter; it seemed to bring life to his 75 year old bones. Up to this point, fatherhood had evaded him, & as he turned his eyes back to the dirt path before him, he wondered how he could be made into a great nation without having any offspring. Surely God knew he & Sarai weren’t exactly in their prime anymore, right? Nevertheless, Abram continued forward in faith as the Lord had told him – trading the familiar for the foreign – believing that somehow God would one day bless all people through him.



Scripture Reading

Genesis 12:1-9

Challenge:

In Genesis 12, Abram is depicted as the priestly representative that will be an instrumental part of delivering salvation to ALL the nations. The language in Genesis 12 screams of Jesus being the FUTURE King who would, through His life, death, and resurrection, bridge these families back to right standing with God.

Are there uncertainties and stressors in your life currently? Do you need to place them at the foot of the cross? Confess with your mouth trust for the Lord's provision for your life.

Prayer

Everlasting Father, we pray that You would help us trust in You. May we not lean on our own understanding and trust in You completely. We thank you for the patriarchs before us, as we can learn by Abraham's example of faithfulness. Fill us with boldness and confidence in believing who You say You are. Help us in our unbelief today!

Isaac

Isaac reached the mountain first & eagerly removed the wood he'd been carrying on his shoulders. It had been a long, 3 day journey, & they had finally arrived in the region of Moriah. Very little had been explained to Isaac along the way in regards to what was going on – all he knew was that sleepless nights seemed to be plaguing his father, Abraham, since they had left. He watched as his father slowly covered the remaining distance, almost as if he was reluctant to finish the trek. As Abraham gathered the wood & began building an altar, Isaac scanned their surroundings for a lamb; he thought it was odd they had all of the necessary elements for a burnt offering except for the most important one. With no lamb in sight, Isaac looked to his father & recalled what he had told him not long before: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

It took some time, but the altar was eventually completed. As Abraham brushed off his hands, Isaac happened to catch a glimpse of his eyes; they were full of tears. Perhaps it was just some dirt, he thought. Abraham approached his beloved son & took his hands into his own, leaving Isaac speechless as his father began binding him with ropes. As Abraham guided him to the altar, Isaac thought, “Is

this really happening? This doesn't make any sense – where's the lamb? Why would we journey all this way without one? Am I supposed to be taking its place?” He was tempted to use the age-old line, “Does mom know about this?” as a last ditch effort to spare his life, but he refrained. Isaac knew he could resist if he really wanted to, since his elderly father was no match for his youthful strength. Instead, he submitted himself in quiet trust, laying on the altar on top of the wood he had carried. An eerie silence fell over the scene as Abraham raised the knife to slay his beloved promise child.

Just as his hand was about to take the deadly dive, his father froze. The angel of the Lord appeared, calling out his name: “Abraham!... Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Hearing a commotion, Abraham & Isaac turned their eyes, & to their amazement, saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket nearby! His father quickly dropped the knife & sprinted to retrieve the ram as fast as his aged bones would allow him, sacrificing it as a burnt offering instead. As the adrenaline faded & the tension eased, they both rested in how the Lord had spared Isaac by providing a substitute – believing that all nations would soon see His provision in an even greater way because of their obedience.

Scripture Reading

Genesis 22:1-14

Challenge

This is an eerie story in the eyes of most. When the Bible depicts violence, typically things are not as they seem at first glance. This had to be prophetic of some sorts, right? Indeed it was. A substitute was provided.

Compare this story of Isaac and Jesus:

- Both were “beloved sons” (Gen 22:1 & Matt 3:17)
- Both sons carry the wood which would be the instruments of their deaths on their backs (Gen 22:6 & John 19:17)
- Both were led up a mountain by their fathers, as they obediently followed. (Gen 22:3 & Matt 26:39)
- Both stories have a Lamb being sacrificed as a substitute. (Gen 22:8 & John 1:29)

Prayer

O God, You are Jehovah-Jireh, the One who provides. Everlasting Father, in this story we see Jesus. Sacrifice for You has always meant the death of one thing so something else can have new life. You provided the ultimate sacrifice in Your Son, which granted new life to us all. Thank you for sending Your Word to dwell amongst us and thank you for His obedience to die the criminal’s death He did not deserve for us!

Conception

(Joseph's point of view)

The date is set! A wedding is set to transpire in Nazareth. Joseph and Mary had been betrothed for a few months at this point. Betrothal was an official and binding engagement time before the actual wedding took place – something that could only be nullified through divorce. Much of Joseph's time was spent on preparing a place for him and his wife. Periodically, Joseph took breaks to surprise his wife in town to help gather water and to help her take it to her parents' house. He was kind, gentle, and compassionate in his love for his sweet Mary. Time spent together sped by – after all, “time flies when you're having fun.” Conversations were full of wedding organizations, names of their future children, and necessities for the new homestead. Life was..just that, full of life. “Happy Ever After” was at their fingertips, and joy daily heaped up in their hearts. Until one day, Mary quietly uttered the dreadful words, “We have to talk...”

The natural response for a man when met with this comment is to resort to the worst possible scenario. “What could this be about? Did I do something wrong?

Does she still like me?” all raced through Joseph's mind. As Mary joyfully told Joseph what seemed like “good news” to her, Joseph's face turned greenish-white and his knees buckled as his heart was wrung out. “I'm pregnant!” Joseph didn't understand, nor did her story make any sense. With his heart bleeding, he finally formulated a response, “How could you? After all of this, how could you do this to me?” There was no way she was pregnant by Joseph. Jewish law strictly required purity before the wedding ceremony, and they had indeed been pure. Joseph was convinced she was an adulteress, but he knew taking this matter to the courts would bring disgrace not only to Mary and her family, but most importantly, to God. So he planned to divorce her discreetly.

The night before the divorce was to be enacted, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is [indeed] of the Holy Spirit.” Startled, Joseph hopped out of bed and made his way to Mary's parents' house. “The angel of the Lord came to me last night in a dream, and I still want to marry you! Will you?” “Of course!” Mary exclaimed, as she leaped into Joseph's arms. Once the exhilarating moment settled, Mary asked, “Did the angel say



anything else?” Joseph swiftly countered, “YES! We are to name Him...Jesus.”

Traditionally, it was the privilege of Jewish parents to name their children; however, throughout the Old Testament, when a child was born for specific historical and redemptive purposes, God Himself would take on the responsibility of naming the child, signifying that the child belonged to Him, the Everlasting Father. This Son's purpose was more grand than they could've ever imagined.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 1:18-25

Challenge

When He was finally born, Joseph had the right to proclaim that Jesus was not his flesh and blood. Joseph instead embraced Jesus as his own son. He protected Jesus from Herod by fleeing to Egypt. He nurtured and cared for Him. He even taught Jesus his own trade, carpentry. Joseph is an incredible reminder of what a good father is like: protective, providing, loving. In the end, Jesus grew up with two fathers: One who was His perfect heavenly Father and the other who was his righteous, humble, hard-working earthly father.

Parenting is 100% discipleship, but anyone can have spiritual fathers and children. Maybe you have heard of being the “Issac” of the “Abraham-Isaac-Jacob” discipleship pyramid. Today, find your “Abraham,” someone who can mentor you. Also, find a “Jacob,” someone who you can pour into.

Prayer

Father, I bow my knees before You and Your Son, Jesus Christ. By the riches of your glory, grant us strength and power through the Holy Spirit in our inner being. Ground us in love and fill us with all the fullness of God. Open our eyes to discipleship opportunities. To disciple and to also be able to set our pride aside in order to recognize our need for discipleship ourselves. Surround me with people who will edify and encourage me, Lord. Thank You for going before me!

Zechariah

A holy anticipation permeated the atmosphere as Zechariah worshipfully pondered the weight of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Twenty-four priestly divisions were responsible for managing the affairs of the temple, & Zechariah belonged to the 8th - the division of Abijah - literally meaning, "Jehovah is my Father." Major pilgrim festivals aside, each priestly division only served in the temple for two weeks out of the year. With each division consisting of such a great number of priests (as many as 20,000 in Jesus' day), each individual priest received the honor of burning incense only once in his lifetime. The time had come, the lots had been cast, & the outcome had been determined. It was officially Zechariah's & his division's turn to be on duty, & he had been chosen to serve as priest before God.

Before him stood the golden altar of incense; this 3 foot tall, 18 square inch table contained burning coals with little wisps of smoke rising up, ready for the incense. To his right was the table of shewbread, & to his left was the golden lampstand - the only source of light in the holy place. Just beyond the golden

altar, separating Zechariah from the most holy place - the Holy of Holies - was a thick, dense curtain. No ordinary man on any ordinary day could move beyond the curtain; only the high priest on the Day of Atonement had the permission to enter at his own risk, as one irreverent misstep could be fatal. With his fragile human nature in mind, Zechariah inhaled deeply & slowly exhaled before praying to God on the nation's behalf. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared before Zechariah, startling him & interrupting his passionate praying with a bold declaration: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, & you are to call him John. He will be a joy & delight to you, & many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord... & he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit & power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children & the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Overwhelmed by the impossibility, Zechariah too eagerly questioned the heaven-sent messenger: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man & my wife is well along in years." The angel retorted:



“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, & I have been sent to speak to you & to tell you this good news...” Zechariah must have forgotten how God had provided a son for Abraham & Sarah in spite of their barrenness & old age. In his unbelief, Zechariah was struck silent & told his muteness would only expire upon the birth of their foretold son, John, who would pave the way for the coming Messiah, the Son of God. Who could do such miraculous things, turning the hearts of fathers to their children & giving children to the childless? Only the Everlasting Father Himself.

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:5-25

Challenge

Gabriel appeared to Mary foretelling a birth just as he did to Zechariah. However, there is a significant difference in these two stories we should all grasp. Mary’s reverent response was “Here I am, the Lord’s servant-girl; let it be done according to Your word” and Zechariah countered, “Impossible! We are too old.” Zechariah’s reaction was consumed by confusion and doubt. Mary’s humble answer to Gabriel’s news was one of sacrificial obedience.

Mary’s words have rung throughout the years as a vibrant model of how we should respond to God’s unexpected vocation.

“Obedience is not measured by our ability to obey laws and principles, obedience is measured by our response to God’s voice.”

– Bill Johnson. What does this quote speak to you? Discuss it with a friend.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, give me ears to hear Your voice. Impart in me wisdom and understanding, for without You, I can do nothing of good measure. You are my guiding Light. I will be a doer of Your word, not just a mere listener. Your love for me exceeds my imagination. As You have loved me, so I will love you and remain in Your love by obeying – even when it doesn’t make sense. Your will is perfect and I place the entirety of my trust in You and You alone.

Prodigal Son

The father couldn't believe what he was hearing – his youngest son's request was like a dagger plunged into his heart. "Father, give me my share of the estate." The son's eagerness to discuss acquiring his inheritance so prematurely showed such blatant disregard for his father & for the Mosaic regulations in general; conversations like these were only supposed to take place after a person's death, not while they still had a pulse. Insulting the one who gave him life clearly didn't seem to faze the son at all; the words "You're dead to me," might as well have come out of his mouth! Nevertheless, the father met his son's ill & urgent demands by promptly dividing his property – watching with tear-filled eyes as his youngest gathered everything he now had & left without even saying goodbye.

The son didn't look back as he made his way forward – the thought of turning around never even crossed his mind. Why would it? He was free! His eyes were open, beholding sights never before seen in the confinements of his father's home. Distant countries beckoned him & his new wealth enticingly, providing him with a plethora of pleasurable options for spending his

time & money. Decisions, decisions – what would he choose?! Where would he go?! The whole world seemed to be at his fingertips, with his riches & desires as his compass! The pull of a wild life was too powerful to resist, as his previous simpler & more settled life left a unsatisfying taste in his mouth. "What's the harm in living a little?" he thought. Surely some spontaneous, borderline reckless festivities would do the trick in cleansing his palate!

As quickly as his wealth came, it deserted him just as fast; turns out riches make a lousy & unreliable foundation. A perfect storm had found the son, now completely broke & hungry due to the severe famine in the land that once promised never-ending surplus. With nothing & no one to fall back on, pigs in a fellow citizen's fields became his closest companions. He often found himself envying the swine, as they always seemed to have something to eat – unlike him; his stomach ached from hunger, yet it was seldom filled. For the first time since his departure, his mind wandered to his father, & his heart yearned for him. "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, & here I am starving to death!" Not expecting to be received back as a son, perhaps his father would embrace him as a servant instead. With only one way to find out, he got up & left for the home he so willingly deserted.



While he was still a long way off, the son spotted his father, & timidity took over as he rehearsed his apology. A brief glance turned into a double-take as he saw his dad sprinting full speed towards him – an unprecedented act in light of Near Eastern cultural protocol. The son's stride halted as his father eagerly embraced him with a hug & a kiss; the practiced apology didn't have the time to leave his lips, for his father's excitement interrupted it: "Quick! Bring the best robe & put it on him. Put a ring on his finger & sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf & kill it. Let's have a feast & celebrate. For this son of mine was dead & is alive again; he was lost & is found!" The son, once estranged, now found himself miraculously received, reconciled, & restored by father – almost as if he had never even left.

Scripture Reading

Luke 15:11-24

Challenge

Jesus often threw dinner parties and attended banquets with religious leaders. In fact, He told this story at one of those banquet dinners. You can only imagine the fumes coming from their heads as he was clearly comparing them to the "elder son." The father of this parable depicts God's love for His children and our need

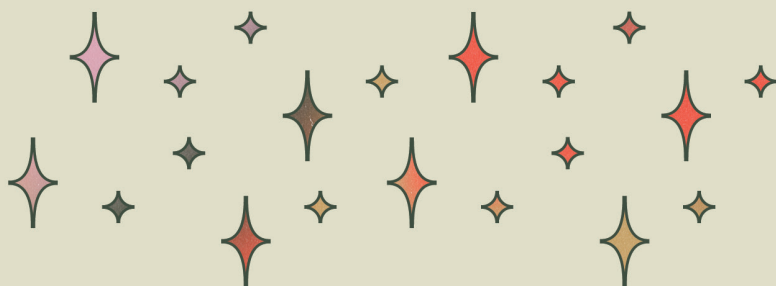
for a merciful Father. His love allowed the rebellion of his son, like that of Israel's rebellion, and also respected human will. The father knew that the son made a foolish and greedy request, yet allowed him to go his course nonetheless. Like the son's father, Our Heavenly Father allows us to wander off into a self-inflicted exile; however, there is always a way back. Jesus used this story to communicate the way back and the only entry point into His Kingdom. It was not privilege and power but to simply humble yourself and recognize your need for God's mercy. What did you learn about God's love & forgiveness in this story? How does free will & love live at the same address?

Prayer

Everlasting Father, Thank You for Your continued presence with us. Thank You for graciously choosing to be in our midst, for chasing after the lost, for lifting our burdens, and for securing the Heavenly place You have prepared for us. Your divine Words bring so much hope and comfort to our hearts. May we cling to Your faithfulness displayed, that we can come back to Your love even when we've gone recklessly astray. Remind us daily that victory and salvation are found in You alone, Lord.

WEEK 4

Prince of Peace



Instructions Before Beginning

1. Prepare your speaker and queue “Glory In The Highest” by Travis Cottrell for the lighting of the Prince of Peace Candle.
2. Have your Bible turned to Acts 4 and Revelation 5 marked for today’s readings.
3. Share a meal as a family before heading into the devotional and candle lighting time.

Prince of Shalom

Peace – it had developed an entirely different meaning. The world, culture, society, & even the government had kidnapped the word & given it a new definition, a new identity. When the word “peace” came to mind, memories of harsh militant leaders forcefully squelching uprisings & rebellions flashed through their minds. It often had the stench of arrogance with it, as those enforcing it seemed to believe that they themselves were the source of stability. Peace, in these times, was a clenched fist ready to bludgeon anyone who dared question it & its authenticity.

The contrast between biblical peace & the worldly version they had come to know was astonishing. The peace of the Old Testament, Shalom, spoke to completeness & wholeness, so much so that it often referred to a perfectly whole stone entirely void of cracks. Israel’s kings were supposed to cultivate this kind of peace with their

leadership, but that was sadly rarely realized. Some were good, most were bad, but all left the hearts of their people hollow & yearning for something that seemed unattainable.

They were left to dream of the days when their promised Savior would arrive, the one the prophet Isaiah had spoken about: the Prince of Shalom. To be crowned by something is to be characterized by it, & this Prince would be crowned by peace. With His entrance, He would rattle Roman rule & every administration to come. There would be no need to overthrow other kingdoms, for He would establish His own – one that would forever supersede & exceed any reign this earth has ever known. His throne would be secure & without any faults or fractures in its foundation, & His rule would be one of peace – the kind with the power to complete & restore, not tear down & destroy. He would make things right in the purest way possible, but He would do so in a way no one expected. This Prince of Shalom wouldn’t come to power by brute force; rather, He would come to us all in the form of a child, & servanthood would be His sword.

Scripture Reading

Acts 4:29-35

Rev 5:6-14

Candle Lighting

Play “Glory In The Highest” by Travis Cottrell as you light the Prince of Peace Candle.

Prayer

Prince of Peace, we exalt your Name! Thank you for not only coming as the ultimate example of servanthood and meekness, but that You are still able to calm anxiety and stress in my heart today. Keep us from being overwhelmed by the chaos of the world as we focus our entire being on You. We bless You, Father, for not only the peace we have with God through the forgiveness of sins by the blood of Jesus Christ Your Son, but also Your promise of unending peace when we abide in You.

Challenge

Jesus’ kingdom began to rapidly advance as people embodied His example of servanthood. As we read in Acts 4, we see what the power of prayer and unity can do! Jesus and his early followers absolutely destroyed the construct of “peace” in their days. When we have Jesus, we are called to see the world through a different lens. This lens we are presented with is a lens that sees Jesus as the little Lamb of Revelation 5, slain for “every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Dwell today on the FACT that ALL of human history converges towards the feet of Jesus, the resurrected and reigning little Lamb! What’s the difference between unity and uniformity? Discuss with your family or with a friend this week.

Deborah's Story

A fellow Christ-follower's story of how the Prince of Peace delivers peace that surpasses all understanding...

The year was 2021, and it was like a bomb had exploded right in the center of Deborah's family. Having known & walked with the Lord for 53 years, she had faced many difficult life experiences, but nothing like this. For months, Deborah had recognized a growing darkness coming into her daughter's life, but she wasn't sure why. The thing she feared, yet she hoped and prayed would never happen, did happen - her beautiful, loving daughter had taken her own life. The prayers she prayed, the declarations of faith, & even her trust in her Savior's abiding love all appeared to be for nothing. In one shattering moment, it was done - finished.

When you do all you know to do and yet the opposite of what you prayed for happens, what do you do? Where do you go? Who has the words of life, if any? Where can you find peace? Not only that, how can there even be peace in a tragedy like this? Questions like these quaked through Deborah's mind, yet she knew there was only One who could hold & care

for her aching soul: the Prince of Peace. He spoke into her heart, "You don't have to understand, only trust Me." Day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment, He gently led her through the chaos one step at a time. Some days, the brokenness surrounded her on all sides, blinding her vision, but she could still hear her Savior say: "Bring me the pieces. Draw on My Word that is in your heart." Never leaving her side, her wonderful Shepherd carried her, comforted her, and always brought her back to the path.

Nineteen months have passed since losing her daughter and many questions remain. Deborah still finds herself searching through the shattered fragments knowing that she may never understand why these things happened. Though her heart still aches with the loss, she is choosing day by day and moment by moment to trust Jesus and rest in His peace - a peace that surpasses all understanding & possesses the power to pervade the deepest chaos & confusion. Christ is her peace, has given her peace in the storm, and is walking her through the broken places. Even now, He is giving her purpose for her pain, healing her heart, and mending her brokenness - little by little.



Scripture Reading

I Corinthians 13:12

John 14:27

John 16:33

Hebrews 13:20-21

Challenge

Losing a loved one is never easy. Whether the loss is suicidal, accidental, or even of natural causes, finding peace often seems impossible or too distant to grasp. Peace doesn't come from your surroundings as they are destined to change as the wind does. True peace comes from knowing Whose you are, and who your true identity is in Him. In loss, we can find our footing in the shifting sands of emotions and mental anguish by looking to Jesus who promised, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." Stand on God's Word in times like this, for his Word teaches us the greatest truth, offers the greatest good, meets the greatest need, holds out the greatest hope.

Prayer

Lord, I know You are near to those who are brokenhearted and You rescue those who have broken spirits. I pray You would fill all of those who are stricken with loss with Your comfort as the trouble and sufferings of loss abound. You hear every cry and see every tear. You are the Prince of Peace, our Redeemer, and our Healer. You heal broken hearts and bind up wounds, in You is where we find our hope for a better day. Plant firmly in us Your peace, that which passes all understanding.

Samuel

The situation surrounding Saul was demoralizing, so much so that Samuel couldn't believe his eyes; things had gotten so incredibly ugly. One second, Samuel was anointing him as king, & then the next, he was rebuking Saul's blatant disobedience & serving him an eviction notice straight from the Lord. Samuel could almost see the headline now: "Saul Rejected as King by The King." Slowly but surely, a mental slump took Samuel hostage as he seemed to take the demotion personally. "My purpose, my role, is to see things - to perceive them. How did I not see this coming?" he thought. Saul, who was once undoubtedly full of promise, now brought Samuel nothing but grief. With his head hung low, the only thing he had the brainpower to formulate was, "Now what?" Yet another king who brought Israel more chaos than peace.

Apparently Samuel's mourning had overstayed its welcome - so much so that the Lord saw fit to interrupt: "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil & be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

Already? How was the Lord so eager to move on after this embarrassing & borderline traumatic experience? The perceived haste only added to Samuel's reluctance, & understandably so. Should Saul hear of these extracurricular activities, the next thing Samuel would see would be heaven.

The potential threats to Samuel's life didn't seem to faze the Lord, for He didn't recant His instructions. With the consequences of disobedience fresh on his mind, Samuel chose to forsake the former things by quickly making his way to Bethlehem.

Perhaps better things truly were ahead. Upon his arrival, as Jesse & his sons graced Samuel with their presences, Samuel instantly took notice of Eliab; surely he was the worthy candidate! Seeing the need to interrupt Samuel yet again, the Lord did: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Seven more of Jesse's sons passed in front of Samuel, & to his dismay, the Lord chose none of them! As a last resort, Jesse sent for his youngest son, David, who had been left behind to tend the

sheep – not that David minded, though; he considered the shepherd fields as his own personal sanctuary of sorts. As soon as David arrived before Samuel, the Lord gave His long-awaited approval: “Rise & anoint him; this is the one.” Unlike Saul, David was a man after God’s own heart, & from his line would come the King to establish the missing peace.

Scripture Reading

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Philippians 4:4-9

Challenge

Is the peace of your heart being disrupted due to a label someone has placed on you? Eliab was the spitting image of what a king should look like. However, the anointing of the Lord was not on him. God chose the cute little shepherd boy, David, who was inexperienced and young. The thing about labels is that they are surface level, what matters to the Prince of Peace is the heart. Where is your TRUE identity? In the Prince of Peace who delivers the peace that surpasses all understanding or in what people ‘label’ you as? Dwell NOT on the negative things people label you as!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I know and firmly believe all the things You proclaim about me. I am Your child. I am beloved. I am a masterpiece. I am chosen. I am forgiven. I am a new creation. I am redeemed. I am worth more than gold. I am a citizen of heaven. I am an heir of God. My identity is not built on the things of this dark world. Let no words against me harm me, for I am more precious and valuable in Your eyes. No one knows me more than You. Instill in me the confidence to be exactly who You have called me to be.

Threat of Another Exile

The Israeli kingdom had been split for years as rumors were being flung around all of Judah. “Assyria is on their way! Our king is on his deathbed!” Judah finally had a king who truly trusted in the Lord. Hezekiah ruled like that of his relative, King David, listening to the counsel of Yahweh’s prophets. He stood out like a sturdy thumb among sore ones, but it appeared his rule was coming to a close. Good kings were hard to come by, and the fear of yet another exile saturated the hearts and minds of God’s people. After all, the rest of Israel had just been swept away into captivity due to their sin against God. The King of Assyria not only uprooted the descendants of Israel and carried all except Judah into exile, but he also filled their land with new inhabitants from Babylon and other strange lands. Now, he was marching up to Jerusalem’s door.

As Israel’s “Promised Land” seemed to be slipping through their grips, God heard Hezekiah’s invocations for healing and added 15 years to his life. *BANG BANG BANG* Hezekiah told his men to be on guard. “Who is it?!” “A messenger of Senneacherib, King of Assyria.” The messenger entered the room, handing Hezekiah a letter stating that Assyria was coming and their “god” wasn’t going to stop them. Immediately, Hezekiah fell to his face and prayed to the Lord, “Deliver us from his hands, You alone, O Lord, are God!” Isaiah, the Lord’s prophet, sent to Hezekiah with confirmation of God hearing his prayers. As the sun set, echoes of war rang out from beyond the walls of Jerusalem. The angel of the Lord defended Jerusalem, and Assyria’s king retreated, leaving Judah alone. God hadn’t forgotten His remnant! Redemption and peace for Judah, for now, at least.

Another knock fell upon the doors of Jerusalem from the dreaded Babylonians. “What could they want?” Upon hearing of Hezekiah’s miraculous recovery, Babylon brought forth a present and letters. The genuine compliments & honorable recognition went straight to Hezekiah’s head, & as a result, he showed the Babylonian men everything - all of



their gold, spices, and oil. Isaiah noticed Hezekiah's men leading foreigners from the recently restored temple and instantly received a word from the Lord, "Surely, everything we have will be carried into Babylon, even our people." This announcement of a future exile fell on the ears of God's people, and anguish set in again. "How could the God of peace be so vicious? Peace never lasts!" Isaiah yet again proclaimed to the discomforted people of Judah, "Be comforted! A voice is calling, 'Prepare the way and clear the path for the triumphant King. The glory of the Lord will be revealed.'" A future King was to bear their transgressions and be crushed for their iniquities, & only through Him would everlasting peace be established.

Scripture Reading

Isaiah 39:5-40:5

Luke 5:16

Challenge

Jerusalem was to be the radiating heart of a world of completeness and wholeness. By definition, Jerusalem can mean "foundation/city of peace."

Having a place of peace seemed to be of extreme importance to Jesus as He often disappeared to find solitude with the Father. Oftentimes, we cling to things that give a false sense of peace - like our cell phones, Netflix, friends, relationships, etc. Instead, we need to create a routine of finding silence and solitude. Create in your home a place for this kind of solitude, a place of refuge to spend time with God. When we sense an exile from peace, let us find ourselves here at the feet of Jesus, our true Peace.

Prayer

I pause today, Father, to rest and commune with you. Help me to be eager to come to You when the terror of the world seems to be louder than Your voice. Instill in me a spirit of stillness and understanding that You are God. Lighten any tense muscles or weary nerves or worked-up emotions. Point me to solitude and silence. Keep me calm in spirit so I may be more responsive to Your presence. You have the last say, God. Your Kingdom is an everlasting one, one of peace. I cling to the peace You delivered to us through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Messiah.

Shepherds

On the outskirts of Bethlehem, gathered together on an ordinary night, a gentle breeze danced through the air & across their skin as the shepherds were tending to their flocks. Though their tents were nearby, slumber was not on the agenda. They were alert, keeping their eyes peeled for any sign of danger. Every now & then, a sheep would threaten to stray from the rest into the dark abyss, only to be quickly corralled back to the safety of the herd. It was a predictable part of the job as sheep have a thing for wandering. The stars & moon shone brightly, penetrating the darkness with enough light to take in the surroundings. Fields & sheep in every direction – it was just another night, or so they thought.

Flock tending, at least this kind, carried a certain weight with it. These weren't just ordinary sheep, but Passover lambs – born & raised for centuries in Bethlehem for the sole purpose of being used for sacrifices at the temple. The shepherds were constantly reminded of their need to be made right with God & the amount of unblemished blood it took to make that happen. They

often wondered, “If only there was a way to address it once & for all...”

All of a sudden, in the middle of their ordinary night, an other-worldly figure appeared before them, covered in a glory & a brilliance unlike anything their common eyes had seen. The angel met their silent terror with a message: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger.” The one angel was then joined by a heavenly choir, roaring their praises to God: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, & on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

As quickly as the angels had appeared, they vanished – leaving the shepherds to process what had just taken place. A Savior? THE Messiah? A baby? Wrapped in cloths lying in a manger?? The sign clicked with the shepherds! Why? Newborn sacrificial lambs were carefully inspected, & once determined to be without blemish, the shepherds would wrap them in swaddling cloths & lay them in a manger. So they took off to Bethlehem, in search of the Lamb of God.

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:8-20

Challenge

Play “What Child Is This.” Imagine what it would’ve been like to be there in the field half asleep when the angel of the Lord appeared to these shepherds. Not only did the angel just appear, but he told of THE Messiah’s birth. They eagerly journeyed over to Bethlehem, the city of David, a prophetic fulfillment.

Prayer

Pray the Shepherds Prayer of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along the right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”

Herod

“Where did that one come from? Am I crazy, or was that not there before?” All eyes were directed towards the night sky as everyone stood perplexed. Curiosity & intrigue filled some hearts, while others shuddered. Who knew an unfamiliar star could capture the attention of an entire nation & its king? In the palace, eyes glanced uneasily as concern consumed the faces of those in his presence. Herod was visibly disturbed. The implications were clear – it was common knowledge that the appearance of a new star over a certain land often represented the birth of a king in that particular country. And this star? Well, it seemed to have fixed its position over Bethlehem in Judea. Herod’s Judea.

Perhaps his throne was starting to feel a little shaky because it was never truly his throne to begin with. Herod was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, who sold his birthrights & blessings to his brother Jacob for the small price of a bowl of soup. Turns out immediate gratification isn’t all it’s cracked up to be – just ask Esau. Or

Adam & Eve. Based on his lineage alone, Herod was unqualified for his position. This star, & the Messiah it represented, threatened to snatch Herod’s throne from underneath him & expose him for the puppet king he really was.

Being a cunning diplomat, Herod knew how to exploit people, so he promptly put his skills to work. He secretly summoned the Magi in an attempt to extract more information on the star, specifically the exact time it appeared in the sky. “Go & search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go & worship him.” His eloquent words to the Magi seemed to do a decent job of hiding his heart’s insidious motives; in reality, he had no desire to worship the newborn king, but to kill him. After all, what better way to protect his throne than to prevent the child from ever getting to it in the first place? In an attempt to preserve his power, Herod orders the slaughter of all Bethlehem’s boys aged 2 & under. While mourning filled the atmosphere & innocent blood flowed through the streets, Herod was finally able to get a good night’s sleep, “For,” so he thought, “this throne is officially mine to keep.”

Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:1-18

Challenge

“There is infinite power even in an infant Savior.” –Spurgeon

The Star was stationed and the Scepter was born which was spoken of in Numbers 24:17. It seemed to echo around the world. The Magi traveled into Jerusalem seeking answers. They were redirected 6 miles south to the city of David. However, they didn't just bring themselves, they brought gifts to honor the newborn King. What are the 3 gifts they brought? What do they represent?

Prayer

Father, I am so thankful for the endless love and hope You bestowed upon Your Son. The offering of my life may look a little different than the Magi, but what I do have is my life. Take it, Prince of Peace. Father, as your prophet Micah wrote, “What do [You] require of [us]? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [You].” That is what I will do all of my days. I will seek to continuously be filled with the Spirit. Trusting Your Holy Spirit to guide me into all truths. Living my life as a perpetual sacrifice for You, God!

Burning Bush

The savior acts of Joseph, son of Jacob, began to become a fairytale. The name of the God of the Israelites, somewhat forgotten, was silently echoing off into the distance. Peace was a foreign word, spoken only in a hopeful manner. Pharaoh, the new ruler of all of Egypt, was NOT a fan of how fruitful and numerous the Israelites were in his land. “Let’s afflict them with harsh labor!” Not only did the harsh labor not hinder God’s chosen people, it led to even more multiplication of the family of God. Pharaoh had to react. His people would be choked out if the Israelites ever revolted. After his second attempt to kill off the sons of Israel he utters the decree to just drown all the new baby boys in the Nile River. Around this time, two priestly descendants of Levi had a son and were afraid the Egyptian warriors would kill them if they didn’t follow Pharaoh’s decree. In a hail mary attempt to ensure the boy’s safety, his mother crafted a miniature version of Noah’s ark. Using papyrus reeds and tar, she formed the ship which would usher the baby boy right into the hands of the daughter of Pharaoh. Showing pity she kept him and raised him alongside the Egyptian boys, naming him Moses.

Years passed as Moses went out to the laborers’ fields and his eyes were opened to their harsh treatment. “Where have the peaceful days of Joseph gone? This must end, these are my family!” Visibly frustrated, he surveyed the land catching a glimpse of an Egyptian beating one of his Hebrew brothers off in the distance. His anger burned as he seized the man after looking both ways and struck him dead. Troubled with apprehension and fear of his death, he fled from Pharaoh’s rage to the land of one of the sons of Abraham, the land of Midian. Tired from all of his running, he found rest and refreshment at a well. Seven sisters appeared over the horizon and seemed to be holding pales. As they arrived, Moses noticed their irritation of the free-spoken shepherds who were gathering water for their flocks. Moses stood in the gap for them and even aided them. Receiving favor from their father, Jethro, Moses found himself eating a meal with the whole family that evening. Jethro, a priest and shepherd, eventually gave over to Moses his daughter Zipporah’s hand in marriage. Terrified to go back, Moses—an educated and once recognized prince—began a peaceful new life by welcoming his first son into the world and working humbly as a shepherd for his father-in-law in Midian.

One day when Moses led his flock to Mt. Horeb, also called Mt. Sinai or the mountain of God. A marvelous light



like that of a bright star appeared over his shoulder. To his amazement, a bush was burning, yet it wasn't consumed. Flabbergasted as he examined it, the bush said his name! "Moses, Moses! Here I am! Remove your sandals but be careful not to come any closer." Moses, still bewildered, acts accordingly and slowly pulls off his sandals. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face quickly as every story he heard about his God began to race through his mind. The bush spoke again, "I have heard of the sufferings and seen the oppression of the sons of Israel and I have a plan for peace. I am going to send YOU to Pharaoh so that you may bring My people out of Egypt. So GO! Tell them I AM WHO I AM sent you and that I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all of My miracles and Pharaoh will let you go. You will take My people into a land flowing with milk and honey." Yahweh's anointing and commissioning of Moses would set the pace for the Someone greater to come. Another One who would deliver true peace to those who are oppressed and afflicted.

Scripture Reading

Exodus 3:1-15

Ephesians 4:32

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

Challenge

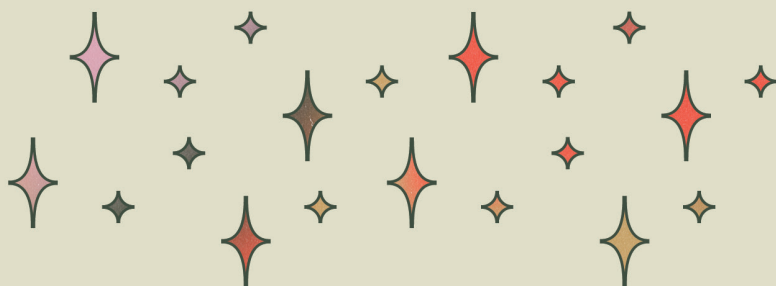
The Hebrew word used to describe the bush comes from the word "to stick or to prick," which insinuates it to be a thorn-bush or bramble. Automatically, this should transport us to the cross where Jesus, crowned with thorns, endured the fires of judgment and yet was not consumed by it. The bush could metaphorically represent us afflicted but not destroyed as God is working endlessly in the midst of our struggle. Moses was commissioned to lead his people from turmoil and enslavement to a place and state of peace, with God in their midst.

Prayer

King of Kings, Lord of Lords, thank You that You possess infinite riches of wisdom, goodness and power. Bring peace in all my relationships, Lord. Help me to work for the restoration of relationships that are broken down. Bless me with Your love that I may love others who have hurt me. Bless me with Your peace that I may bring calmness instead of confidence. May You establish my heart as blameless in holiness before You. Fill me with a passion for reconciliation. You are our peace!

December 25

Immanuel Is Here



Instructions Before Beginning

With your Bibles opened to Luke 2, have “Christmas Day” by Michael W. Smith queued to be played in the background for the lighting of the Jesus Candle.

2. As we welcome our Savior into the world, have the children prepare the table with the Jesus Candle. Have the cardstock, scissors, markers, and string arranged for the Christmas challenge.

3. Share a meal together – plan for something special and unique about this final one.

Immanuel Is Here

Joseph frantically ran door to door with his blister-covered feet in an attempt to find a comfortable place for Mary to have the baby. His urgent pace & quick movements caused dirt to stir through the streets, forming a fog that followed him & Mary everywhere they went. His heart pounded through his chest as panic began to set in; every one of his knocks was met with a resounding rejection: “We have no room! Find somewhere else!” “Do you people have no sympathy?! My wife is in labor!” Joseph pleaded. It was no use, as his distraught screams fell on deaf ears & hardened hearts. With so many people in town due to the census, it would be a miracle to find any room to spare.

Meanwhile, Mary had come to terms with the fact that there was absolutely no way to comfortably sit on a donkey while 9 months pregnant & experiencing contractions. With every passing minute, the pain was only intensifying. Looking to the heavens & clenching her jaw to keep herself from screaming, Mary begged God to be her strength & to provide her

& Joseph with a place to safely bring this baby into the world. Already drenched in sweat, she clutched her belly hoping to have her prayers answered & to receive any level of much-needed relief.

“I found a place!!” Joseph exclaimed, running towards Mary. Sweeter news than this could not have greeted her ears. Joseph did his best to gently yet swiftly guide the donkey to their final destination. It wasn’t much to look at once they got there; in fact, it was more fitting for accommodating animals than bringing a child into the world. Nevertheless, as time was of the essence, Joseph grabbed Mary from the donkey & softly laid her on the ground. Almost immediately, Mary released her previously pent-up screams, startling the animals surrounding them. After what seemed like an insufferable amount of time, a new scream suddenly entered the atmosphere that sent shockwaves throughout eternity; He was here. The long-awaited Immanuel had finally arrived, & for the first time ever, the world could behold the face of God.

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:1-21

Candle Lighting

Play “Christmas Day” by Michael W. Smith as you light the final candle...the Jesus Candle.

Prayer

Father, We are filled with gratitude this day as we celebrate the birth of Your son Jesus Christ. The promised Messiah had finally come, in the most unusual way. As angels proclaimed the good news, and shepherds came to see this child, the world changed. For Your son came to redeem. To remove the veil between us and you. To be our Advocate, our Rescuer, our Redeemer, our King. May we be mindful of all the ways You are continuing to do Your work on this earth. All the ways You continue to restore, to bring shalom once again. And may we be mindful of how we are part of Your great work to further Your Kingdom this day.

Challenge

JESUS IS HERE! We have been immersed this Advent in how Jesus is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Our Lord Jesus is the climax of all of human history! Grab the cardstock paper and cut out 10 or more stars. Write “Jesus is” on each one and record what describes Jesus to you. String the stars and hang them from the mantle or make them ornaments! Feel free to decorate them!



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