

# ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

December 2020



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# INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, Christmas meant waiting. In the fall, my sisters and I waited for catalogs from the local department store to come in the mail (for those of you thinking, 'what's a catalog,' imagine if you put Amazon in a magazine). We would fold the pages and circle the toys and clothes we hoped our parents would buy for us.

The month of December meant more waiting. My parents bought us those advent calendars to count down the days until Christmas. Remember those? With that terrible chocolate inside? They'd been sitting in some warehouse where the chocolate had melted and re-hardened about 18 times. It would turn a weird, gray, chalky color. But man, we loved it.

Even Christmas morning required waiting. We'd get up at 5:30am, we'd sit down in the living room and wait for mom and dad to bring us our stockings. Why did we start with stockings? What kid wants to begin their Christmas morning with new socks and chapstick?

Eventually, the moment would finally arrive. We would wait at the bottom of the stairs while my dad went up to check and "make sure that Santa came." When he gave the all clear, we'd sprint up the stairs – only to wait again, while he slowly reviewed the gift tags and handed each present to the right person. More waiting.



For centuries, the world waited for Christmas. In the Bible, God's people are promised that Christmas is coming. They don't know when, they don't know how, but Christmas is coming. Dozens of times, they are promised that a Savior will come to save them. And finally, he does. His name is Jesus. And the world divides time by his birth – those who waited for Christmas, and those of us who get to celebrate Christmas.

This Christmas season, I have an invitation. Slow down and step into the Christmas story. What was it like to wait for Christmas? What was it like to wonder if, and when, God would make good on His promises? Even though the Christmas story is thousands of years old, as you wait for Christmas to get here, you can uncover how the arrival of Jesus Christ on earth is a personal story for you today.

Each day, we will read an Old Testament promise and see how God kept that promise by sending Jesus. Let this daily devotional be an encouragement to you as you encounter a God who keeps every promise He makes.

*Pastor Brad*

# A NEW PLAN

***Genesis 3:15*** – “And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; *he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*”

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***1 John 3:8*** – The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason *the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.*

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**T**he kids were being crabby and ungrateful. Despite a great week of vacation at the beach, exhaustion was winning, and the car ride home was a disaster. What the kids didn’t know was that mom and dad still had a trick up their sleeve. They had a plan that would make everything better, but the kids’ attitude threatened to ruin it all. As they pulled into the water park and announced to the kids that vacation wasn’t over yet, there was cheering from the back seat. A whole new energy filled the car.

When Adam and Eve sinned, God could’ve said, “That’s it! I’ve had enough – you kids had everything, and you ruined it!” He could’ve cancelled all of the good things He had planned. But God had a better plan. And it wasn’t revenge or wrath. It was Christmas.

The promise of Christmas started the day God’s children chose to disobey Him. In their rebellion, God announced He had a plan for restoration. He would face down and defeat this enemy. He would drive back and destroy evil. He would win.

But he'd do it through a baby. Instead of sending an army, He sent a child. And not just any child, and not someone else's child; He sent His own Son. What Adam and Eve had destroyed, God would restore. What sin had ruined, God had a plan to make new.

God calls Himself our Father. He's Dad. And each day, probably every hour, or even minute by minute, He could easily pull the car over and say, "You kids had everything, and you ruined it!" But He doesn't. Instead, He draws near to us. He tells us He has a plan for us. And His plan is good. Maybe you feel like you've ruined everything. Maybe you're waiting and hoping that God will restore what's broken in your life. Take a deep breath. God still has a plan.



## **remember + reflect**

- He sent His own Son to restore all that had been destroyed.
- This advent season, do you need to believe again that God loves you and He is good?



# ALWAYS THE SAME

***Genesis 49:10*** – The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, *until he to whom it belongs shall come*, and the obedience of the nations shall be his.

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***Hebrews 13:8*** – *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

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**I**t seemed like everything was pretty stable. You assumed you’d be friends forever. You imagined you’d spend your entire career working for that company. You planned to be together forever and have the future you always envisioned. But something changed. That friend moved away. The company closed. You didn’t marry your high school sweetheart.

It seems like the things we rely on most are often the first to let us down. We think we’re standing on solid ground, and then that thing that we are so sure about disappoints us. Sometimes, we start to wonder if we can really be sure of anything.

From the early chapters of the Bible, God promises to save His people. But His promise is different than other promises. He can’t change His mind. He can’t cool off. God can’t find something else or someone else to take His attention. The Bible says that Jesus Christ is the same today as when he was speaking creation into existence. He is the same right now as he was when he told Noah to build a boat, or when he told David to fight a giant. Jesus is the same today as the day

he laid in a manger or the moment he hung on a cross; and he will be the same for all time.

Literally, everything in this world is changing – except Jesus. He hasn't changed. He can't change. He won't change. God's love for you today cannot fade tomorrow. While our excitement and passion for all things, even for God, might change, Jesus remains the same, yesterday, today, and forever. We don't have to sit by and wait for Jesus to let us down. He won't!



## **remember + reflect**

- It feels like everything changes – but more importantly, Jesus changes everything.
- What confidence do you have because Jesus never changes?



# A GENTLE SYMBOL

*Exodus 12:12-13* – “On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. *The [lamb’s] blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*”

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*John 1:29* – The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*”

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**W**hat do golden arches, a half-eaten apple, a swoosh, and mouse ears have in common? They are among the most recognizable symbols in the world today. But these logos don’t just represent a company – they make you feel something. Maybe the golden arches of McDonald’s make you feel hungry; or maybe the mouse ears of Disney remind you of a trip you made as a kid; perhaps, the Nike swoosh makes you want to exercise.

In the Bible, there is no more meaningful symbol than a lamb. When God’s people saw a lamb, it reminded them of God’s mercy and grace. It was a lamb that saved thousands of firstborn sons in Egypt from a final plague. It was a lamb that symbolically carried away the sins of God’s people, freeing them from the chopping block and the wrath that was coming.

So when John the Baptist proclaims Jesus as the “Lamb of God”, it’s not just a cute moniker. It’s a meaningful symbol, a powerful symbol. Like the lamb in the Old Testament, he is the sacrifice to take away our sin. He destroys sin and evil.

But he’s also gentle. No one looks at a lamb and fears, because a lamb is a gentle animal. Jesus is gentle. He does not force himself on us. He does not demand that we accept his forgiveness for our sins or that we follow him. He offers grace and he offers himself as a sacrifice, but he does it gently.

When we think of Jesus in a manger, it’s easy to see him as gentle. But look at him when he heals people, look at him when he teaches the truths of life, and look at him on the cross. He’s gentle. Maybe this Christmas won’t look like the idyllic holiday you had in mind, but this gentle Jesus comes to make things new and good. He’s the lamb of God.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus is the lamb who take away the sins of the world.
- What do Jesus and a lamb have in common?

# THAT VOICE

*Deuteronomy 18:15* – The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. *You must listen to him.*

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*Acts 3:22-26* – “For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’ Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, ‘Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, *he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.*”

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**F**or centuries, God sent messengers to tell people of His love and His plan for them. One after one, He sent a spokesperson: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, the list goes on and on. But few people listened. So, He sent John the Baptist. Again, few people listened. Finally, He sent His own Son. He was more than a messenger – he is the living Word of God. He must be listened to and obeyed.

Every day, we are bombarded by voices, by messages, by opinions, and by advice. Of course, this is only increased during the holiday season with Christmas

marketing, and shopping, and all the things you have to do – it gets loud! So, what voices do you listen to? What is the first voice you hear in the morning that sets the tone for your day? When you're stuck in traffic, what are you listening to? Is it the yelling on cable news? Is the person giving you advice a TV talk show host or the latest podcaster?

In the middle of all the noise, there is a gentle voice; it's the voice of God. Are you listening? He speaks through reading the Bible. He speaks through the advice of wise friends. He speaks through pastors and teachers. But He doesn't want to shout at you. He wants you to be close enough to Him that He can whisper. When Jesus finally came, so many of the people who were waiting for Christmas missed it because there was so much noise. This advent season, slow down, lower the volume, unplug from the noise. God is speaking, are you listening?



## **remember + reflect**

- God wants you to be close enough to Him that if He whispers, you will hear.
- What voices do you listen to for guidance, encouragement, and truth?

# A COSTLY PRICE

***Psalm 49:7-8*** – No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them – the ransom for *a life is costly*, no payment is ever enough.

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***1 Peter 1:18-19*** – For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with *the precious blood of Christ*, a lamb without blemish or defect.

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any great mystery movies have a fascinating kidnap and ransom scene. The best are the ones where the person paying the ransom is challenged to do something morally questionable to earn the ransom money. They have to steal from some evil billionaire to get money to rescue their family member, who only has hours to live because of some life-threatening health emergency. And they're put in a moral dilemma about what they should do.

There's an incredible rescue story in the Bible, where God chooses whether He'll pay the ransom. God's children have been taken captive by sin. Despite men and women of great character and integrity who try, there's nothing they can do to rescue God's children. The ransom price is so high, no one can pay it. So God has a decision to make: will he pay the ransom?

The cost of the ransom is the life of His own Son. Who would give up their only child to free a bunch of people who would hardly be grateful? A perfect heavenly Father would. So, God sent Jesus to pay the ransom. But He didn't deliver a suitcase full of cash like in the movies. Jesus would have to pay the ransom with his own life.

Have you ever really thought about how much you are worth to God? Consider what Christmas cost Him. If God had paid to save your life with cash, you might think, "Well, God has lots of money, it doesn't mean that much." But God paid the ransom with His most valuable possession: He paid with the life of Jesus.

You are infinitely valuable to God. No matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you, and no matter what you will do tomorrow or 10 years from now, you are incredibly valuable to God. Christmas proves it – you're worth the price of His own Son.



## **remember + reflect**

- You are infinitely valuable to God.
- Why did God have to send Jesus to ransom His children from sin?

# THE END OF THE STORY

**1 Samuel 2:10** – *“Those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.”*

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**Matthew 16:16-18** – Simon Peter answered, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus replied, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”*

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**I**n a city called Caesarea Philippi, Jesus said these famous words, recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. It is believed that he and his disciples were sitting on a hillside that overlooked a famous temple. Behind that temple there was a cavern that was so deep, it couldn’t be measured. Warm water bubbled in a pool of water, and steam came from inside the cavern. People believed that this mysterious cave was the gate to Hell and that demons entered and exited the world through this pool. While the cave terrified the locals, Jesus stood above it and declared, “What I’m building, even the gates of Hell cannot defeat.” It’s basically Jesus’ way of saying that what he’s started, he’s planning to see through to the end, and that he will prevail.

Do you know that if you have a relationship with Jesus, you can be totally confident in how things will end? You’re already on the winning team! From Abraham, through the lineage of King David, leading all the way up to this baby



named Jesus, God promised that He would send a Savior, who would reconcile His people and judge the earth. And guess what, He did exactly that!

It's like we're characters in some epic novel, but we can actually turn to the last pages of the book and see how it ends. Our hero Jesus arrives on the scene and forever destroys pain, depression, loneliness, shame, sickness, sadness, and even death. He's creating a world where none of that exists, and literally, it's not if that world comes, it's when.

You might not feel like you have a lot to be confident about right now. Perhaps it's been a rough year for you. Maybe there's been job loss or disappointment, or maybe this is the first holiday you'll spend without a loved one – that empty seat at the dining room table feels suffocating. But here's your confidence: Jesus wins. Love wins. And if you are trusting him for this life and the next, you're on the winning team.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus wins!
- How does knowing the end of the story impact how you feel about things today?

# REAL INFLUENCER

*Psalm 2:7-9* – I will proclaim the Lord’s decree: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, *the ends of the earth your possession*. You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”

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*Matthew 28:18-20* – Then Jesus said to them, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

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**I**magine Jesus walking on earth today. Can you picture the Instagram posts of people tracking him everywhere he went? “Here’s a picture of Jesus at the mall.” “Today, I saw Jesus ice skating at Rockefeller Center.” People would try to get selfies with him. Scientists and investigative journalists would scrutinize every miracle he performed. Academics would examine his work. In one sense, Jesus would be a rock star. He could fill stadiums with people wanting to hear him speak. Others would bring loved ones to be healed.

But Jesus didn’t come to be a rock star. Think about what he tells his disciples before he ascends to heaven. He doesn’t say, “save the world,” “change the

culture,” or “overthrow the corrupt government.” Instead, he simply says, “go and teach people what I taught you.” It sounds so underwhelming. The Son of God, who has all authority, who can do anything he wants, tells a room full of his friends to tell other people about him and teach them the things he said. In a world where we make grandiose 5, 10, and 20-year life plans, it seems almost insignificant.

Perhaps your journey seems insignificant. You had big dreams and wanted to change the world, and you’ve come up short. Maybe God never put that responsibility on any of us. If anyone was qualified to “change the world,” it was the few dozen people that spent every day with Jesus. But that’s not what he tells them to do. Instead, he says, “Tell people about me.” It feels inconsequential. But the truth is it’s the most important thing they could do.

Right now, maybe you’re waiting for God to use you in some major way. And sure, you should set goals for your life. You should work really hard to achieve what you want, but the most important assignment you could have is this: Tell people about Jesus, and teach them to obey what He taught. That will never be insignificant.



## **remember + reflect**

- Pointing people to Jesus is the most important assignment ever given.
- How are you using your relationships and circumstances to point people to Jesus?

# NEVER SURPRISED

*Psalm 16:8-11* – I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because *you will not abandon me* to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay. You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

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*Acts 13:34-35* – “God raised [Jesus] from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’ So it is also stated elsewhere: ‘You will not let your holy ones see decay.’”

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**E**very Super Bowl, every Kentucky Derby, every great championship in almost any sport ends the same way: someone is celebrating, while the others just watch, totally stunned. It’s as if the members of the losing team were unaware that losing was even a possibility. For months, they worked towards one goal, getting to the championship game and winning it all. They never considered that they might get there and lose. And so, they sit on the sidelines, or in the dugout, or on the bench, just watching, completely in shock.

When Jesus’ body was put in the grave, people must have been stunned. There’s no way they could imagine that this is how it would end. His mother had held

him as an infant – she'd believed all the angel had said about her boy. The disciples had left everything to follow him. And now, after three years of Jesus talking about a new kingdom, could it really all be over? Like this? Had they lost? This was total shock.

And yet, in the heavens, our Heavenly Father looked on – everything was going according to plan. God was not surprised that Jesus had died. He knew people would be confused, but He was not surprised, and He was not shaken.

How many times have you been surprised by the direction life takes you? Have you ever thought, 'how did I end up here?' or, 'when will I get to my next chapter?' Life can be confusing, waiting is exhausting, and plans can go awry, but God is never surprised. He knows the events of today – that you'd be reading these very words – and of tomorrow, and the next day, and when you get there, He won't be surprised. He'll be waiting for you, waiting to walk with you and hold your hand.



## **remember + reflect**

- God is never surprised.
- Is there something you are confused by that you need to trust God with today?

# COMFY FOOTSTOOL

*Psalm 110:1* – The Lord says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

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*Matthew 22:44* – “The Lord said to my lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’”

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**W**e’ve all been there. It’s a hot day. You’re walking through the parking lot, and all of a sudden, you feel it. You stepped in gum. It ruins your whole day. There’s no simple way of getting it off. You can drag your foot through the grass, you can scrape it on the curb, but it’s still there. It’s sticky. It’s stringy. It’s gross.

Imagine what must’ve been on the bottoms of shoes in ancient Israel or 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. It’s the middle of the desert. It’s dry, it’s dusty, and it’s dirty. The roads are not paved, and people regularly walked through the streets with animals. At best, they wore leather soled sandals, some just went barefoot.

So, picture Jesus putting his feet up on your deepest fears and greatest obstacles. The doubts that keep you awake at night. The anxieties that try and follow you around. Jesus is so powerful and so in authority, they are but a footrest for his filthy, dusty, gum covered shoes. While we try and manage our fears, control our anxieties, and carry our doubt, Jesus tells us to throw them on the floor, so he has something to put his feet on. It doesn’t mean that he thinks our fears and obstacles are insignificant. It means that we have a Savior that is so powerful that he will not be moved by the things that threaten to destroy us.

While in a Nazi concentration camp, Corrie ten Boom famously said, “Lord, this burden is too heavy for me to carry.” You can stop trying to carry the burden yourself – put it down, and let Jesus rest his feet on it.



## **remember + reflect**

- Your greatest fears are but a footstool to the Lord.
- Do you have fears, doubts, or anxieties you need to surrender to Jesus right now?



# HERE AND THERE

***Isaiah 7:14*** – Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him *Immanuel*.

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***Revelation 21:2-3*** – I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and *God himself will be with them and be their God.*”

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**Y**ou often hear it, you’re going through a tough time, maybe a job loss, maybe the death of a loved one, and someone says to you: “Let me know if there’s anything I can help with.” or “I’m there for you if you need me.”

And it certainly means a lot. Think about those words, “I’m there for you.” It means someone is thinking about you, supporting you, maybe even praying for you; they’re willing to take on some level of burden to help you. Yet, don’t those words imply some sort of distance? “I’m *there* for you.” Where? You’re thankful for the support, but when facing most problems, at some point, you ultimately feel like you’re on your own.

But God’s heart, from the early pages of Scripture until the very last page, is not

a cliché “*I’m there for you.*” Instead, He says, “*I’m here with you.*” God desires to be close to us, to walk with us. In the Garden of Eden, He walked and talked with Adam and Eve. Throughout the Old Testament, He promises that He will come to His people. And then Jesus comes. And he’s not merely *there* for us, but he’s *here*, and he’s *with* us.

And in the end, for all of time, in the New Heaven and New Earth, God has spoken and said, “I am Immanuel,” meaning “I am *with* you.” Today, you may at some point find yourself alone, or at least feeling alone. Maybe this Christmas isn’t the Hallmark movie you thought it would be. But God is Immanuel, He is with you, and He wants to walk with you all the days of your life, and on for eternity. He is not merely “there for you.” He is “with you.” Talk to Him, ask Him for help, ask Him to lead you and to give you peace. He’s right where you are.



## **remember + reflect**

- From beginning to end, God desires to be present with His people.
- Do you say to suffering people, “I’m there for you,” or can you say, “I’m here with you”, as you walk with them through trials?

# REMEMBER THE LIGHT

*Isaiah 9:1-2* – Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan – The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness *a light has dawned.*

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*John 1:5* – The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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**I**n the poem “What to do in the Darkness,” Marilyn McEntyre uses physical darkness to represent the seasons of darkness we go through in life, be it grief, loss, doubt, fear...you understand darkness, you’ve felt it. Among the lines in the poem, she encourages the reader to “take an outstretched hand if you find one,” and to “practice trust.” Two lines in this short poem focus on light. In the middle of the poem, she writes, “Remember the light.” She concludes the poem with these words: “Watch for dawn.”

For centuries, people lived in spiritual darkness. Cut off from God, they had no hope. They kept hearing of a promise that one day light would come. And this light wouldn’t just shine darkness on God’s people, but on the whole world. And so, in the darkness, they watched for dawn.

Just as God promised, He turned on the lights. Jesus is the light. Light is good, and it's pure, and it guides us. Light illuminates dark corners, so they're no longer scary; it eliminates the spooky shadows. When there is light, even a little bit of light, we can see. Jesus is good and he's pure, and he's gentle, and he lights up our lives with hope and with wisdom. When we ask him, he illuminates the path for us to walk. In him, there is no darkness at all.

Maybe you're in a season of darkness. The shadows are growing long, and it might even be scary. Remember the light. Jesus is the light of the world who shines goodness and peace in your life. Just ask him. Ask him to turn on the lights, take his hand, and watch for dawn.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus is the light of the world.
- If you're in a season of darkness, are you watching for the coming dawn?


# SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

*Isaiah 9:6-7* – 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 it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time one and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*

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

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 Every day, we search Google more than 5.5 billion times! That’s over 2 trillion searches per year, more than 3.8 million searches every single minute. Imagine if we still used the Dewey Decimal System! That many searches can only mean one thing: people are searching for answers.

The Bible says that Jesus is a wonderful counselor. The word that is used for counselor is pretty much what you’d expect. It means someone who gives you advice. Jesus gives us advice, or counsel. But it’s not just any advice. It’s wonderful advice. It’s advice that you marvel at. It’s advice that is extraordinary, it’s outside the realm of our human thinking.

So, think about it: If Jesus is a counselor, he probably wants you to ask him questions, right? He wants you to bring your messy situations to him and seek his advice. And here's why asking Jesus is better than searching the Internet: because Jesus can actually help you. Yes, if you need a cookie recipe, the Internet is the place to go. But what about when your heart is broken? Or what about when you are hopeless? What about when you're overwhelmed? Jesus wants you to run to him.

It's through talking with Jesus, it's in reading his Word that he gives us counsel, and it's wonderful. If you want to know where to take your dog to get a haircut, ask your friends on social media. But when you have questions about how to parent your child or you need help staying committed to your marriage, or when you're wondering which job offer you should take, you don't have to wait to talk with an expert. Jesus asks you to come running, because he wants to give you counsel. And it's wonderful.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus wants you to bring him your sticky situations.
- What do you need to talk to Jesus about today?

# EYES OPEN

*Isaiah 35:5-6a* – Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

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*Luke 4:40* – At sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them.

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**B**ecause of advances in modern medicine and science, some who were once deaf can now hear through the miracle of cochlear implants; others who are color blind are able to see colors for the very first time. There are videos all over the internet of their reactions to hearing and seeing for the first time. It is an inspiring thing to watch. You can't help but be impressed by the technology involved, that something small enough to hold in your hand can actually allow someone to hear or allow someone to see!

While he was on earth, Jesus healed a lot of people with serious conditions. He made paralyzed people walk; he gave sight to blind people and hearing to deaf people; he healed people from miles away; he even restored the dead to life. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people witnessed these miracles. This is the boy that grew up down the street, miraculously healing people. It's easy to wonder, "Why didn't everyone recognize that it was God's power at work in him?"



When you look at your life, do you recognize God's power at work? When good things happen, do you see it as the fulfillment of God's promise of blessing? It seems like anyone who saw Jesus perform a miracle with their own eyes should've believed in God's power and goodness. Throughout the Old Testament, God promised a Savior who would give sight to the blind and freedom to captives. Jesus did those exact things. Yet many people who saw with their own eyes did not believe.

Today God is at work all over the world, just as He has promised He would be. And yet we don't see His goodness and give Him credit. Right now, God is at work in your life. Are your eyes open to see it?



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus came to undo what had been broken.
- Are your eyes open to see what God is doing in your life?

# OPENING ACT

*Isaiah 40:3* – A voice of one calling: “In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”

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*Matthew 3:1-3* – In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” *This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

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**S**ome of the greatest musical performers in history benefited from incredible opening acts. Stevie Wonder and Prince both opened for the Rolling Stones, Guns N’ Roses opened for Aerosmith, Jimi Hendrix was the opening act for The Monkees! Opening acts often play a role in the feel and success of a concert, but it’s the headliner that sells tickets.

For centuries, God sent messengers, known as prophets, announcing that one day, the headliner would come, who was Jesus. John the Baptist was the final opening act, and he called the world to repent of their sin, because the headliner, the one they were all waiting to see, was about to come. None of the prophets intended to draw attention to themselves, but rather to point a wandering people back to God.

As we get closer to Christmas this year, maybe you're looking forward to a big family dinner, or opening presents, or some Christmas Eve tradition. But those are barely the opening act. While there is so much tradition and goodness around Christmas, Jesus is the headliner.

Followers of Jesus can live in such a way that people are directed to that goodness and love of Christ. So maybe your relationships, the role you have in your family, or the position you hold at work, are all things you can use to point people to Jesus. The question is: In this season, will you use those things to build your empire and to make a name for yourself, or will you use it to make Jesus known?



## **remember + reflect**

- Prophets and people are merely the opening act to the real star, Jesus.
- Today will you make your name known or make Jesus known?

# SMILE

*Isaiah 42:1-3* – “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. *A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice.*”

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*Matthew 11:18* – “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and *I will give you rest.*”

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**T**here is a woman named Julie who works at a children’s hospital. Her job is to bring toys and games to their hospital rooms and play with them. Some days, she brings along therapy pets to visit the kids. Julie does whatever she has to do to put a smile on each child’s face. With an advanced education, she could be doing many other things, making more money, and receiving more accolades. When asked why she does it, Julie says, “At their worst moment, I want these kids to know that there is still good, and they can still smile.”

In our worst moments, Jesus wants us to know that we are loved. He deals with us gently and kindly when we are weak. Imagine a candle that has burned almost all the way out. The wax that once held up the wick is just liquid now. The flame is flickering out, and all that’s left is a smoldering, smoky wick. Sometimes life can do that to us. We get burned out. That’s when Jesus is his most gentle. When our flame for life is burning out because we’re stressed, we’re tired, we’re

overwhelmed, Jesus doesn't deal harshly with us. Instead, he holds us gently and cares for us.

What's burning you out? Maybe it's something that's been going on for a while, and you see no end in sight. But God promises to fix everything; He promises He will never snuff us out. And we can go to Jesus and know he will deal with us gently.

If Julie would work so hard to make sure each child knew they were loved and to make them smile, how much more does your Heavenly Father want you to smile today?



### **remember + reflect**

- Jesus is gentle and kind when we are weak.
- Do you need to ask Jesus to show you gentleness?

# PANIC OR PEACE

*Isaiah 53:7-9* – He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; *for the transgression of my people he was punished*. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

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*John 19:14-15* – It was the day of Preparation of the Passover; it was about noon. “Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!” “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked. “We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate *handed him over to them to be crucified*.

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How are you under pressure? Do you panic, or can you keep a level head? For example, if you drove upon a car accident, can you assess the situation and make reasonable decisions about what needs to happen, or are you running around with your hair on fire? (Bad news men, a number of studies have shown that women respond far better in crisis.)

Some people thrive in crisis. Others panic. They lose their ability to make rational decisions. While some exhibit calm, grace, and gentleness, others turn to intensity, sometimes pride. And while none of us wants to be judged on one moment, there is something revealing about a crisis. Whatever is going on under the surface seems to come out.

So here's Jesus, just a few minutes before being nailed to a cross. Five days ago, the crowds cheered "Hosanna," now they cheer, "Crucify." He's done nothing wrong, ever, and yet, he's being hauled away for execution. It's a crisis. And it reveals so much about his character.

Jesus could've easily panicked and overpowered the people who wanted him dead. He could've torn the bindings from his wrists. He could've condemned the crowd with just one word. He had every option and every resource at his fingertips. What did he do? He calmly and peacefully went to the cross. He didn't fight back. He didn't yell and scream. The worst moment of his life, the greatest crisis he would face, and his response was peace.

When you're not having the best day, when someone says something about you that's not true, when something happens at work that's not fair when your kids are driving you nuts, do you respond with peace? Look to Jesus as the model, for on his darkest day, he chose peace.



## **remember + reflect**

- On his worst day, Jesus chose peace.
- Today will you panic or lash out, or will you choose peace?



# DEBT FREE

***Isaiah 61:1-2*** – The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me *to proclaim the good news to the poor*. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn.

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***Romans 8:1*** – Therefore, *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*.

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**H**ave you ever paid off a debt? Maybe you've made that final payment on a car loan? Maybe you've finished paying back some student loans from college? Or even paid back a friend you borrowed a few bucks from. There's an incredible feeling of freedom when you make that last payment.

In ancient Israel, God's people were supposed to follow something called Jubilee, or the year of the Lord's favor. In the year of Jubilee, which was supposed to take place every 50 years, all debts were forgiven. And not only that, any land that had been sold was to be returned to its original owners. And anyone who was working to pay off debt no longer had work to pay back the loan because that debt ended.

If you've ever paid off a debt, you know how freeing it is. It feels like an emotional and even physical burden is lifted. You are no longer the debtor, controlled by what you owe. That feeling is what God wants us to have in our relationship with Jesus. All of the sin and shame you've acquired in your life, all of the disappointment and embarrassment, is totally erased. Completely forgiven. The Christmas story makes way for the year of Jubilee. This isn't just refinancing or consolidating debt to a lower interest rate. This is complete and total debt forgiveness. Because Christ paid the full debt.

So if there is no condemnation, no debt, for those in Christ, why are you still beating yourself up for your sin? Why are you still living as if the smell of shame follows you around? Some of that sin was years ago. Even decades! And didn't you hear? There is NO condemnation in Christ. None. Not even a little. When God looks at you, He doesn't see you as a disgrace. He doesn't see a disappointment. He only sees love.

We're really good at telling people about how Jesus loves them so much that he died on the cross for all of their sins. Don't forget that he died for you, too! He loves you so much that he came to earth as a baby and died on a cross for you. And he paid your debt. All of it.



## **remember + reflect**

- Christ did not refinance or consolidate your debt, he paid it in full.
- If there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, do you need to live in shame?

# TO TELL THE TRUTH

***Jeremiah 31:33*** – “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and *they will be my people.*”

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***Romans 11:26-27*** – And this is the way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: “The Deliverer will come from Zion; *he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.*”

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**A**s a kid, there were lots of ways you tried to convince someone they could trust you. Things like: “I swear,” or “I pinky promise,” or “cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” (What were we thinking?!?!) But did any of those things actually mean you could be trusted? If you lied, was anyone really going to chop off your little finger?

When God wants us to know He’s serious, He makes a covenant. A covenant is stronger than a promise (even a pinky promise), because a covenant cannot be broken. Throughout the Bible there are lots of covenants. There’s the Noachic covenant with Noah, where God promises He’ll never flood the earth again. There’s the Abrahamic covenant with Abraham, where he promises He would make Abraham a great nation. Then there’s the Mosaic covenant, that’s the whole Ten Commandments and Promised Land thing. Then there’s the Davidic covenant, with, you guessed it, David. Then there’s the Messianic Covenant, which Jesus calls a “new” covenant. Meaning, it supersedes all the previous covenants.

What's most incredible about God's covenants is that each one gets better than the one before, even when the people He makes an agreement with seem to get worse! With Noah, it was simply that God wouldn't destroy the world. With Abraham, it was that God would bless the nations. With Moses and David, God was making a path for redemption in faith and establishing a line of Kings, Prophets, and Priests. And then in Christ, it got personal. Here, God made a covenant with you: if you would believe in His Son and follow him, He would be your God, now and for all of eternity.

This is the story of covenants: that God's goodness is unending. Just when we think God couldn't be any more generous, He gives a little bit more. Just when we think He could not be more faithful, He shows us how trustworthy He really is. When we are ready to give up, He sends His own Son. Praise God, who is able to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine.



## **remember + reflect**

- Each of God's promises is better than the one before!
- What promise has God made in His Word that gives you great hope?

# MAN'S MAN

*Daniel 7:13-14* – “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and people of every language worshiped him. *His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*”

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*Mark 14:61-62* – Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus, “And you will see *the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*”

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**T**he late evangelist Billy Graham told a story about seeing a bunch of ants scurrying around trying to rebuild an anthill. He thought to himself, “I’d like to help them rebuild that anthill, but the only way I could communicate with them is to myself become an ant and go down there with them.” He told that story as an illustration because in Jesus Christ, that is what God did for us. Advent reminds us that God became a man so that He could communicate with mankind.

Some of the descriptions in the Bible of Jesus reveal how powerful and majestic he is. Do you remember that Jesus really became a human? The Son of God is also the Son of Man. Do you remember that he was really born, and as a baby he cried when he was hungry; and he really grew up and had acne, and he really had to listen to and obey his parents when they gave him a curfew? Do you know that he got tired after a hard day's work? Do you remember that he really was nailed to a cross, and he really died? Everything he experienced on earth he experienced as a man. And he did it for us. Jesus became fully human so that you could become the full human God desires you to be.

When you think about Jesus, do you imagine him distant, not knowing what it's like to be you? Unable to understand the challenges you face? Had Jesus remained in heaven, you might have a case. But he became an ant, and he came down to this anthill to communicate God's love to you.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus is fully God and fully man.
- Jesus came here to earth as a man – what else could he do to show you his unending love?

# EARNED

*Hosea 11:1* – “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and *out of Egypt I called my son.*”

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*Matthew 2:14-15* – So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “*Out of Egypt I called my son.*”

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**T**here’s an old saying that “TIME + TRUTH = TRUST”. Over time, if someone shows themselves to be trustworthy, we start to trust them. We don’t trust people until there’s a history of trustworthiness.

Throughout the Bible, God does two things:

1. He provides, protects, and delivers His people (especially from Egypt).
2. He reminds them that He provided, protected, and delivered them.

God’s point is that we look back, so we can move forward. When we start to lose hope, we recall the times that God carried us in the past. Remember that sticky situation you saw no way out of? That disappointment you thought you’d never get over? Or that broken heart you never thought would heal? Yet, here you are today. God showed His faithfulness, so the next time that you need to trust Him, you can look back and see that faithfulness.

Maybe today, you're having a hard time believing that anything good can possibly come from the situation you find yourself in; you're waiting, wondering when the pain will end. If you will remember the times that God has shown up before, you can trust that He'll show up again. There's simply no way that God has brought you this far to all of a sudden forget about you! Remember that He is good. Remember that every time you have fallen, He's been there to pick you up.



## **remember + reflect**

- God has carried you this far – He won't drop you now.
- Is there a time that you had no hope, but God showed up in your life to walk with you?



# AN UNDERDOG STORY

DAY 21

***Micah 5:2*** – “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, *out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*”

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***Matthew 2:1-2 & 6*** – After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him...” “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, *are by no means least coming the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*”

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**T**he legend goes that some of today’s biggest companies started in garages. Apple, Amazon, Google, and even Disney all have their roots in a residential garage. Phil Knight started Nike by selling track shoes out of the trunk of his car.

We love an underdog story, one where the hero is unexpected, at a disadvantage, and has to fight for something. Maybe we love the underdog because God loves the underdog. Logic says that the long-awaited Messiah should’ve been born in Jerusalem. He should’ve been the son of a prominent Jewish ruler, a Pharisee, or at least a military leader.

Instead, it was just as God promised: he was born in Bethlehem, laid in a manger, surrounded by farm animals, from a no-named town called Nazareth, son of a young girl who wasn't even married at the time. No one saw this coming. God loves the underdog. He loves using people of no notoriety, often with questionable pasts, to do His work.

If God wants to use you today, are you ready? Maybe He wants you to show His love to your co-worker by helping them with a project, maybe He wants you to show His mercy to your spouse by forgiving them, maybe He wants you to show His generosity by helping someone with a financial need. You might not be what people expect God's love to look like, but you might have the love of Jesus they need today.



## **remember + reflect**

- The long-awaited Messiah was unexpected, but just as God had promised.
- God uses the unexpected, are you willing for Him to use you?

# FOOT OF THE TABLE

*Zechariah 9:9* – Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, *lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

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*Philippians 2:5-7* – 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 advantage; rather, *he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

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**I**n 1911, President William Taft became the first U.S. President to have his own motorcade, a 4-car fleet that cost just \$12,000. Beginning after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, various security measures were added to each president's cars over the years. Today, the President has multiple cars, all known as "The Beast", and each is outfitted with the world's latest security and technology, costing well over \$1 million. All over the world, celebrities and world leaders are outfitted with incredible transportation. The Pope even has the "Popemobile!"

A week before he would die on a cross, Jesus came to Jerusalem on a donkey. Not even a big, impressive, really cool donkey, but the foal of a donkey. He had no secret service agents, no security measures in place. As the crowds chanted all around him, "Hosanna, Hosanna," He arrived, just him, the Creator of the universe, riding on a donkey.

Isn't it incredible that Jesus never claimed a seat of honor for himself? He was happy to sit at the foot of the table. He had no need to be the star of the show, even though he is literally the star of this entire show. He never demanded special treatment. He didn't expect to be honored by every crowd. He simply went around humbly loving the people he crossed paths with.

When you think about what you want in life, does it look like riding in an armored car, or riding on a donkey? Of course, there's nothing wrong with our leaders being safe. We need them to fulfill the offices God has appointed them to. But there's something about a leader who will come into town with no fanfare. Jesus could've been the kind of leader who brags about his accomplishments and status, but instead, he empties himself of it all and becomes a baby, so that his life would lead people back to God. We are called to have that same kind of love, and, in humility, to consider others above ourselves.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus was happy to sit at the foot of the table.
- Do you need to be the center of attention, or can you simply love people when you cross paths?

# SEE THESE SCARS

*Zechariah 12:10* – “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”

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*John 19:37* – And, as another scripture says, “They will look on *the one they have pierced.*”

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“**T**ime heals all wounds.” “Scars are tattoos with better stories.” “Chicks dig scars.” There are a lot of ridiculous quotes about scars that attempt to minimize their effect. Scars on our body are a sign that we’ve gone through something. And they signify that whatever we went through hurt us.

Somewhere you probably have a scar on your body. Maybe it’s on your knees or your elbows from falling off your bike as a kid. Perhaps you have a scar from one of your first times shaving. Maybe you have a scar because you did something dumb and hurt yourself. For most of us, if we could, we’d remove the scars. Either because they represent a painful memory, or because we think they’re ugly to look at.

When Jesus is raised to life after dying on a cross, his body is restored. Something changes. He is somehow perfected in his physical appearance, so

much so that a couple of his close friends don't even recognize him when he appears to them. But the one thing he doesn't change is his scars. The scars from the nails are still there. He shows them to a skeptic Thomas. He points to the scar in his side where he was pierced with a spear.

Why doesn't he restore his hands and his side? Because when we look at Jesus, he wants us to see how much he loves us. He never wants us to forget what he went through for us. His love and his sacrifice weren't a one-day event. His love lasts forever, just like his scars.

When you look at the scars on your body, maybe there's an opportunity to say, "Yes, I was hurt. But God has sustained me to today." Maybe your scars can be a simple reminder of his scars, so you won't forget about his love.



## **remember + reflect**

- Just like his scars, Jesus' love for us lasts forever.
- How can your scars remind you of his scars?

# FULL ACCESS

***Malachi 3:1*** – “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly *the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,*” says the Lord Almighty.

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***Mark 15:37-39*** – With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. *The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”*

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**A** trip to Independence Hall in Philadelphia allows visitors to see the room where Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams signed the Declaration of Independence. The tour guide leads patrons through another area where the Supreme Court first met. You can touch the same desks America’s founders sat in front of, and the smell of the old building is nothing short of historic. Yet, like most museums, old buildings, and the like, you can only go so far until you find a sign that says something like, “This area is off limits to unauthorized personnel.” Only employees and VIP’s can ascend the stairs to see what is on the second floor, and it takes special clearance.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites could meet with God in the tabernacle and the temple. However, only certain people could participate. Only the best of the best were allowed into the Holy of Holies, an area behind a heavy curtain where

the Ark of the Covenant was kept, where God's Spirit presided, and where on rare occasion, one Levite priest could enter to worship. You needed special clearance to be in the presence of God.

In his death, Jesus completely disrupts the notion that God meets His people behind a curtain, and that only a select few are invited. When the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom, God became accessible to all. The whole earth, and now the hearts of His people, are God's temple and the dwelling place of His Spirit. The same God, who once dwelled behind a curtain, only giving access to a select few was born on Christmas and now dwells in all the earth – even in your heart and mind right now. If you are waiting for the day that you're enough, that God would call you His beloved – that day is today.



## **remember + reflect**

- Jesus tore down the curtain that separated God's people from His presence.
- Do you believe you've been given full access to God?



# CLOSING

My prayer for you is this: Slow down! It's Christmas!

Whatever burdens you, whatever you're waiting for God to resolve in your life, it can keep waiting. Today is the day that God made good on so many of His promises because simply, He loves you!

**Merry Christmas!**



**faith church**