



*2022 Advent Devotionals  
written by Sugar Land Students*

# THE KING IS HERE

**EDITED BY SCOTTY SWINGLER**

# **The King Is Here**

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Thanks for checking out *The King is Here*. I pray it is a wonderful tool for you and your family during this Advent season. The Scripture in this book is quoted from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

I'm extremely proud of each student who wrote a devotional. You'll be enriched by their writings. Gen Z continues to amaze me with their hearts. They're a gift to the Church. Thank you for entrusting Sugar Land Students to be your spiritual leaders for the next four weeks. Just a heads up, a couple entries have a trigger warning at the top since they discuss sensitive subjects. I always encourage my teenagers that church is a safe place to talk about "real life" struggles, and there's certainly some of that content in this book!

We're blessed at Sugar Land Baptist Church to have a tremendous student ministry staff that works selflessly with little recognition. The investments Erin McKinnerney, Jamar Mitchell, and Noah Waters make into teenagers and God's Kingdom each and every week is flabbergasting, and I am fortunate to be on a team with them. Our summer intern Rebecca Chappell was also a crucial part of our team in the most critical season of the year. Their devotionals here will give you a glimpse into their hearts for Jesus. You'll also read from my supervisor Davey Gibson; his unwavering support and enthusiasm hold my fragile soul together more days than he could ever know. I'm thankful for these friends who contributed to this book. And I'm thankful for you, a church family who would use it and celebrate it.

The Creator has come to visit Creation! The King is here! May we worship in celebration and sincerity this Advent!

- Pastor Scotty

# An Introduction to Advent

*Scotty Swingler*  
*Student Pastor*

## **Scripture:**

*Praise the Lord, my soul;  
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*  
*Praise the Lord, my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits. **Psalm 103:1–2***

We recently finished studying the Psalms at *Surge*, our weekly Wednesday night gathering for students. We discussed how the Psalms were the hymns for Jesus as He grew up in synagogue. Just as the Psalms formed Jesus as a worshipper, they should form us as well!

One thing I notice about the Psalms is how often they rely on remembrance. The Psalm writers insist that it is important, even necessary, to call to mind the things which God has already accomplished as part of our expression of worship. This helps us “zoom out” in some ways from our narrow perspectives of “me, here, now” to look at the broader canvas God is painting. To remember God’s work is a centering device for our oft-wayward

hearts. It helps us see God rightly and see our own stories rightly as we attempt to follow Jesus in a broken world.

Psalm 103 opens with an exclamation of worship “in my inmost being,” followed by a reminder to the writer’s soul to “forget not all his benefits.” As we proactively remember God’s work throughout both history and our story, worship moves from an outward expression of praise to an inward posture of submission. It also reminds us that following Jesus is **beneficial** to our lives rather than a hindrance to our lives.

Advent is an intentional season of remembrance. Worship during Advent is the most intentional of the year as we stop to remember core fruits of God’s character— Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love—as well as God’s work, namely, in the Christmas story of the past and the Second Coming story of the future. We look backward and forward at God’s work to recall who we are and why we hold to the Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love we have.

Advent is not only a season of remembrance, but also a season of waiting. As we await the baby in the manger, we likewise await the return of Jesus Christ as

King at the end of all things. We look backward and forward not only to remember, but to anticipate.

You see, when Jesus was born in a Bethlehem stable, a King had arrived. This was no “typical” birth for a “typical” King, it was entirely atypical. The Kingdom that Jesus introduced was upside-down, marked by humility and service. But we hold fast to a promise that one day when Jesus returns as Enthroned King and establishes the Kingdom of God, we will live with Him forever. Throughout the many struggles of life, we await the King’s return with great and holy anticipation.

So this Advent season, we remember and we wait. We read, we pray, we sing, and we bow down. The King arrives at Christmas, yes, the King is here! And the King will come again to make all things right, and build that Holy City on the foundations of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Hallelujah! Let us remember and anticipate together in the name of the Holy One, Jesus, this Advent.

**Prayer:** *God, help me remember Your works and anticipate Your Kingdom, and may I be centered in Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love during this Advent season. Amen.*

# **Week 1: Hope**

Sunday, November 27

# Hope in the Waiting

*Erin McKinnerney*

*Student Ministry Associate*

**Scripture:** *Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;  
Lord, hear my voice.*

*Let your ears be attentive  
to my cry for mercy.*

*If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,  
Lord, who could stand?*

*But with you there is forgiveness,  
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.*

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,  
and in his word I put my hope.*

*I wait for the Lord  
more than watchmen wait for the morning,  
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

*Israel, put your hope in the Lord,  
for with the Lord is unfailing love  
and with him is full redemption.*

*He himself will redeem Israel  
from all their sins. **Psalm 130***

I remember sitting in my apartment during my freshman year of college. I had just finished filling out my



transfer application to Texas A&M University, hoping that by the beginning of my sophomore year I would be at my dream school. Although optimistic thoughts of what my future might look like filled me with excitement, I was also overwhelmed with a feeling of anxiety. The anticipation of waiting for months to find out if I'd been accepted into Texas A&M constantly plagued my brain, but there was nothing I could do to make the process go faster. It was out of my control. Waiting was hard, but I prayed for God to go before me, open the doors meant for me to pass through, and give me peace while I waited.

Like the Psalmist, I had to put my hope in God and wait for Him to reveal His plans for me. We live in a fast-paced, instant-gratification world where waiting is seen as a frustrating inconvenience; but, like the Psalmist says, we are supposed to put our hope in the Lord, especially in inevitable times of waiting. We are called to long for Him, His forgiveness, and His redemption.

Something else I notice is the Psalmist's confidence isn't rooted in God's plan, it's rooted in God's character. This is what we're called to do, too. Although God knows

exactly what is going to happen to each and every one of us, we're not supposed to focus on that. We are supposed to put our faith in God's character and accept the gifts He gives us. If we do that, there's nothing else that we need to worry about. In fact, worries decrease.

When we choose to wait and put our hope in the Lord—when we allow Him to confirm or redirect our plans—we find inner peace about the outcomes. And in that way, God will never disappoint us.

Our worldly desires and the big plans we make for ourselves will never amount to what God has planned for us. We know this because God always offers us His love and redemption, despite our sin. How cool is it that we can have a relationship with a God that keeps no record of wrongs, and always forgives?

Oh, and thanks to God's goodness, guess what? I got into Texas A&M. Whoop!

**Prayer:** *God, help me remember that Your plans are always better than mine. Help me place my hope in You and experience Your steadfast love and redemption. Amen.*

Monday, November 28

# The Post-Credits Scene

*Megan Waldo*

*Senior, Foster High School*

**Scripture:** *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. **Hebrews 11:1***

If you've watched any movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, you know that Marvel Studios likes to add an extra scene at the end of each movie to give a preview of upcoming films. These "post-credit" scenes bring a feeling of wonder and anticipation for what will happen in the future movies. My family and I have created a tradition out of staying through the end credits to see them at the movie theaters.

The post-credit scenes create speculation and encourage the audience to make predictions about what happens next. Will they kill off this character? Maybe this character will become a bad guy! Are they going to do more in the multiverse? Even after asking all those

questions and dreaming up those ideas, whenever I finally see the next movie, it usually ends up being better than I had imagined!

When thinking about our relationship with God, sometimes we find ourselves doing the same thing with God's plan for us. We see God work in one area of our lives, and then we begin wondering what He will do next, trying to make our predictions.

However, like Marvel Studios knows their own movies, only God truly knows the detailed plans for our lives. The Israelites tried for centuries to predict how and when the Messiah would come, but they never imagined he would come as a baby boy, let alone to eventually die on a cross.

This verse reminds us of the confidence we gain by putting our hope in God. When we remember how God's plan to send baby Jesus at Christmas turned out in the end, we can be assured that God's plan for our lives will turn out good as well.

God is more trustworthy than Marvel Studios. Regardless of the predictions you make based on life's

“post-credits” scenes, you can place your hope in a God who will never let you down in His plans for you.

**Prayer:** *God, I pray for you to grant me the patience and joy to allow your plans to play out in my life and to help open my mind about what you are calling me to do in the future. Amen.*

Tuesday, November 29

# Hope in Lament

*Cade Doherty*

*Sophomore, Foster High School*

## **Scripture:**

*Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.*

*They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.*

*I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion;  
therefore I will wait for him."*

*The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him,  
to the one who seeks him;*

***Lamentations 3:22–25***

## ***TW: Suicide***

Fall Retreat in 2021 was one of the greatest weekends of my life. In those two days my relationship with God was strengthened to a point that felt unbreakable. For the first time, I had ***truly*** placed my hope

in Him. I thought this new surge of commitment would be everlasting and easy, but as the Bible promises, it was not.

When I got home my parents had a look on their face. As a kid I thought I knew every “face” they had, but this was one I’d never seen. When I heard what they said, I realized why. A friend of mine had taken her own life.

As I was praising God, she was feeling lost. This made me rethink every promise I’d made with the Lord that weekend. How could He let something like this happen?

The deeper I swam in my own thoughts, the more I blamed God for this tragedy. I tried to pray about it, but always ended up yelling at God. I had accusations. It was almost as if I finally had an excuse to throw all my problems, not just this one, at Him. I had no hope.

God doesn’t “control” our lives, even if sometimes we think He should. He gives us free will, the ability to think and do as we please. Whether you interpret this as a blessing or a curse, what free will creates is this: an authentic trust in God for our hope, not a blind handing-over of our belief. I’ve come to realize that the Lord

protects us and is “good to us” when we put our hope in Him. His compassion never fails. It’s out of His compassion that He saves us.

This road may not be easy. There may be ups and downs. We may witness first-hand what can happen if we reject His compassion and don’t allow Him to help us. But God never said life would be easy; He never promised a perfect earthly life for us. But Jesus did promise to return, and when He does, we can have hope that a perfect life awaits all of us in heaven.

**Prayer:** *God, thank you for being with me even in the darkest moments of life. Thank you for your compassion—love necessitating action—which meets me where I am and holds me through the hardest times. May I put my hope in You, even in life’s hardships. Amen.*



Wednesday, November 30

## Complicated Hope

*Katin Moore*

*8th Grade, Home School*

**Scripture:** *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.*

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **Romans 5:1–8***

Hope in a Biblical sense is an expectation and anticipation that rests in what we believe.

Hope is made manifest in character and perseverance. Your character is what defines you, and it

guides you on what to hope for. Perseverance helps you wait and go through hard times, maintaining hope so that you may see what you hope for come to fruition. (v 3-4)

Perseverance is a key aspect of hope because Jesus needed perseverance in the darkest moment of His life. At the moment Jesus was crucified, He lost His connection with the Father. Can you imagine? A man who had never been separated from God and never sinned, yet He was the one to bear the burden of the cross. Why is that?

Jesus died for us, the ungodly, so that we may be made righteous. He took in all our sins, numbered in the infinite, on the cross. Jesus persevered in a way we can't comprehend in this moment. He maintained hope that God was in control, even when He could no longer see His Father.

“Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.” Jesus didn't die for “good” people only. He died for everyone. He died for you, me, and everyone. Who's the worst person you can think of? Jesus died for them, too! The sacrifice and grace of Jesus can give that person hope.

And for we who believe in Jesus, it should be the source of our hope every single day.

**Activity:** *Write down, in a journal or on a sheet of paper, the various ways in which these verses can inspire your hope today.*

Thursday, December 1

# The Light of the World

*Ava Bennetsen*

*Junior, Foster High School*

**Scripture:** *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. 1 Peter 1:3–4a*

During the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic I felt so alone and empty. I didn't know the answer to end the isolation and the pain I felt. I knew life wasn't supposed to be this way, but I didn't know what to do.

So I turned to social media, specifically TikTok, to get my mind off the questions I had in hopes of numbing myself. One day, several Christian content creators were showing up on my TikTok feed. Even though I didn't care too much to hear what they had to say, I had this conviction to stop and listen; I even liked most of them. One night I was laying on the couch downstairs watching TikTok and one of these Christian content creators said

something that struck me. He said God would do anything, even allow the world to shut down, to get His children's attention. He said God would meet me where I was and look me in the eyes and say, "It's time get up and walk with Me."

And so in March 2020, I gave my life to Jesus and I was saved. Since that moment I've continued to walk in the hope that radiates from the merciful gift of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

All throughout Scripture we can find hope in dark places, whether that be in a story about someone like Job or in a letter composed by Paul inside a Roman jail. Peter's first letter offers one of the most hopeful promises within the Bible in today's devotional passage. In these verses we can see that Peter gives his readers a reason to hope in God because of His amazing character and promises.

Reflecting on this verse has allowed me to recognize Jesus as a living, walking hope. And Jesus can be a living hope to others because, like I once was, many walk around slaves to their vices, desperately seeking satisfaction that will never be found within those things.

Rather than hoping in things that may disappoint or leave you empty, have hope in the day when you'll be with Jesus and receive an inheritance that will "never perish, spoil, or fade," not one polluted with sin, isolation, grief, shame, sadness, anger, and judgment.

As you go through this day, hold on to this truth: **You** are the daughter or son of the Most High, the God of the universe, and you have a promised future with an inheritance in God's Kingdom. Today, you can hope and find rest because of the perfect goodness coming.

**Activity:** *Write down your testimony of when you first came to know Jesus as your Savior. Who led you to that decision? What feelings did that decision inspire? Then, **reflect on** how you can keep that feeling of "new birth" into your inheritance alive in your life today.*

Friday, December 2

## Hope in the Past and Present

*Lee Hamblet*

*Sophomore, Logos Preparatory Academy*

### **Scripture:**

*For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord,  
my confidence since my youth.*

*From birth I have relied on you;  
you brought me forth from my mother's womb.  
I will ever praise you.*

*I have become a sign to many;  
you are my strong refuge.*

*My mouth is filled with your praise,  
declaring your splendor all day long. **Psalm 71:5–8***

It's easy to think that hope is entirely focused on the future. We constantly "look ahead" for what we are hoping for. However, this viewpoint neglects two essential elements of hope: the past and the present. Throughout these verses, only one line out of nine uses future tense. This illustrates the importance of the other two tenses.

The past helps strengthen our hope, and the present allows for the perseverance of hope. Without either, hope becomes useless.

If you neglect or ignore the past, your hope is unfounded and you will likely have little of it. That kind of hope is like a bridge with no support; it will soon crumble. By contrast, a hope reliant on the memories of how God has provided for you in the past will prevail through much hardship. This is how we grow in hope.

Without the present a strong hope is meaningless. The final three lines of our passage show how we must not be idle in our hopes. The Psalmist praises and exalts God in his or her hope. This active expression of hope in the present helps us persevere toward our future.

Take hope from your past; begin each day by thinking about ways God has been faithful to you over the years. As for the present, make the choice to praise God in your circumstances to actively maintain your hope.

**Activity:** *Write down ways God has been faithful in your past, and what circumstances you need hope for today.*



Saturday, December 3

# Suffering for Jesus

*John Curtis "JC" Sandlin*

*Sophomore, George Ranch High School*

**Scripture:** *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.*

*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

**Romans 8:18–25**

As a swimmer, I often complain about the difficulties of swim and how much easier my life would be without it. Every day after practice, I find myself telling my

friends and family about the grueling practice and all the sets I hated the most. All I think about is all the pain and suffering I go through each time I go to swim.

But in today's Scripture, Paul tells us not to even think about our sufferings when we have the glory of God to look forward to. This is a man who was beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and starved telling us that we can be hopeful because our suffering is nothing compared to what is to come, and that all we must do is trust in Jesus.

Like many people, I spend lots of time sulking over relatively minor issues. However, Paul gives us a different way. He saw God's promise was so magnificent, he could stay hopeful and look beyond his many major problems.

Of course, this doesn't mean you won't go through pain. There will be times when it feels like the whole world is out to get you. Paul even says "the creation was subjected to frustration [because] of the one who subjected it," which basically means the world is suffering because of sin. But then he goes on to say that none of the world's suffering compares to the glory that Jesus will bring.

The glory of Jesus will one day outshine the pain of all suffering in our world, the major stuff and the minor stuff—including swim practice. There is no better source of hope.

**Prayer:** *God, please allow me to remain hopeful, and keep my focus on Your coming glory, even in times of suffering.*

# **Week 2: Peace**

Sunday, December 4

# What Do You Promote?

*by Jamar Mitchell*

*Student Ministry Associate*

## **Scripture:**

*Deceit is in the hearts of those who plot evil,  
but those who promote peace have joy. **Proverbs 12:20***

What emotions are you allowing to take center stage in your life? Typically, our emotions can dictate our attitudes and what we think about each day.

This passage says that deceit is at the heart of those who plan evil. Christians tend to believe evil is derived from a villainous character from a movie or book, but it can come from anybody who sins or promotes things that are not of God. The way we lead in deceit is by allowing life's frustrations, temptations, irritations, and any other negative emotion to take center stage.

Sometimes this fall into deceit causes us to do things that benefit ourselves or a particular group of people instead of doing what is pleasing to God. Instead of peace-making we

end up causing hurt and division due to our sin and negativity.

So how can we avoid these negative things? We avoid them by shifting our focus to the positive things about our lives. The biggest positive of a Christian life is a relationship with God.

Are we seeking a plan of peace? Our focus as Christians should be to spread the Gospel, "the good news." The godly person is one who is a "counselor of peace." These are the ones who bring the truth from the Word of God and present it to the world. They bring the gospel to those who realize that they are facing a dire future in their sins. To be a counselor of peace is to be a person who presents Christ to the lost.

There is no peace for the wicked, but for those who humble themselves and promote peace there is great joy. I pray that as you go forth, that you promote peace so that God may grant you joy!

**Prayer:** *God, help me serve as a counselor of peace. Give me boldness to share the gospel with those who may not know you so they too may experience peace. Amen.*

Monday, December 5

# Troubles No More

*Luke Keasler*

*Sophomore, Foster High School*

**Scripture:** *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* **John 16:33**

Have you ever prepared for an audition, tried out for a sports team, or gone to an interview? I've had my fair share of these moments, mostly in the context of instrumental auditions. Each time I walk into the room to perform a piece of music—one which I've meticulously broken down for many months—I tense up, lose concentration, and start to sweat.

Maybe you've had similar experiences in your life. These feelings of stress and anxiety happen outside of just interviews and tryouts. Lots of things can go wrong in a day whether it be a sick family member, a bad day at the office, or a fight in your family. These situations of “trouble” can really throw you off and disrupt your peace.

But in our Scripture for today, Jesus says that in these situations we need to remember that he has overcome the world and its troubles. He reminds us that one day there will be no more troubles when we'll live with Him in heaven. All that we suffer through on earth will be no more when we are with our brothers and sisters in Christ in heaven. Jesus is going to make all things right, and the troubles of this world will cease forever.

We know some things are bound to go wrong in life, but when they do, remember what Jesus promised us. This verse reminds us that there is hope in this life, and a perfect life in the world to come.

**Prayer:** *God, help me to remember that no matter what troubles I face, You have overcome my challenges and one day I will no longer face trouble as I'm with You in heaven. Amen.*



Tuesday, December 6

# King of All Kings

*Justin Seyler*

*Senior, Ridge Point High School*

## **Scripture:**

*For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this. **Isaiah 9:6-7***

Daily life can pose many challenges, often leaving us stressed out, confused, and depressed. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, seemingly left without guidance or knowledge of what to do next.

We are just like the Israelites in that we need guidance from the Lord. I often rely on myself—and only myself—to get through situations only God can get me through. A personal example, for me, is the passing of multiple family members this past year. I would find myself becoming angry at God; I would lose faith and doubt everything I know to be good.

However, when I placed my trust in God—that His plan is perfect, and nothing takes Him by surprise—I found comfort and peace. Order and rest come over me when I keep faith in my Lord.

Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy from Isaiah. This leadership of God was brought to earth through the Son when Jesus arrived at Christmas. He's not only the ruler on David's Throne, but the King of all Kings. Jesus reigns over all things, including us. His plan is good and His timing is perfect. Trust Him! Making Jesus your Lord, not "just" your Savior, is the pathway to perfect peace.

***Consider these questions (on the next page). Write your answers down in a journal or on a sheet of paper. Pray over your answers.***

- *Does stress often rule your life? What helps you relieve stress?*
- *What in your life gives you peace?*
- *Do you allow God to rule over all aspects of your life?*
- *What can you commit to doing, starting today, to keep Jesus the King of your life?*

Wednesday, December 7

# Making Peace With An Enemy

*Alex Carlo*

*7th Grade, Logos Preparatory Academy*

**Scripture:** *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

**Romans 12:17–18**

Do you remember the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*? In my favorite book series, *The Land of Stories*, author Chris Colfer explains why Goldilocks went to the three bears' home.

You see, Little Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks both had a crush on Jack—you know, the one from the story with the beanstalk. So Red, as she's named in the book, forged Jack's handwriting in a note. It said to meet him in the forest where the three bears' home was. Red didn't mean any "real" harm—she thought Goldilocks would get "merely scratched."

Red secretly gave the forged note to Goldilocks, and Goldilocks fell for the trap. She went into the forest looking for Jack. But when she arrived at the bears' home, the fairy tale you know occurred, and Goldilocks was forced to go on the run from the police. Later, when Goldilocks finds out Red wrote the letter, she seeks revenge. She tries to kill Red, a LOT, in *The Land of Stories* book one.

God, however, is frequently reminding us in the Bible that if someone slaps us on one cheek, we should turn the other. Goldilocks didn't do that, but we should as followers of Jesus. Jesus came to earth at Christmas to make peace with sinful us, despite the many times we've turned our backs on Him. We should follow His example.

We shouldn't seek revenge; we should seek peace with our enemies. Even if they sent us to a bear's house to get "merely scratched."

***Pray, right now, for someone you consider "an enemy."***

Thursday, December 8

# Peace in God's Commands

*Sam Doherty*

*Senior, Foster High School*

## **Scripture:**

*Rulers persecute me without cause,*

*but my heart trembles at your word.*

*I rejoice in your promise*

*like one who finds great spoil.*

*I hate and detest falsehood*

*but I love your law.*

*Seven times a day I praise you*

*for your righteous laws.*

*Great peace have those who love your law,*

*and nothing can make them stumble.*

*I wait for your salvation, Lord,*

*and I follow your commands.*

*I obey your statutes,*

*for I love them greatly.*

*I obey your precepts and your statutes,*

*for all my ways are known to you. **Psalm 119:161–168***

On the first day of summer, I celebrated my freedom from school with a bike ride. For three hours I peddled leisurely while the breeze caressed my face and the sun warmed my skin. I listened to birds chirp excitedly

and watched squirrels chase one another up towering pecan trees. I was excited for all the adventures summer would hold and relieved to be free of lingering deadlines and procrastinated homework. Life was good; I was at peace.

We often say we are “at peace” when everything is going right. We think of peace as something that fills the absence of conflict and struggle, but the author of Psalm 119 offers a very different perspective. In verse 161, the Psalmist writes, “Rulers persecute me without cause.” Subjection to unjust persecution by those in power doesn’t exactly scream “peaceful.” And yet in verse 165, the Psalmist speaks of “great peace.”

Unlike the peace I experienced upon getting out of school, the peace the Psalmist had was not a product of his or her circumstances. The source of the Psalmist’s peace was not deliverance from trials, it was faithful obedience to God’s law in the midst of them. The Psalmist loved God’s statutes and waited patiently for salvation. We only experience true peace that supersedes our circumstances and “surpasses all understanding” when we

delight in God's word and are content to rest in His promises.

Part of this contentment is believing that God's ways are better than our own. In verse 167, the Psalmist says, "I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly." The Psalmist doesn't feel confined by God's commandments. On the contrary, he or she gladly obeys them because doing so brings a peace that is completely independent of circumstance, an inner peace that only comes from God.

The Psalmist says that God's peace comes to those who love God's law, not to those who follow it perfectly. Praise the Lord! We're all sinners incapable of living out God's law perfectly, but this doesn't make us disqualified to receive the peace promised to us in scripture!

**Reflect:** *Do you love God's law? Are you content to rest in His promises? What circumstances or idols in your life battle to steal your peace? Rather than praying for peaceful circumstances, **pray** today for peace in the midst of your circumstances. **Pray** also for the strength and discipline to obey God's statutes even when it's tough.*



Friday, December 9

# Blessed Are the Peacemakers

*Esther Opiyo*

*Senior, Clements High School*

## **Scripture:**

*Blessed are the peacemakers,*

*for they will be called children of God. **Matthew 5:9***

It may sound like a contradiction to you, as it did to me—peace demands sacrifice. “Peace” as we often understand it is won on the battlefield or uneasily negotiated.

The peace of Christ comes as an extension of His love for us, making further mockery of human wisdom. Jesus states that those who put their faith in Him and actively pursue peace-making shall receive the “ultimate reward”—eternal life as children of God. As God’s children, we’re called to bring about God’s peace and unity.

However, as we dive deeper into this chaotic and stress-inducing time (aka the “holiday season”), it

becomes hard to prioritize peace and lead the peace-keeping lives God asks us to live. Especially since that means more than simply wanting or longing for peace, but taking real action to promote God's peace in a world filled with destruction.

God's peace, like human peace, requires heavy sacrifice. How do we do that?

As Christians, God has granted us peace with Him through His grace. But He's also called us to be ministers of reconciliation so all people of the world may be reconciled back to God and gain true peace at heart. Jesus, who carried this burden before us, reminds us that peace, while transactional, comes not only with the "ultimate reward" but with one visible in the here and now. We can invite others to become God's children so they will also know perfect peace.

So, as you carry on this holiday season, I urge you to remember: Just as you have made peace with God by believing His Son is the Savior, God asks you to become an ambassador of God's peace to others. Through your ministry of reconciliation and peace-making efforts (which

take work and sacrifice!), you can invite others to experience God's love and salvation so they too can revel in God's eternal reward and receive peace at heart here and now.

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your one and only Son to die on the cross for my sins. It is through His sacrifice that we have peace with You. Give me the strength to become a peace-maker everywhere I go, by sharing Your love and grace with everyone I meet. I know I can't do this except through you, all loving God. Amen.*

Saturday, December 10

# God's Trustworthy Character

*Rebecca Chappell*

*2022 Student Ministry Summer Intern*

**Scripture:** *You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.*

**Isaiah 26:3**

## ***TW: Death of a Parent***

When I think of the word “peace,” I think of an environment that is quiet and serene. I think of being outside in a forest where you can hear all the sounds of nature. But what does peace look like in the face of unexpected tragedy?

Last year my world was flipped upside down. I'd just started my junior year at Louisiana State University, and we'd just finished our first home football game of the season. I received a phone call from my mom informing me that my dad had passed away.

It's difficult to put into words the way grief struck me in that moment, and stuck with me in the following months; my situation, in its lowest moments, felt impossible. I felt like the world was caving in around me.

When going through difficult seasons, the Christian community loves to say, "The Lord won't give you more than you can handle,"—an unhelpful misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:13. In the weeks after my dad's passing, I often found myself asking, "But how am I supposed to handle this?!" I discovered that the only way to obtain true peace amidst incredible pain is through putting my complete trust in God.

We know God's character is trustworthy from Biblical revelation and the way Jesus treated people. The only way you will feel "perfect peace" in every situation is to put your trust in God's character through the ups and downs of life. God holds you in the palm of His hand, no matter what. When we set our minds on the wonderful characteristics of God, especially in the face of adversity, we can know peace even when it feels impossible.

**Reflect:** *Recognize God's ever-present goodness in your life and think of tangible ways to trust God this coming week.*

# **Week 3: Joy**

Sunday, December 11

## Joy in the Comeback Story

*Davey Gibson*

*Education & Discipleship Pastor*

### **Scripture:**

*Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people;  
praise his holy name.*

*For his anger lasts only a moment,  
but his favor lasts a lifetime;*

*weeping may stay for the night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

*You turned my wailing into dancing;  
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.*

*Lord my God, I will praise you forever.*

***Psalm 30:4–5, 11–12***

We all love a good comeback story—call it a *180*—the team that lost all season wins the championship, the bad guy learns their lesson and changes their ways, what was wrong is now made right again. The concept of redemption is woven throughout movies, TV, and books.

The story of King David is one big comeback tale. The youngest son of Jesse, even his own father forgot



about him when the roll was called before Samuel to anoint the next king in 1 Samuel 16. Once David is anointed as the next king, he is put to service in the court of the current king, Saul. David runs for his life on several occasions as the person who stands between him and the throne is understandably upset that the future king has already been anointed. Immediately upon becoming King, David does the unthinkable. His first act as king is to take the unconquerable fortress that is the City of Jerusalem and aptly rename it the “City of David.” He throws the biggest party the city has seen; he leads the parade, dancing before the Lord with all his might in 2 Samuel 5-6.

Psalm 30 is a “song of David” about the great comebacks in life. Maybe this is why the ancient Jewish Talmud suggests that this song was used in the dedication of the house (or Hanukkah; this Jewish celebration starts next Sunday)—meaning it was used by Judas Maccabeus in 165 BC to celebrate the purification of the 2nd Temple after Antiochus Epiphanes committed the Abomination of Desolation by destroying the God’s Holy Altar. Or maybe this is why when another King of the Jews comes into

Jerusalem some 400 years after Judas restores the Temple, the people shout “Hosanna, to the Son of David!”

The late Christian author, pastor, and theologian Frederick Buechner writes of King David, “He had clay feet like the rest of us if not more so – self-serving and deceitful, lustful and vain....”

But what a comeback for the entire world through the most famous “Son of David,” the Son of God—Jesus. There is nothing God cannot redeem and no one God cannot use for His Kingdom.

What about us this advent season? Where do you need a comeback? Where are you weeping and waiting for joy? In what ways has God already restored and turned “mourning into dancing?” Be watchful and wait expectantly for God to do what only He can do—write your comeback story.

**Prayer:** *O God who is the source of inexpressible joy, give us grateful hearts to see You at work in our lives this day and respond in joy. Just as David did, may we understand the great turnaround that we celebrate each Advent – God gave hope to the world. And for this hope we give you thanks.*

Monday, December 12

## On Cloud Jesus

*April Ma*

*Senior, Dulles High School*

**Scripture:** *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**

It took me a long time to realize that all the love and hope I'd been searching for in earthly things—relationships, friendships, money, grades—could only fulfill me to a certain point. That 100 in calculus, the one person I thought would never let me down, being able to buy whatever I wanted—those things made me happy, but only to a certain point. The 100 drops, that person leaves, and materialistic goods only last for so long. Deep down, I always felt empty inside, like part of me was missing.

Luckily, I came to understand that this didn't mean there was "nothing left" for me. God was always waiting

for me to come back to Him, arms wide open. Happiness went from unattainable to overflowing in a relationship with Jesus, and I was able to find happiness even during my times of despair—true joy.

I grew up learning phrases like “good news of great joy” and “the J in Jesus stands for joy,” but I always brushed joy off as simply being happy. It was at camp during middle school where I learned the actual definition of joy. Biblically, joy is more than simple happiness; joy as a feeling of good pleasure is dependent on who Jesus is rather than who we are or what is happening around us. The wise men experienced exceedingly great joy when they caught a glimpse of the star over Bethlehem, knowing that God had a purpose for them regardless of their circumstances. They then laid down their earthly treasures to put their faith in Jesus.

Often, the joy of the Lord is unexplainable to the world. How could one be going through turmoil or trauma yet still be able to find good pleasure? Like the wise men in Scripture who bowed to the newborn Jesus, we often find joy in unexpected places as we worship Jesus. Putting our

full faith—everything we have to offer—in Jesus allows us to have fullness of joy, just like the ones who followed the star and worshipped Him all those years ago.

***Write about*** how you can find fulfillment in Jesus Christ instead of seeking Earthly pleasures. Then...

**Prayer:** *Lord, I give me the strength to seek joy in You.*

Tuesday, December 13

## Finding Joy in the Gift of Life

*Gabriel Cole*

*Sophomore, Logos Preparatory Academy*

### **Scripture:**

*Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior. **Habakkuk 3:17–18***

I clearly remember second grade, when the only thing I wanted in the whole world was an Xbox One. Every single night before I went to bed, I prayed to God and asked for an Xbox. I explained to Him that an Xbox was the only thing in the world that could make me happy.

My parents aren't the type to spoil their kids so my pleading to them was as pointless as a broken pencil, but then, a miracle happened. My prayers were answered! There was a raffle at my school and for some reason my

parents bought a ticket for \$10. They won the top prize: my Xbox One.

Of course being seven years old, I saw the improbable odds and thought this victory was a sign from God. I was the happiest kid for a couple days but quickly that “joy” I thought I had faded, and I wanted something else. That Xbox only gave me temporary happiness.

As humans, there’s always something more we want. There's always a part of our lives we wish could be better. It’s easy to complain and get caught up with everything in our lives we think is going wrong. Where we find **joy** is through God, and the salvation He gives us through Jesus.

In the verses above Habakkuk uses the imagery of fig trees, vines, fields, and animals to display the struggles that he and the nation of Israel are going through. Even though Habakkuk is going through intense troubles—life is going wrong—he rejoices because he knows God is his savior. We should do the same thing!

Let’s be honest: life isn’t fair, and we all go through adversity. Maybe for you, adversity is failing a test, falling

behind at work, dealing with illness, struggling with sin, or losing a loved one. The things of the world, like my second grade Xbox, cannot give us joy in the face of these difficulties. The only reliable, sustainable, and full joy is found in Jesus Christ. You'll find your joy through Him.

**Activity:** *Take five minutes out of your day and pray for Jesus to exemplify His joy in your life.*



Wednesday, December 14

## Roadblocks to Our Joy

*Gabe Carlo*

*Senior, Fort Bend Christian Academy*

**Scripture:** *But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy. **1 Thessalonians 2:17–20***

Life puts obstacles in our way that will throw us off our path. There is an enemy, Satan, who wants to block us from seeing the glory of God.

This often comes in ways we do not see or realize. In my life, people I thought of as true friends were actually pulling me away from God. People I thought I could trust were the reason my faith in God started to fade. This clouded my vision where I could no longer see our glorious God the way I once did. Not only did my faith in God

suffer, but my joy diminished as well. As I became distracted and road-blocked, distancing myself from God took away things I used to love.

However, when I became conscious of what was really happening in my life, I became aware of the distance I had put between myself and God. This awakening opened my eyes to the worthiness and glory of our God. I also realized I needed friends in my life who would help me follow God, and from those friendships I can find true and vibrant joy.

I trusted God in his plan and stepped back onto the path He was paving for me. When I re-commit to God as the Lord of my life, and when my community is built on God's love, my joy is restored.

Are you lacking joy? Find friends who will point you to Jesus and make God the Lord of your life again by coming back to the road He's calling you to walk down. Your joy will, like mine, be restored.

**Reflect:** *What in your life distracts you from the Glory of God? Are you willing to put aside those distractions to experience God's joy in your life?*

Thursday, December 15

## Daily Joy

*Katelyn Croft*

*Freshman, Logos Preparatory Academy*

**Scripture:** *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the 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 and lying in a manger.”*

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” **Luke 2:9–15***

Joy is my middle name, so I was excited to write a devotional about it. However, I was somewhat nervous because so many people might read it.

The Bible tells us not to be afraid. But the shepherds in this passage were terrified, as most people might be if the sky suddenly filled with angels. Those angels brought good news that was meant to bring great joy not only for them, but all people.

What should they be joyful about? A Savior had been born nearby! And although shepherds weren't usually considered important people and were often looked down upon, they were the first people God chose to hear this great news and meet baby Jesus. Later in verse 20, Luke talks about how the shepherds returned praising God for all they had seen and heard.

Just as Jesus brought the shepherds joy, He should be our source of joy today. I love the words of KSBJ's Joy Pledge. "I need joy. When I keep my eyes on Jesus, I have joy. When I lose it, I will choose it. I choose joy."

After this miraculous encounter with joy, the shepherds had to go back to their routine work of sheep-

tending. After Christmas, we will have to get back to our routines as well—and it isn't always easy. How can we continue to have the joy that Jesus brings? A common acronym for joy is:

J—Jesus

O—Others

Y—Yourself

As Christians we can maintain our joy by going to Jesus first, trusting Him to lead and take care of us. Another way we experience joy is by finding ways to love others and point them towards the cause of our joy. I hope we will all be able to say “The joy of the Lord is our strength,” not just at Christmas, but every day of the year.

**Prayer:** *Dear Jesus, thank you for coming to our world as a baby at Christmas. Please help me keep my eyes focused on You as my source of joy today and every day. Amen.*

Friday, December 16

# Perseverance in Times of Trial

*Will Gibson*

*8th Grade, Briscoe Junior High*

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

If you were put on trial, how would you feel? How would you act? It probably depends on how prepared you are. If you're unprepared, you might feel nervous, scared, unsure. Will the judge be fair? Lenient? Throw the book at you? When you feel this way, you might lash out and get angry. You may blame others for your misfortune. Or you might try to hide from your troubles, filling your time and thoughts with cell phones and video games, ignoring the court date coming up. But if you've prepared your defense, you can walk in confident, ready, sure of the outcome. You don't need to worry because you've done the hard work in advance.

James tells us how we should prepare for life's trials that are guaranteed to come. Most trials are lengthy affairs. But that is part of their value. The verdict of life's trials, according to James, is perseverance leading to greater faith.

A trial is a test, an event that shows our true colors. That doesn't provide much joy or hope right now, but that is the glorious work of Jesus! Just as He shows us our weaknesses in trials, He also strengthens and shapes those weaknesses into His strength. Whenever we are weak, He is strong.

James goes even further and tells us to think of trials as pure joy! A gift even! Joy is deeper than happiness. It's not dependent on our feelings; it's dependent on our attitude. Joy is happiness combined with gratitude. We can be thankful for our trials (even if we don't like them!) because what we receive from them is greater than the anguish we go through in the moment. The world may think us crazy for having joy in trials because that is not the world's way. But what a witness to

the power and love of Jesus when we joyfully grow in trying times!

Perseverance in our faith helps us become mature and complete human beings. Search “complete” in an online Bible, paying attention specifically to the New Testament verses. Notice how many verses talk about joy and completeness. I’m convinced you can’t be a complete person without joy. And Jesus is the only source of our joy in the midst of the trials.

**Prayer:** *God, help me see Your love clearly, even during trials. May I keep my eyes on the finish line and the “completeness” of faith You are creating in me, and may that promise fill me with joy. Amen.*



Saturday, December 17

## God's Gift of Joy

*Ryan Hiegel*

*Junior, Foster High School*

### **Scripture:**

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.*

*Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.*

*Then it was said among the nations,*

*“The Lord has done great things for them.”*

*The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.*

*Restore our fortunes, Lord,  
like streams in the Negev.*

*Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.*

*Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,*

*will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them. **Psalm 126***

Throughout our lives we will all experience moments of joy. You might experience joy in things such as having fun, doing really well on something, or being with

certain people. For me, the thing that brings the most joy is having fun with my friends. Whatever it is that brings you joy, remember that God has provided it for you. God will always provide us with occasions of joy.

In Psalm 126, when the people of Israel saw that God had restored their fortunes, they were filled with great joy. God provided great things for them because of how much He loves and cares for his children.

However, some scholars think Psalm 126 was written after the Israelites returned from the Babylonian Exile. They had suffered in captivity in Babylon for generations, and God eventually led them out. They were probably just happy to be out of Babylon, but God gave them additional gifts just because of his love for them. What a joy!

Even when things seem bad and ugly, God will come through in the end and provide for you. It might not be immediate like you want, but God knows what is best for you and has plans for your life. God will give his gift of joy to you. You never know when those seasons of overwhelming joy might come, but God does. And in the

end, even the hardest times will have been worth it because of the overwhelming joy God promises to give us, both in this life and more so in the next.

**Prayer:** *Lord, help me to believe that you will provide for me. Help to notice Your gifts and enjoy the abundant life you have given to me. Amen.*

# **Week 4: Love**

Sunday, December 18

## Show the World God's Love

*Noah Waters*

*Associate Student Minister of Worship & Production*

**Scripture:** *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” John 13:34–35*

Have you ever met somebody that just loves Christmas? When the season comes around, they simply radiate joy; you can see it without ever having to ask how they feel. It's evident in the way they live their life during the Christmas season, and they try to share their love of Christmas with everyone else.

I think that we as Christians are called to do the same with the love of God. Even though we tend not to be very good at it, we are called to be a beacon of love in this dark world—so that all may know that we are His disciples!

In my family growing up, we had a saying: “love is an action, not a word.” I’ve held on to that all these years because I think it really lines up with the command given in John 13:34. When we are told to “love one another,” that doesn’t mean to unconditionally harbor positive feelings towards everyone. In fact, I often get the most aggravated by the people I love the most! But love means standing by people and taking action rather than giving nothing but lip service. The Christmas season is one that readily showcases that love.

I’ve got great news for you today: God’s love isn’t confined to a season! Christmas comes and goes, but the love that we have been given is a constant. And since we are loved, so we are called to love; just as the verse says, everyone will know that we are disciples of Jesus if we love one another well. What a joyful, simple truth: if we show love to the world, they will know that we are Christ-followers!

If Christmas as a holiday is cause for celebration, how much more is the birth of Christ? How much more are we called to share the love that has been given to us? This

season, and every season, I challenge you to love those around you (and far away from you) with the same love that you are given by the Lord.

*As you go about your week, spend time **actively trying to show love** to those around you.*

Monday, December 19

# God's Not Done with You

*Sarah Batarseh*

*Senior, Logos Preparatory Academy*

**Scripture:** *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:8*

One of my favorite songs is *God's Not Done with You* by Tauren Wells. Each time I listen to it, it reminds me of why I woke up that morning. It's because God's not done with me!

His love is so unconditional that it "covers a *multitude* of sins." At my school, we have a Bible study called C2 where we go to someone's home to learn more about Jesus on Monday nights. During these nights we have different speakers that preach to us. One night, the football coach came to speak. He told us about a time he told his friend that he felt like he had made too many mistakes for Jesus to love him. His friend replied that if he



had made too many mistakes for Jesus to love him, then what Jesus accomplished on the cross wasn't enough.

As you go through this Christmas season, I want you to ask yourself, "Is what Jesus did for me on the cross enough for me to believe that He loves me unconditionally?" (P.S. the answer is YES). Jesus died for you; you are enough for Him. He loves you no matter what. God's not done with you.

As Christians, we should "love each other deeply." Maybe someone in your life needs to hear that they are enough, that God loves them, and that God's love can cover all their worst mistakes. So go tell them! It's a reminder everyone needs. And maybe that's why God's not done with you; maybe He'll use you to love someone else in a way that changes their life.

**Prayer:** *Dear God, thank you for all the blessings in my life. Thank you for loving me unconditionally. Thank you for sending your only Son to die for me. As I go about this new year, lead my heart to love people unconditionally, like You love me unconditionally. I love you. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Tuesday, December 20

## A Gift Out of Love

*Connor Schultz*

*Senior, Travis High School*

### **Scripture:**

*Better a small serving of vegetables with love  
than a fattened calf with hatred. **Proverbs 15:17***

Each Christmas season, thousands of sheets of construction paper, bottles of Elmer's glue, and other craft items are meticulously (or haphazardly) assembled by little children in their preschool and elementary school classes. Although I was never one for arts and crafts, I can remember the joy brought to me when I delivered these gifts to my parents. They can still be found on the Christmas tree or in my mother's collection of keepsakes, as I'm sure is true for many families.

Perhaps the most significant part of the average American Christmas is giving gifts. Corporate America loves to take advantage of this and overwhelm us with advertisements for "the best deals on gifts they'll love."

Many Christians find themselves torn between living up to this consumeristic ideal and turning to what we know we should be focusing on this Advent season: God's gift to us.

In this verse, Solomon reminds us that it is not the gifts given that matter, but the attitude with which they are given. This reflects our true character that God sees. In his commentary on Proverbs, Albert Barnes points out that the "small serving of vegetables" referenced in the verse would likely be attributed to meals eaten by the poor. Just as He smiled upon the poor woman's tiny offering, God smiles upon the gifts that represent true love for others in our heart. In fact, He gave us the greatest example of this principle by sending Jesus to Earth.

It is important to reflect on our true motives for our great showering of gifts this Christmas. Are you emulating God's love for us in the ways you show your love for others? Let's all practice giving thoughtful gifts to one another rather than on showy displays of affection.

**Challenge:** *Perform a random act of kindness for someone today.*

Wednesday, December 21

## Learning to Love Graciously

*Karoline Joe*

*Junior, Saint Agnes Academy*

**Scripture:** *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **1 John 4:7–11***

Being an athlete throughout high school, I have played on teams with all sorts of people embodying many different personalities. Some I get along well with, and some are extremely frustrating. However, no matter the dynamic, we are teammates first and share at least one thing in common: love for the sport.

Through the challenges of team drama, I remain calm and grounded in God's example of unconditional love for all. As described in verse 10, God's love for us is so

deep that He sacrificed His only Son so we can live. “God is love” (verse 8), and we are called to love each and every one of our peers because God loves the world. This calling includes loving strangers and even our enemies, despite any differences. Because Jesus sees every human as worth dying for, we should work to eliminate judgments and social divisions in order to love everyone just as God does.

Embodying such gracious love in a broken world is somewhat similar to my experience as a high school athlete. In the same way that I have to remind myself to love my teammates despite our differences, I also pursue God’s calling to love all people, because we all share one thing in common: our humanity.

There’s a lot of hate in the world, and our society can be divisive. Yet one thing remains constant: God is love. Living like Jesus requires us to love others graciously, like Him. We learn to love like Jesus by abiding in Him through Scripture, good Christian community, and prayer.

God is love. When you find it hard to love others, find refuge in these verses. We serve a graciously loving God; may we reflect that gracious love to all we meet.

**Reflect:** *Think about an individual in your life who you find it difficult to love. Then **ask God** to soften your heart and help you show gracious love to this person in whatever way you can.*

Thursday, December 22

## Love in Action

*Savannah Garner*

*Freshman, Home School*

**Scripture:** *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. **Romans 12:9–10***

Every year I love volunteering at Project SMILE. Project SMILE provides an opportunity for the community, including Sugar Land Baptist Church volunteers, to honor people who find themselves in difficult circumstances during the Christmas season. It fills my heart with joy to see all the donated Christmas presents and people volunteering their time.

When I am volunteering at Project SMILE, I have a Christmas-morning-like excitement knowing that in a few days these families will have joy opening their Christmas presents. I am always inspired when the founder, Mrs. Carolyn Tarver, shares her compassionate story of love. Project SMILE is an organization that provides a place

where people can gather and sincerely love families who are in need. Mrs. Tarver provides an example to all of us of how to show honor and devotion to our neighbors. She, and Project SMILE, put love in action.

Jesus loves us like this. Jesus provided us with the ultimate example of love in action by dying on the cross. This world needs the kind of love that Jesus gives us, and not only at Christmas or Easter. It is our responsibility as Jesus-followers to show His love to one another.

Jesus told his disciples in John 13:35 “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” So, let us be inspired by the words of Jesus and people like Mrs. Carolyn Tarver to be devoted to one another in love. Merry Christmas!

**Activity:** *Write down in a journal or on a sheet of paper ways you can put your love in action not only this week, but all year.*



Friday, December 23

## Love Like Jesus

*Dena Batarseh*

*Sophomore, Logos Preparatory Academy*

**Scripture:** *Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. **Ephesians 5:1–2***

Ever since I can remember I've always been told to love like Jesus. But what exactly does that mean? And why should we love like Jesus?

This verse tells us to follow God's example and “walk in the way of love.” We should learn to love like Jesus because he loved us first. Jesus loved us so much He died on the cross for us. That offering was gross and ugly, but it brought about a beautiful result: our salvation.

I'm pretty sure in a church like Sugar Land Baptist, this is a well-known story. But if the story doesn't change our lives, we've missed something. If we want to be more

like Jesus, we have to start here—we have to love others the way Jesus loves us. Even if it takes a sacrifice.

Even if it's your worst enemy, God calls us to forgive. Jesus loved the people who were persecuting him. If we are going to follow God's example, our love should be the same. I want to challenge you to go out and spread God's love by doing kind things for the people who have been mean to you or to the people you don't talk to much. Even if it's as simple as smiling and waving, that still shows God's love. Put others first! That is how we walk in the way of love; that is how we follow Jesus in this world.

**Reflect:** *How can you walk in the way of Jesus and show love to people, especially the people who are hard to love?*

Saturday, December 24

# God's Heroic Love

*Cullen Portier*

*7th Grade, Sartartia Middle School*

**Scripture:** *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **John 3:16***

I love sports, and so does my dad. We especially love watching Houston Sports. Outside of the Astros, Houston teams are doing... well, not that great! But my dad and I still love them, win or lose. Guess what? This is what Jesus does with us.

The Scripture for today is, in my opinion, the best verse of all time. It says "God so loved the world that he gave his Son." If you think about it, that is Christmas in a verse! God the Father sent God the Son down to earth to live as a man and to die in order to save us. Jesus didn't have to die but He chose to for us, when we instead should have been punished. This was God's plan for our salvation all along.

When we mess up, we can feel like it's the end of the world, but God is known to give His children second chances, over and over. The Father who sent His Son will always love you. Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son, is always there for you with forgiveness.

God's love is constant no matter what. He loves us when we mess up, and when we are doing good things to glorify His name. He is faithful and doesn't give up on us when we mess up. When we are glorifying His name, He takes joy in us. He loves us in every season, in every way. I love that about God. His love never fails. His love so sweet, it's like candy that brings a rush of delight. And His love is definitely better than the love a diehard sports fan feels for their team.

**Reflect:** *Do you believe God loves you, no matter what? If so, thank Him for it! If not, **pray** and ask God that He would show you His love right now, and tomorrow on Christmas.*

Sunday, December 25

# Humility

*Scotty Swingler*  
*Student Pastor*

**Scripture:** *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used  
to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness. **Philippians 2:5–7***

I've received funny looks whenever I mention that my favorite Christmas passage comes from Philippians rather than the Gospel accounts of Matthew or Luke. Yet it holds true that these words from Philippians 2 remain the pinnacle of holy Christmas tidings, at least as they speak to my soul.

For one thing, Paul beautifully reminds the Philippian church of the magnitude of Jesus' sacrifice not only in His death and resurrection, but in the very act of

becoming human. The Apostle John teaches us in the first chapter of his Gospel that Jesus is the literal agent by which creation took place. Yet Jesus laid down His divine nature, power, and privilege to come as a baby of Mary's womb on this day over 2000 years ago. The magnitude of this downgrade we can't begin to fathom. The heights of glory we don't have language for; the limits of infancy our brains force us to forget.

But Paul also gives us the **why** for this transaction. If I'm being honest, I'm not sure I'd give up even my position as a Student Pastor to go back to starting life over as an infant. I certainly wouldn't give up being King of the Universe! But Jesus—precious Jesus—gave up the most exalted seat in all of creation for a baby's crib because he “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.”

Jesus would not take advantage of His Kingship though it was His right. He chose, instead, to serve. And not to serve His Father only, but to serve “nobodies” like Peter, James, and John. To serve traitors and thieves like Levi and Judas. To serve society's marginalized women,

lepers, and unclean. And, ultimately, to serve someone as broken and sinful as you.

It is history's greatest moment of selflessness, and its purest example of humility. Paul rightly points out that if Christmas illustrates the lengths Jesus went to in order to humbly serve others, we should do the same in our relationships with one another. Our positions of power and privilege, whatever they may be, aren't for our "advantage," they are to be leveraged to serve others. As we reflect on the picture of God's holy humility at Christmas, think with me: How is Jesus inviting you to be humble in your relationships?

- In a world where we can be quick to condemn who we're "against," maybe Jesus is asking you to be "for" *everyone*. You know ... because He is.
- In a church where we want everything run "our way," maybe Jesus is asking you to serve others without being in command.

- In an American culture that obsesses over “protecting” rights, maybe Jesus is asking you to lay a few of yours down for the betterment of your neighbor.
- In a period of social unrest and tension, maybe Jesus is inviting you to be a peacemaker and build bridges of love between disparate factions of people.
- In an age of social media and self-promotion, maybe Jesus is asking you to forsake your “good reputation” to invite sinners to the table of grace.

Jesus gave up the power of Creator and the privileges of King to become a baby boy, in order to serve you. That should humble you.

***And that's the point.***

This Christmas, dream of ways God is inviting you to humbly serve the world in whatever place you find yourself. You'll find Jesus there. And in Him you'll find perfect Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love to last for eternity.



What a King we worship! He didn't stay locked away in heaven, but is now born in Bethlehem!

Hallelujah! The King is Here! Merry Christmas, dear friends. May God be with you, now and forevermore.

**Prayer:** *Humble God, show me where I can be humble in my own life for the sake of serving others. It's not about me, Jesus; it's about You. Help me carry Your Christmas humility with me wherever I go from now on. Amen.*