



# *Filling Up Christmas*

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



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# *Filling Up Christmas*

Christmas is known for being full of excitement and joy - and busyness. Consumer culture and the retail industry add to the stressful demand of the season. Store hours are lengthened because happy shoppers make for successful sales and holiday income pulls in almost 20% of the industry's yearly revenue. For some, Christmas is a season concerned with filling bank accounts. For others, it's a time filled to the brim with shopping, celebrations, parties, and presents. Yet often, we move through the Christmas season feeling depleted and empty.

The good news is we don't need to end the season feeling frantic, disappointed, and bloated. We have a choice in the matter. The four weeks of Advent have been crafted into the rhythm of the church calendar to help us intentionally remember God's coming to us and to wait in hopes of His coming again. Let's be honest. This will take careful attention lest our hectic schedules leave us no time for the purpose of Advent. Remember, Advent is not about us filling our time full, but rather about taking the time to remember how God fills time full: "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son" (Galatians 4:4).

This Advent, as a community, we'll be focusing on intentionally "Filling up Christmas" with moments and memories, leaving us overflowing with hope and joy and peace. Our desire is for this devotional to become one of the resources you use to fill up with Jesus' fullness this Christmas. Over the next four weeks, we invite you to relax and refocus on Sundays by learning the posture of receiving rather than achieving. We invite you to engage family activities to capture beautiful memories with those you love. We welcome you to reflect and respond as a way of participating with God in a meaningful way. Our prayer for you is to prepare Him room so you can enjoy what leaves you full to the fullest this Christmas.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas!  
The Daily Writing Team



# *In the Fullness of Time*

## RELAX + REFOCUS

As you enter Advent, take a few moments to prepare your heart to welcome this season afresh. Inhale and exhale a few times, letting go of distractions. Quiet your thoughts and open yourself to God. Prepare to experience God's Word through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

## READ

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. Galatians 4:4-5

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Notice what word or phrase stands out to you and notice how your heart is responding. Are you... puzzled? Doubtful? Amazed? Ponder why the Spirit may be bringing attention to this aspect of the text. Then, have a conversation with God as you would a friend about what you're noticing.



## FAMILY ACTIVITY



**Walk and Talk** *Go on a family walk and talk about what everyone is looking forward to in the Advent season. What activity helps make Christmas really happy for you? What activity makes you feel overwhelmed?*

# Waiting on God

READ GALATIANS 4:4

Ryan Paulson

I remember cutting strips of red and green construction paper. With each cut, the expectation for Christmas grew. We turned those strips of paper into a Christmas chain - each link representing days from December 1st to the much anticipated glory of Christmas morning.

Unbeknownst to me, my parents were also preparing for Christmas. They were buying presents, planning family time, and getting the house ready. Their preparation involved more work and less wonder. *Christmas always involves preparation... and it always has.*

Even that first Christmas required preparation. The Apostle Paul wrote, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son..." (Galatians 4:4). Nobody knew that the Divine Christmas chain was on its last link. However, God had a plan, birthed out of love to forever change the world. God was behind the scenes, much like parents at Christmas time, making all the preparations for that first Christmas. His preparation involved 400 years of silence - "long lived the world in sin and error pining."

Christmas reminds us that God's *promise is often a process*. He promises, but doesn't deliver right away. The journey of faith is one of learning to wait, trusting that God is behind the scenes setting the stage for the fulfillment of His promise. But just like Christmas, that promise will only be recognized at the right time...the fullness of time. So the Psalmist encourages us, "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:14).

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Take a moment to consider what you are waiting on this Advent season. What might it look like for you to wait well?

# Anticipating Hope

READ GENESIS 17:1-8

Donna Burns

Genesis records the incredible faith journey of Abraham. He lived years of faith in God, and trusted in promises he couldn't see. He camped where God was leading, he waited 25 years for a family heir, a treasured nation and a promised land. He grounded his faith in anticipating hope, even though he faced seemingly impossible circumstances, and there were no objective reasons for hope. Romans 4:18 says, in *hope* he believed *against hope*, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."

God promised and Abraham waited. In the meantime he obeyed God and kept the covenant. It is difficult to wait. Life keeps rumbling on and throwing noise at us. We go through ups and downs. We white knuckle sharp curves. Anticipating hope does not mean the absence of troubles but an assurance in the midst of experiencing them. Abraham was fully persuaded that what God had promised he was also able to do.

We can be fully persuaded with anticipating hope too. The Advent season is designed to reflect on this confident expectation in God. We also might be in a season of waiting; for a job, a spouse, a baby, a resolution, better health, etc. We can hope because God is God to us, the covenant maker and keeper. This advent, let's focus on Him who fulfills His promises. Galatians 3:8 says, "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Spend some time praying for God to give you anticipating hope. Start a list of ways God is doing this and continue the list into the coming new year. Sing the carol, *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. Search YouTube for the version by Red Mountain Music.



# Preparing the Way

**READ LUKE 2:1-6**

**Rich Obrecht**

The Romans were conquering warriors. By Jesus' birth, they had conquered most of the Mediterranean rim. Their rule would venture much farther as the years passed. While they were ruthless on the battlefield as well as towards dissidents, they brought many improvements to living. Their introduction of a common language and roads opened borders to commerce and safer travel, and their strong military presence brought peace to those who chose to live within their rules. Pax Romana was prevalent in this portion of the known world.

With all the good things that the Romans introduced to the world, there were others they introduced that weren't so good. Perhaps one of the most destructive, from a spiritual perspective, was their pantheon of gods, along with the manner of worship of their gods. All forms of decadence imaginable were in play. All manner of evil behavior, some of which would be deplored even today, were practiced.

This period in history, where peace and cruelty walked hand in hand, seemed ripe for a redeemer. The days were dark and the nights darker. The way was being prepared, and the Jewish people were ready for Messiah. They'd endured hardship for many hundreds of years. The people of Israel yearned for delivery from persecution and they looked expectedly for the promised freedom. During this nexus of good and evil, the fullness of time was coming. God was preparing his people, for the arrival of their Savior, Redeemer, Brother, and Lord.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

As you think about how Jesus, the Messiah, came at an opportune time in Israel and the world's history, relate it to your own life. When you responded to the Gospel for the first time how was your heart and mind specifically ready? How is your heart and mind ready today to enter into this Advent season and receive the fullness of Jesus this Christmas?



# *Sending His Son*

**READ HEBREWS 1:1-3**

**Aaron Bjorklund**

The Incarnation is one of the most beautiful ideas in the Gospel. Incarnation is simply the reality that God stepped into history himself to reach the world with his love. It's why Christmas is so profound. Why send His own son? What is God trying to say through Jesus?

The beginning of Hebrews chapter one is one of my favorite passages in all of the scriptures. God has been communicating with his creation since the very beginning. In the past he did that through prophets, but the author of Hebrews tells us that now he speaks to us, "by his Son." No more middle man, God wanted to make sure we knew what he is really like. That is why he sent his own son, Jesus. Jesus is, as the text says, "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his (God's) nature." Jesus is a letter to humanity. A letter written on flesh and bone through healing hands, open arms, wise words, and unconditional self sacrificial love. Jesus is an amazing letter!

Jesus' life as a man is also a loud invitation to do the same thing he does. We were made in the image of God so every time we see the image of God in the face of Jesus we learn what we were designed to reflect. Jesus' incarnation is an invitation to reflect God's character just as Jesus did so well.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

If Jesus is a letter to humanity about what God is like, what does the letter say? What is one way you can extend love and thereby reflect God's character to those around you today?

## *Fulfilling the Law*

**READ GALATIANS 3:19-26**

**Billy Berglund**

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says he fulfills the law, instead of abolishing it. The law of Moses had a specific purpose, but it was a temporary covenant and never meant to last forever. However, Jesus did not come to oppose this law or to discard it. Instead, Jesus took on human flesh, lived a perfect life, displayed the intent of the Jewish Scriptures, and became the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins.

So, why was the law given at all? First, the law increased awareness of conscious sin. This highlighted the need for a Savior, since humanity cannot keep the law perfectly. Thus, the law prepared the way for the preaching of the gospel and increased our longing for Jesus. Secondly, the law had a guardian function (Galatians 3:22-25), helping decrease sin, creating a nation designed to bring God's love and justice to humanity. The law had a positive role as it both revealed and restrained transgressions. However, with Christ's finished work on the cross, a new covenant has been established and we have hope in Him.

Today, we are no longer living in slavery to the law. We are justified by faith (Galatians 3:24), thus granting us freedom in Christ as children of God. So how are we called to live today? Paul says in Galatians 5:16 "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" As *O Holy Night* says, "Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace."

### **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Consider what it means to you personally that Jesus came to fulfill the law. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for Christ's sacrifice for you; thank him for fulfilling the law and ushering in a new covenant of freedom.

## *Filling our Soul*

**READ ISAIAH 7:14**

**Yvonne Biel**

Around the holidays, we all know what it feels like to be stuffed. Many of us fill up our schedules with endless appointments, fill our closets with impractical purchases, or fill the Instagram feed with epic adventures. We can literally “fill up” at the touch of a button, finding more information, buying the latest technology, or streaming yet another episode of a show.

We live in a culture with more options, greater availability, and easier access than ever before, but we’re left feeling all the more empty. We’re realizing that we know how to stuff ourselves, but no one has taught us how to truly fill our souls. We see it in the trends - more and more people praising simplicity, minimalism, and mindfulness with the hopes of finding something meaningful to fill our hungry souls.

But, what if the secret to feeling fully satisfied is not in the process of filling up or emptying out? Rather, what if the secret to feeling content rests in the contents or substance with which we choose to fill our souls?

We see the escalating climax of the Biblical narrative when God chose to come, in the fullness of time, to fill one virgin’s womb with his personal presence. This “filling up” moment shifts our entire concept of experiencing God. As he reveals himself to us, God wants to be as close to our souls as humanly possible. He does not remain far off, but desires to fill us with himself. Filling up with God’s presence is the content that offers contentment, wholeness, and satisfaction.

### **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Today, begin by simply breathing in deeply and welcoming God’s presence within your whole self - body, mind, heart, and soul. Ask Him to fill you up with His presence and with contentment, wholeness, and satisfaction.

# Fullness of Family

## RELAX + REFOCUS

Center yourself by breathing in and out. Relax your neck and take time to let your muscles relax. Then read the passage aloud slowly. Take time to let the words “fall on your ear.”

## READ

*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Galatians 4:4-7*

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Which of these ideas from the passage would you like to embrace more fully?

1. Jesus came to redeem those who were under the law.
2. Jesus came so that you might receive adoption.
3. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your heart, crying, “Abba! Father!”
4. Jesus came so you are no longer a slave, but a son.
5. Jesus came to make you his child and if a son, then an heir through God.

Talk with God about how you feel about this idea and how it connects to your life.





## FAMILY ACTIVITY



**Storytelling** *Make up a story about a royal family. Talk about what it would be like for princes and princesses to be heirs in a kingdom.*

# Regifting Christmas

**READ ROMANS 5:17**

**Ryan Paulson**

Have you ever regifted a present? Or have you received a gift you were pretty sure had been regifted? Whether you've given or received a regifted present, it probably felt awkward; after all, the gift was originally intended for someone else.

What if a regift is actually a great gift? What if it's the best gift? Receiving a regifted Christmas present can feel awkward. But when we really ponder the Christmas story, we find that it's all about God regifting, in the most beautiful, non-awkward way.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Galatians 4:4-5). The gift of Christmas is: humanity invited to become children of God. However, it's a gift already given thousands of years ago. Adam and Eve were created as God's children and designed to enjoy relationship with their creator. They walked and talked with God until they sinned and ruined the communion he created them to enjoy. The relationship with their creator became fractured.

But God was not content in allowing his creation to live separate from him. Each Christmas we celebrate the reality that God is regifting the invitation to become his children. What Adam and Eve lost in the garden, Jesus begins to regain in the manger. Paul made the point by writing, "For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, [how] much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17). The greatest gift ever given, that humanity squandered, is once again being offered through the life of Jesus the Messiah. It's life, hope, righteousness, and sonship, that is regifted to humanity through the birth of Jesus.

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Take a moment today and reflect on the regift of Christmas - the gift of sonship. It's such an extravagant gift, God gives it twice!

## Becoming Children

READ ISAIAH 40:1-20

Donna Burns

"Behold our God!" Isaiah marvels at who God is and what he's done. There is no God like him. He is OUR God. It is he who created the world (v. 12-17), and revealed his glory (v. 8). It is he who sits above the circle of the earth to rule (v.22), with wisdom (v.28), and with might (v. 10). He does not grow weary (v. 28). His people have received from his hand (v. 2), comfort (v.1), guidance (v. 28), and forgiveness (v.2). He renews the strength of those who wait for him (v.31).

During Isaiah's day the idea of a close, caring and personal God was revolutionary. False gods were to be appeased and avoided. There was no assurance of their favor or relationship. Other major world religions continue to this day to be based on performance and fear. Followers are never sure if they have done enough. The One True God, Yahweh, is driven by intimacy for his creation. He loved us so much he became one of us, to bring us into fellowship with him. He has secured our belonging to him forever. He chose us. We can be confident of our identity in Christ.

This Advent, let us marvel at the humility of God, becoming one of us, so we could become his family, his sons and daughters. Jesus even calls us his brothers and sisters (Matthew 12:50). Isaiah describes God our Father with pictures of tenderness: "he gathers us in his arms, he holds us close" (v. 11). "He speaks tenderly" (v. 2). Revel in the intimacy that you are his child. Hear him speak tenderly to you today.

### REFLECT + RESPOND

Today listen to the Isaiah 40 passages in Part 1 of *Handel's Messiah* and marvel at our Father God. Search YouTube for *Part 1: Air: O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings to Zion*.

# Offering Adoption

**READ EPHESIANS 1:5**

**Rachel Cookston**

My story of adoption starts in Calcutta, India. My birth mother had me when she was around fourteen. I don't know much about her background, but I do know I was found in the streets of Calcutta by one of Mother Teresa's nuns.

Growing up I hated being adopted. I hated being the only non-white person in my family. I was desperate to fit in. I developed an anguish in my soul towards the India I hated so much and I didn't want to be recognized as different, just as American.

My family, of course, loved me and told me I was chosen. But there was still an empty place inside of my heart that made me feel unknown. It wasn't until college when God revealed his beautiful love and grace to me in an unexpected way. I was asked to go on a missions trip to India for four months, but I immediately said no. After a lot of prayer, I decided to step into an adventure that forever changed my view of adoption.

One day, as I was walking in a small Indian village, a man came up to me begging me to take his beautiful, bright eyed, black haired baby girl. I looked into her eyes and finally understood what it meant to be adopted. I saw this little one, desperate to be loved and taken into a loving family. She was so innocent and unable to speak for herself.

This experience broke my heart because I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't take her, but I knew in that moment how God saved me, how He saw me, how He chose me to be part of my family. In that moment, I realized, just how much God loves and cares for me. God knew my story and he had a plan for my life.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Ponder the connection between Rachel's adoption story and your "adopted into God's Kingdom family" story. Imagine going through this Advent season as an orphan; offer a prayer of thanksgiving to your Abba Father for sending Jesus to earth so you could be his child.



# Forming Christ in Us

**READ GALATIANS 4:19-20**

**Billy Berglund**

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32, the younger son takes his share of the estate and squanders all of his wealth. He gets to the lowest possible point, starving and desperate. At that moment, he comes to his senses and decides to return to his father. Yet, he is convinced his father will never accept him as a son after his poor choices, so he decides to ask to be a hired servant. Incredibly, when the father sees the young son approaching, he runs to him and embraces him. The younger son, despite his mistakes, brokenness, and sin, was not accepted as a hired servant, but was welcomed home as a fully loved child.

Our Savior, Jesus Christ, came into this world as a human, living a perfect life, dying on a cross for our sins to offer us new life. By faith in him, we become children of God and begin to be transformed by Jesus from the inside out. Transformation comes as the Spirit shapes us into people who live in the way of Jesus with the heart of Jesus. As Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

This Christmas, we celebrate that Christ was born, that we might be transformed. Not just behavior modification, but rather true transformation as Christ is formed in us.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Take a moment to really ponder these song lyrics: "I'm no longer a slave to sin, I am a child of God." What would it look like for you to no longer live in constant fear and worry, but instead to live in freedom in Christ and his deep love for you?

# Accessing Destiny

**READ PSALM 2:1-8**

**Yvonne Biel**

Presently, we see global rulers who negotiate through whatever means necessary. We watch as those in positions of power and governmental authority try to set themselves apart to gain influence and harness human control. But to what end? In Psalm 2, the Psalmist depicts God sitting in the heavens mocking the prideful hearts of the rulers of earth. In reality, it is God who possesses the ends of the earth and has the authority to give out nations as his inheritance.

When God opens the invitation for us to become his children, this includes receiving what is rightfully his as inheritance - authority and dominion. Paul says, "if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16). Humans have always been designed to receive dominion (Genesis 1:28). And Christmas reminds us Jesus is coming to redeem dominion and to invite us into his royal inheritance once again. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder." (Isaiah 9:6)

When Jesus enters as a child, he exists in human form and begins to take back his rightful authority of the earth through subversive means. Now, through his resurrection and ascension, Jesus sits at the right hand of God the Father. Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne and we, as his children and co-heirs, inherit what is rightfully his. Christmas means our destiny is redeemed. We no longer need to fear the rulers of this earth, but we can trust God to give out his inheritance with goodness and justice and perfect peace. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." (Isaiah 9:7).

## REFLECT + RESPOND

A redeemed destiny is reason to worship. Join in the song *Unto Us* by listening to Hillong's version on YouTube.

# Redeeming Family

READ JOHN 1:11-13

Ellen Rosenberger

Family. A word that holds promise for some, but a world of pain for others. Family, where our sweetest joys can be found, as well as where our deepest scars can exist.

Many of us carry burdens and hurts from strained family relationships. We may desire to be in close relationship with family but may realize that desire is not reciprocated. Or perhaps we've been hurt too often and there doesn't seem to be any hope for reconciliation. Why does family strife hurt so much. Why do we place such high hopes upon family and why can we feel such deep sorrow over familial estrangement? I believe it goes back to the garden where perfect relationship flourished between man and woman. But sin tarnished the design of family. Brother killing brother. Families split over pride, jealousy, and anger - so totally opposite of how our loving God purposed for his creation to live and work together in peace and right relationship.

Our hearts burn for a return to what was: relationships built of truth, peace, and intimate engagement. Yet, we live in a world where that is often not a reality. Even Jesus can relate to the pain and disappointment we may feel in our families. He was rejected by his own brothers who did not place their faith in him and even betrayed and denied him. He knows what relational pain feels like.

But there is hope. At Christmas we remember there is hope. God is redeeming this world and he is redeeming family through Jesus. As we've reflected on this week, we are adopted into a new family. An eternal family. And our new family will live together in peace, without sin or tears or pain or disunity for the rest of time.

## REFLECT + RESPOND

What relationship seems impossible for Jesus to redeem? Ask the Holy Spirit to direct your prayer for that person. Commit to praying for that person each day this coming week.

# Fullness of Spirit

## RELAX + REFOCUS

Close your eyes and allow your mind to be still. Turn your palms downward as you let go of all distractions and cares. Now turn your palms upward as a physical posture of opening yourself up to receive the living word from your Abba Father.

## READ

*And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Galatians 4:6-7*

## REFLECT + RESPOND

What are some of the images of the Spirit of God that come to mind? What is he like? What does he do? How has your understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit changed over the years and through what means? Ask the Spirit now to teach you and grow you through our study of the scriptures this week.





## FAMILY ACTIVITY



**Big Picture Creativity** *Draw what first comes to mind when you think of the Holy Spirit. Discuss your drawings together.*

# Dwelling Among Us

**READ JOHN 1:14**

**Ryan Paulson**

When my kids were younger, we'd dress up and play make-believe games where superheroes conquered bad guys and princesses ruled over the extravagant castles. We'd dress up in character, make forts, and enjoy the afternoon in another world. But after the playtime was over, we'd get out of our costumes and go back to "normal."

Christmas is the time when we dwell on how God has pursued humanity to the point of becoming human. As Eugene Peterson phrased it in *The Message*, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). Essentially, God decided to dress up in a body - the infinite became the finite infant. But what strikes me is that Jesus never went back to "normal." We tend to think of Jesus' time on earth as the only time he was human. We imagine that after he ascended to heaven he changed back to his preincarnate state - but that's not the case. Jesus never changed out of his humanity. He never ditched his body and stopped being the God-man. Certainly his body was changed at the resurrection (just like ours will be), but he is in his resurrected glorified body in heaven right now. He is still human!

That God would not only take our frame, but keep our frame, is astonishing. What love, grace, and mercy. And what sacrifice. If that doesn't affirm the goodness and dignity of humanity, I'm not sure what would. As Charles Wesley so poignantly stated, God was "pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel." Incarnation was a price God himself paid because of love and it was an act so audacious that it still causes all of the heavenly realm to stand in awe (1 Peter 1:12).

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Take some time today and ponder Jesus' scars still on his hands, feet, and side today in heaven. They are a display of his love for you.

## *Dwelling in Us*

### **READ 1 CORINTHIANS 6:19-20    Harvey Shepard**

The Spirit in us. We know the story. Jesus came to accomplish something – to establish his kingdom in this world and to work in the hearts of individuals. Words from Jeremiah echo the promise that “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.” (Jeremiah 24:7)

Shortly before Jesus indicates the completion of his task, “It is finished,” he told his followers of the Comforter he would send to help and be with us forever (John 14:16). Paul’s words paint additional details for his readers: we are temples of the Holy Spirit, being built together into a dwelling where God lives by his spirit. He lives in me and in us.

If you are like me you may be asking, “Is there evidence of the Spirit’s work in and through me?” While this is a natural question in the West, in Eastern cultures the question might be, “Do people see evidence of fruit in us?” The texts support both ideas, but for those of us from the West, it may be helpful to consider that although Jesus indeed loves me, he does much of his work through us, the collective body of Christ.

The fishermen among the apostles, who Jesus made fishers of men, did their work as a group. During this Advent season the Spirit works in and through us as a family, community and church so that we and others can be filled to the fullest of Christmas joy.

### **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Early Jesus followers had the conviction that their bodies had become the new temple, housing God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Imagine that, the sacred space where heaven and earth overlapped was now humanity. Consider how much dignity and worth that exuded to people who had been walking in darkness.

# *Walking in the Spirit*

**READ GALATIANS 5:21-23**

**Rich Obrecht**

As I walked to school with my friends, we'd talk and dream about gifts we hoped to get for Christmas. Invariably, the conversation would change to what it'd be like if Christmas was every day. What if every morning we woke up to gifts and they were gifts we actually wanted, not gifts parents typically give, like socks and t-shirts? The pace of the conversation would pick up, we'd get all the more excited, and then someone would see the school. The conversation would quickly die down and reality would set in. We all knew *that day* wouldn't be another Christmas morning.

While such childhood conversations and dreams are unrealistic, we as believers have fruit being born in us daily as we journey in our faith, walking in the Spirit. And we need these gifts every day: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Who wouldn't want those? Who wouldn't want to share them? These fruit are given to us in our relationship with Jesus and they're not private gifts. No, these gifts are seen by all around us.

Christmas is a joyous time of year for many. As we celebrate Christmas with family and friends, I'm sure conversations will include gifts hoped for and whispers of gifts to be given. Almost certainly, we'll talk and sing about how Christ came to be with us and how his birth led to his sacrifice for us and our redemption. May we not only daily recognize and appreciate the gifts generously given by the Spirit, but also liberally share them with those around us. In this way, our childhood dreams of Christmas gifts every day are realized, both given and received!

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Notice ways the fruits of the Spirit show up in your day today and in this Christmas season. Take initiative to let others know how much you appreciate the gifts of the Spirit they are sharing as well.



# Maturing in the Spirit

READ GALATIANS 5:25

Yvonne Biel

Our celebration of Christmas portrays God as infant. Let's imagine God as a tiny living creature, not yet fully developed, a dependent, innocent, and immature child. We press into Jesus' incarnation today, may he show us the way to maturity from a place of weakness.

Jesus came into the world much like Adam and Eve, who were also dependent, innocent, and immature. They were invited to mature in the context of unhindered relationship with God. However, they were quickly tempted by the enemy and their sin blocked them from growing in the *unhindered presence* of God. Now we all grow up in the context of *distorted relationship* with God.

Also, remember Jesus "grew up like a young plant." We don't have much recorded of this process except for Luke 2:52, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." We can imagine he was dependent on his family and community as he learned and matured in his relationships. Like us, Jesus had to grow into his true identity.

So, how did Jesus, being immature, never sin? In our immaturity, like Adam and Eve, we sin easily. Jesus was an immature child and entered human life not fully developed, yet he grew up in the context of *unhindered relationship* with God. This only happened because he was connected to God through the Holy Spirit his whole life and he fought to maintain this connection. Jesus demonstrated that we, too, have a fighting chance to live in context of the presence of God, all because Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit. We now fight to live in connection with his Spirit in order to fully mature as Jesus did.

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Praise Jesus today for maturing in the context of the Holy Spirit and ask his Spirit to come quickly to your aide as you fight to live in his presence today.

# *Suffering in the Spirit*

**READ ROMANS 5:1-5**

**Donna Burns**

When it comes to expectations this time of year, we are often like those kids in the famous *The Night Before Christmas* poem, where "visions of sugar plums danced in their heads". We want our holiday to look a certain way, be a certain way and have certain gifts. As Christmas comes closer, are we engaging the season as it is, or as we wish it were? Is it beautiful or broken? Wonderous or woeful? Precious or pressured? Paul proclaims, "no matter what circumstances you find yourself in, you can rejoice." Paul learned from his experiences that God produced character in him as Jesus' love poured into his heart through the Holy Spirit.

If your Christmas isn't filling it up with what you wished, have hope. Paul's encouragement is that we are already filled up. We might not get the gifts we want for Christmas, but we have been given the gift that never stops giving. Our spirit is born again with the coming of Jesus in our life. Through the Holy spirit, God continually pours his love into us. We might be experiencing difficulties but we are filled in the midst of them. We are not without resources. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives.

Suffering is part of the human condition, but God doesn't leave us to suffer alone. The Holy Spirit suffers with us and for us. He is our comforter, constant companion and guide. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit is pointing you to Jesus in the midst of your circumstances, and filling you this season.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Listen to *Shoulders* by For King and Country on YouTube. Take a moment to claim your free gift, the miraculous indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by being reborn in Christ Jesus.

## *Focusing on the Spirit*

**READ JOHN 15:26**

**Aaron Bjorklund**

This week we have directed a lot of attention on the Spirit. I wonder if he is blushing? You see, If you study the Holy Spirit through texts like John 15:26, you begin to learn that the Spirit is constantly pointing people to Jesus. Jesus is the Spirit's favorite subject. There is this beautiful little verse in Romans 12:10 that says, "Outdo one another in showing honor." It would seem that the trinity takes its own advice. Jesus is always deferring to the Father, the Father delights over the son and the Spirit points us back to Jesus.

When Jesus is born he comes bearing gifts. One of those gifts is the promise of the Holy Spirit. But it's not just any spirit, it's that selfless spirit that he gives us. One way to know how in step we are with the spirit of Christ is to evaluate how Jesus-focused we are. If we choose to accept God's Christmas present to us, namely the Spirit, we must also remember our Christmas present, by nature, is focused on Jesus.

So in the spirit of Christmas, how Jesus-focused are you? How interested are you in pointing others to Jesus? If you don't feel as Jesus-focused as the Spirit is, it's not a thing to feel guilt about, it's just a sign that you may not be listening to the Spirit. You may not have opened and enjoyed that Christmas gift from God to and in you. Ask the Spirit to drive more of your motivations. See what happens. Keep asking and see if the Spirit will make his voice heard more through you. I suspect he might say, "Isn't Jesus amazing!"

### **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Make a list of characteristics of Jesus. Hang it somewhere you'll see throughout the season.

# Fullness of Freedom

## RELAX + REFOCUS

Place both feet on the floor, relax your entire body and breathe in deeply. As you breathe in a second time, pray "Lord Jesus." And now as you exhale, pray "You are freedom." Do this two more times.

## READ

*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)*

## REFLECT + RESPOND

When you think of freedom what comes to mind? What are the ways you have attempted to be free of sin, free of worry, free of responsibility, free of pain in your life? Ask your Heavenly Father, who gives wisdom freely to all who ask, to fill your heart with the truth of his incomprehensible freedom, lavished on us through Jesus.





## FAMILY ACTIVITY



**Freedom of Expression** *Have a Christmas dance party in your living room! Talk about the “why” behind freely worshipping Jesus.*



# Hoping for Freedom

**READ HEBREWS 2:14-15**

**Rich Obrecht**

Centuries of oppression. The Israelites experienced hundreds of years of being conquered and oppressed. It's easy to say they brought it on themselves, especially after what they were told in Leviticus 26. That doesn't make their suffering any easier. These centuries were spent looking and hoping for the arrival of Messiah, whom they believed would deliver them.

Hope. The people were hopeful for freedom they imagined their Messiah King would bring. Deliverance. Delivery from the oppression and injustice of this foreign regime, the Roman Empire. Peace. Their hope for future peace was probably based on experiences during King Solomon's reign, and the realization of just how little peace they'd experienced since. Little did God's people know their desire for hope, deliverance, and peace would be incarnated soon, and not as they expected. Their expectations of Messiah King revolved around their nation being freed from their earthly oppressor and their former power being restored. Their hope for freedom was based upon national liberation and restoration. Israel discovered Messiah's freedom to be very different, and their reaction followed the Old Testament prophecies. While the Messiah would bring hope, deliverance and peace, the oppressive mantle thrown off wasn't the Roman Empire, but one more insidious, invisible, and having near-eternal presence: sin and death (Hebrews 2:14-15, 1 John 3:8).

We have hope today, too. We have hope in the resurrected Son of God, our Messiah King, who gives us incomprehensible peace and life eternal, delivering us from sin and death. We shouldn't miss what the Israelites did: this is why Jesus came. Christ-given hope, peace, and deliverance were given to usher us into the Kingdom of God, which is now and to come.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

What comes to mind when you think of the freedom Christ came to give you? Consider how you might share peace and freedom with another believer today.

# *Celebrating Freedom*

**READ ISAIAH 7:14**

**Dan Elliott**

Ahhh...Christmas is finally here! I remember when I was a kid staring at our nativity set perched on top of our TV. It was a cardboard one – with very English-looking people in it. Baby Jesus was lily white. One of the shepherds was wearing an old English-style hat and one of his legs was missing (a mishap caused by either my brother or me). That didn't stop me from being mesmerized by this nativity set. I would go from one character to the next, imagining what they experienced at that stable.

I was a toe-headed, blue-eyed kid. I grew up thinking Jesus was too. And you know what? That's OK. It reminds me of a carol I love. Take a moment to listen and reflect on *Some Children See Him*, by James Taylor. You can find it on YouTube.

Now, go back to that shepherd scene. The shepherds are in a field, guarding their flocks, getting ready for another typical night. But it's anything but typical. An angel...a blinding radiance...a heavenly choir. In the middle of all this, it's the message that catches my imagination: "I bring you good news of great joy for everyone!" (Luke 2:10 NLT)

Have you ever tried to think what kind of news would be good and full of joy for everyone? I might rejoice that a war is over – but what if I'm on the losing side? Think about it. The only kind of news I can come up with that is "good news... for everyone" is this one – "The Savior – yes the Messiah, the Lord – has been born tonight!" (Luke 2:11 NLT) The good news of Jesus doesn't depend on nationality, race, age, gender, societal or vocational status, physical abilities or shortcomings. This is good news for everyone and it's filled with joy!

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Imagine yourself stepping into a nativity scene. Let each character's faith fill and stretch your own. Read today's scripture verses again. It's Christmas! Jesus has come!

# *Freedom for Freedom*

**READ GALATIANS 5:1**

**Larry Boatright**

How many of us, when our parents set a boundary, thought, "Someday, I'll be old enough to do whatever I want." We dreamt of all of the things we would do when we were free. Where we would go. How much money we would spend. How late we would stay up. And then, just like that, we were old enough to move out on our own. The sweet nectar of freedom!

I remember going to college, with unlimited freedom, and no one to oversee my actions. It was bliss - at first. Before long, however, I had spent all of the money in my meal account because Taco Mayo had such good burritos and was open until 2 am (who could blame me?). And I had flunked out of school with a 2.5 GPA because I found it inconvenient to regularly attend classes. What I perceived as a freedom became a huge hardship.

When you read, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free," what comes to mind? Does freedom really mean doing anything we want? Is that always the best path? Going hog-wild with no boundaries can ultimately leave us in more bondage. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23, You say, "I am allowed to do anything" —but not everything is good for you. You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is beneficial. True freedom submits itself to the lordship of Jesus. Grace isn't a license to do anything we want - it's the power to operate in a healthy way when given freedom. If you're courting the line of, "how far can I go with this?" or actually living in bondage rather than true freedom, remember the Father waits for the prodigal to come home. True freedom comes from laying aside our own indulgent pleasures and pursuing the mind of Christ.

## **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Have you been indulging your freedom in areas that don't fall under the Lordship of Jesus? What is one specific step you can take to bring that area into alignment?

# *Freedom in Captivity*

READ JOHN 8:36

Yvonne Biel

Throughout history, God's people have been proclaiming freedom while in captivity. Israel sings praise songs to God while locked in slavery under Egyptian rule. At the mercy of the wilderness, Israel still rejoices. Even after establishing themselves in a turbulent land and being taken into exile, the people of Israel worship their God. Worship is what sets God's people apart, because even under the worst of circumstances, God's people know they are free!

The Apostle Paul and the disciples of Jesus rejoiced in suffering and found joy during periods of suffering. James says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). Paul says, "I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him" (Philippians 3:8-9). And before Jesus underwent some of the most horrific human suffering, he was reminding the people around him that the "truth will set you free...everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So, if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:32, 34-36).

Like those who have gone before, our circumstances may threaten to enslave us, but the true oppressor is sin. The truth of Christmas is that Jesus Christ came to set us free, has conquered sin, and won the victory. We need not succumb to the enemy's attempts to enslave our hearts ever again.

Although this Christmas season may become heavy with a pressure to consume, over-filled schedules, and expectations of family members, this season is a time to rejoice. Christ has come. We know the truth. Christ came at the fullness of time. Christ came to make us children of God. Christ came to give us his Spirit. Christ came that we might claim victory.

## REFLECT + RESPOND

Ponder captivity and rejoice in freedom today! Thanks be to God, who's gives us victory through Christ (1 Corinthians 15:37).

## *Freedom to Serve*

**READ GALATIANS 4:8-10**

**Billy Berglund**

In this Christmas season, we celebrated the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. We opened presents, shared meals, and gathered with family. As we find ourselves here today a few days after Christmas, we may be sensing the holiday joy wearing off. There are houses to clean, jobs to return to, and tasks to be done. We also may find ourselves falling back into our same routines of relating to God.

We are programmed to think we have to earn grace as if to say, "It was nice that Jesus came to earth, but now we have to make it up to him. We have to work harder to keep earning his love." Thankfully, the birth of Jesus is the death of religious striving. Through faith, we now have freedom in Christ. Our relationship with him makes us free and enables us to serve, not out of "religion," but out of love for God.

All throughout Scripture, we see the pattern of what God has done for us, and what we do in response. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:1-2, "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." We are dearly loved children because of Christ's deep love and sacrifice for us. As a result, we walk in the way of love from this place of freedom. What we do comes from who we are, rather than vice versa.

### **REFLECT + RESPOND**

Today, meditate on Romans 8:38-39, which tells us nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." As we come to the end of the year, let this new freedom in Christ encourage and fill you up to serve God and others.



## *Freedom to Love*

READ GALATIANS 5:14

Donna Burns

Love. God sent his son to be incarnated love. Incarnate means made into flesh, made plain, made visible, factual, real. It's a theological word, and it's never used in the Bible. The fact of the incarnation is God's love made flesh in Jesus. The method of incarnation was the immaculate conception in the Virgin Mary. God freely gave; we are free to receive. Jesus is God's love to us incarnated and we are Jesus' love incarnated to those around us.

God made himself visible in Jesus. Jesus makes himself visible in us. The world will know we are Christians, not by how we look, but by the demonstration of his love. Living it. Love is being committed to our spouse, an aging parent, a challenging child. Love is calling a depressed friend every morning to encourage them to get up and go to work. It is listening to and walking with the grieving as long as it takes. Love is understanding with Kingdom values and seeing with God's eyes. Love is moving at the Holy Spirit's leading. Love is thinking of others first and loving them as you would yourself.

As we begin the new year let's embrace the profound gift we have been given: God's love, made real, made flesh. This gift can change everything around us; it can change us. We are free to make the choice to let his love change us. You can live in the fullness of Christ, his love made visible, this January. You are Jesus' love made real to the world if you choose to live it.

### REFLECT + RESPOND

Look back over your advent journal for places you have highlighted. Do you notice a theme or direction? Has Jesus' love filled you in new ways this Advent? Perhaps a new perspective, a new leading by the Holy Spirit, a conviction to act? You have been filled up with Christ and given freedom to love.



# Family Activities

SUN

MON

TUES

dec. 2

## Walk and Talk

*Go on a family walk and talk about what everyone is looking forward to in the Advent season. What activity helps make Christmas really happy for you? What activity makes you feel overwhelmed?*

3

Set a 30 second timer and play a waiting game.

4

Start a list of hopes for the new year.

dec. 9

## Storytelling

*Make up a story about a royal family. Talk about what it would be like for princes and princesses to be heirs in a kingdom.*

10

Do a white elephant gift exchange.

11

Go stargazing; say to one another "Behold our God."

dec. 16

## Big Picture Creativity

*Draw what first comes to mind when you think of the Holy Spirit. Discuss your drawings together.*

17

Enjoy a board game together.

18

Build a fort; talk about Jesus dwelling among us.

dec. 23

## Freedom of Expression

*Have a Christmas dance party in your living room! Talk about the "why" behind freely worshipping Jesus.*

24

Let kids choose what's for dinner or an evening activity.

25

Merry Christmas!

Enjoy your kids!

WED

THURS

FRI

SAT

5

Sing a carol of hope.

6

Write a letter from Jesus to the world.

7

Kids pretend to be parents and make up house rules.

8

Stay in your pj's all day and/or have breakfast for dinner.

12

Talk about and pray specifically for orphans.

13

Make playdough to imagine the Spirit forming us.

14

Read Yertle the Turtle by Dr. Seuss on YouTube.

15

Visit a family member or friend.

19

Take a nature walk and play "I Spy."

20

Look at family pictures; see how everyone has matured.

21

Do a family prayer circle.

22

Make a bowl of popcorn and watch a Christmas movie.

26

Enjoy a Christmas present with the whole family.

27

Pick a Psalm and make up a tune to go with it.

28

Find an unused toy and wrap it up to give away.

29

Write thank you notes for Christmas presents.



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