



# ADVENT 2020

## WISE ONES

Arkadelphia First Baptist Church



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A Christian Family Celebrates the Season

First Baptist Church  
Arkadelphia, Arkansas

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# CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

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Humans early recognized the sequences of cosmic time—days, seasons, years—and celebrated spring (fertility), fall (harvest), rites of passage (birth, weaning, puberty, marriage, and death), and historical events (victories and defeats, settlements, transfers of power, special visitors). Many celebrations blended private with public and were (and are) celebrated in public form and space.

Like all religions, Christianity has celebrated certain special times. The sequence of these times has become known as the liturgical year, or Christian calendar. It does not rival secular time, which Christians recognize as one of the Creator's gifts in which they are to live in grateful acceptance and which they are to shape to their own purposes. Instead, it is intended to clear the way for faith, hope, and love—to promote growth in grace.

The Christian calendar is rooted in the Jewish one just as Christianity is rooted in Judaism. The Jewish calendar was lunisolar and began in the autumn, with the Sabbath as the basis of its cycles. Its celebrations (feasts) occupied days which began on the previous evening and lasted twenty-four hours. Those feasts celebrated significant events in the story of Jewish salvation, were tied to prominent features of an agrarian society, and sometimes entailed seven days of celebration.

The Jewish year that the early Christians knew began with a New Year Feast (Rosh Hashanah), which occurred on the first new moon after the autumnal equinox. Ten days later was the Feast of Atonement (Yom Kippur), during which the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, sacrificed for his own sins and those of all the people, then sent a "scapegoat" into the wilds symbolically carrying the people's sins. On the 25th day of Chislev came the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple (Hanukkah), best known as the Festival of Lights, in celebration of the Maccabean cleansing and rededication of the temple in 164 BC, and most specifically of the miraculous light from the Menorah, which burned for eight days on a day's worth of oil.

Between January and the following autumn came three "pilgrimage feasts"—so called because every male Jew above the age of eleven was obliged annually to journey to Jerusalem for at least one. Passover (14th day of the first month) and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (begun on the 15th and lasting a week) occurred during the first full moon in the spring (the beginning of the barley harvest) and commemorated liberation from Egyptian servitude. The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) occurred seven weeks after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, was a feast of thanksgiving for the wheat harvest, and commemorated the Covenant at Sinai and the Ten Commandments. The Feast of Huts (or Booths or Tabernacles) began on the 15th day of the seventh month, was the feast of thanksgiving for the grape harvest, and celebrated the Torah (books of the law). The year's last celebration was the Feast of Purim, a fast on the 13th day of the last month followed by two feast days, the whole commemorating the deliverance of the Jews from threatened extermination by Haman, who chose the date by casting lots (purim).

The observances of the Christian calendar require participants who function as witnesses to a salvation meant for all and who act with a sense of responsibility for and commonality with fellow humans. These observances look to the stories of the past and to the promise of the future, the actions which brought salvation and the hope of its completion and fulfillment. They speak of the salvation of believers and the glorification of God through a constantly repeated encounter with the Lord who seeks us and accomplishes our salvation. They are a thankful commemoration of the saving acts of Jesus, which must be repeatedly celebrated if they are to perform their function of proclaiming salvation and making it present in each new here and now.

The seasons that mark, and the holy days that punctuate, the Christian year have particular significance and are meant to develop particular attributes of the

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spiritual life. Underlying it all is a cycle of evil and good, dark and light, sin and salvation. At its heart, the calendar's structure demonstrates the evils of the world from which Christ's sacrifice offers salvation. Each major holy day is preceded by a time of preparation, so that the celebrant can experience the day's full measure of meaning. By observing the liturgical calendar, with each new year one meets Christ anew and keeps His life and sacrifice fresh by living it in a very real way. What follows is a simplified version of that calendar in the Western tradition.

**All Hallow Even** – October 31 – the eve of Allhallowmas (All Saints' Day).

**All Saints' Day** – November 1 – the beginning of the Christian year - commemorates the lives of the saints.

**All Souls Day** – November 2 – commemorates all the faithful departed, particularly those who have died during the past year.

**Advent** – the four weeks (from the first Sunday in December) preceding Christmas.

**Christmas** – December 25 – celebration of Christ's nativity.

**Epiphany** – January 6 – commemorates the appearance of the Magi in Bethlehem and symbolically the promulgation of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

**Lent (the Paschal Fast)** – a 40-day fast season commemorating the fast of Jesus in the wilderness.

**Ash Wednesday** – the first day of Lent and beginning of the fasting season. Named for the custom of burning the fronds from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration and rubbing some of the ashes onto the forehead in the sign of a cross or sprinkling them on the head as a sign of mourning and penance.

**Holy Week** – the last week of Lent.

**Palm Sunday** – the first day of Holy Week – commemorates Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

**Tenebrae** – a special portion of morning and evening services during the last three days of Holy Week

commemorates the coming of the light.

**Maundy Thursday** – commemorates the institution of the Lord's Supper.

**Good Friday** – commemorates Christ's crucifixion.

**Easter** – since the Council of Nicea, 325 AD, the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox – commemorates Jesus' resurrection.

**Ascension Sunday** – one month after Easter – commemorates Jesus' ascension into heaven.

**Pentecost** – ten days after Ascension Sunday, the Thursday that marks the fortieth day after Easter commemorates the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the church and the missions impetus.

## HOURS OF PRAYER

As it divided the year into liturgical seasons, so the early church marked the passage of the day with prayer at specified times: most importantly morning (lauds) and evening (vespers), and at the third, sixth, and ninth hours (calculated after the Roman custom of the twelve hours of light commencing at 6 AM—hence, at 9 AM, noon, and 3 PM). After the institution of monastic orders, prayers were offered by the faithful at matins, lauds (praise), prime (6AM), terce (9 AM), sext (noon), none (3 PM), vespers, and compline (completion—the final hour that ends in darkness, but promises new light in the morning).

## LITURGICAL COLORS

Since the 1200s, white has been associated with the festivals of Christ, Mary, and the unmartyred saints; red with the feasts of the apostles and martyrs, the Cross and Pentecost; black with Advent, Lent, and services for the departed; and green for all other occasions. Since 1970, red has been assigned to Palm Sunday and Good Friday, violet can replace black, and “on the most festive of occasions the richest materials available should be used, without regard to color.”

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# SEASON'S SYMBOLS & COLORS

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Advent is a time of expectation and anticipation that prepares us for the worship, joy, and celebration we experience on Christmas Day. Advent observance is uniquely a family time characterized by lighted candles, good food, intimacy, worship, and inner warmth.

Your Advent observance should begin four Sundays before Christmas. Usually the family gathers around the wreath before eating. They may sing a hymn. They look on while the head of the family leads a brief meditation, prays, and then lights the appropriate number of candles for that week. The candles burn throughout the meal. Meditations are placed in this book at the appropriate days for your family's Advent observance.

Your family is encouraged to use these devotions as a focus of family worship during the Advent season. In

addition, you may want to make or purchase an Advent wreath. A twelve- to sixteen-inch styrofoam circle works well. Equally space four candles around the circular base. Attach evergreen cuttings to cover the base. Place a larger white candle in the middle of the wreath.

The wreath's round shape symbolizes God's never-ending love. The evergreens represent everlasting life. The candles may be any color, but traditional colors are usually purple, red, white, or pink. The four candles in the wreath represent the four weeks of Advent—one each for Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love – and the center candle is known as the Christ candle. The first candle is relighted each day throughout the week. An additional candle is lighted during the second week, then the third, then the fourth. The Christ candle is lighted on Christmas Eve.

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# THE FOUR WEEKS OF ADVENT

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## THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

November 29	Proverbs 1:7; 9:10	Wisdom	Ray Granade
November 30	1 Kings 3:12; 4:30	A Wise and Understanding Heart	Nancy Harrell
December 1	Proverbs 14:1; 2 Samuel 20:22	A Wise Woman	Lee McGlone
December 2	Psalms 14:2; 53:2	God Seeks the Wise	Malea Borland
December 3	Ecclesiastes 2:21; 7:4; 8:1	Wisdom's Use and Effect	Bob Duncan
December 4	Matthew 7:24; 11:25; 25:1-13	Wisdom and Foolishness Contrasted	Dana Dixon
December 5	James 3:13	Humility and Wisdom	Phil Hardin

## THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

December 6	Leviticus 26:6	Peace's Source	Mitzi Bass
December 7	Deuteronomy 20:10	An Offer of Peace	Mike Ayres
December 8	Judges 3:11, 3:30; 5:31; 8:28	The Land Had Peace	Hannah Seaton
December 9	1 Samuel 16:4-5	Do You Come in Peace?	Ian Cosh
December 10	Job 3:13, 26	Peace and Its Absence	Melanie Rothwell
December 11	Psalms 29:11, 119:165; Isaiah 32:17-18	Peace Is Your Reward	Kathy Collins
December 12	Isaiah 9:6-7; 53:5	Prince of Peace	Judy Harrison

## THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

December 13	Isaiah 55:12	Promise of Joy	Snookie Dixon
December 14	Nehemiah 8:10	Joy of the Lord	Ellis Leagans
December 15	Psalms 32:11, 35:27, 100:1	A Joyful Noise	Roberta Long
December 16	Esther 9:22; Job 41:22; Psalm 51:8	Sorrow to Joy	David McAllister
December 17	Psalm 51:12; Isaiah 61:10; Habakkuk 3:18	Joy of Our Salvation	Lisa Hill
December 18	Romans 5:3-4; 1 Peter 1:6-9; James 1:2	Joy in Suffering	Tiffany Pickett
December 19	Luke 1:14, 44; 2:10-11	Joy of His Birth	Judy Jones

## THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

December 20	1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13	The Greatest of These Is Love	Ronnie Granade
December 21	John 3:16-17; 15:13; Romans 5:8	Sacrificial Love	Sue Poole
December 22	Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:1-3	Brotherly Love	Scott Duvall
December 23	Deuteronomy 11:13, 22; 13:3, Joshua 22:5	Love the Lord Your God	Becky Bost

## CHRISTMAS EVE

Luke 2:1-20	The Birth of Love	Ann McMillion
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## CHRISTMAS DAY

James 1:17-18	The Perfect Gift	Adam Wheat
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# WISDOM

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## PROVERBS 1:7; 9:10

Jesus told a story (Luke 18:1-8) known variously as the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the Importunate Widow, or the Persistent Widow. In it, Jesus introduces his listeners first to a judge “who neither feared God nor cared what people thought” as the NIV translates it. To His hearers, Jesus signaled the judge’s lack of wisdom and understanding. They would have heard, whispering in their mind’s ear, today’s passage. They would also have harkened back to the Genesis account of the two named trees in Eden: that of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and that of Life. They would have drawn distinctions among knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

As is so often the case, we “moderns” tend to accept our world’s “wisdom markers.” Often we point to success in some field of endeavor as proof of wisdom transportable to every field. Sometimes we point to longevity and hence experience as proof of wisdom, as if life mirrored the movie “Groundhog Day” in allowing constant repetition of experience to produce wisdom rather than boredom. Sometimes we argue that riches and possessions, or breeding, or education, or some combination, can produce wisdom. My sons have long delighted in saying that I have more education than can do anybody any good, presumably countering that argument.

Just as we tend to accept the world’s wisdom markers, so we accept its estimate of wisdom as a by-product of possessions, its conflation of what we have with who we are. Even non-religious popular culture esteems Solomon as wise, holding up his decision about a contested baby as an example. But most of all, it remembers his wealth—while forgetting his domestic life and familial difficulties. We religious folk speak of the Magi, the wise ones “from the east” who show up in Matthew’s account with precious gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We call them kings, endowing them with all the riches that title implies, singing in imagined voices words imputed to

“We Three Kings.” Yes, we draw our whole conception of wisdom, its origins, and how we recognize it from the physical world we inhabit and the culture we have created to match those surroundings.

Advent comes early in the Christian liturgical calendar that takes its new year demarcation from the succession of All Hallow’s Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day as October becomes November. The year begins as our religious and popular cultures both pay homage to the supernatural (though the religious one prefers the term “spiritual”). That beginning reminds us that what we have and who we are cannot be synonymous. It asks us to look at wisdom in a different light. It warns us that wisdom cannot be purchased, seized by force, or slyly stolen. Neither relentless pursuit nor careful study can run wisdom to ground. Counterintuitively, it says, wisdom is a gift that appears when our attention focuses elsewhere.

Wisdom, scripture tells us, is a by-product rather than an end in itself, serendipitous rather than a grail. Wisdom comes to us when we focus time, efforts, and attention—our totality—on what truly matters. Wisdom emerges only when our relationship with God assumes paramount importance. That relationship resembles the application of corrective lenses to astigmatic eyes. Everything comes into focus. Seeing clearly, we recognize things for what they are and realize how they relate. Our awestruck adoration of God begins the clarification process as He brings all into focus. The more we love Him, the more we serve Him, the clearer we see our world. To borrow Paul’s image, what we see darkly begins to lighten and sharpen. That clarity is what we call wisdom. And as God tells Moses about the workman Bezalel in Exodus 31:2-3, He reveals the source of that clarity, that wisdom: *I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge, and with all kinds of skills...* (NIV)

—Ray Granade

# A WISE AND UNDERSTANDING HEART

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## 1 KINGS 3:12; 4:30

*I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.*

I Kings 3:12 (NIV)

*Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.*

I Kings 4:30 (NIV)

We were in the middle of a weekly hour-long meeting, during which we small-talked and occasionally deep-talked. Our relationship had been slow going; I sensed her disappointment at having been paired with me as her mentor, and the knowledge of that created a barrier between us. But that day, she said something that I remember like it was yesterday. Speaking about a mutual acquaintance, she casually observed, “His parents only ever prayed that he’d be wise.” Based on what I knew of the young man in question, God certainly seemed to be answering his parents’ years-long prayer.

I’m still not sure exactly why that conversation—passing comment, really—has stayed with me for more than a decade. My hunch is because of the confidence

I sensed in those parents’ singularly focused prayer, a confidence I lacked in praying for my own children. I mean, isn’t the list really endless when it comes to things one ought to pray for one’s children? It can feel daunting, overwhelming. How could a parent narrow her prayers so specifically and still trust that they’re enough?

But wisdom is enough. Even a cursory read through the Proverbs reveals that a wise person possesses all sorts of desirable traits: humility, a teachable spirit, integrity, discretion, fear of the Lord.... The list goes on and on.

All of this makes me wonder: did David pray that his son Solomon would be wise? Solomon knew enough to ask God for it, whether or not his father’s prayers included the request. And God blessed Solomon with a wise and discerning heart, giving him insight in governing and a reputation for wisdom that spread far and wide.

Wisdom and discernment...discernment and wisdom. These strike me as a much-needed duo to add to my grown-up Christmas list. Perhaps your list has an opening for them as well. May this Advent season see all of us growing in wisdom and discernment, two Solomon-like—and very Christ-like—qualities.

—Nancy Harrell

# A WISE WOMAN

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PROVERBS 14:1

2 SAMUEL 20:22

In this Advent season, the theme of “Wisdom” forces us to think in broad terms about life, priorities, purpose and direction, the Created Order, and God’s activity among us—in short, Advent reaches out to claim us as indispensable ingredients in God’s redemptive plan. The ancient Jews ordered their holy books in three divisions: the Law (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the Prophets (both major and minor), and Wisdom (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, and numerous Psalms). The actors in the dramatic movements of the time, and the writers of these magnificent documents, were recognized as having keen insight into our world (the Created Order), including the intellectual challenges that arise from the ambiguities within it (Job, Ecclesiastes). Wisdom literature not only helps us faithfully to encounter life, it encourages our engagement with life wherein our greatest joys are discovered.

But all Wisdom is not compacted into the Wisdom literature. The text for the day is taken from Israel’s history (2 Samuel 20:14-22). The wise woman of Abel-bethmaacah is unnamed yet her influence is unmistakable. Her insight led to a reasoned solution to a national dilemma. The rebel Sheba raised an army to fight King David. Joab, leader of David’s armies, prepared to destroy the entire city of Abel in order to kill Sheba. The Wise Woman of Abel intervened, seeking a more peaceable and faithful way to end the skirmish. Afterward, Joab promised to leave the city if Sheba was handed over. The city leaders had Sheba beheaded and threw his head over the wall. Joab then departed and returned to Jerusalem to inform the king. Instead of many deaths, wise counsel from an unnamed woman prevented undue violence and bloodshed.

The Bible is replete with examples of women whose God-confidence is obvious and to be admired. Barak

hesitated to obey the Lord, but Deborah reminded him of God’s promise to guide his way. And God gave him a great victory at the river Kishon (Judges 4:6-7). Ruth (3:9) in utter humility called Boaz to recognize that he was God’s choice to provide her protection—and thus secure God’s plan for the future; Ruth became mother of Obed, grandfather of David. Hannah went before the priest Eli seeking solace and direction but he thought her to be drunk. Hannah gently, but plainly, corrected him and opened his eyes to see God at work. Hannah later became mother of Samuel, the prophet who anointed King David. Esther called all the Jews of Susa to gather for three days of prayer aimed at influencing the King’s deadly decree against all Jews (Esther 4:15-16). Esther believed that only God could save her people.

Such bold and faithful examples of women guided by God’s Spirit are not limited to the Old Testament. In this Advent season, think of the central female figure, Mary the mother of Jesus. Mary is a woman to be admired. Still a young woman, she demonstrated admirable wisdom in her decision-making. Recall that the Angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26) came to her and announced that she would become mother to the Savior Jesus, Son of the Most High, and that His Kingdom would never end. Imagine that overwhelming moment. But Mary was not overwhelmed. Her reply resembled that of the wise women who came before her. From her inner self came this faithful declaration: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Her commitment was to work collaboratively with God in whatever way God called. I cannot imagine a wiser model for decision-making.

Now may the Presence of Almighty God guide our ways “according to God’s Word.”

—Lee McGlone

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DECEMBER 1

# GOD SEEKS THE WISE

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## PSALMS 14:2; 53:2

*The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.*

Psalm 14:2 (NIV)

*God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.*

Psalm 53:2 (NIV)

These verses talk about wisdom, something that's very important to me. I've been home-schooled almost my whole life and I sat in on my first college class in roughly 5th or 6th grade. Plus, my dad is a philosopher, which basically means that his job is to search out knowledge and truth. Needless to say, I have been put on an academic- and wisdom-minded path in life and have considered my judgment and thoughts to be core pieces of who I am.

But this, of course, doesn't stop me from making

silly mistakes! In fact, I made a mistake earlier when reading these verses! I first thought that they said that God was looking down on us to see if there were any who understand God! But that's not what it's saying at all. It's saying that God is looking down to see if there are any who seek Him and understand basic Christian values, seeking Him being one of them.

So often I think we (myself VERY much included) try to fully understand God in His immense glory, power, and mystery. When we do this, we end up missing what's most important, which is loving and serving Him as well as others. Us trying to fully understand God is like being given an advanced trigonometry question having never done basic arithmetic. It's just not possible. Some things are better left not understood. My challenge to all of us would be instead to work towards serving Him and seeking Him because God is looking for those who do, especially during this special season!

Merry Christmas!

—Malea Borland

# WISDOM'S USE AND EFFECT

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## ECCLESIASTES 2:21; 7:4; 8:1

*For a person may labor with wisdom, knowledge, and skill, and then they must leave all they own to another who has not toiled for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune.*

Ecclesiastes 2:21 (NIV)

*The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.*

Ecclesiastes 7:4 (NIV)

*Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.*

Ecclesiastes 8:1 (NIV)

The Preacher in Ecclesiastes seems an unlikely consultant regarding the hope of the Advent season. In verse 21, he grieves the fact that leaving a material legacy does not guarantee that heirs will also receive the qualities of character that built it. However, he observes that wisdom makes this life better. Wisdom has learned that sorrow is a better teacher than pleasure. Wisdom values empathy for others over self-gratification (7:4). Wisdom makes a person more winsome and approachable. The wise person's character shines through as they surrender the hard struggle of always competing for the winning spot and focus on being a servant. Wisdom builds community because others feel safe with wisdom (8:1).

Now, how does this relate to Advent? Advent is a season of waiting for the birth of the new life that God wishes to bring to us. The first step in getting ready for that new life is to acknowledge that we need it. We need the wisdom that the Preacher in Ecclesiastes recommends. Advent invites us to slow down, to become

conscious of our emptiness, to seek wisdom regarding the many choices about how we spend our time, energy, money, loyalty, and devotion.

As we do this kind of inventory, we open the space for God's gift in our lives. Then, our minds will be able to discern truth in a world full of misinformation. Our hate will be transformed into love for one another. Our fear of scarcity will be changed into sharing. Our arrogance and false certainties will become humility. Our intolerance and hurry will be reborn into acceptance and patience.

James wrote: *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.* (1:5). That's quite a promise! We are not left on our own as we face the confounding problems of a politically polarized country, the complexities of the pandemic, and the everyday issues of family, health, and finances as well as the great threats of climate change, poverty, and racism.

So, we can only listen to the Preacher in Ecclesiastes as he advocates for the benefits of wisdom or we can confidently seek wisdom and trust that God will give us what we need this Christmas if we are willing to humbly ask for this deeper life of wisdom and love.

*Join with me in praying for this gift: Help us, Lord, to have this kind of life that is not focused on earthly treasure but on loving relationships with our neighbor; not focused on power but on self-sacrifice; not focused on having all the right answers but on learning to ask the right questions; not focused on our own righteousness but on humility in the face of life's complexities. May Your Spirit guide us, this Advent, into the wisdom of Your more excellent way of love for You and for our neighbors. Amen.*

—Bob Duncan

# WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS CONTRASTED

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## MATTHEW 7:24; 11:25; 25:1-13

I have spent the last three years working toward a Doctorate in Business Administration. The program is structured as a cohort, so I have gotten to know my classmates pretty well and they are so intelligent. They are so intelligent that it bears repeating. Honestly, I'm amazed at how smart they are! However, their intelligence isn't the wisdom taught by Jesus.

Matthew 25:1-13 gives us an example of wisdom versus foolishness. Five of the wedding attendants prepared for a long wait by taking extra oil for their lamps. The other five took their lamps but nothing to replenish them. I'm sure they all hoped that the wait would not be long but only some prepared for a long wait. Those who were prepared are examples of the wise and the ones who will be admitted to Heaven.

I think this parable encourages each of us to think about preparation. Are we preparing for eternal life with

God? Are we preparing every day for life by spending time with God? If we aren't prepared, then this is the perfect time to begin. It is a time to focus on the incredible act of redemption that began with Jesus' birth. It is also a great time to make a New Year's resolution to become better prepared.

I also think that this parable reminds us that no one can prepare for us. Just as the five wise wedding attendants could not share their oil, so we aren't capable of fixing someone else's relationship with God. We should encourage them and pray for them, but everyone must take care of her or his own relationship with God.

My favorite teaching about wisdom is James 1:5: *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (NIV)*

—Dana Dixon

# HUMILITY AND WISDOM

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## JAMES 3:13

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (NIV)*

During 2020, it seems that we have been bombarded more than ever before by the very vocal opinions of others.

Political leaders, campaigners, and pundits have held forth about the year's elections. Public health and infectious disease experts have made conflicting pronouncements about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Government officials and business leaders at all levels have debated options for dealing with the resulting economic slowdown. To add to the noise and confusion, many of our friends have offered contentious and competing statements in social media outlets about which of the above voices we should heed. Just whose "wisdom" should we follow?

The writer of "The Epistle of James" spends most of Chapter 3 warning Christians to be careful about what they say. He compares the tongue to a spark that can

start a forest fire. He rightly observes that most of us engage all too often in thoughtless and selfish talk, which can interfere with or even nullify our Christian witness.

He cautions us to control our tongues, concentrating instead on displaying the fruit of the Spirit, living as much as possible under the influence of God's love and mercy. Only then can we expect to be perceived as wise and to be a respected voice in the world.

As always, the Advent season provides us with a fresh opportunity to seek the Christ of Christmas. Like the shepherds and magi, we should once again make our way to Bethlehem and humble ourselves before the Child. We should give thanks for His life, death, and resurrection, which made possible God's salvation for us all.

And as we reflect on Jesus' life, we can renew our commitment to imitate Him. Only by striving to live as He lived can we begin to approach wisdom, and then speak with Christ-like compassion to the world around us.

—Phil Hardin

## LEVITICUS 26:6

Peace in 2020? How?

Perhaps as we near the end of 2020, our understanding of peace, and our desire to find it, have been masked by concerns about COVID-19 and its rampant spread and death rate. Our longing for peace may be shaken by daily news reports of raging injustice that touches every part of our culture and conscience.

In Leviticus, we read about God's clarification of His laws given to Moses. The curses for not obeying and the blessings for obeying are enumerated. Tucked into Chapter 26, verse 6, we find the blessing of peace clearly offered: *I will give you peace in the land and you will be able to sleep with no fear. I will rid the land of wild animals and keep your enemies out of your land.* (NLT)

Let's look again—the blessing for obedience is peace, freedom from fear, sleep, and protection from animals and enemies! This verse promises these amazing blessings if we are obedient. Advent is THE time to bow our heads, hearts, and knees as we thank God for the gift

of Jesus Christ, who gave his life for our sins. We don't have to earn this blessing; through repentance and belief in Jesus Christ, the price has been paid. Thanks be to God!

Zephaniah tells us in Chapter 3, verse 17: *For the Lord your God is living among you. He is a mighty Savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With His love, He will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.* (NLT)

Have a good night's sleep! And may the Lullaby of the Lord calm our fears and bring us peace.

*Please pray with me: Dear God Almighty, we join together in humble adoration to ask that You heal our world of the coronavirus and that You heal our hearts of hate and our mouths of hateful words. We thank you for the gift of Your Son, the Prince of Peace, and may we each, in some small way, be an instrument of Your peace for our world that may have forgotten the definition of peace and surely does not know where to find it!*

—Mitzi Bass

# AN OFFER OF PEACE

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## DEUTERONOMY 20:10

*As you approach a city to fight against it, first offer it a truce. (TLB)*

As I was thinking about what to write, I was reminded about how things used to be when I was younger. For the most part people were always trying to find a solution to a problem in a peaceful manner, helping each other out, not anything like what seems to be happening today. Everywhere you turn, people are offended about one thing or another, just itching to start a fight of some kind, looking the other way instead of helping. There does not seem to be much attempt to come up with a peaceful solution or truce, if you will, to the problem. Most of the time people on the outside looking in can see several solutions to make both sides happy, but for some reason the two sides do not see them OR do not want to see them. Is it because each side does not really care about the outcome, they each just want to win so they can have bragging rights or that trophy on their shoulder, or money in their pockets? Maybe it is because over time our hearts have become hardened and we do not realize it. What really makes me sad is that more often than not it is between friends, neighbors, and family that these things are taking place. It seems that everyone has forgotten how to love and forgive or that each and every one of us has the right to our own decisions.

In this scripture it is saying that the Lord will give you the victory if you follow His commands. He knows

the outcome even before you start and all He wants from us is to stop, listen, follow Him, and trust the outcome, not go bulling our way through the problem trying to do it ourselves. We have forgotten how to listen to God. Today there seems to be a lot going on in the world, in our country, and in our community. Some say it is not good to mix politics and church together, but I think if we continue on that path we are taking and leave God out of everything, disaster awaits; there has to be common ground somewhere. I think that if we are to act and live as Christians, we need to trust in the Lord that all is going according to His plan for the world, our country, and our community. We need to stop trying to do everything ourselves and stop trying to force our thoughts and actions upon others around us. Just step back and take a deep breath; listen and look for the solution to the problem that the Lord wants us to see.

So, today, as you approach a city (conflict), looking for a solution, first do (offer) what the Lord wants us to do (a truce), and then if that does not work, acknowledge that you have done the Lord's will and He will take it from there.

This holiday season, let's each look around and see if there is something that we can do for our friends, neighbors, and family—offer peace and follow God's commands.

Merry Christmas and hugs all around!

—Mike Ayres

# THE LAND HAD PEACE

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JUDGES 3:11, 3:30; 5:31; 8:28

*And the land had peace for forty years...*

The book of Judges chronicles some dark days for the nation of Israel. Between their arrival in Canaan and the glory days of King David, the Israelites were in a cycle of sin, conquest, crying out to the Lord, and deliverance by a hero-judge. Over and over again the Israelites “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” So the Lord handed them over to another nation. They cried out to Him. He rescued them and they had forty years of peace.

It becomes almost monotonous. Why did the people continue to do what was evil? Didn't they know what would happen? Didn't they want to keep the peace?

There are faint echoes of this in my own life as a mom to a three-year-old. IF YOU throw the toy ... THEN the toy gets put away. IF YOU blow bubbles in your milk ... THEN you lose your milk. IF YOU keep licking your brother ... THEN you cannot play by him on his blanket. The parenting books and blogs suggest that this is a very effective discipline method. Gotta be honest: in my house, it's hit or miss. But it seems so

clear. So reasonable. IF...THEN.

I know, as the mom, that the boundaries are for the good of our household. To maintain safety and a measure of cleanliness. To instill respect and kindness. The rules help the house run smoothly. They keep the peace.

God gave rules and boundaries for the good of His people. To show them how to live well in this world. IF you follow the Lord, THEN there is peace.

IF...THEN. Even though it seems so clear, we, like the Israelites, fall short over and over again. Our eyes turn away from the Lord. We do what is sinful instead of what is righteous even though we know the consequences.

On our own, we cannot keep peace in our hearts, our families, or our communities. In Judges, God raised up men and women to deliver his people through military might. Today, we are delivered through the death and resurrection and reign of Jesus Christ. In Christ, there is eternal peace.

—Hannah Seaton

# DO YOU COME IN PEACE?

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## 1 SAMUEL 16:4-5

I have observed that strong Christian men and women have a perfect God-given blend of strength and gentleness. Consider Billy Graham, a strong and powerful person who preached the gospel of peace and reconciliation. Similarly, Corrie Ten Boom had the ability to endure the humiliation and fear of living in Nazi Germany followed by her willingness to forgive those who persecuted her and her family; again we see a combination of strength and gentleness.

One of my own mentors, Dr. Ben Elrod, was a man of similar qualities. No one who served with him was ever in doubt that he was capable of making tough decisions, but he loved people deeply and cared about the individual as well as the institution. Dr. Dan Grant, another one of my mentors, is similarly gifted. He is a man of great intellectual and emotional strength but is also a gentleman and one who is always in control of his words and actions. Even in his advanced years he continues to testify to these qualities of strength and gentleness.

These four people come to mind when I think about the prophet Samuel. We know from the biblical text that he was clearly a man of wisdom, courage, and faithfulness. Is it any wonder that when he showed up there was a sense of admiration and anxiety about his presence? He

was not someone to be treated lightly, hence the question “Do you come in Peace?” Samuel had just been given the highly dangerous task of anointing Saul’s successor David, a task that could cost him his life if Saul found out. Samuel understood that being faithful to difficult tasks was part of his calling, which required strength and gentleness.

At this season of the year, it might be helpful for us to reaffirm that the Christian life is a robust calling. We are called to speak the truth in love and to deal realistically with the ugly reality of life in the trenches. We are called in 2 Timothy 4:2 to *preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.* (NASB)

This is a fallen world and God’s people have to be involved in the messy reality of life if we are to fulfill our duty to Christ and His kingdom. Take time this season to be ready, when the moment calls, to exhort, reprove, or rebuke. There is no easy formula to get it right all the time, which is why we must depend on God’s grace and keep walking daily in the Spirit. If we do, then I believe that we can be authentic, robust Christians fit for service in a needy and challenging world just as Samuel did in his day.

—Ian Cosh

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# PEACE AND ITS ABSENCE

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## JOB 3:13, 26

Can you remember the last time you couldn't sleep? Perhaps, in these days of the pandemic, you've had some unrest. Were your thoughts filled with worry? Did you find yourself nervous or fearful? We see in our Scripture today that Job felt this way.

*For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.*

Job 3:13, 26 (NIV)

The truth is, we have no peace without Christ. As we read through the book of Job, we find that he speaks often of wanting a legal trial, of wanting to meet God in court. He uses legal language about charges, arguments, and defenses.

*But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. I will surely defend my ways to his face.*

Job 13:3, 15b (NIV)

As he pleads his case, Job feels that he has no satisfaction: *Though I cry, "Violence!" I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice.* Job 19:7 (NIV) Then, in a very telling statement, Job gets to the heart of the matter: *If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together.* Job 9:33 (NIV)

Job was looking for a Mediator. In the past, I have thought that the book of Job was just about a suffering man. However, I now look at the book of Job also as a precursor to Christ. There is a scarlet thread that flows from Genesis to Revelation speaking to us about Christ in each book of the Bible. Job displayed a deep longing to

be rescued. He revealed what we all need—an Advocate, someone to come to our defense. No one escapes this need. Job may not have even heard of the Messiah in his day. We are told that the book of Job is chronologically one of the earliest books of the Bible. He may not have had all of the prophetic writings at his disposal, but he disclosed a deep visceral revelation that we all have—a deep need for an Advocate, for Jesus Christ. Job asked over and over for a fair trial before God. None of his friends would defend him. Job yearned for someone to plead with God on his behalf. Job wanted a Mediator. He may not have even known that there was this Advocate, this Intercessor. But we don't have to wonder. We live in post-resurrection times and are thrilled to have this Messiah, our Savior.

*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*

1 John 2:1 (NIV)

Job probably did not know all of the details of who he was asking for, but he knew in his weakness that he needed someone to come to his rescue—just as we do.

We celebrate this revelation, this mystery revealed to us. Let us rejoice that our need is met. We understand that without Jesus, there is no peace. Praise God for His gift to us!

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

Luke 2:14 (NIV)

—Melanie Rothwell

# PEACE IS YOUR REWARD

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PSALMS 29:11, 119:165

ISAIAH 32:17-18

This year, of all years, Peace on Earth seems somehow more important than usual to me, and maybe to you too. The pandemic portion of uncertainty and disruption of our normal lives has left us feeling very tossed about, out of control, and completely lost at times. I trust wholeheartedly in the Lord's promise in Psalm 29:11: *The Lord gives strength to His people. The Lord blesses His people with peace* (NIV). And again in Psalm 119:165: *Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble* (NIV). I hear a very strong message of what the Lord will do for His people—even in the midst of a global pandemic. I think what He promises to do for us is a lot like an experience I had as a teenager.

Our family of six didn't take many vacations, so our trip to California was a special treat. Besides getting to visit family members on the west coast, my uncle made sure that we also got to have the full Southern California experience. I remember looking in awe at the extensive collection of miniatures at Knott's Berry Farm and laughing through the performance of a melodrama there. Except for the long lines we had to stand in for the rides, Disneyland was truly a magical experience. But the day at the beach was especially memorable.

I am not sure what it is like today, but back then Laguna Beach was a great place to spend the day. I have always loved swimming, so I was thrilled about this part of our visit, and I felt very well-prepared to play in the water. After all, I was an old hand at wading in the surf and playing in the waves from all of our previous excursions to the Texas Gulf Coast. Could the Pacific Coast be that much different?

In retrospect, I know that the adults were watching all of us kids very closely that day as we began braving the waters. I undoubtedly assured my parents that I was not "in over my head" when I began "body surfing," for me a new variation of playing in the waves. It was so much fun wading out a bit and then jumping up so the incoming wave would catch me and carry me back to shore! At one point though, I realized that I had gotten

kind of far out. I could still stand with my head above water, so I wasn't too worried about it.

Then I thought I heard someone calling my name as if in warning, but something drew my attention from the shore. I turned to look over my right shoulder and there it was...the next incoming wave. In my frightened teenage eyes, that wave looked like it was ten feet over my head! It was surely the biggest wave I had ever seen. It wasn't there one second and the next there it was looming over me. I turned in a desperate attempt to swim for shore, but I was too late. That wave came crashing down on me, hitting me with a force so strong that I had no control over my movements. It first slammed me to the sea floor, and I remember thinking "I am going to drown right here in sunny California!"

But then, a most unusual thing happened. Right at the moment I hit the bottom, I felt an overwhelming calm, a peace at the very instant one would expect to be frantically struggling to survive. I felt like the LORD had reached down to hold on to me even as I was being rolled and tossed around by that wave. Suddenly I knew that all I needed to do was relax and let the wave toss me around because I was secure in the Lord's hands. That was the most amazing feeling of peace I had ever experienced in my life. As I relaxed, the wave rolled me around some more and actually moved me back toward the shore. The next thing I knew, I felt sand beneath my feet and could stand up. I walked to shore just like nothing had happened. My parents must have experienced a few moments of panic as I disappeared beneath that wave, because they rushed over to make sure I was OK. For that few seconds, which seemed like a lifetime, I felt that peace that the Psalmist writes about in the midst of those crashing waves.

No doubt we have all experienced times like that teenager who found herself being tossed about in the California surf. Even in the midst of the single most unbelievable year of our lives, what a wonderful promise we have to claim—no matter how much we get tossed around in the uncertainties of life, we are safe in His hands and His Peace is our reward.

—Kathy Collins

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DECEMBER 11

## ISAIAH 9:6-7; 53:5

*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*

Isaiah 9:6-7 (NKJV)

*But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5 (NKJV)

A promise made—a promise kept. In the 8th Century BC, the prophet Isaiah warned Israel about the coming judgment of the Lord upon Israel. He believed that God would use Assyria to punish Israel for her repeated disobedience, wickedness, and unfaithfulness. Although he was deeply troubled about what was to happen to the people he loved, Isaiah could also see light in the midst of darkness. Isaiah knew about God's unconditional covenant with King David ensuring him that the Messiah would come through his lineage and that his kingdom would endure forever. The suffering inflicted by Assyria would be temporary because God was sending a Deliverer, a Child, His Son, who would be called *Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace*. This covenant was unconditional—it did not depend on Israel's behavior; it

depended upon the certainty of God's promise.

We are no different from the children of Israel. We are sinful, unfaithful, and disobedient; we suffer from the consequences of our disobedience. We continuously abuse our planet, and we see the extreme effects of climate change. While indulging ourselves, we neglect the poor and disenfranchised, and we see riots and destruction. We deny care to the sick, and we become insensitive to human suffering. In the midst of a pandemic, we demand our "rights" to endanger the lives of others. Somehow, many of us, like Isaiah's Israel, see ourselves as entitled to God's bountiful blessings at the expense of others. We expect the winner of a national election to be our "Prince of Peace," yet a mere mortal, no matter how pious, boisterous, or favored, cannot save us from the consequences of our sin. The only government that will bring everlasting peace, justice, and righteousness will be established by the Mighty God.

The Bible tells us that sin is punishable by death and that we are all guilty of sin against God. Instead of sentencing us to death for our guilty verdict, God pardoned us. He sacrificed His Son to be *wounded for our transgressions* and *bruised for our iniquities*. Our peace comes from the payment made by the true "Prince of Peace." God's promise to David continues through believers today. As a sinner in a sinful world, I am grateful that Jesus atoned for my sin and that the Everlasting Father keeps His promises.

(Happy heavenly birthday, Maw!)

—Judy Harrison

# PROMISE OF JOY

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## ISAIAH 55:12

*You will go out in JOY and be led forth in PEACE;  
the mountains and hills will burst into song before  
you, and all trees of the field will clap their hands.  
(NIV)*

Hannah, our oldest granddaughter, works in Winter Park Ski Resort in Frazier, Colorado. Mary Rothwell also has been working there. Hannah has been in Arkadelphia for a couple of weeks because of the raging wildfires that are threatening the range of mountains across from the Resort. Winter Park would be in harm's way.

Early this morning, Hannah sent two pictures: first, the glow of FIRE on the mountains, the colors of which were both beautiful and scary; second, the white of SNOW on the mountains! God had allowed His grace to fall!

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields*

*seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is  
my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not  
return to me empty, and will accomplish what I  
desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Isaiah 55:10-12 (NIV)

As we come into this Christmas season with the renewal of our minds by the birth of our Savior, it is like the refreshing snows on the Colorado mountains. It brings JOY and PEACE to our hearts during one of the most difficult and tumultuous times of our lives. When we remember to give praise to our Heavenly Father for this wonderful gift of His Son, there surely is a chorus of clapping hands in heaven.

*Prayer: Dear Father, we pray that our JOY and PEACE  
for this wonderful salvation will not be stifled by the troubles  
of the world in which we live. May we clap our hands in JOY  
for this gift above all gifts, the Prince of PEACE. Amen*

—Snookie Dixon

## NEHEMIAH 8:10

*Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

Nehemiah 8:10 (NIV)

In the context of Nehemiah 8:10, Governor Nehemiah calls on Priest Ezra to read portions of God's holy scripture. They have returned in the fifth century BC from Babylon, and Ezra reads from a portion of the Torah (Pentateuch). After the reading, Nehemiah calls it a holy day. The people in Jerusalem are weeping as they hear the reading of God's powerful message. It seems obvious that this is repentance. While sackcloth and ashes would sometimes be expected, Nehemiah calls on them to have a feast and share with others, and to delight in the "joy of the Lord as their strength."

God's written Word, when discovered and read, made an impact on the people of Jerusalem. God's written Word still brings that element of excitement, impact, and challenge to believers. I like it that Nehemiah draws attention to the need to celebrate and express joy.

Fast forward about 450 years from Nehemiah and there is even more reason for "Joy of the Lord." The events of the first Christmas show joy without limits. John the Baptist leaped with joy in Elizabeth's

womb when the pregnant Mary arrived for a visit. Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke 1 is a poem of great joy. The angelic announcement to the shepherds on Jesus' birth night was "good news of a great joy."

Sometimes I think that experiential definitions are superior to dictionary ones. For me, joy certainly fits this category. I have known lots of people who equated joy and happiness. My firm belief, though, is that although they may occasionally come close to being synonymous, joy and happiness are not nearly the same. Happiness is an emotion that comes and goes. Circumstances dictate how we view it. On the other hand joy, especially joy in the Lord or joy of the Lord, is a permanent state. Over the years in Colombia and Guatemala, we had friends and acquaintances who had very little reason to be happy, given their life circumstances, but they had joy. They had a rich, victorious, contagious joy through their relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

That divine joy that is poured into us is only because of Christmas Day when Jesus came incarnate, lived among humans, gave His life, and conquered death. May we have JOY amid the coronavirus crisis, even if what we deem happiness seems elusive.

To paraphrase a popular song: I wish you a JOYous Christmas and a JOYous New Year.

—Ellis Leagans

## PSALMS 32:11, 35:27, 100:1

*Be glad in the LORD and rejoice...shout for joy...*

Psalm 32:11 (NAS)

*Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth. Serve the LORD with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing.*

Psalm 100:1-2 (NAS)

Be glad...shout for joy...serve with gladness...come with joyful singing? Father, how do we respond with joy in the midst of a global pandemic and days filled with social injustice and unrest, political division, isolation, and uncertainty?

The Bible Project defines joy as a choice, an attitude adopted because of hope and trust in God's love and promises. Joy has eyes that see beyond current circumstances to a destiny where we are no longer burdened by sorrow, but will rejoice in the richness of God's presence.

In scripture, God's people sang with joy in the wilderness when their focus was the Promised Land (Exodus 15). Paul was full of sorrow yet always rejoicing (2 Corinthians 6:10) when he repeatedly chose the joy of faith and hope that rested in the power of his Savior's life and love. Yes, he acknowledged the pain of his circumstances, but chose to see beyond it.

When I asked some FBCA family members "What has prompted you to make a joyful noise unto the LORD even in these days of uncertainty," common threads ran through the responses: cherishing relationships more, richer enjoyment of and deeper appreciation for the simpler things, spending quality time with the Father and His word, and finding joy in the beauty and diversity of God's creation. When asked a similar question concerning the cheerfulness of his church music, Franz

Joseph Haydn responded, "I cannot make it otherwise... when I think upon God, my heart is so full of joy that notes dance and leap, as it were, from my pen..."

During days when our food ministry seemed to grind to a halt, I found renewed joy in sitting quietly in God's presence, gaining deeper understanding of the expansiveness of His grace and in learning that my worth isn't in what I do or in what others think of me, but solely in Him and what He did for me. New eyes to see God open windows of ministry followed, bringing joyful service opportunities.

Psalm 100 says that we are to make a joyful noise because of who God is, the only source of all we will ever need and so much more. We can come into His presence with joyful song because He made us, He knows us, and we are His forever. We can choose to shout for joy because God is good, true, and faithful. His love, mercy, and grace never run out.

Henry J. van Dyke's "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" paints a beautiful picture of how we can join the chorus already begun by creation, marching forward with songs of triumph and joyful music into His amazing presence where His love reigns over us and binds us even in the midst of all that 2020 has brought us.

*Prayer: Father, forgive me for desiring our broken-down, sin-stained world to be my paradise. Remind me often that 2020 is but a stop on a journey You are using to prepare me for my final glorious home. Thank you for not leaving me alone or without the resources I need to face the hardships of today and for blessing me with your great faithfulness and mercies that are new every morning. Thank you for sending Jesus to purchase my ticket to the place of never-ending joy to come. Amen*

—Roberta Long

ESTHER 9:22

JOB 41:22

PSALM 51:8

For a devotional thought on “Sorrow to Joy” during the season of Advent, it somehow didn’t seem appropriate to use the Jews’ celebration of the slaughter of 75,000 of their enemies and the impaling of the 10 sons of Haman on poles (Esther 9:22). Nor did it seem fitting to consider a verse from the rather lengthy description of the horrible Leviathan (Job 41:22). But two verses from Psalms, 51:8 and 30:11, beautifully describe how God can lift us up from the depths of sorrow to the heights of joy:

*“Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.”*

Psalm 51:8 (NIV)

*“You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.”*

Psalm 30:11 (NIV)

The first of these passages (51:8) records David’s prayer of confession and his plea for forgiveness after being confronted by his friend Nathan. In this Psalm, David opens himself in confession to God, asks for cleansing, and promises to “sing of your righteousness.” David clearly believes that God has the power to turn his deep sorrow into joy, but realizes that he can’t simply wait for the joy to descend—it requires action on his part. In this case, the action is sincere confession and repentance. Likewise for us—whether our sorrow is a

result of events over which we had no control, or a result of poor decisions on our part—we often must take the first step to seek God’s wonderful gift of forgiveness and joy.

In contrast, Psalm 30:11 is from a song of thanksgiving for the dedication of the Temple, a song of praise for things God has already done. In this verse, David recognizes God’s power to turn “wailing into dancing,” and pledges “Lord my God, I will praise you forever.” But again, we are reminded that action is required of us. David says, “To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy.”

In this, an Advent season like none other we have experienced, it is easy for us to sink into moods of sorrow and sadness. We may think of all of the things we are missing—joyful times with family and friends, holiday celebrations and concerts, traditional holiday dinners, crowds in stores and malls—and wonder if it will ever return to normal. But God calls us to look to the times throughout history when He has lifted His people from even more desperate circumstances. So use this Advent season to pray, as David did, for joy in things to come, for creative ways to experience joy in difficult times, and for the eternal joy we find only in our Lord Jesus.

—David McAllister

# JOY OF OUR SALVATION

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PSALM 51:12

ISAIAH 61:10

HABAKKUK 3:18

At the tender age of seven, I gave my life to Christ. My family, pastor, and Sunday School teachers taught me about Jesus and His love from my earliest days, and when I sensed His tug on my heart, I was ready to respond. The joy that accompanied that decision was palpable, and I was so excited to share my joy with others! My deepest longing was to know Jesus more, to pray, and to read God's Word.

Through the years, I have had many opportunities to learn, to grow, and to serve. God has demonstrated His loving-kindness and His faithfulness time and time again, and He has taught me much about trusting Him.

Often, though, it has been easy to get caught up in this world's cares, to fall into a busy routine that distracts from a life of faith. And in those times, joy fades and God seems distant.

The difficult events of this year have caused much angst. And, for many of us, our Christmas celebrations may be quite different. Regardless of our circumstances, may we be intentional in finding our joy in Jesus this season. The baby born in Bethlehem long ago is the Giver of true joy! Like David, may we call upon God to restore in us the joy of our salvation, the joy we had when we first placed our faith in Christ. May our soul's delight rest in Him.

*For the LORD takes pleasure in His people;  
He will beautify the humble with salvation. Let the  
saints be joyful in glory.*

Psalm 149:4-5a, (NKJV)

JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD HAS COME!  
LET EARTH RECEIVE HER KING!

—Lisa Hill

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DECEMBER 17

ROMANS 5:3-4

1 PETER 1:6-9

JAMES 1:2

*Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.*

James 1:2 (NLT)

When I read this verse in preparation to write, it struck me how negative my feelings were toward this passage. The year of our Lord two thousand and twenty has been one for the record books. Record-setting hurricanes, murder hornets appearing in the Pacific Northwest, a *derecho* in Iowa which is the most costly thunderstorm in U.S. history, the death of groundbreaking United States Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, not to mention a once-in-a-century pandemic that has taken the lives of over 230,000 Americans and 1.2 million souls worldwide. Besides these newsworthy and attention-grabbing trials happening around us and to us, I'm sure that there have been troubles in your own life: jobs lost, loved ones sick, financial stresses, political anxiety...

So when I reflect on the amount of hurt, grief, and anxiety that all of us are feeling, it is hard to be on the same page with James when he wrote this. We absolutely live in a world of suffering, injustice, and pain, but so did the people to whom James was writing this letter. I don't think it's productive to get into a game of comparing pain, but I think it's important to remember the hardships of living in that time. So when James tells individuals in the first century to count trouble and hardships that come their way as joy in a world where medical care

was minimal, enslavement was common practice, being a Christian could be a death sentence, and women and certain ethnicities weren't considered full citizens but oftentimes property, it puts our hardships and troubles as 21st Century Americans into perspective.

James finishes out his thought in verses three and four by saying *For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.* Those to whom James was writing had their faith tested.

I know my faith has been through a standardized-test amount of testing this year. But through deep breaths and fervent prayers to endure all that comes my way, I am working my way to counting it for joy—because the darkest seasons of my life are where I have seen God work the most. In those dark nights of the soul, God has shown me how suffering and evil can be used for good. I have experienced God's love through a kind word during a season of self-doubt or a provided meal when a loved one has died. I have experienced God's peace through small moments of a hug or held hand.

I don't have all the answers. I don't think any of us do. But I know that we must confront our pain—our suffering—in order to see God work. No matter the times in which one lives, suffering and pain will endure; but so will the peace of God that goes beyond any of our human understanding. And as we work out our faith with fear and trembling, we can count it as great joy.

—Tiffany Pickett

# JOY OF HIS BIRTH

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LUKE 1:14, 44; 2:10-11

Knowing Jesus as our Savior gives us JOY each and every day. Authentic JOY and happiness are found in God's presence. Several of the Psalms tell us of true JOY. In Psalm 16:11 (Berean Study Bible), David wrote *You will fill me with JOY in your presence.*

We recognize the true JOY that surrounded the birth of Christ. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Christ. When Zechariah was told by an angel that he would have a son, he was told of the JOY and delight that he and Elizabeth would receive: *Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a JOY and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth....* (Luke 1:13b-14 BSB) The phrase "many will rejoice" in this scripture means that many would be filled with JOY due to John's life and ministry.

Luke 1 continues with the angel's announcement to Mary proclaiming Jesus' birth. When Mary went to share her news with Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth's womb recognized Mary's voice as the mother of his savior: *As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.* Luke 1:44 (BSB) What JOY Elizabeth must have felt when she realized about Mary's baby!

Luke records the greatest JOY of all as the angel spoke to the shepherds: *Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great JOY that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.* Luke 2:10-11 (BSB)

I love the words of this verse from The Living Bible: *Don't be afraid! I bring you the most joyful news ever announced and it is for everyone!*

What a birth announcement! There was pure JOY born in a stable that special night. That was a night filled with complete hope and JOY. Yes, we do have JOY because of the birth of Jesus Christ!

Do not just read the words of this hymn; sing it loudly and sing it with a heart full of JOY!

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come:  
let earth receive her King;  
let ev'ry heart prepare him room,  
and heav'n and nature sing,  
and heav'n and nature sing,  
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.*

—Judy Jones

# THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

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## 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3, 13

On this date in 1966, Ray Granade and I pledged our love and commitment to each other for all of our lives. When I saw that the scripture lineup for our Advent booklet had this one on our anniversary date, I knew it was the one for me. In our wedding ceremony, we included a solo based on this very passage as part of our wedding music—to be sung as we lit our unity candle.

Today there are many songs based on this scripture, but why include it in an Advent book? Isn't Christmas about a baby's birth over two thousand years ago? The scene for this joyous celebration is filled with angels, shepherds, a stable filled with animals, an immigrant family, wise men, an angry king, and a great star rising in the East. Where does love fit?

Paul wrote this passage to correct a misunderstanding about spiritual gifts among Christians living in Corinth. Some who lived there thought that speaking in tongues or prophesying was more spiritual than any other activity. This argument had created a division in the early church with jealousy and feelings of inferiority causing friction among its members.

Paul preaches that all gifts come from God and are equally essential for the church to thrive and prosper. Spiritual gifts are useless and destructive when not applied from the standpoint of love, he writes. Furthermore, he points out, all spiritual gifts may be impressive but are worthless when not used as intended by God—when not

used out of a heart of love for Him and fellow believers. Selling everything and giving to the poor, sacrificing life to be burned at the stake—even extreme offerings gain nothing if not given in love.

The Greeks to whom Paul writes understood three different types of love: *eros* (romantic love), *philes* (brotherly, friendly, or companionable love), and *agape* (concern for the well-being of another over self). *Eros* does not appear in the New Testament; here, Paul speaks of *agape*.

*Agape* is a verb and signifies an action taking place. We need to demonstrate our love in some practical way. We give food to someone hungry, water to someone thirsty, welcome to someone strange, clothes to someone naked—or visit someone sick or in prison. This type of love does not come and go; it is constant. It doesn't rely on flowery language, on eloquent words. No, it is unconditional, never failing, always effective, and eternal.

This brings us back to a baby's birth two thousand years ago. That baby was God's son, born of lowly earthly parentage—of poor immigrant parents. It was God's sacrifice to come to earth in such a manner to save mankind, His creation, from sin. It was love in action, *agape* love, which is the greatest of all virtues. God's action calls us to go and do likewise: to lovingly touch the world in which we find ourselves living in 2020.

—Ronnie Granade

# SACRIFICIAL LOVE

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JOHN 3:16-17; 15:13

ROMANS 5:8

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.*

John 3:16-17 (NIV)

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

John 15:13 (NIV)

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Romans 5:8 (NIV)

Father God, King of the Universe, these words from You drift down on us today like flakes of pure Christmas snow, gently settling over the landscape of our lives. We are amazed again by how lovely snow transforms even piles of rubbish into objects of sparkling beauty.

We contemplate this beautiful truth: that all the time we were pursuing some lesser love in our lives, You were reaching out to us. While You would be fully

justified in being angry and disappointed in the ways we disrespected You, Your love was not diminished by our sin. Seeing us through eyes of love, You sent Your Son Jesus to bring us back to You knowing that He would suffer and die on that rescue mission.

Father, as we meditate on Jesus' birth this day may we see that He showed us Your heart of love, love capable of the highest expression, sacrificial love. Let our Christ-following be motivated by this realization: that You love us, and the whole world, to death. We respond in worship,

*Silent night, holy night!*

*Son of God, love's pure light*

*Radiant beams from Thy holy face*

*With the dawn of redeeming grace*

*Jesus, Lord at Thy birth,*

*Jesus, Lord at Thy birth!*

—Sue Poole

## ROMANS 12:10 HEBREWS 13:1-3

*Love one another deeply...*

Romans 12:10a (CSB)

“What sort of person are you becoming?” That is probably the best question for gauging our own spiritual growth over time. Not “What have we done?” or “Where is our membership?” or “What do we believe?” But “Who are we becoming?” The answer to that question shows us our own heart. Maybe the best thing about Advent is that it reminds us that the God who has come to us in Christ is the God of love (1 John 4:8, 16). When we were at our worst, He came to our rescue. He came because that is who He is—He is love and that is what love does.

In our Scriptures for today—Romans 12:10 and Hebrews 13:1-3—God calls us to share the love He has poured out on us with one another. *Love one another deeply* as family members. Continue in this family kind of love by showing hospitality, remembering those in prison and those suffering by caring for them. When

we receive God’s love, we have a choice: will we allow it to flow through us to others or will we hoard it? It’s always tempting to save the good stuff for ourselves (e.g., think about those crazy competitive Friday and Monday shopping days before Christmas). But when it comes to God’s love, there is no need for selfish hoarding. There is an infinite supply of God’s love, so we can pass it along without ever fearing that we are losing one drop of the love He has for us. He first loved us and He keeps on loving us perfectly. We never lose anything by loving one another; we only gain by giving love. We are enriched. We flourish. Relationships are strengthened. We are becoming more like Jesus himself.

Judy and I recently rejoined FBC after a time away serving other churches. Someone asked me why I joined First. After thinking about it carefully, I answered: “because they really love one another.” Thanks be to God that what we celebrate at Advent, we are able to enjoy all year round.

—Scott Duvall

# LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD

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DEUTERONOMY 11:13, 22; 13:3

JOSHUA 22:5

Some of our fondest family memories were made at the Road Hog Park in Fayetteville, Arkansas. When our two sons chose to attend college at the U of A, we purchased an RV, joined the Road Hogs, leased a site, and spent many wonderful weekends tailgating with family and friends.

This tradition continued even after those college years, as wives and grandchildren joined our crew. David's laptop screensaver depicts one of those delightful memories. Our first grandchild, Lucy, is dressed as a tiny Razorback cheerleader and her dad, Jonathan, is walking beside her. His hand is clutching hers. The photo is taken with them walking away from the camera, Lucy looking straight ahead, as Jonathan looks down adoringly toward her.

To say that Lucy was an active toddler is like saying that Usain Bolt can run fairly fast. Running headlong into traffic, giggling hysterically, she would have given even Usain trouble catching her. Verbal warnings meant nothing to Lucy. Jonathan discovered that taking her hand and patiently going back and forth to the street

with her was the safest option. Lucy loved having her daddy race along beside her—over and over and over, as is the way of toddlers.

Just as a loving earthly father extends his hand to a willful toddler, so God extends His hand to us. He created parents and children to teach us about Himself and His love for us. He waits patiently to guide us away from danger. He wants us to enjoy holding His hand. He tells us in these passages of scripture to take hold firmly and love Him:

*Be careful to obey all these commands I am giving you. Show love to the Lord your God by walking in his ways and holding tightly to him.*

Deuteronomy 11:22 (NLT)

*The Lord your God is testing you to see if you truly love him with all your heart and soul.*

Deuteronomy 13:3 (NLT)

*Love the Lord your God, walk in all his ways, obey his commands, hold firmly to him and serve him with all your heart and all your soul.*

Joshua 22:5 (NLT)

—Becky Bost

# THE BIRTH OF LOVE

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## LUKE 2:1-20

It was a cold winter day, but my aunt's house was warm. The big oak table was decorated for a birthday party. My cousins and I squirmed with excitement. In the middle of the table was a big angel food cake covered with fluffy white frosting. On it, candles were burning brightly. "Are you ready to sing?" my aunt asked. We were ready so we began to sing: "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Jesus, happy birthday to you!" Then we all blew out the candles. The cake was cut and we savored its wonderful sweetness. It was a joyous celebration of the birth of Jesus, the birth of love.

It takes a person to love another person. God is a person who loves us and wants what is best for us. Love is not a feeling, but an action. God saw that we were having trouble understanding how much He loved us. He saw too that we were having trouble loving other people. So God acted out His love by coming into our

world as the baby Jesus, who grew into a man who acted to show us how much He/God loves us. He showed us that love means working for the well-being of others even if it means sacrificing our own well-being.

The birth of Jesus was the birth of love. We are the candles on the birthday cake of Jesus through our actions shining out the love of God into the world's darkness. Every day we should ask ourselves "How can I make my light shine brightly?" (If you know it, sing "This Little Light of Mine.")

*Prayer: Father, thank you for the birth of love in the person of Jesus. Help us to keep our eyes on Jesus and follow His example. Please help us to love you by obeying you and to love other people by putting their welfare before ours. Thank you for loving us through Jesus. Amen.*

(Below you might like to write some actions you can take to love others.)

—Ann McMillion

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## CHRISTMAS EVE

# “ HOW GREAT OUR JOY ”

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## JAMES 1:17-18

Here it is...at last!

The holiday we have needed...the moment we have waited for...the day we have anticipated...has finally arrived.

But...

How do we celebrate? So many difficult things have happened this year, and in many instances we look forward to 2020 being over. So how do we sing and laugh...how do we keep our traditions alive...how do we spread joy to the world or peace on earth, when we can't do it, won't get to, and don't feel it ourselves?

Well, what do we typically do to find our way out of the dark? We look for the light. Now I know you may think that is easier said than done in our current situation, but hear me out...or, rather, hear James out.

The first verse of today's passage encourages us, like the early church, not to be misled. It's easy to be misled in the dark. We don't exactly see things clearly, and in this case, James warns against the belief that—by our present circumstances—God is somehow trying to tempt or torment us. We live in a broken world resulting from the complex and compounding consequences of centuries of human determination to “do it ourselves” and “go our own way.” And for some reason, God binds Himself to allow us the full force of that freedom. We aren't told to avoid questioning but rather to avoid placing blame in the dark where we cannot see the whole picture.

The second verse of the passage reminds us that God gives us “good and perfect” gifts...faithfully. Every day the sun spreads a blanket of warmth, and every night the

stars dance across the sky. Every day. Every night. The cycle continues unbroken from the dawn of time. Yet we still conclude that God changes His pattern of loving us when He allows things we have deemed “bad” to touch our lives. Have you never received a present that you came to appreciate over time? You just didn't understand how good a gift it was until something happened that required it.

Finally the third verse explains why we should celebrate today not in spite of our circumstances, but because of them. Today is a gift itself, but it also recalls the greatest gift we ever received: God Himself, His True Word, His only Son, was wrapped in our humanity and placed within our reach to be discovered and enjoyed... though we did not appreciate how good a gift He was at first. Through Jesus we come to understand exactly how loved we are by God. James calls us His “prized possession,” and you don't leave something with that kind of importance in the dark, do you?

No, you bring it into the light. Your care for it may not keep it from getting bumped or chipped, but it doesn't mean that you value it less. This Christmas, may we smile—even though it may tremble or be through tears. May we look at the lights on our tree or the lights in the sky and remember our steadfast God. May we trust that many good and perfect gifts we do not recognize have been given to us in the midst of our uncertainty. And may we follow them out of our darkness and into the Light of the World.

Merry Christmas!

—Adam Wheat

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## CHRISTMAS DAY

# CREDITS

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