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FOR CHRIST, WE WAIT

AN ADVENT STUDY
of the PSALMS OF ASCENT

MICAH LANG

“I’m thankful for this Advent devotional, which takes us by the hand and gently guides us through the Psalms of Ascent toward Christmas, showing us the beauty and excellence of Jesus Christ. Read it and grow in your love for Jesus this Christmas.”

Stephen Witmer

Lead Pastor, Pepperell Christian Fellowship; Author of *A Big Gospel in Small Places* and *Eternity Changes Everything*

“Micah has done a wonderful job conveying to his readers the Scriptural precedent of hoping, preparing, rejoicing in, and adoring our Savior, Jesus, during the Advent season. Drawing truths from the Psalms of Ascent, Micah very practically and graciously points the Christian’s eyes upward to God and away from sin and self. We will all do well to make *For Christ We Wait* a part of our efforts to glory in God as we anticipate Christmas, and his glorious return one day soon.”

Joel Littlefield

Preaching and planting pastor, New City Church;
Author of *Beeline to the Cross*

“This is a devotional that will certainly prepare your heart’s focus for Christmas. But to be honest, this book is bigger than Christmas because it carries us through our entire journey until the final coming of the God-Man, Jesus. It’s also a relief to find a devotional that is robust, relational, and accessible for a busy season. May God use this heartfelt book from Micah to bring joy and hope into our lives and the world around us.”

Dan Church

Lead Pastor, South Lewiston Baptist Church

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*For Christ, We Wait:
An Advent Study of the Psalms of Ascent*

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INTRODUCTION

Advent & the Songs of Ascent

What is Advent?

Advent means “coming.” The season of Advent is an annual season of anticipation of the celebration of Christmas. Historically, Christians have used this season to reflect on what is most important about Christmas: the coming of Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners. Typically, the four weeks of Advent have focused on different themes related to God’s work at Christmas. The Advent in view is primarily Jesus’ first coming; however, we also look forward to the Second Advent when Christ comes again. Many believers have found an intentional centering of the mind and heart around Christ during Advent to be both spiritually enriching and deeply worshipful. Consider how you might take time amidst the busyness of Christmas planning and holiday events to slow down, consider Christ, and remember what he has done.

What are the Songs of Ascent?

In the midst of the Psalms come a collection of songs starting in Psalm 120 and going through Psalm 134, all joined by this idea of “ascending.” These songs come in the midst of Israel’s rebellion and captivity and look forward to when the Messiah will come, rescue them from their captivity, and restore them to glory and peace. There is a tension between what is and what should be. There is sorrow over what currently is happening but hope in what will come to be. Many Jews would recite these songs step by step as they walked up to the temple in Jerusalem. The songs are meant to give a voice to our suffering while also pulling us into the light of God’s promises. We see many of these promises fulfilled in the coming of Christ and some yet to be consummated when he comes again.

Why meditate on these songs during Advent?

There is anticipation and hope within the Songs of Ascent that do well to prepare our hearts for the good news of Christmas. We need to feel the tension as we await the coming of Jesus. Will God keep his promises as we hope in him? In a similar way to the psalmist, we are still waiting. We await the return of Jesus Christ and long to see him restore all things, save us from the darkness of this fallen world, and bring us into glory. The beautiful hope we can feel through these songs is that as sure as Jesus came the first time, he will come the second time. We long for his return but we know the New Jerusalem is coming. Home is not far away.

In Advent there are four traditional themes: hope, preparation, joy, and love. In reading the Songs of Ascent, one can quickly find how all four themes permeate all of these psalms. Because of this, it is good meditate on how the psalmist expresses hope, preparation, joy, and love for God. It is also good to reflect on how Christ is the fulfillment of what the psalmist is longing for. Christ is the answer!

How should I use this devotional?

Churches typically begin celebrating the season of Advent four Sundays before Christmas, with its culmination at Christmas Eve. Accordingly, this devotional is structured around the “four weeks” of Advent; however, there are 24 devotionals so that one can easily follow along daily with the calendar month of December.

Each meditation includes a passage, a devotional, and a prayer. Each week there is also a practical devotional, meant to spur thoughtfulness and conversation around putting into practice the theme for that week. Consider meditating on these devotionals as a supplement to your quiet time or read them with your family or small group. Read carefully. Meditate thoughtfully. Pray vulnerably.

WEEK 1

*“God, we hope
* in your promises.”*

PSALMS 120-123

1

THE FIRST WEEK

Hope in God's promises

READ

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

ISAIAH 9:2, 6-7

CONSIDER

I love autumn. I love the wearing of sweaters, the picking of apples, the vibrant colors of the trees. But autumn is also a reminder that winter is coming. As trees become empty and the grip of winter's chill closes in, we are reminded that seasons of darkness and cold come upon all of us. It is no wonder that God so designed the universe to experience the daily contrast of darkness and light. God often uses the picture of darkness in scripture to point to something deeper.

We all live in a world of darkness. We feel the brokenness of our sinful thoughts, words, and actions. We feel the off-tune cravings

of our heart, seeking to be satisfied with things that draw us away from the light of God's presence. We feel brokenness around us. We feel the pain of sickness, disaster, conflict, and injustice. The world is not right. The world is broken. The world is dark. And we have been walking in darkness. We need hope.

And hope has been promised for us. The very God who created light (Gen. 1:3-5) and is light (1 John 1:5) has promised that the darkness will not win. In Isaiah 9, the people of Israel face the judgment of captivity. "Darkness" in Isaiah often represents the Lord *hiding his face* (see 8:17). They feel the harsh, cold loss of God's favor and presence as they fall headlong into their sin and brokenness. But their darkness will not last forever. The light that is coming will be greater than the darkness. As far as the curse is found, he will come to make his blessings flow.

And how will he display this light? Through a child. A child that will be called the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the prince of peace. He will reign on David's throne and will be the perfect King who reigns forever. This is the promise. This is our hope. Darkness will give way to light. Our God has promised this. This week, tune your heart to the channels of hope. But not just hope for hope's sake. Hope in the promises of God. Hope that no matter how dark the world seems, light is coming. As sure as Christ came at Christmas, he will come again and accomplish all that he said. *The zeal of the almighty shall accomplish this.* Hope in him. Hope in the light that is coming.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I confess that I am a sinful person. I feel brokenness within me and about me. I too often set my gaze on the darkness rather than the light of your goodness and good promises. Help me to hope. Help me to think often of the promises you have made. Help me to believe them. Help me to no longer walk in darkness because my eyes have seen your light. Cause me to walk in your ways, to long for your presence, and look with hope to the day you have determined to come and make all things right. May this week be yours. May my life be yours. And may your light shine in me so that others would see it too.

For Christ and in Christ's name,

Amen

PSALM 120

Hope in God's deliverance

READ

In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.

PSALM 120:1

Read all of Psalm 120

CONSIDER

We all need deliverance. The comforts of life can cause us to forget this truth but if we were to peel back the highlight reels of social media posts and modern comforts, our need for salvation becomes clear. Until we feel the gravity of our need, we will never feel the wonder of hope. Do not run from facing your sin. Do not ignore the storm raging around you. For if you do not face it, you will not feel your need for God's saving power. And if you don't feel your need, you will continue to walk in darkness, blind to the glorious light of God's grace.

It is appropriate that the Psalms of Ascent begin with distress and longing. For as we ascend the mountain of God to dwell in his presence, we see a journey of hope as God meets us in our brokenness. The psalmist begins: *In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me.* Are you in distress? Call to the Lord. Are

you discouraged? Call to the Lord. Are you weighed down and tired? Call to the Lord. Where else can we go? Often God uses our sorrows to drive us to his presence. For when we have great need, we find the God of great provision.

The situation the psalmist finds himself in is being surrounded by those with “*lying lips*” and a “*deceitful tongue*” (120:2). He is trying to live in the truth of God but is surrounded by deceit. He wants peace but everyone around him wants war (120:7). How does he comfort himself? There seem to be three things: **1) He acknowledges the wages of sin.** He says sharp arrows and burning coals are destined for those who live in deceit, emphasizing the severity of judgment (120:3-4). **2) He hates his own role in his distress.** He acknowledges the wrongfulness of sojourning with and dwelling among those who hate peace (120:5-6). Too long has he made his dwelling with them. **3) He cries out to God for salvation.** He knows that sin is evil, he knows that he has contributed to the mess he is in, and yet he still comes to God for help.

Whether the situation we are in is of our own making, the evil of others, or of unknown means, the one to whom we cry remains the same. God will never say, “You got yourself in this mess. Get yourself out of it.” No, when we cry to him in our distress, he will answer us. Like a loving father that longs to minister to the heart of his hurting child, whether their hurt was from their own foolishness or not, God desires that we come to him with every discouragement and cry of distress for he is the one who can deliver us. And the reason we come to him is because of hope. We hope that he will deliver us.

As we approach Christmas, we see the great lengths God went to in order to deliver us. For Christ came as the one hoped for by

God's people. Christ came into a place of distress, although not because of his sin, but ours. And Christ came to deliver all that the Father chose to give him. When we call on the name of the Lord, he saves to the uttermost. Our hope rests in the God who became flesh to save his people.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I need you. I confess that I often forget how much I need you. Sweet Savior, help me to see how great my need is for you. If you must bring me into times of distress to see it, I humbly submit to your sovereign wisdom. May your will be done. When I am in distress, I make it my aim to hope in your deliverance. I resolve in my heart to cry out to you and come to you when I am in need. May my life be marked by a constant return to your saving hand. May I feel your comfort and strength in times of discomfort and weakness. And may I evermore see deeper beauties in the coming of Christ to save me unto deeper moments of worship and surrender. May I look to Jesus for my every need and trust that he will always answer.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 121

Hope in God's help

READ

1 I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

PSALM 121:1-2

Read all of Psalm 121

CONSIDER

My daughter, Ada is in a very cute stage of life as a 3-year old. She is sweet, kind, and very independent. But regularly she struggles with doing certain things like opening the bathroom door or cutting her food or putting on her shoes. It's then when she says, "Papa, please help me." On one hand, it is good to teach her to do things by herself. But on the other hand, it is honoring for me as her father to help her. It honors me because she is coming to me for help. She believes I *can* help her and that I *will* help her. Unfortunately, I am not as capable or consistent as our heavenly Father. But in the same way, it glorifies him when we come to him for help for he is a God who loves to help his children.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist feels exposed. He is a pilgrim, wandering a lonely countryside. Animals or thieves or enemies could descend upon him. How does he comfort himself? He looks up

to the hills and reminds himself that his help comes from the very God who made the hills (along with everything else). The psalmist places his hope in the protection and care of his God. If God establishes his foot, it will not be moved (121:3). We can sleep, knowing that God never sleeps (121:4). We need not lay awake worried about what might happen because our creator is watching over us. He keeps us as a good shepherd keeps his sheep. He protects us from all evil (121:7). He protects our coming and going (121:8). His point is that God's protection and help cover all of our existence. It is like when Jesus said not one hair on our heads would perish (Luke 21:18). When God comes to help us, his help is comprehensive.

It is all too easy to look at our circumstances and despair. But do we not know that our help comes from the Lord? The one who made heaven and earth? Do we know that not one thing can enter our lives without being approved by the sovereign will of our Father? Do we not know that even what others intend for evil, God intends for our good? If the Lord is on our side, why should we worry and fear? Look up, dear child of God. If you belong to Christ, you are safe in his hand. No matter how bleak the situation looks, help is on the way. Hope in that reality.

Christmas reminds us that God has provided help for us in the person of Jesus Christ. In the ultimate sense of "coming," God's help came to us in human form. He lived a perfect life, suffered for our sins, and conquered the grave. Truly, help has come for our helplessness! It is often said, "God helps those who help themselves." But nothing could be further from the truth. Christmas is proof that God has chosen to help those who could not help themselves. He has come and done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Hope in your sovereign God, the helper to the helpless.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I confess my utter helplessness. There is not one good thing I have done that was not a result of your lavish grace. And there is not one bad thing I have done that your grace cannot cover by the blood of Jesus Christ. God, I need your help. I love you but I do not love you as much as you deserve. I am tempted often by passing sins and impure thoughts. I do what I know I shouldn't do. I am desperately dependent on your help and I thank you for sending it in the person of Jesus Christ. What I could not do, he has done. The price I should have paid, he has paid in full. Help me to live in such a manner that reflects the glorious sacrifice you have made for me. I can go nowhere else but to you. For from you my help comes.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 122*Hope in God's house*

READ

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

PSALM 122:1

Read all of Psalm 122

CONSIDER

Many try to go through life alone. They are done with the struggles of relationships, with the hurtfulness of betrayal, and the failing of expectations. Even Christians become lone rangers. They say, "I love Jesus but I'm not really into this whole church thing." But this is not the picture the Bible gives us of how we are to live. It is also not how to experience the hope that God calls us to live in.

When considering all of the spiritual disciplines in scripture, most theologians categorize them into three distinct groups: 1) scripture, 2) prayer, and 3) church. To live in the Spirit and pursue God's presence, we must feast from the scriptures, commune with him in prayer, and fellowship with his body. How often does God use the words of encouragement from a loving brother or sister to lift our spirits and help us find hope once more?

In Psalm 122, the psalmist is rejoicing in the house of God. The psalmist rejoices over the promises of God to his holy city, Jerusalem and then prays for the peace of *shalom* to be upon it. As pilgrims would journey to the holy city, you can imagine the joy of seeing the city's silhouette appear on the horizon. The city was a reminder that God had chosen his people and brought them together. We should be glad when our spiritual family invites us into fellowship (122:1). As Jerusalem was "*bound firmly together*" so is the spiritual church of Christ united in Spirit with him. The psalmist rejoices in the "*thrones of the house of David*" which were set in Jerusalem (120:5). These thrones pointed to God's promises to David that he would establish his house and his kingdom forever. The psalmist continues by praying for peace in the city (122:6). May those who love God be secure! For the sake of God's people, he wishes for peace and well-being (122:8-9).

For us, we should do the same. We are not just saved into a relationship with Christ but also with his family. Our hope is not only in the fact that God will secure us till the end but that the gates of hell cannot prevail against his Church. He has secured a people for himself and in this, we rejoice! And we rejoice together. We remind each other of the goodness of God and of his promises. We sing together. We read together. We listen together. We pray together. How important is it to let others fan the affections of Christ within us into flame? How important is it for us to do the same for them? When we are downtrodden, others can lift us up. When they are downtrodden, we can lift them up.

In this season of Advent, we are reminded that all Jerusalem symbolized is fulfilled in Christ and his church. The descendant of David has come and occupied his throne. The prom-

ises are fulfilled and Christ will have the bride for which he died. His people, chosen by his love, will gather and sing his praises. With a rich history of Christmas songs at our disposal, take time this season to sing with God's people. Let the voices and encouragements of others produce the hope you might be lacking. Let us be glad to go to the house of the Lord together.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I thank you for your people. I thank you for bringing me into your family and giving me a place at your table. Father, help me to look this season to the needs of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Many despair and struggle in the holiday season. For many, these days bring deep hurts and increased hardships. Many are lost, alone, and hopeless. Please use me to lift them up. Do not allow me to be so distracted with my own traditions and joys to not see the glorious opportunity to come and serve. Help me to rejoice with your people. May peace resound through your church. For you have reconciled us to yourself and accomplished peace for us. I praise you, my Lord and my God.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 123*Hope in God's mercy*

READ

... so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he has mercy upon us.

PSALM 123:2

Read all of Psalm 123

CONSIDER

Hope is essential to life. But hope ebbs and flows. We feel hope at one point and the next, it feels all but gone. Think of Abraham who hoped in God's promise for a son but, as time went on, his hope diminished and he listened to the sinful counsel of Sarah, choosing to conceive with Hagar. Hopelessness leads to mistrust of God's promises. This is why we need hope that endures; hope that is stubborn and persistent. We choose, even in the midst of sorrow or struggle, to hope.

This is where the psalmist finds himself in Psalm 123. He has been hoping for God's deliverance, God's help, and God's peace but the answer hasn't come yet. In the midst of this longing, there are those who have it good that are taunting him. They say, "Look at you! God clearly doesn't care about you. You have all kinds of issues in your life. What kind of God would do that

to you?” His soul has had “*more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud*” (123:4). What is his response? To humble himself before God and look up in persistent prayer to the God of promises.

The entire psalm is a direct prayer to God. He starts by saying, “*To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!*” (123:1). He doesn’t look to the taunting enemies or his troubling circumstances. He lifts his eyes to the King of the universe, the one enthroned over all things. How does he look to this God? “*As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master ... so our eyes look to the Lord our God*” (123:2). The psalmist recognizes his relation to this God. He is not one to critique or question God’s authority or decisions. He is a humble servant but he is looking... He is looking to the hand of his master for something. And he will keep looking “*till he has mercy upon us*” (123:2).

Do you feel the desperation and persistence of this statement? To pray to God and cry out to him *until* he shows favor; *until* he has mercy? This word for mercy (*hanan*) means to take pity or show compassion from a position of strength, like a king showing mercy to a hurting subject. And this is what the writer longs for. He is praying and pleading for mercy from his master. And he says that he will plead for mercy until his compassionate master gives it to him. His hope is enduring in persistent prayer. Would this describe your prayer life? Does your hope in God persist in the midst of sorrow? We can learn from the psalmist.

Often in scripture, God makes promises that are fulfilled far into the future. Patience and persistence are critical lessons we must learn if we are to have enduring hope. When Christ came

to the earth, it was hundreds of years after the promises were made. But God kept all of them. Even now, thousands of years have passed since we received the promise of Christ that he would return for us. Although we still wait for his perfect timing, may we wait with patient and persistent hope in our great God, the one enthroned in the heavens.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

It is to you that I lift my eyes. You are the Lord our God, King of the universe. I choose now to look to you for my comfort and consolation. You are a good king and you have made marvelous promises. And now, I wait. Life is hard and I feel the contempt of the enemy. But God, I choose to hope. I come to you and pray that you would come, that you would fulfill your promises, that you would send your Spirit to abide with me so I know you are near. God, I yearn for this. As I look to you, will you look to me and show mercy? Will you show compassion to your servant? My hope is in you. Oh Lord, my hope is only in you.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

Practicing hope

PRACTICE

As we *hope* in preparation for Christmas, it can be helpful to put hope into practice. The following suggestion is an exercise that you (or your family) can do to cultivate a posture of hoping in Christ.

1) What are you hoping for this Christmas?

Truly ask yourself (and your family) this question. Take time to express (praying to God, writing in a journal, or discussing as a family) what you are hoping for. It's okay if the answer feels lighthearted (ex. A gift you're hoping to get) or is quite deep (ex. A restored relationship).

2) What promises has God fulfilled?

Write down (or discuss) a few promises you can recall from Scripture that God has fulfilled. Consider God's promises to Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, the nation of Israel, or the prophets. Remember how God has faithfully kept his promises in the past.

3) What has Jesus promised to do when he returns?

Write down (or discuss) things that the Bible has said would happen when Jesus comes back. Consider these passages: Matt. 25:31-46; John 14:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:52; Heb. 9:28; Rev. 21:1-7. Note that none of these things have happened yet.

4) Which of these promises do you most look forward to?

Considering all that is to come when Christ returns, write down (or discuss) promises that sound especially wonderful to your heart in this season. Why do you long for it? Why do you hope for it?

CONSIDER

God has made many promises to his people. Many of those promises he fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus Christ. Christmas is proof that God keeps his promises and that those who hope in him will never be put to shame. Although we continue to wait for all of God's promises to come true, we need not doubt their certainty. In light of all God has fulfilled, we can truly wait in hopefulness.

Choose to see Christ as the only one who can truly satisfy your heart's longings. Look upon him in hope this Christmas. Long for what he has promised he will do. Know deeply that Jesus will fulfill all that he has promised. Let your heart hope in him.

PRAY

Take a couple minutes to pray to God, hoping in his promises. If your heart struggles to hope right now, ask God to help you hope in him.

WEEK 2

*“God, we prepare
* as we wait.”*

PSALMS 124-127

7

THE SECOND WEEK

Prepare as you wait

READ

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

ISAIAH 40:3-5

CONSIDER

One of the beautiful things about the grace of God is that we don't need to clean ourselves up in order to enter his presence. We can come as we are because his favor is unmerited. With that said, an important concept throughout scripture is that of *spiritual preparation*. I know that every day I come home to my wife, I come as I am and she receives me as I am, whether I had a good day or bad. But when I go on a date with my wife, there is some preparation involved. We need to organize childcare, pick a place to go, and sometimes dress appropriately for the occasion. This isn't because our relationship is dependent on it but because we love each other enough to prepare for special times together. We prepare for what is important to us.

We find this in scripture as well. Jesus describes the virgins who were prepared for the bridegroom when he arrived (Matt. 25:1-13). Noah prepared for the coming flood (Heb. 11:7). Several places describe being prepared for when Christ comes again (Matt. 24:44; Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 John 2:28). In Isaiah, the prophecy concerning John the Baptist talks of his role as one that is *“preparing the way”* for the coming Messiah. The idea behind all of these passages is that there is something coming and, as we wait for it, we prepare ourselves for it.

Why is this necessary? Why must we prepare ourselves for what we know is coming? Consider these three reasons. **1) We *prepare to express our trust.*** If I told my wife that I was coming home to take her on a date and she was ready when I arrived, I would know that she trusted what I said. When Christ tells us to be ready for his coming, we prepare ourselves spiritually as an expression of trust in his promises. **2) We *prepare to increase our anticipation.*** Anyone who plans a holiday party knows that with much preparation comes much anticipation. When we work hard to get ready for something, our longing for it increases. Preparing for your wedding day does this. I think this is why we are called to be “watchful” and “vigilant” in our preparation for Christ’s coming. We anticipate him in our preparation. **3) We *prepare to nurture our affection.*** When I am about to go on a date with my wife and I see her walking down the steps wearing makeup and a nice outfit, I feel loved. She valued our time together so much that she wanted to prepare herself for it. We don’t prepare ourselves to *earn* God’s love. We prepare ourselves as a *response* to his love. And in that preparation, our affections increase.

What are you anticipating about Christmas? As you prepare for the holidays, what are you preparing for? This week, as you

consider all that Christmas brings, prepare your heart to receive *him*. Remind yourself of his goodness and his grace. Pursue holiness for he is holy. As we wait for Christ to come again, may he find us ready. *Prepare the way for the Lord! His glory will be revealed and all will see it together.*

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I often I look forward the most to things that have little eternal value, especially at Christmas. I confess that I get too busy with all the planning and preparation that my time with you feels short and secondary. I ask that you would prepare my heart to receive you. Remind me every day that you are what I long for. You are who I ready myself for. You are who I anticipate. May my trust, anticipation, and affection for you increase this Christmas. Lord, hasten the day when I will see you face to face.

For Christ and in Christ's name,

Amen

PSALM 124

Prepare by remembering

READ

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side...

PSALM 124:1

Read all of Psalm 124

CONSIDER

We are very forgetful people, are we not? Forgetfulness is a common reason for sin in scripture, especially with the people of Israel. Israel grumbles and accuses God because they *“forgot his works”* (Ps. 106:13). Israel made the golden calf and worshiped it because they *“forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt”* (Ps. 106:21). Israel falls into idolatry because they *“did not remember the Lord their God”* (Judg. 8:34). Israel fell into the hands of their enemies because they *“forgot the Lord their God”* (1 Sam. 12:9). Moses exhorts the people to *“not forget”* the Lord their God, his ways, and his covenant with them (Deut. 4:9, 23; 9:7-8). We are forgetful people. We often forget what God has done for us, which is why we prepare to be in his presence by reminding ourselves of who he is and what he has done.

This is what the psalmist does in Psalm 124. He states that if the Lord was not on their side, they would have been destroyed. Their enemies would have destroyed them (124:2-3) or God would have sent natural disasters to sweep them away (124:4-5). The psalmist is considering a hypothetical: what would have happened if God had not been with us? His conclusion? Complete destruction. But he goes on to bless the Lord for his protection and salvation. The Lord has not given his people as prey to their enemies (124:6). He broke the snare and saved them from their clutches (124:7). He concludes with a powerful reminder of where their help comes from. *Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth* (124:8).

Child of God, it is important to reflect on all God has done for you. **Think of his hidden protections.** Think of how many sicknesses, terrible accidents, conflicts, and temptations he has guarded you from. There are a million things he does for his people that they never see. **Think of his revealed protections.** Think of the times when he reconciled a relationship, provided what you needed, healed you from ailments and diseases, gave you fellowship and comfort from other believers, or sent his Spirit to convict, comfort, and guide you. **Think of his saving grace.** He caused the gospel to make its way to you. He opened your mind and heart to receive it. He quickened your soul so that you would repent and trust in Christ. He secured your salvation, leads you into greater Christ-likeness, and has prepared a place for you in his presence to enjoy him forever.

The point of celebrating Christmas together is so that, at the most base level, we would *remember*. We would remember that Christ came to us in humility, lived a perfect life for us, died a sacrificial death for us, and rose again, securing new life for us

in his name. Do not go through this holiday season without stopping to remember. The Lord has done great things for us. Our help is in the name of the Lord. Do you doubt it? Look in the Bethlehem manger.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I am a forgetful person. Help me to remember. Remind me of your great love for me, of your constant provision, and of your gracious salvation. Remind me of who I am in Christ. Remind me that this world is not my home, nor is it what I should live for. Remind me that I can do nothing to earn your favor. Show me the good works you have prepared for me to walk in that I might listen and obey. Remind me every day of Christ, his beauty, and his sacrifice. If you were not on my side, I would be lost forever. Thank you, my God. I bless your name. Thank you.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 125

Prepare by fortifying

READ

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.

PSALM 125:1

Read all of Psalm 125

CONSIDER

As much as we are forgetful, we are also unstable. For many of us, when the storms of life appear, our knees tremble and our hearts fear. We worry and become anxious. We do not feel like an immovable mountain. For some, they try to rise above this tendency by convincing themselves that they are strong and immovable in and of themselves. They say, *“I’m a survivor. I’m a warrior. Nothing can defeat me!”* Many of us see this outward facade and wish we were as strong as them. But they are just as unstable as the rest of us. We are not strong enough to withstand the storm. I think of Paul where he states that the affliction he experienced was beyond his strength and he despaired of life itself (1 Cor. 1:8). However, he states that this was *“to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”*

This is how we prepare. This is how we fortify ourselves. By trusting in God’s strength, not our own. This is what Psalm

125 is all about. The psalmist is rejoicing in how we are kept secure and fortified by God when we trust in him. We are like “*Mount Zion, which cannot be moved*” (125:1). As the mountains surround the city of Jerusalem, so does God surround his people (125:2). This doesn’t mean they aren’t in turmoil. Verses 3-5 discuss the reality of wicked people oppressing the land. But the psalmist trusts that those who seek the Lord with an “*upright heart*” (125:4) will receive peace (125:5). The Lord will do good to his people. So, trust in him.

We all live in the tension between how things are and how they should be. And this tension stretches tight like a rope holding a ship to the harbor in the midst of a raging sea. The rope is stretched. Will it break? Should we try to secure the ship with something else? All the while, the captain tells us not to worry. The rope is secure. We will be safe. We will feel the rocking of the boat. We will hear the pounding of the rain. But the rope will not break. In the same way, although the sorrows of this life may cause us to wonder if his promises will stay secure or break, we can trust that no storm we endure can separate us from his strong hand.

As we prepare for Christmas, it is important for us to be reminded of how secure God’s promises and protection are. Many Jews wondered if God would ever keep his promises but, at just the right time, Christ came. He proved how trustworthy he was by sending his own Son to die for our sins. He keeps his word. He will hold us fast. We are safe. Fortify yourself in faith. Build in your heart layer upon layer of trust in his goodness. And when the rains come down, the floods rise, and the winds blow, the house built on this rock will stand.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I praise you for your faithfulness. I am not safe because of how strong I am but because of how strong you are. You will hold me close. You will keep me safe. I am sorry for the ways in which I let the storms and sorrows of life shake my faith. You are good and I trust in you. I cannot be shaken from the rock of Christ. Help me to believe this. Prepare my heart. Fortify my heart so that I will trust you when life gets hard.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 126

Prepare by pleading

READ

3 The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb!

PSALM 126:3-4

Read all of Psalm 126

CONSIDER

The previous two psalms have focused on remembering God's past faithfulness and fortifying ourselves in the trust of God's protection. These are truths we must remember. But just because we know God is faithful, that does not mean we should never cry out for him to do what he has said. All of these psalms include moments of petition and Psalm 126 looks upon all these rock-solid doctrines and pleads from them to God for his help. Although this may seem like a strange activity to prepare us for Christ's coming, it is critical.

When my family is on a road trip for hours, the children get a little antsy. I remember a time when my daughter had been sitting patiently for three hours and said (on the brink of tears): "*Papa, can we be at grandma's house now? I am tired of the car.*" In that moment, I didn't feel frustration; I felt compassion. "*I*

know, sweet girl. You have been so patient and we will get there soon. I promise.” When we come to God with our desires and longings, we glorify him. God is magnified in our pleading to him for it shows our hope in him as the one who can help. This is especially true in times of waiting.

Psalm 126 begins with a seemingly delirious joy in God’s faithfulness in the past. There is dreaming, laughter, shouts of joy, and the glorious declaration of God’s people: The Lord has done great things for us (126:3). But that was in the past. That was then, not now. The psalmist reflects on times of great joy in his relationship with God but mourns his current situation with a simple request: “*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb*” (126:4). The Negeb was a desert. There was no water there. But God can cause streams to bubble up in a desert. He can make those who go out weeping with seeds to sow in the dry sand (126:6), watering those seeds with their tears (126:5), to return with shouts of joy and a plentiful harvest. God can do this! And so he pleads to the Lord to do it.

God is not an aloof parent, bothered by the questions and requests of his children. He is a kind and compassionate father. When we come to him with our desires and requests, he hears them. And this process of regularly going to God and pleading for these things prepares our hearts in a striking way. It reminds us that God is our father and he longs to hear our cries. Our heart needs to be reminded not only that God is worthy of our trust but that he is receptive to our requests.

When God saved Israel, it was because their groaning and cries for rescue came up to him and he heard them (Ex. 1:23-24). The prophets regularly cried out to God for salvation. In the midst of captivity, the people cried out to God and he heard

them. How do we know that he hears our cries? Because he sent Jesus to the earth to save us. He is not apathetic to our sorrows. He has compassion on those who cry to him. So, come to him. Prepare your heart by reminding yourself that he is a Father that you can take your longings to and he hears.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I rejoice in your past faithfulness. I rejoice in the periods of my life where I felt your presence and favor more fully. I rejoice in the times of joy and peace I have experienced. And God, I come to you pleading for you to restore the joy of my salvation. May I not look back and feel as if I was closer to you then. May I be drawn into deeper intimacy and joy now. My heart struggles to believe that you want to hear my deepest desires. Help me to see you as you are. Help me to bring all that I long for to you. For only you can satisfy my heart and fill my need.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 127

Prepare by trusting

READ

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

PSALM 127:1

Read all of Psalm 127

CONSIDER

Charles Spurgeon once said, *“Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength.”* We all lean towards worry and anxiety. I think this is mainly because we naturally want to trust more in ourselves than in God. I believe this because every time we are called to “not be anxious” in scripture, we are also called to know something about God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to not worry about anything, knowing that God provides for us (Matt. 6:26-34). Paul says not to be anxious about anything but instead take our needs to God, who will strengthen us and help us (Phil. 4:6-7). Peter says to cast all our anxieties upon God, humbling ourselves under his sovereign hand, knowing that he cares for us (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

This is what the psalmist is pressing into with Psalm 127. He gives three pictures of times when we work hard for things we need (building shelter, protecting ourselves, and raising a family) and then points to our need to trust in God with those things. Unless the Lord is the one building the house, we build in vain (127:1). Unless the Lord is protecting the city, those who watch for danger do so in vain (127:1). Unless the Lord is working in our children, our best efforts to raise them will fall short (127:3-5).

But the psalmist is not intending to discourage us from laboring in these ways. All three areas assume hard work and responsibility. What the psalmist is addressing is a heart that trusts in our own hard work instead of the sovereign work of God. He says clearly in verse 2: *It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.* He is questioning why we feel the need to get up so early to work and then work late into the night, only to be anxious when we sit at the dinner table, worrying that tomorrow's food won't come. This is a stressful, anxious way to live. We put our hope in a growing bank account, a respectable education, a stable job, or a perfect family. Then we worry about all the bad things that can happen. It is in vain that we live this way.

Why is it in vain? Because, as the psalmist says, *“For he gives his beloved sleep.”* Think about that. God loves us. And because he loves us, he gives us the gift of sleep. We need not stay awake, worrying about tomorrow. God is in control. He wants you to sleep. He wants you to get some rest. He wants you to trust in him. Sleep is the daily reminder that we are not God. He doesn't need rest but we do. And we can rest, knowing that he is in control.

The holidays don't often feel restful but they should. In fact, we can prepare for Christmas by choosing, in the midst of all the holiday stress and busyness, to get some rest. If you tend to get really stressed out this time of year, then you need to hear this. Get some sleep. God is in control. Don't eat the bread of anxious toil. Rest in him. He sent his Son to die for you so that you might rest in what he has done, not in what you have to do. He loves you and wants you to rest in him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I confess my tendency to trust in my own plans, hard work, and abilities. I think too highly of myself and do not trust in you as I ought. Thank you for all the ways you provide for me and have provided for me. Help me to rest in you. When worries flood my mind and make it hard to sleep, calm my spirit. Remind me that you are in control and there is nothing that escapes your loving gaze. I choose today to rest in you. No matter what my responsibilities are, when you give me rest, I will choose to receive it as a gift. Help me do this.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

Practicing preparation

PRACTICE

The following suggestion is an exercise that you (or your family) can do to cultivate a posture of preparing to receive and enjoy Christ this Christmas.

1) How do the holidays feel stressful or restful?

Take time to write down (or discuss) the things about Christmastime that feel both stressful and restful. What are the primary causes of anxiety or “busyness” in your regular rhythms? What aspects of Christmas feel restful and worshipful?

2) Does Christmas truly feel like it’s all about Jesus? Why or why not?

Write down (or discuss) transparently how your practice and celebration of Christmas makes much of Jesus or not. Does Jesus feel secondary to all the parties and presents and traditions? What ways are you doing this well? What ways are you not?

3) Brainstorm a few ways your celebration of Christmas can be more *restful* and *worshipful*.

Be creative. Consider how you (or your family) can incorporate a new rhythm or two that highlights Jesus more. Consider how you can make Christmas less about *doing* and more about *enjoying* the realities of Christmas. Do this as a family, if you can!

4) How do you need to prepare *now* for these new rhythms?

It's not enough to dream about these things. Plan to make them a reality. Consider what you may need to take off your calendar. Consider how you may need to simplify aspects of your holidays plans to make room for more rest and worship. Come up with a plan and start preparing now!

CONSIDER

Christmas is a busy season and that's okay. Busyness is not always an enemy of worship or rest, but it can be and often is. The big takeaway I hope you receive is that, although Christmas can be a wonderful mixture of craziness and joyfulness, it is foolish to let Jesus feel secondary. It is also foolish to be so busy that you never have moments to stop, rest, and enjoy why Christ came to this earth.

So make sure you are setting aside and guarding those moments where you can rest in and worship Jesus Christ. Prepare your heart for him. And make sure you do it as a family!

PRAY

Take some time to pray for these things. Pray that you would rest in Christ this holiday season and that worshiping and enjoying him would be the goal of all you do.

WEEK 3

*“God, we rejoice in
* your peace.”*

PSALMS 128-131

THE THIRD WEEK*Rejoice in peace*

READ

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

MATTHEW 2:10-11

CONSIDER

Anyone who has lived in a household with conflict knows that when true repentance and peace is found, it is a joyful thing. When my wife and I get into a fight or hurt each other, it is humbling to confess our sins and seek peace. But when it is experienced, there is a renewed intimacy and joy in each other because of it. If this can be experienced in our earthly relationships, imagine the joy available to us when peace with our heavenly Father is restored?

In this third week of Advent, we focus on rejoicing in the peace God has secured for his people. When the shepherds heard the proclamation of the angels, they said that they brought “*good news of great JOY*” that a Savior had been born (Luke 2:10). Immediately following this declaration, a joyful chorus breaks out, praising God: “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth*

PEACE among those whom he is pleased with" (Luke 2:14). The news that brought the greatest joy was that God had come to make peace with his people. To be saved is to have peace with God and this is the basis for our joy.

In Matthew 2, the wise men were following the supernatural direction of God given to them as a sign in the heavens. And this sign elicited joy (Matt. 2:10). When they came to the house where Jesus was, they bowed down and worshiped him. They could not help but present gifts to him. It is hard to know exactly how much these traveling astrologers understood who Jesus was. All we know is that they believed God was doing something big and they followed where he led them. And he led them to Jesus. Truly, it seems that God is in the business of proclaiming his peace and salvation to all people for the sake of his glory and our joy.

What was their response to Jesus? In their joy, they give him extravagant gifts. Some have seen symbolic meaning in the three gifts (*gold* for royalty, *frankincense* for deity, *myrrh* for death) but Matthew makes no mention of this. At the least, these gifts imply extravagance. In the same way that Jesus said that the kingdom was like a treasure found in a field and the one who found it went, IN HIS JOY, and sold all that he had to buy that treasure (Matt. 13:44), so do we come to Christ and, IN OUR JOY, give all that we have and all that we are to him.

Because Christ came to us as a baby, we can know peace *with* God and joy *in* God. This week, allow your heart to rejoice. Command your heart to rejoice. This is good news of great joy! God has come to save us and make peace with us. How else can we respond to such good news but to give God all that we are and all we have? Everything is his!

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I praise you and give you glory for what you have done. I was lost in sin, at enmity with you, with no hope in the world and doing what I wanted to do. But because you are rich in mercy, great in love, and abounding in grace, you chose to send Jesus to die for my sins. I am eternally grateful. Help me to know this peace and respond in joyful worship. May this Christmas be different. May I think only of you and what you have done. May every celebration, every hour with family and friends, every moment of prayer and consideration be directed to you. I give you my life and this holiday season as a gift of worship.

For Christ and in Christ's name,

Amen

PSALM 128

Rejoice while fearing the Lord

READ

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD ...

PSALM 128:1a

Read all of Psalm 128

CONSIDER

Fear and *happiness* seem contradictory, don't they? How is it that we can rejoice in the fear of the Lord? This week is about rejoicing in God. We might wonder why Psalm 128 calls us to rejoice while fearing him. But if we bring ourselves under the divine perspective, it may start to make sense. We must *fear* the Lord in some sense. And in some sense, that fear leads us into *joy*.

The psalm begins with the word *blessed*. This biblical word has two dimensions. **On one hand, blessing gives.** To be blessed is to have received something that is good and often undeserved. **On the other hand, blessing gladdens.** To be blessed is to be made happy. We experience inner joy and delight in that blessing. What is the source for this giving and gladdening? It is for everyone who *fears* the Lord. What does that mean? Well, there are many dimensions to this concept of “fearing” the Lord. 1) **“Fearing” involves the heart.** It is a deep inward

posture towards God. 2) **“Fearing” involves humility.** Fearing corresponds with a lowly and sensitive understanding of your own inadequacy. 3) **“Fearing” involves reverent awe.** It recognizes the grandeur, glory, and holiness of who God is. 4) **“Fearing” involves obedience.** True biblical fear is always coupled with response. The psalmist elaborates by saying those who fear the Lord are those *“who walk in his ways”* (128:1b). In short, fearing the Lord is the weighty, inward understanding of oneself in relation to the holy and glorious God of the universe, accompanied by a desire to obey him.

The logic is clear: When one understands their humble position in relation to God, they are in reverent awe of him, and they respond in obedience to him, that person is *blessed*. They experience God’s grace and joy. When we fear the Lord, we will be happy in him because he is a good King and a good Father. The psalmist elaborates on this blessing. Your work will be blessed (128:2). Your home will be blessed (128:3-4). The people of God will be blessed (128:5-6). He is highlighting how lavish God’s blessing is to those who fear him.

However, if we are not careful, this can sound like we are the ones who accomplish this. We don’t want to turn to a works-based righteousness. The answer to this danger is found in the very nature of Christmas. The whole of the Old Testament shows us that the people of God failed to truly fear him. We know in ourselves that we fail to fear him as he deserves. This is why we need Jesus, the one who perfectly feared and obeyed the Father. He lived a human life in our place and died for our failures. In this, we know that when Jesus taught, *“blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,”* (Matt. 5:3) it is by his perfect life, death, and resurrection that we can

recognize our spiritual poverty. We now “*work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us]*” (Phil. 2:12-13). God is the one who accomplishes this through Christ. So, see the blessing of Christ given to you, let that humble you, and live in trembling joy.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I tremble before your mighty power, your beautiful glory, and your awesome holiness. I am a sinner and the only way I can enter your presence is by the power of Christ’s death and resurrection applied to me. I plead his blood to cover my brokenness. Help me to know the joy of fearing your name. I don’t want to live a life that dishonors the name of Jesus. Cleanse me from my sin. Purify me. But don’t let me do this only from sorrow. May it be from joy in Christ that I surrender all to him. I want Christ to be magnified in my life! Create this heart in me.

For Christ and in Christ’s name,
Amen

PSALM 129

Rejoice while enduring suffering

READ

Greatly have they afflicted me from my youth, yet they have not prevailed against me.

PSALM 129:2

Read all of Psalm 129

CONSIDER

As much as fear and happiness seem incompatible, *suffering* and *happiness* seem just as antithetical. But here is the paradox of the Christian life: *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing* (2 Cor. 6:10). No one enjoys suffering, otherwise it wouldn't be suffering. However, there is a joy to be found in the power and purposes of God that can persist even in suffering. How is the psalmist finding joy amidst suffering? By reminding himself of who God is and what he does.

The psalmist begins by acknowledging the pain of his suffering. Great are his afflictions. Long are his afflictions. But his enemies have not prevailed against him, even though *"the plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows"* (129:3). He bears the scars of his suffering; however, *"The Lord is righteous; he has cut the cords of the wicked"* (129:4). In other words, God

has preserved his people. He has cut the cords used by wicked people to beat them. God saves his people.

The psalmist continues to look in hope to the future when the enemies of God will be put to shame and turned backward (129:5). Like grass, they will wither and no one will look on them thinking that the Lord has blessed them for their sin (129:6-8). So, not only has God preserved his people in suffering but justice will be ultimately satisfied. It is to both God's saving mercy and his sovereign justice that the psalmist finds comfort in and we should too. The implication of the final verse of this song is that although the enemies of God *will not* be blessed by the Lord, the people of God *will*. God will gladden his people with his salvation and justice on their behalf.

The only way to endure suffering is if we know that God is in control and that he saves his people. We don't need to take justice into our own hands because God is just. In this, we can rejoice. As Peter wrote, "*Don't be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes upon you... but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed*" (1 Pet. 4:12-13). We rejoice now, knowing we will rejoice more then. Suffering will give way to God's glorious victory and everything will be redeemed.

This truth is seen most powerfully in the coming of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus who willingly gave his back to the smiters (Is. 50:6). It was Jesus who stepped into suffering for us as the incarnate God to be a vicarious sacrifice for his people. He bears the scars of the suffering he endured for our salvation. See his hands and feet! As Jesus came as a baby into the world, he came destined to suffer. But it was for the joy that was set before him that he endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). And now,

his joy is our joy. For in the cross, God's saving mercy and his sovereign justice held hands. And we are the recipients of that divine work. Rejoice now, dear child of God. No matter what feels hard or weighty today, rejoice and endure. His suffering makes your suffering meaningful.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for coming as a baby to suffer for me. It was my sins that required your suffering, your death in my place. Even now, as I suffer, I look to you for comfort and sustenance. My life is hard but my life is yours. Lord, you are righteous. You have cut the cords of the wicked. I know that I will not be put to shame for trusting in you. I trust in your saving mercy and your sovereign justice. Help me to rejoice in you so that I may rejoice more when I see you face to face.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 130

Rejoice while waiting for the Lord

READ

5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

PSALM 130:5-6

Read all of Psalm 130

CONSIDER

Waiting is hard. My wife once said that it is hard enough that *“love is patient”* without moving on to the rest of 1 Corinthians 13. When my wife and I were dating long-distance, it was really hard to wait. When we were engaged, knowing the wedding date was coming, it was really hard to wait. In life, we often have to wait for what we long for and we can easily question God’s timing and his character. But Psalm 130 rejoices in the Lord while in the midst of waiting. How is the psalmist able to do this? By reminding himself of four truths.

1) The Lord hears. The psalmist is crying to the Lord *“out of the depths”* (130:1) because he believes that the Lord will hear his voice. He believes the Lord will be *“attentive to the voice of [his] pleas for mercy.”* Just like a child is comforted knowing that when

they get hurt, they can always run to their loving parent, so we can rejoice in the waiting because that he hears us.

2) The Lord forgives. The psalmist recognizes his own sinfulness by acknowledging that if the Lord should mark iniquities, who could stand? But with him there is forgiveness (130:3-4). We need to be reminded in suffering that nothing we could go through is worse than what we deserve. But God has forgiven us! We can rejoice even while we wait for him, knowing that he is abounding in grace toward us.

3) The Lord will come. *“I wait for the LORD, my waits, and in his word I hope”* (130:5). The psalmist is waiting for the Lord with hope because he knows that sorrow only lasts for the night. Joy is coming in the morning! God will not remain distant from those he loves. He will come. We must remind ourselves of this. The Lord will come for us. Always.

4) The Lord will redeem. The psalmist cries out to God’s people, inviting them to *“hope in the Lord”* (130:7). Why? Because with the Lord there is *“steadfast love”* and *“plentiful redemption”* (130:7). The Lord will redeem his people! Truly, there is not one ounce of brokenness in our lives that God cannot and will not redeem. We rejoice in knowing that the Lord hears us, he forgives us, he will come for us, and he will redeem us.

And truly, how much does the coming of Christ prove these four glorious truths? In Christ, we have tasted and seen that the Lord hears us, he has forgiven us, he has come for us, and he has redeemed us. Even now, we wait for his return. But we do not wait as people without hope. We know he is coming again and his redeeming love will have the final word. This Christmas, as you anticipate all that it brings, anticipate Christ’s return! Hope in him. It is for Christ, we wait.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

My soul waits for you. My soul yearns for you. I confess how hard it is to wait. But I know that with you, there is steadfast love and redemption for my sins. You have redeemed me through what Christ has done and my hope is in him. Guard my heart from grumbling as I wait. May I wait actively, prayerfully, patiently, and urgently. Until you come again, there is good work for me to do. Find me faithful when you come.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 131*Rejoice while quieting your soul*

READ

1 O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. 2 But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. 3 O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.

PSALM 131**CONSIDER**

How is it possible to hurt and still rejoice in God? How can joy permeate the core of our being so that it still shines through in the midst of deep sorrow? This is why I love Psalm 131. As a papa to two beautiful little children, there are many times when my son or daughter fall down and hurt themselves. Just a few days ago (from writing this), my son (who was 18 months old at the time) tripped on a toy and face planted on the floor. His lip started bleeding, tears welled up in his eyes, and he cried a very pitiful cry. I grabbed a washcloth and ice pack and went to work. But mostly what I did was just hold him in my arms, rock him back and forth, and tell him everything was going to be okay. After about one minute, his crying died down to a whimper and then to a heavy sigh. He held onto me tightly, nuzzling deeper into my arms.

Sometimes, joy in Christ looks like this. Sometimes, it is crawling into the arms of God and resting in his presence, knowing that he loves you. The psalmist describes his situation in verse 1. His heart is not encouraged. He can't lift his eyes too much. He isn't comforted with deep theological truths about God. But he has "*calmed and quieted [his] soul*" (131:2). He has humbled himself. He understands he is just like a small child who needs their mom. He is hurting and he needs his loving Father. Sometimes, it's hard to sing. Sometimes, it's hard to be happy. But we can always come into the presence of God and simply (and silently) sit there. We can rest in who he is.

The psalmist rejoices in God's tender care and it is out of this reality that he calls to the people of God and says, "*O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore*" (131:3). Yes, the psalmist rejoices at times in God's massive displays of power. Yes, the psalmist rejoices at times in God's forgiveness or his justice. But also, the psalmist rejoices in the gentle, tender, loving care of God. And when the God of the universe comes and holds you in his arms, you will know that he is worthy of your hope. Those are the times you will say, "*O God, I can't wait to dwell with you forever. I could never get tired of this kind of love.*"

The startling reality of the Christmas story is that the high and exalted God humbled himself and took the form of a fragile baby. This was the greatest act of condescending love the world has ever known. That Jesus Christ would take on vulnerability and human limitation so show us the Father is an astounding reality. It humbles us and calls to us to see the great love of God for his children. He is tender and loving, especially when we are hurt and discouraged. We can rejoice in his caring hand because in the midst of our sorrows it is most intimately experienced.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

There are times when it is hard to sing. Will you help me sing? There are times when my heart is not encouraged. Will you have my heart? There are times when I am sad and discouraged. Will you hold me? Come, my Savior and comfort me. Tell me that I am yours and you are with me. I promise to come to you when I feel most desperate. Help my heart to receive your love. And help me give to others the kind of love that you have given me.

For Christ and in Christ's name,

Amen

Practicing joy

PRACTICE

Consider the following exercise as a way for you (or your family) to cultivate a posture of joy this Christmas season. Aim to put joy into practice.

1) What are your favorite traditions around Christmas?

Write down (or discuss) what makes you the most happy about Christmas. What traditions, activities, or opportunities are the most life-giving and joy-inducing?

2) What are things that might make Christmas less joyful?

Consider things that may get in the way of experiencing the joy and peace of Christ in your home. It might be bad things like conflict, stress, or sickness. It might be good things that distract from Jesus. Consider what might get in the way of Christ-centered joy this Christmas and how to fight against them.

3) What is a new tradition that can nurture joy in Jesus?

Consider these ideas for you (or your family):

- Bake a birthday cake to celebrate Jesus on Christmas morning.
- Take the melody of a Christmas hymn and write new lyrics to sing to it.
- Make Christmas cookies and bring them to your neighbors with a note and a passage of scripture.
- Play **Telephone Pictionary** with friends or family, using only phrases from the Christmas story.

- Do a family “Christmas play” where you act out the Christmas story for each other. Try to be as silly as you can!
- Get crafty! Make a new ornament to go on the tree that celebrates Jesus. Make your own or find something online, like [this](#).

Be creative and have fun! If you have kids, get them involved. If you create regular rhythms and fun traditions to celebrate Jesus, you will experience much joy this Christmas.

CONSIDER

There are many things that threaten to steal our joy. Holidays can be very joyful and very difficult. If you have lost a loved one, Christmas may be a painful reminder of what you have lost. But Jesus brought with him good news of great joy. While we wait, while we endure, and even while we suffer, joy is available for us in Christ. So, fight for joy this Christmas. Be aware of what might try to sneak in and steal that joy. Push back against the darkness with militant rejoicing! Our King has come.

PRAY

Lift up anything on your heart that is threatening to get in the way of rejoicing in Christ. Ask for God to be near and give you joy in him. Thank God for all he’s done. Thank God for Jesus.

WEEK 4

*“God, we adore you
* for your love.”*

PSALMS 132-134

THE FINAL WEEK

Adore God for his love

READ

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

JOHN 3:16-17

CONSIDER

As we rapidly approach Christmas, it is appropriate that we focus on the love of God. After all, we are the recipients of his extravagant affection. John 3:16-17 has been a fountain of comfort and truth to those seeking to understand the love of God and in these verses we see how the coming of Christ intersects with the love of the Father. The beginning could be translated, “*For God loved the world in this way...*” and Jesus goes on to explain how this love played out. In it, we see four beautiful truths that call on us to adore him.

1) God loved us at great cost to himself. God loved us so much that “*he gave his only Son.*” The Greek word for “only” implies something that is in a class by itself (one of a kind, the only one like it). And he gave his one and only Son for us. It would be different if God loved us simply out of his excess. But God’s love came at great cost: his only, begotten Son.

2) God loved us while we deserved judgment. He gave his Son so that whoever *“believes in him should not perish.”* This implies that destruction is what we deserve. If God hadn’t stepped in, we would be lost and destined for wrath. But God chose to love us in the midst of our fallenness. He didn’t love us because we deserved it. He manifested his love in that while we were still sinners, he sent his Son to die for us, in our place.

3) God loved us by gifting us eternal life. God could have saved us and made us his slaves and we would have rejoiced. But he didn’t just save us *from* destruction; he saved us *for* eternal life. He didn’t just pardon us; he adopted us as his children. Eternal, abundant life is now ours because God has loved us.

4) God loved us from his heart. And notice verse 17. Jesus is emphasizing the purpose of God’s love. God didn’t send Jesus in order to provide salvation with little thought to how we might respond. No, God sent his Son so that those whom he loved *would be* saved through him. His heart was not set on condemning us; it was set on loving us.

It is hard to imagine this kind of love. It is impossible to fully understand the depth of the love with which God loved us in sending Christ to us. But we are called to respond to it. In the same way that a child may not understand the depth of their mother’s love for them, they still enjoy that love and adore their mother because of it. Let us do the same. Come to Jesus. Reflect on the Father’s love for you. How else can we respond to such love but by falling down in worship?

Oh come, let us adore him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I praise you for your extravagant love for me. I could never earn it or deserve it. But I thank you for it. Thank you for not leaving me on my own to receive what my sins deserved. Thank you for sacrificing your Son for me. Help my mind to increase in its knowledge of the magnitude of your love for me. Help my heart to respond in adoration to your beauty. Help my life to be a pleasing reflection of your love to others. And may my song forever be to tell of your great love for me.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 132

Adore God for his electing love

READ

13 For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place: 14 “This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.”

PSALM 132:13-14

Read all of Psalm 132

CONSIDER

When we choose who we will marry, we make that choice based (hopefully) based on the knowledge of who that person is. When I proposed to my wife, I felt so confident in my decision because Felicia was kind, compassionate, committed, faithful, and worshipful. Everything about her was beautiful to me. It was easy to set my affections on her. But the kind of love one has for a child is different. When we found out we were pregnant with our first, we were already in love with the little girl growing inside Felicia. We didn't know her at all but we loved her. Our love for our children was decided before we ever got to know them.

Psalm 132 reflects, in adoration, at the electing love of God for his people. He does not say, “Remember us because we are so awesome.” He says, “Remember us because you made a prom-

ise to your servant, David.” The psalmist rejoices in the character of God who chose to set his affections on David (132:11), make a promise that one of his sons would sit on his throne forever (132:11-12), and that his people would dwell with him forever (132:13-14). The abundance of blessing that accompanies this electing love is staggering. God will rest with his people (132:14), he will bless them with bountiful provision (132:15), his priests will be clothed with salvation (132:16), his saints will shout with joy (132:16), and their enemies will be put to shame (132:18). When God chooses to love someone, he is extravagant in that affection.

Every night, I look into my daughter’s face and tell her, “Ada, I love you. Not because of anything you’ve done but just because you’re mine.” The reason I do this is because I want her to understand something of the love of God. When he chose us, it was not because we were so lovable. He has set his affections on us, not because of who we are, but because of who he is. And he is a loving God.

The fullest expression of this electing love is found in Jesus’ fulfillment of this psalm. He is the son who will sit on the throne (132:11-12). He is the horn that will sprout from David’s line (132:17). He is the anointed one who will carry the light of God to the world (132:17). He is the one who will wear the crown of glory for all to see (132:18). All of the hopes and dreams of God’s people would be realized in the most unexpected way imaginable. God himself would come down in the person of Jesus Christ, humble and lowly, to save his people and occupy his throne forever. What else can we do but adore God for his electing love?

Oh come, let us adore him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

If you had not chosen me, I would never have chosen you. My sin runs deep. But your love has saturated the darkness of my sin with your light. I praise you for who you are. You are a loving God. I praise you for what you've done. You have sent your Son to die for me. I praise you for what you will do. You will come make all things new. Lord, have my heart. May every fiber of my being live to adore you. You are worthy of nothing less.

For Christ and in Christ's name,

Amen

PSALM 133

Adore God for bringing us into a family

READ

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

PSALM 133:1

Read all of Psalm 133

CONSIDER

We all know the pain of being in an unhealthy environment. We know what it's like when drama, gossip, complaining, or fighting abound. It's all too common. Unfortunately, many do not know what it's like to live in a healthy community. Because of this, it can be tempting to withdraw. We can easily think that it would be better to *not* open up and commit ourselves to others if it means we can avoid getting hurt. But this is a lie. Isolation is just as damaging. We were made to be with others. We are made by a relational God to live in relationship. And when the family is healthy, there is an abundance of joy.

This is what Psalm 133 is rejoicing in. This is what the psalmist is adoring God for. He says, "*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*" (133:1). There is something that feels right about intimacy and oneness. And it is pleasant. It is happy and enjoyable. The image implies intimate familial rela-

tions (“*brothers*”) but he is referring to the people of God. This goodness and pleasure is experienced when the people “*dwell*” as family, meaning they are together, living life with each other. And it’s when they dwell in “*unity*.” This word is not in the original language but is a faithful translation because the Hebrew implies a deep “togetherness” in the life-on-life experience. This isn’t a fake unity. It is a unity in God and with each other, keeping what is most important always in front of us.

The psalmist describes this experience with two metaphors: 1) oil running down Aaron’s beard and 2) dew on the mountains of Zion. The first implies extravagant anointing *by* God. The second implies extravagant blessing *from* God. God is the source of joy and goodness. The reason for the depth of this experience is because this is where the “*LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore*” (133:3). God’s sovereign blessing rests on the family he has created. It is experienced in the fullness of life for the fullness of time. Think about that. For those in Christ, we will always be a part of his family and will enjoy the fellowship of that family forever.

This is the picture we seek to mirror as closely as we can in this life. The reason we come and worship God together, the reason we press into our spiritual family, the reason we aim to do all the “one anothers” of scripture, is because we want to display (and experience) the blessing of God that he has poured out on us. We will one day fully know the beauty of perfect fellowship and in the meantime we strive for it, bearing with one another, forgiving one another, and loving one another.

Christmas is the beautiful reminder of what truly unites us. How could people from such different walks of life, cultural backgrounds, social positions, ambitions, and personalities all come

together and be a family? Because Christ came down to die for our sins and raise us to new life in him. We share the most important thing in the world! The gospel is the only truth that can create such unity. In him, there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. We are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). We all come to the same manger to worship the same baby. We all are headed to the same eternal home. We all participate in the same mission. One Spirit, one faith, one baptism. We are one. Christ prayed for this unity to be experienced by his people (John 17:21). When we come together, we come because of Christ and that is what unites us. It is beautiful. It is joyful. Adore your King for it!

Oh come, let us adore him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for bringing me into your family. I am your child because someone told me the good news of Jesus Christ. Help me to love the spiritual family you have given me. Help me to be patient and kind, gentle and gracious, humble and caring. Help me to experience the joy of unity with your people. I look forward to when we will all worship you together in sinless perfection. Until then, may we display you well here on the earth.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

PSALM 134

Adore God for he is worthy

READ

1 Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD! 2 Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD! 3 May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!

PSALM 134

CONSIDER

We have reached the pinnacle of the Songs of Ascent. As the pilgrim ascends to the top of the holy mountain, as he walks into the temple of the Lord, as he comes to the end of his journey, all he can do is worship. This short psalm is the ultimate end of our very lives: to bless the Lord and call others to do the same.

The psalmist is so undone by the glory and beauty of God, he turns to God's people and calls them to worship. He says, "*Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord*" (134:1). He directs his attention to those who know God and serve him. His encouragement is simply this: come and worship. Come, bless the Lord! The priestly singers in the Mosaic law would worship him day and night in the house of the Lord (1 Chr. 9:33; 23:30). It seems that these are the servants the psalm is addressing. He calls

them to lift their hands to the holy place (134:1). In other words, come and worship God in the splendor of his holiness. Worship where he has come to dwell, in his holy sanctuary.

The psalmist finishes his song with the reminder that God blesses his people. He wishes that the Lord would bless his servants with the same power that he made all of creation with (134:3). This blessing comes from Zion, the holy mountain. This is yet another reason for the necessity of such continual and extravagant worship: God has continually and extravagantly blessed us and we are happy in him.

Truly, the coming of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of this psalm. **First**, all Christians have been made priests to God and are his holy servants through the New Covenant in Christ's blood (1 Pet. 2:4-5). **Second**, Christ came as Immanuel (*God with us*) and God has made his dwelling with his people through Christ (Jn. 1:14). His presence is no longer confined to a physical temple. We are his temple through Christ! **Third**, Christ's mediation of a new covenant is the fulfillment of the picture that Zion presented (Heb. 12:22-24). The spiritual reality of these Old Testament pictures is eternal and pervasive. We no longer need to ascend a physical mountain. We live for a heavenly city, which has come down in Jesus Christ. **Fourth**, in Christ we have received the most extravagant of God's blessings. He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). Truly, what the psalmist got a glimpse of, we now know in its fullness.

Lord, help us if we come to Christmas and find any joy without its ultimate source and end being Jesus Christ. He is the reason why we sing. He is the reason we know the joy of God's blessing. Let every moment of happiness and rejoicing be a reminder that

Christ has come and, in his coming, he brought all of heaven's blessing with him. Come, bless the Lord! Adore your great God, for he is worthy of it.

Oh come, let us adore him.

PRAY

Heavenly Father,

I praise you for your extravagant blessing toward me. I worship you for your unfathomable grace. I adore you for your steadfast love. Thank you for giving me a reason to rejoice. As happy as I may be at times, I am never happy enough. I have never once expressed joy that is worthy of the blessing you have given me. May this Christmas be one that comes closer to experiencing and expressing the true joy available to me in Christ. May not one moment be absent of your presence and your goodness. Help me adore you and only you.

For Christ and in Christ's name,
Amen

Practicing adoration

PRACTICE

Consider the following exercise as a way for you (or your family) to put adoration into practice. Christmas is almost here! The anticipation is great. But make sure, in your heart (and in your family), Christ is the one you adore.

1) If you were invited to come see baby Jesus 2,000 years ago, how would you express your worship to him?

Consider (or discuss) what you would do (or give) to show your heart of adoration for Jesus. The angels sang. The shepherds worshiped and told everyone. The wise men gave extravagant gifts. What would you do?

2) List things God has done for you or has given to you.

Write down (or discuss) the many ways God has displayed his love and grace to you. Consider what he has given you in Christ's death and resurrection. Consider the practical ways he provides for you. Consider the many evidences of his grace in your life. Remind yourself of these things. Remind each other.

3) Sing a song of praise!

Yes, it may feel awkward. Yes, you may not have a great voice. But consider that each of the Psalms we have walked through were intended to be sung. Find a favorite Christmas hymn or simply a worship song, play it on your phone or an instrument

(if you or a family member has the ability), and sing praise to the Lord. Even if you don't feel like it. Even if you feel silly. God is great and greatly to be praised. He is worthy of our worship. Allow a song of worship lift your heart to adore him.

CONSIDER

Most often, practices of adoration (like praying, singing, thanking, or journaling) feel awkward because we are not in the practice of doing them. If, at any point, you are praying, sitting in silence, singing a worship song, sharing things you're thankful for, or trying out a new spiritual exercise and it feels strange... I would invite you push through those feelings. We have to get through the barrier of awkwardness to reach the joyful worship on the other side. If you don't have regular practices of adoration in your life, commit to adding at least one to your normal rhythms. Try prayer-journaling. Try fasting once a week. Try starting your daily quiet time with a short prayer, thanking God for 3 things he brings to mind. Care about nurturing your joy in Christ. Care about adoring him.

PRAY

Write out a prayer of thankfulness to God. Thank him and adore him for all he has done for you. Fight to get your heart focused in this moment. This moment is all about Jesus. Pray to him. Adore him. Worship him.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Oh come, let us adore him

CONSIDER

On this holy night, we celebrate the greatest miracle to ever occur: when God became man and dwelt among us. Nothing else matters if this is not true. Jesus, in his great love and mercy, humbled himself, took the form of a servant, appeared as a frail human baby, and displayed the very glory of God in his coming. What else can we do but simply come and adore him?

We join Christians throughout the world and through history and say to each other, “*Come, adore your King.*” He has not kept his distance. He has not remained aloof. He has heard our cries. He has fulfilled his promises. He has come. Praise God! He has come.

Oh come, let us adore him. Christ the Lord.

PRAY

*O source of all good,
What shall I render to you for the gift of gifts,
your own dear Son?*

*Herein is wonder of wonders:
he came below to raise me above,
was born like me that I might become like him.*

*Herein is love;
when I cannot rise to him he draws near on wings of grace,
to raise me to himself.*

*Herein is power;
when Deity and humanity were infinitely apart,
he united them in indissoluble unity,
the uncreated and the created.*

*Herein is wisdom;
when I was undone, with no will to return to him,
and no intellect to devise recovery,
he came, God-incarnate, to save me to the uttermost,
as man to die my death,
to shed satisfying blood on my behalf,
to work out a perfect righteousness for me!*

*O God, take me in spirit to the watchful shepherds,
and enlarge my mind!*

*Let me hear good tidings of great joy,
and hearing, believe, rejoice, praise, adore,
my conscience bathed in an ocean of repose,
my eyes uplifted to a reconciled Father!*

*Place me with ox, donkey, camel, goat,
to look with them upon my Redeemer's face,
and in him account myself delivered from sin!*

*Let me with Simeon clasp the newborn child to my heart,
embrace him with undying faith,
exulting that he is mine and I am his!*

In him you have given me so much that heaven can give no more.

*“The Gift of Gifts” | A Puritan Prayer from *The Valley of Vision**