



ADVENT SERIES 2025



Christmas **SIMPLY**

CITY ON A HILL



CITY ON A HILL

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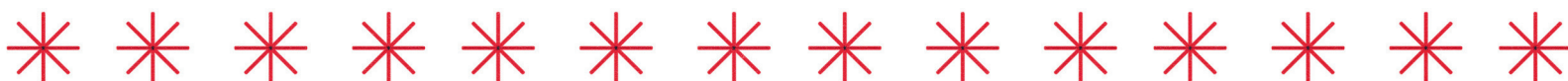
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ADVENT IS HERE, BUT WHO CARES?

WHAT ADVENT IS, AND WHY IT MATTERS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

It's a strange word, isn't it? *Advent*. What in the world does that even mean? And why are we spending an entire month talking about it? Advent seems like a word that doesn't really belong in the English language, and that's because it doesn't. Advent stems from the Latin word *Adventus*, meaning "arrival." Simply stated, Advent is a season observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. It's a time to reflect on the goodness of God who sent His Son to a dark and weary world. It's a time to consider what the arrival of Jesus Christ means, not only for the people in the 1st century but for us today, as well. But, why does Advent matter?

Think about it: the holiday season is *busy*. Schedules change. There is extra shopping to do. You sometimes have commitments with extended family (which is a very touchy subject for some folks). Relatives often come in from out of town or you end up planning on going out of town to visit family elsewhere. Traffic becomes more of a problem. Stores are overpacked with frantic shoppers. Restaurants have waiting lists that are 30-45 minutes long on weeknights. But hey, at least we get holiday drinks from Starbucks, *right?*

As exciting and stressful as the holidays can be, we are at high risk and often don't even realize it. We are at risk because our attention is suddenly taken by a myriad of details and if we aren't careful, we forget what all the chaos is about. It's the old, tried and true Sunday school answer: Jesus. As we traverse the month of December, we will be embarking on a study on how Advent meets us where we are. This packet will serve as both your curriculum in bible study (if you choose to go to one) and also a space for notes during the sermon each week. We've also included some devotionals written by some of our members here at City on a Hill, as well as lyrics to a Christmas carol that highlights each week's theme. I encourage you to do the devotionals and the Bible study portion even if you don't attend a Bible study.

My prayer is that this study becomes a place of refuge in your mind when things get a little too chaotic. When you are unsure how family gatherings will go this year, *remember hope*. When you are stuck in traffic and stressed out, *remember peace*. When you are anxious about all of the things you need to get done before Christmas morning arrives, *remember joy*. And when you are gathered with individuals you love, sharing gifts with one another, *remember the love* that God demonstrated to us when He gave us the gift of Jesus.

Immanuel came, *and He is still here*.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 1:5-21

To understand the hope of the message foretelling the birth of John the Baptist.

Read the Text:

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. 8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." 18 And Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. 20 And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time." 21 And the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they were wondering at his delay in the temple." (Luke 1:5-21)

Study the Text:

Simply Hope

Luke's narrative begins not with the birth of Jesus but with the foretelling of John's birth. John will serve later as a forerunner for Jesus, "declaring the way of the Lord" (Lk. 1:76), a fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 (Lk. 3:4). But keep in mind, up to this point, there has been virtually no contact between God and His people for a long time. Malachi, the most recent prophet to date (at this point), lived and prophesied *nearly 400 years ago*, leaving the people of God feeling pretty *hopeless*. Therefore, Zechariah and Elizabeth's experience in this first chapter is groundbreaking, as the Spirit of the Lord begins to awaken hope in the hearts of key individuals who will subsequently usher in the child promised in Isaiah 9:2-7.

John's Birth Foretold

Luke 1:5-25 foretells the birth of John to Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, by the angel Gabriel. John is to be an important person in God's messianic economy in that he will be the one to prepare the way for Christ. Below is a breakdown of some key details in this passage.

IN THE DAYS OF HEROD

Luke begins this portion of the story by connecting it to God's broader prophetic work. "In the days of Herod" is the same kind of language used in several prophetic works. Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah all three prophesied "in the days of King Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah" (Is. 1:1; Jos. 1:1; Mic. 1:1). Both Jeremiah and Zephaniah prophesied "in the days of Josiah" (Jer. 1:2). Amos prophesied "in the days of Jeroboam" (Amos 1:1). Likewise, the prophet John and the final and greatest prophet Jesus would be born "in the days of Herod." Luke directs us, as readers, to the reality that this story is not new but a continuation and fulfillment of the story God has been unfolding all along.

ZECHARIAH

Zechariah is introduced to us as both "a priest" and "of the division of Abijah" (Lk. 1:5). That he is of the division of Abijah also indicates that he is of Aaronic descent, which marks him as a particularly "pure" individual, religiously speaking. Being a male, he would have inherited his priestly duties from his father, and his father from his father, and so on. The priesthood was, at this time, divided into 24 divisions, and each division would take temple responsibilities twice a year. This story focuses on one of the weeks in which "his division was on duty" (Lk. 1:8).

ELIZABETH

Not many details about Elizabeth are given, other than that, like her husband, she is also a descendant of Aaron (Lk. 1:5). Zechariah did not have to marry someone from the priestly line. She simply needed to have an unblemished ancestry. However, given her status, her ancestry was clearly unblemished, and it was guaranteed that any male offspring of their union would be a priest as well. These details are essential for a couple of reasons. For one, Zechariah's experience with the angel will take place in a holy place, the temple, and his priestly duties explain why he was in the temple in the first place. His background is part of Luke's story-building, which is important to Luke. Luke wants to corroborate eyewitness accounts of Jesus to validate the Gospel story for future readers (Lk. 1:1-4). The history of Zechariah and Elizabeth provides an objective and empirical basis for such a claim. Secondly, the emphasis on their Aaronic ancestry sets Zechariah and Elizabeth up as ideal parents for a child chosen as the "Elijah" figure who would prepare the way for the coming Messiah (Mal. 4:5).

GABRIEL

One additional character is introduced in this narrative, an angel named *Gabriel*. This was not simply an angelic encounter, but an encounter with a unique angel. Gabriel is one of only two angels named in the Scripture (the other being *Michael* in Jude 9 and Revelation 12:7-12). Gabriel is referenced in both Daniel 8:16-17 and 9:20-23, and possibly Daniel 10:5. In the so-called inter-testamental period (the period between Malachi and the Gospels), Gabriel was taught to be an archangel, like Michael, who stands in the presence of God (along with Raphael, who is unnamed in both the Old and New Testaments but found in the apocryphal book of Tobit). While the Bible never specifically calls Gabriel an archangel, it is perhaps implied by Gabriel's own words to Zechariah in Luke 1:19. There is, however, no verse in the Old or New Testament that specifically states that standing in the presence of God is a qualification for being an archangel. Nevertheless, that Gabriel is identified here as the same angel in Daniel and that he stands in God's presence lend not only to his credibility as an essential voice to be listened to but also to his being quite terrifying (Lk. 1:12).

JOHN

Zechariah and Elizabeth are told that they will have a child who is set apart for a specific life of service to the Lord. First, he will bring them "joy and gladness," and many will "rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord" (Lk. 1:14-15a). Further specifications are given regarding the pure life he must live: "And he must not drink wine or strong drink" (Lk. 1:15b). These are the exact details given regarding the Nazaritic vow (Num.

6:2-5), a special set apart vow taken in the Old Testament by the likes of both Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11) and Samson (Jg. 13:4-5). However, John is given other details that set him even further apart from those who have taken the vow (Lk. 1:15-17). John will be one who will prepare the way of the Lord (Is. 40:3-5).

From Silence to Skeptical to Silence

One of the more humorous parts of this story is the “punishment” that Zechariah undergoes for his disbelief in Gabriel’s words: “And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time” (Lk. 1:20). Zechariah is subject to the supernatural power of the angel Gabriel. Interestingly, this story begins on the heels of 400 years of silence, and now that God has already started to speak, He will make others silent.

A Note About Life

In an age where even Christians have sacrificed their biblical worldview to embrace a growing cultural acceptance of abortion, Luke 1 reminds us that life does, in fact, begin inside the womb. How, you may ask? The fact that John the Baptist will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord even inside the womb indicates that he is alive in the womb. It is an illogical and ill-formed idea to think that a lifeless clump of developing cells in a woman’s uterus could receive the Spirit of the Lord. The Scripture clearly speaks to the reality that life begins before birth (Ecc. 1:15; Ps. 139:13; Is. 44:22; Jer. 1:5). Luke’s account of John’s being filled with the Spirit further demonstrates what Scripture has been saying all along, and thus, this story provides clarity on how to think Christianly about abortion.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the reality that hope often begins small. God does not bring forth the Messiah in some cosmic parade. He visits a devout man and informs him of something He will do through the man’s son. He doesn’t even give Zechariah the whole picture! But what He does offer is enough to inspire hope. And secondly, and certainly more importantly, the same hope that was born in Luke’s Gospel is the exact source of hope for all believers today. Jesus Christ is our hope yesterday, today, and forever.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 1:5-7. Briefly describe Zechariah and Elizabeth, and their context.

2. Read Luke 1:8-11. What was Zechariah chosen to do, and who appeared to him while he was doing it?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 1:12-15. How did Zechariah respond to seeing Gabriel? What does the command to avoid alcohol indicate? What is implied by John being filled with the spirit of the LORD in the womb?

2. Read Luke 1:16-17. What will John do, according to Gabriel? What is significant about the mention of Elijah? What verse does this likely fulfill from the Old Testament?
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Day Three

1. Read Luke 1:18-20. How does Zechariah respond to Gabriel's words? How does Gabriel describe himself? What does he say will happen to Zechariah because of his disbelief?
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2. Read Luke 1:21. What did the people think when they saw that Zechariah could not speak? How did Zechariah try to communicate with them?
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Day Four

1. Read Daniel 8:16-17 and 9:20-23. How is Gabriel described in these passages?
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2. Read Jude 9 and Revelation 12:7-12. How is the archangel Michael described? What are the similarities and differences between his description and Gabriel's description?
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Week 1 Discussion: Simply Hope

Hope is a central message of the Scriptures and a fundamental aspect of Advent. Talk as a group about the role hope plays in your life, and how it affects your everyday choices and relationships.

1. Icebreaker: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word *hope*.
2. Do you consider yourself more hopeful or hopeless? Why?
3. Do you ever feel hopeless? What do you think the root of those feelings is?
4. How do Gabriel's words and actions in Luke 1 convey hope to the reader? What is hopeful about this?
5. Do we need all the details of what God is doing to have hope? Or only some of the details? Why?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Have your kids imagine what it would be like if dad (or another caretaker, if dad isn't present) were silent for as long as Zechariah was. Ask them what they would think about that?

Takeaways:

1. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both of the priestly line and, therefore, set apart for the work of the LORD.
2. Gabriel came to Zechariah and told him the significance of their future son, John.

DEVOTIONAL 1: THE ARRIVAL OF HOPE

WILL REYNOLDS

There is not a day of the year that I do not look forward to Christmas. Even on Christmas day, I begin to dread its end and look forward to next year. And in a real way, this leads to disappointment. All year long, my mind builds toward a day that can never meet the expectations I place on it, because while I long for Christmas all year, I do very little to bring it about. I do not buy the presents, or decorate the tree, or cook the Christmas dinner. It just arrives, and I *expect* it to satisfy my hope.

While it may seem like a trivial example, my hope in Christmas is sometimes how we approach our hope in eternal life. But Romans 5 shows us the progression of hope that yields satisfaction in our lives and gives real hope to others. As little as we wish it were true, the path to hope begins with suffering. Suffering is not the everyday issues we face (although sometimes they look similar); it is rather the consequences of a life devoted to God in a fallen world that yield the fruit of conflict. But the goal of ending our suffering is not ease of life but endurance (or patience in trials). And your patience in the pursuit of Jesus in a fallen world will bring not only more suffering but will also build character (proof of purity in those situations). And as you look back on your suffering, or as you face a similar circumstance, you know you can overcome, which gives you hope.

We ultimately hope in Jesus' finished work on the cross (for He has overcome!). But in our pursuit of conforming to His image, we are then placed in situations where we must carry our cross through suffering and, with endurance, build character and stand firm in the same hope that Jesus had that God would raise Him (and us) from the dead.

When my hopes for Christmas are realized on Christmas morning without an ounce of work having been done, it is not really satisfying (however, my wife must feel a great sense of satisfaction since she does it all). But our hope in Christ's finished work and our partnering with Him in His suffering yield endurance, character, and ultimately hope. And this "hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

As you consider the sufferings you face this Advent season that result from your choices to follow Jesus' commands, my prayer is that you grow in endurance and character so that your true hope will not be put to shame.

SERMON NOTES

WEEK 1

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DEVOTIONAL 2: A HOPE THAT HOLDS US

BRAD MARVINE

This past year has reminded me in a very real way how fragile life can be. Between my own health issues and walking closely with family members facing their own medical challenges, I've had moments where life felt suddenly unsteady — like the ground underneath me shifted without warning. One doctor's appointment. One scan. One unexpected phone call. And you realize how quickly the things we assume will stay steady can change.

And when life shakes, our sense of hope often shakes with it.

We tell ourselves things like, *"Once I get healthy again..."* or *"Once this season calms down..."* or *"Once everything falls back into place..."* Then I'll feel grounded, steady, hopeful. But if this year has taught me anything, it's how quickly those hopes can rise and fall. Circumstances shift. Bodies fail. Plans unravel. And our own strength to hold it all together runs out faster than we want to admit.

Advent invites us into a better kind of hope — *a hope that doesn't depend on our stability at all*. Christian hope is not something we manufacture through positivity or grit. Hope is *Someone who comes to us*.

Jesus entered a world that was anything but calm or predictable. He came into poverty, political tension, danger, and fear. And yet His arrival brought peace — not because the world around Him was peaceful, but because He Himself is peace. Hope didn't show up as an idea or an emotion. Hope arrived as a Person lying in a manger.

That means the hope we cling to this season doesn't rise and fall with test results, circumstances, emotions, or the unpredictability of life. Our hope rests on the One who stepped into our broken world and promises to step into our broken places, too.

The baby of Bethlehem would one day carry our sin, defeat death, and promise to make all things new. And He will return — not quietly this time, but as the King who keeps every promise.

So, if this Advent season finds you weary, stretched thin, or unsure what the future holds, you're not alone. You're human. And you're exactly the kind of person Jesus came for.

Let Isaiah's words steady your heart: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength" (Is. 40:31). Our hope isn't fragile because He isn't fragile. Our hope isn't fading because He isn't fading. Our hope is Christ — and He is enough.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 1:18-25; ISAIAH 7:14

To understand how Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah 7 means true peace for God's people.

Read the Text:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." (Matthew 1:18-25)

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Is. 7:14)

Study the Text:

Simply Peace

The Gospel According to Matthew's first central narrative begins in verse 18 with the birth of Jesus Christ. Verse 18 indicates that something highly unusual has happened: "When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." The idea of betrothal has often been compared to modern-day engagement, but this comparison is not apt. The term *μνηστεύω* (*mnēsteuō*) conveys a legally binding contract that was signed by witnesses and could only be broken by a writ of divorce. The marriage was not consummated until the wedding night, but it was considered legally binding and, if the husband died, rendered the wife a "widow."

Matthew gives this detail of betrothal to help explain the controversy of the situation. Since the wedding had not yet been consummated, the only plausible explanation for Mary becoming pregnant was that she had been unfaithful, which is why Joseph, "being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matt. 1:19). Joseph, though obviously upset by this perceived infidelity, still demonstrated remarkable character by not allowing Mary to be publicly shamed. It is into this context that an angel visits Joseph. We are not told which angel, but if we assume that Gabriel is the principal agent in this birth narrative per Luke's account, it is not unreasonable to think this is probably Gabriel here as well. The angel explains to Joseph the extraordinary circumstances in which Joseph and Mary now find themselves, bringing peace to Joseph in the midst of his seemingly broken relationship with Mary.

A SAVIOR WILL BE BORN

While Joseph considered divorce, the angel appeared to him and said: “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:20b-21). The thrust of this prophetic warning from the angel is that this child, mysteriously conceived by the power of God through the Holy Spirit, will be a Savior to His people.

This pronouncement accomplished two things. For one, it acquitted Mary of the charge of adultery, thereby establishing peace in the relationship. The angel confirmed that this conception was not by normal means, and thus Mary had remained faithful to Joseph. But secondly, it determined the name of their child: “Jesus.” And this Jesus would eventually deliver an otherworldly kind of peace to His people (Jn. 14:27; 16:33).

CHRIST IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Further clarity is given about the kind of Savior Jesus will be in verses 22 and 23. It's not uncommon for the New Testament to quote the Old Testament. It's also not unusual for the New Testament to claim that whatever is being described is a fulfillment of something that was written in the Old Testament. Both of these things are true for verses 22 and 23. Verse 22 says, “Now, all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” and then verse 23 gives a literal quote from Isaiah 7:14. Essentially, Matthew is saying that the birth of Jesus took place in a way that *fulfilled something that Isaiah said would happen*. This is called a *fulfillment text*. It seems simple enough, right? Whatever happens in the New Testament is the fulfillment of whatever is being quoted from the Old Testament. While this is true, it's often oversimplified. This is where the interpretive methodology of “typology” becomes helpful.

Typology suggests that *there are persons and events in the Old Testament that serve as patterns or types of something more definite in the New Testament*. You could say it this way: the Old Testament person or event is the shadow, and the New Testament person or event is the substance. Typology is often called the “near view/far view” phenomenon, because in it we see both the immediate (or literal) fulfillment of a prophecy and a much later typological fulfillment of the same prophecy. With that said, Matthew 1:23 is not a literal fulfillment of 7:14, but a *typological fulfillment*.

CONNECT THE DOTS

In Isaiah chapter 7, Isaiah speaks to King Ahaz on God's behalf about Rezin and Pekah, the kings of Syria and Ephraim (also known as Israel). In this passage, Rezin and Pekah have formed a military alliance to destroy Ahaz. God, in His kindness, instructs Ahaz to ask for a sign that will encourage him to trust God in the midst of what appears to be impending war. Instead of trusting God, however, Ahaz foolishly and arrogantly refuses to do so. God decides to give a sign anyway, and Isaiah says to Ahaz, speaking on God's behalf: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel” (Is 7:14). This is the verse that Matthew says is being fulfilled, but there are problems that arise if what Matthew means is a literal fulfillment.

For one, according to the prophecy, this will be fulfilled during the lifetime of Ahaz. Isaiah describes a child named Immanuel who will not “know how to refuse the evil and choose the good” before both Syria and Ephraim are deserted (7:16), a claim that cannot be made about Jesus, since Ephraim and Syria will be deserted hundreds of years before Jesus's birth. So that raises a question: If Jesus is the typological fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, who is the literal fulfillment? An acceptable answer would be Isaiah's son, born in the next chapter, named *Maher-Shalel-Hash-Baz* (Is. 8:3-4). Isaiah 8:18 talks about this child as “a sign and portent in Israel from the LORD of hosts.” In other words, when God told Ahaz that a child would be born of a virgin who would be a sign to God's people of God's presence with them, that child was born not even two

years later. This child was a reminder to the people of Judah that God would not allow Syria or Ephraim to overtake them. He was present. God was with them. In the context of Isaiah 7, then, *Immanuel is a guarantee that God's presence will overcome the enemy that threatens to destroy them.*

But wait a minute, if Isaiah's son literally fulfills the Immanuel prophecy, does that mean he was also born of a virgin? Yes, but not in the way you might imagine. In Isaiah 7, the word "almāh" is translated "virgin," but it actually means "a girl of marriageable age or young woman." It, notably, does *not* mean a literal virgin. However, Matthew uses the word παρθένος (parthenos), which means *an actual virgin*, and this is intentional. Matthew points to a typological fulfillment of this passage that will be found not in Isaiah's son but in the Son of God. To clarify, consider the breakdown below of how Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled both literally and typologically.

The Literal Fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14: A young woman of marriageable age (Isaiah's wife) gives birth to a boy (Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz) who will be called Immanuel because he will signify God's presence.

The Typological Fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14: An actual virgin (Mary) will give birth to a boy (Jesus) who will be called Immanuel because He is the embodiment of God's presence.

Simply stated, the promise of the Immanuel figure in Isaiah 7 has two fulfillments: an immediate literal fulfillment in Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, and a future typological (and thus *greater*) fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

What About Now?

The primary takeaway is this: "Peace is not the absence of trouble, but the presence of Christ." God doesn't promise to remove the troubles in our lives. He does promise, however, to come into our lives, no matter the problem. Jesus Christ, our Immanuel, is "God with us" in the flesh, and His presence can bring peace even to the most contentious circumstances. Why? Because He is the "Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 1:18. What was the relationship between Joseph and Mary? What happened to Mary?

2. Read Matthew 1:19. How is Joseph described? Why? What was he "unwilling" to do?

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 1:20. As Joseph considered divorce, who came to him? What did he say?

2. Read Matthew 1:21. What did the angel tell Joseph to name their son? Why?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 1:22-23. What would this birth fulfill? What Old Testament passage is quoted here?

2. Read Matthew 1:24-25. What did Joseph do when he awoke from his sleep?

Day Four

1. Read Isaiah 7:14. Who is this “sign” given to, and why?

2. Read both Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. What are the differences between the wording of each?

Week 2 Discussion: Simply Peace

Peace is another fundamental aspect of the Advent season. As a group, talk about the peace you have found in Christ, and how it shapes the way you handle difficulty and hardship in your life.

1. How is the promise of God’s presence a promise of peace?
2. How does the birth of Jesus fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy strengthen your belief in the claims of the Bible?
3. Read Isaiah 9:6. How does the title of “Prince of Peace” correlate to this text?
4. The promise of Immanuel (God with us) to God’s people in Isaiah 7 during a particularly challenging circumstance is an even greater promise for all believers, because Jesus is our Immanuel. Talk about a time this year when you felt the presence of Immanuel in your life in a particularly challenging circumstance. How did it make enduring that circumstance easier?
5. Read James 3:8. What does it mean to “make peace?” What follows when Christians do this?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Ask your child what brings them the most peace, and why?

Takeaways:

1. Joseph is visited by an angel, who tells him that Mary conceived through the Holy Spirit and that he should name their son Jesus because He will save the people from their sins.
2. The arrival of Jesus is foreshadowed in Isaiah 7:14.

DEVOTIONAL 3: MOUNTAINS & VALLEYS

MIKE BERKES

Our life on earth includes times when we are in the valley and times we are on the mountaintop. It's easy to praise God from the mountaintop, but from the valleys of life? Sometimes, it's not that easy.

But take heart! Psalm 23:4 tells us: "Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, *for you are with me.*" This is a promise of God that is still true to His people today (Matt. 28:20).

But let us all read, meditate on, and memorize John 14:27. Let us take Jesus at *his word*. These are the words of Jesus himself. Listen to them and imagine how you would have felt if you had been standing right there with him, one of the crowd of people there, as he looked out over his followers and said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

This is peace.

SERMON NOTES

WEEK 2

[illegible]

DEVOTIONAL 4: PEACE (AND A SWORD)

JESSICA BLEDSOE

BENVOLIO: I do but keep the peace: put up thy sword,
Or manage it to part these men with me.

TYBALT: What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word,
As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.

In his famous, classic (and possibly *most overdone*) play – Romeo + Juliet – Shakespeare invites us to contemplate the costs of a life lived bathed in resentment, constant strife, and revenge-seeking. The Montagues and Capulets, both rich and powerful families in Verona, are fierce rivals due to an “ancient grudge.” Their enmity ultimately causes their children, our “star cross’d lovers”, to take their lives.

In Act 1, Scene 1, the Montagues and Capulets begin a gang fight in the streets. Benvolio, Romeo’s cousin, enters, sword drawn, and immediately tries to de-escalate the situation, appealing to “keeping the peace.” But Tybalt, Juliet’s cousin (and the main *antagonist* of the play), isn’t having it. He scoffs at Benvolio, who speaks of peace while still drawing his sword. Tybalt claims he hates peace as much as he hates hell. Both of them are walking contradictions, aren’t they? One uses a sword to demand peace, and the other says he hates hell while actively creating war and chaos. Benvolio’s seemingly contradictory attempt at bringing peace to a relationship “is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage.”

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, came to us in one of the most peaceful ways possible – as a baby, born to an unknown family in the middle of the night. He taught many things about peace during his ministry on earth, which the writers of the New Testament passed on to us. In the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matt. 5:18). Similarly, in his letter to the Romans, Paul urges us: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18).

But relationships are hard, aren’t they? *People* are hard. So how do we live as peacemakers? In Ephesians 6, Paul portrays the Christian’s life as a battlefield and tells us to gear up: “Put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11). We are to engage in the battle, not simply lie down and let things happen. When we think about living peaceably with others, it engenders feelings of agreeableness, gentleness, tolerance, turning the other cheek, etc., but I would argue that Benvolio’s approach to peace is more akin to the above passages. In our battle gear, we are given the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). A sword, my friends, is an offensive weapon used to attack. Benvolio, as it turns out, wasn’t a peacekeeper as he claimed, passively placating his enemies. He was a *peacemaker* – ready to fight, if necessary, though reluctantly. He appealed to truth, saying: “Part fools! You know not what you do!”

DEVOTIONAL 4: PEACE (AND A SWORD)

JESSICA BLEDSOE

When Jesus returns, he will be clothed in his name, which is the Word of God, and from his mouth will come a sharp sword (Rev. 19:14-15). It is no coincidence that the word of God is likened to a sword, and that the sword will come from Jesus' mouth. During his ministry on earth, Jesus sought peace, yes, but he also used his words, the Word of God, to combat evil and ill will. Yes, sometimes living peaceably means turning the other cheek, or denying yourself and putting others first. But peace is *never* meant to placate injustice or evil or hide from the truth. In fact, there can be no peace until injustice and evil are vanquished.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 1:39-56

To understand the role of joy in the work of the Holy Spirit and in Mary's *Magnificat*.

Read the Text:

In those days, Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, 40 and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, 42 and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! 43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord. 46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; 52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." 56 And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home. (Luke 1:39-56)

Study the Text:

Simply Joy

There are a lot of words that could be used to describe Luke 1:39-56, but one word is undoubtedly "joy." There is joy in the womb of Elizabeth upon being greeted by Mary (Lk. 1:41, 45). There is joy in Elizabeth's response when she feels her baby leap. There is joy in Mary's *Magnificat*, a song of praise offered to God. The whole passage is simply joyful, and for good reason. Below is a breakdown of the text, with special attention to key details.

THE FRANTIC TRIP

The passage begins with Mary frantically on the move: "In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (Lk. 1:39-40). Why was she in such a hurry? She was eager to determine if the news she received in verse 36 was trustworthy! It was well known that her relative, Elizabeth, was barren and now older. And yet, according to the angel who had just visited Mary, Elizabeth was six months pregnant (Lk. 1:36). Moreover, the angel had told Mary that she, herself, was pregnant. However, she had not been sexually intimate with anyone. All of these details were unexplainable apart from the work of the LORD. This prompted Mary to leave in haste and travel roughly 80 to 100 miles from Nazareth to "the hill country, to a town in Judah" (Lk. 1:39), a three- to four-day journey.

A SAMUEL CONNECTION

Luke doesn't give the exact name of the city where Elizabeth and Zechariah live. Either he didn't feel like the details were of great importance, or more likely, he chose to use terminology that was reminiscent of Samuel's birth. Samuel's dad is described in 1 Samuel 1:1: "Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim." Given that Mary's *Magnificat* in the following verses has a great deal in common with Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2, it might be that Luke is introducing the Samuel connection in the wording here.

A LEAPING BABY

Just as John the Baptizer will prepare the way for the Lord in his earthly ministry, he is already able to recognize the presence of the Messiah — but, how? Recall verse 15: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb." John can discern the presence of Jesus for two reasons: 1. He is alive (because life begins at conception, not birth), and 2. The Holy Spirit is the means by which he can distinguish Christ in the womb of Mary. This passage demonstrates both that the child in the womb is indeed alive and able to be used of God, and that the baby and the mom are intricately connected. It was upon *Elizabeth* (and not John) hearing the greeting of Mary that John responded.

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Just as the Holy Spirit gives John the ability to recognize Jesus, the Spirit gives all people the ability to remember Jesus. Apart from the work of the Spirit, we will not get Jesus right. This is worked out in Paul's writings, but even here, Elizabeth receives the Holy Spirit as well upon John's movement. She is also able to discern the presence of the Lord rightly: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me" (Lk. 1:42-43). The role of the Holy Spirit cannot be overstated here, because apart from the Spirit, people are unable to discern anything spiritually (1 Cor. 2:14).

Mary's Song

Mary's song is often called the *Magnificat*, derived from the Latin (Vulgate) translation of verse 46: "Magnificat anima mea Dominum" ("My soul magnifies the Lord"). The song or prayer is one of gratitude. Below is a breakdown of some keywords in this passage.

SAVIOR

While the word "savior" is not a surprising term for us in Christendom, it is scarcely used in Luke's Gospel. It is only found twice: Once in verse 47 ("God my Savior") and once in Luke 2:11: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." That Mary clearly refers to God as Savior in the *Magnificat*, and that Luke uses it only once more in the announcement of Jesus' birth, is a clear argument for the deity of Christ.

HUMBLE ESTATE

The word used for "humble estate" in verse 48 is the one that literally means "depression, abject condition." It's a word that suggests Mary does not see herself as having power or any advantage over others. That God has chosen her, then, should be seen as *shocking*, and yet she says, "from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Lk. 1:48), a statement that is still true to this day (albeit sometimes to the detriment of idolatry).

THE HAND OF GOD

Mary's emphasis on her lowly state becomes a theme for the latter half of the *Magnificat*, wherein God flips the world upside down. The proud and powerful are brought low by the hand of God (Lk. 1:51-52), and the poor and needy are lifted (Lk. 1:53-54). This also foreshadows the coming kingdom of God. Jesus' birth is the

event that sets the kingdom into motion and turns what we think is right upside down. It won't be the world leaders that change the world, but "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). In many ways, Mary represents all of God's people in that God uses the least likely individuals to accomplish His will.

What About Now?

There is, again, a reminder that a baby in the womb is indeed alive and connected to the mother's faculties, so that when the mother does or experiences something, so does the baby (John responds to Elizabeth hearing the voice of Mary). There is also the reminder to us that God chooses the weak and foolish things of the world to accomplish His will. It's so typical of us to place expectations on ourselves where God doesn't; He only needs those who are available, humble, and willing to relinquish control over their lives.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 1:39-40. Where did Mary go? What house did she enter? Why do you suppose she went "with haste?"

2. Read Luke 1:41-42. What happened to the baby in Elizabeth's womb when she heard the voice of Mary? What happened to Elizabeth? What did Elizabeth say following receiving the Holy Spirit? What does this indicate about the work of the Holy Spirit?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 1:43-45. What does Elizabeth say in verse 43? What is she recognizing in this statement? Summarize in your own words verses 44 and 45.

2. Read Luke 1:46-48. What did Mary say first? How does she refer to God? How does she refer to herself?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 1:49-50. How is God described in these verses? Who does His mercy fall on?

2. Read Luke 1:51-53. Who does He scatter? Who does He bring low? Who does He exalt?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 1:54-55. On what basis has He helped Israel? In your own words, write what that means.

2. Read Luke 1:56. How long did Mary remain with Elizabeth?

Week 3 Discussion: Simply Joy

Joy is yet another fundamental aspect of the Advent season. As a group, talk about the joy you have in Christ and how it motivates and inspires you to worship God.

1. Icebreaker: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word *joy*.
2. Can you have joy in the midst of suffering? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel a sense of joy when you worship God in the Sunday morning corporate time of worship?
4. How is joy expressed in worship? What does joyful worship look or sound like?
5. What does a lack of joy indicate?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Ask your child what brings them joy, and why? Share with them what brings you joy as well. Then talk about how the ultimate source of joy is found in Christ.

Takeaways:

1. Mary goes to see Elizabeth, and John the Baptizer leaps at the sound of her voice.
2. Elizabeth receives the Holy Spirit.
3. Mary's *Magnificat* is not only about how God chose her, but how God chooses the most unexpected and least qualified individuals for His purposes.

DEVOTIONAL 5: THE JOYFUL MAN OF SORROWS

JEFF GORDON

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Lk. 2:10)

At Christmas, the radio is filled with songs about joyous feelings and the thrill of hope. But the joy of Christmas isn't merely shallow cheerfulness. Rather, it is deeper, sturdier, and even more mysterious than that. It's a joy that was wrapped in swaddling clothes. A joy that stepped into a world full of pain.

The prophet Isaiah described the Messiah as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." (Is. 53:3) And yet, in Hebrews, we are told that God anointed Him with "the oil of gladness above all His companions." So, which was He - *sorrowful or joyful*? The Christmas story of the Gospels teaches us that Jesus held both perfectly.

He came into our sorrow - into a world of tears, loss, fear, and brokenness. He didn't avoid it but chose to enter it. From the manger to the cross, He willingly embraced the weight of this world's pain. He emptied himself, bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows.

But Jesus was also full of joy. This was the joy of perfect communion with His Father (Heb. 10:7-9) and the joy of His mission to rescue sinners (Lk. 15:7). It is a joy that was set before Him as He shone light into the darkness and "... the darkness has not overcome it." (Jn. 1:5)

The joy that Jesus had wasn't the absence of sorrow - it was the presence of God in the midst of it.

The miracle of Christmas joy is that Jesus was sorrowful because the world is broken, but He was joyful because He came to heal it, to bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty. One day, He will even wipe away every tear (Rev. 21:4). His joy was not seasonal or fragile. It didn't depend on the best of circumstances. The joy of Jesus Christ has been and remains strong, steady, and unstoppable. And His desire is "... that My joy be in you, and that your joy may be full." (Jn. 15:11)

And because Jesus carried both joy and sorrow, you can too. This Christmas season, we need not pretend that everything in our lives is perfect. Christmas is an invitation to experience a joy that is deeper than sorrow and stronger than any fear. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." (Is. 9:2) Let heaven and nature sing, and this weary world rejoice. We have an everlasting joy of knowing and loving "Immanuel," who is "God is with us." (Matthew 1:23)

SERMON NOTES

WEEK 3

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

DEVOTIONAL 6: THE EVENT OF JOY

BRYAN PETERSON

Joy is a mysterious word sometimes. It is often used interchangeably with the word *happy* or *happiness*. In *Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, the definition of happy is "experiencing joy and pleasure, expressing such feelings." Then it defines joy as, "intense happiness or great delight, that which gives rise to this emotion, or on which this emotion centers." Even Webster connects these ideas very closely. I believe, however, they are very different, though they can happen at the same time.

In Luke 2, we see the shepherds receive the angels' announcement of the Messiah's birth. The shepherds' understandable first response to the appearance of the angels was terror. The angels tell them, "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12 And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10b-12 NLT). Throughout Scripture, you will notice that joy can be expressed in the same moment of happiness, but it is not always true that both descriptors are used. Joy marks a moment, an event of colossal importance wherever it appears in Scripture!

Joy overwhelms us when we experience it. It is life-changing. The birth of a child changes all family members connected to that child: parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. Marriage, too, is a momentous event that permanently changes our lives. Salvation itself is a moment of great joyous change that shapes the path of the rest of our existence, both here on this earth and in eternity. Joyous moments are never forgotten. Moments of happiness are often, if not in general, lost in the shuffle of life.

The angels were not bringing news that just stirred up some emotion that would pass eventually. A life-changing, world-changing event was occurring that, as we know, marked history worldwide and has exponentially improved every life it has touched. These men would see the infant Savior themselves and would never forget that moment. The clearest example of how joy is a separate, bigger thing than just happiness is that the sacrifice of that Savior on a cross, combined with His resurrection, brings us such joy as we remember it each Easter (and hopefully daily).

My point? Well, as a person who loves Christmas and its season, I know how easy it is to get lost in the temporary happiness it brings. Beautiful music, pretty decorations, visits from family and friends... The question is, do I stop to remember the great Joy of this season, the birth of the Creator in the body of a human infant? The infinite, confining Himself to the boundaries of a finite fleshly body. He knows our every experience of being human, its struggles, embarrassments, discomfort, everything. He entered this world to eventually take upon His perfect shoulders the weight of all of mankind's sin and pay for it once and for all. Does that bring you joy? Do you intentionally take the time to remember and feel that joy? If not, why not? I assure you that Christmas will be so much richer for it when you connect with its true meaning.



SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 2:22-40

To understand the love of God revealed to Simeon and Anna through Jesus Christ.

Read the Text:

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 29 "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation 31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." 33 And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." 36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, 37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:22-40)

Study the Text:

Thirty-Three Days Later

Some details in the New Testament don't make as much sense apart from a robust understanding of the Old Testament. Luke 2:22-40 presents one such detail. Verse 22 begins with, "And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses," which indicates a specific amount of time has passed. But how much time is entailed in "the time of purification?" The time of purification, according to the Law of Moses, is given in Leviticus chapter 12:2b-4a: "If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As long as she is menstruating, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for *thirty-three days* in the blood of her purifying." The law lays out a timeline: birth, followed by seven unclean days, circumcision on the eighth day, and then purification thirty-three days after the initial seven unclean days. Verse 22, then, picks up forty days after His birth. The Holy Family has completed the "time of purification" as required by the law of Moses. And now, being that they were Jews, they were preparing to travel to the Temple to give the appropriate offerings as laid out in Leviticus 12 and Exodus 13.

Fulfilling the Law

Verses 22-24 include significant fulfillment of Old Testament laws. Below is a brief breakdown of each.

UNCLEAN

Leviticus 12 sets forth the law of purification that is required of women who have just given birth. The law indicates that if the child is male, the woman is unclean for 7 days, and then she is to remain in purification for another 33 days, for a total of 40 days. If the child is female, she is unclean for 14 days, and remains in purification for 66 days, for a total of 80 days. For Mary, given that Jesus is male, the first applies. To make purification for her uncleanness, Leviticus 12:6-7 go on to describe what kind of offering is to be given in the Temple: “And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting *a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering*, and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female.” This is significant for two reasons. For one, it speaks to the false doctrine that Mary was without sin from the moment of conception, as first promulgated in a papal bull by Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, in 1854. It was, however, argued even before this that Mary was without personal sin, going back to the Council of Trent (1545-1563). However, given that Luke asserts her need for the law of purification, it would be illogical to arrive at such a conclusion. Mary needed to give both a burnt offering and a sin offering for atonement.

A HUMBLE SACRIFICE

The second reason these details are important is the kind of offering she gives. Leviticus calls for “a lamb a year old” and “a pigeon or turtledove.” Still, Luke states that they brought “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” (Lk. 2:24). There seems to be a contradiction until you read further in Leviticus 12 and realize that for families who could not afford a lamb, they could offer “two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering” (Lev. 12:8). Luke’s inclusion of this detail gives the reader some information about the holy family, namely that they were not wealthy. They would have been considered lower class and unable to afford the standard offerings.

EXODUS 13

The other reference given here comes from Exodus 13, which requires the firstborn of a womb to be consecrated to the Lord. Exodus 13:1-2 reads, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.’” Both Mary and Joseph are following not one, but two laws as prescribed by Moses in their Temple visit.

Simeon and Anna

When they arrive at the temple, we are introduced to new characters, Simeon and Anna, and, in many ways, they both represent the male and female’s hopeful expectation of the coming Messiah in Israel.

SIMEON

Simeon is introduced first: “There was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Lk. 2:25). Again, we find the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, which is essential according to verse 26. Simeon knew that before he died, he would meet the Messiah, and he became immediately convinced “in the Spirit” that Jesus is the One whom he had waited for (Lk. 2:27-32). He immediately takes the baby Jesus, blesses him, and speaks. First, he declares he can now die in peace (Lk. 2:29), because he has now seen God’s salvation (Lk.

2:30). He then alludes to Isaiah 49:6, prescribing Jesus as “a light to the Gentiles” and “glory to your people Israel,” a reference to Isaiah 60:1. He goes to say that Jesus will cause a rise and fall in Israel, which is precisely why He came (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6-8). That Mary herself will even be pierced could be an allusion to her presence at the crucifixion as Jesus was dying (Jn. 19:25).

ANNA

Verses 36 and 37 introduce Anna: “And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband for seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.” She was a prophetess who, like Simeon, walked closely with God through the disciplines of fasting and prayer. Verse 38 indicates that, as Simeon was blessing Jesus, Anna entered and recognized Jesus as the Messiah as well.

What About Now?

For the two devout people in Luke 2, Simeon and Anna, there was no question who this child was. He was the child of whom Isaiah spoke in Isaiah 9:6, who would ultimately embody God’s love as an expression of God Himself, who is love (1 Jn. 4:16). Love is the ultimate theme of Advent because Advent is God’s act of giving Himself to His people. We can love because we were first loved (1 Jn. 4:19). And the world will know that we belong to Jesus Christ by our love for one another (Jn. 13:35). Love, as it turns out, is the most Christmas-forward thing you can do.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 2:22-24. What led the holy family to the Temple? What did they bring with them to sacrifice, and why? What two laws were being fulfilled here (Hint: See above notes)?

2. Read Luke 2:25-26. Who is introduced here, and how is he described? What did the Holy Spirit reveal to him?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 2:27-28. What did the Spirit reveal to him when he came into the Temple and saw Jesus? What did he do in response to this?

2. Read Luke 2:29-30. What did he say first upon seeing Jesus? What did his eyes see?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 2:31-32. Who has prepared this moment? What two prophetic references was Simeon making here in verse 32 (Hint: See above notes)?

2. Read Luke 2:33-35. In your own words, summarize what Simeon said here. What do you think he meant?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 2:36-38. Who is Anna? How is she described? What did Anna do when Simeon began to bless Jesus? What did she speak and to whom did she say it?

2. Read Luke 2:39-40. After they were finished giving their offerings, where did the family move to? Was this where they came from? What happened to the boy?

Week 8 Discussion: Simply Love

In Luke 2:22-40, both Simeon and Anna recognize the love of God incarnate (Jn. 3:16). Talk as a group about the final and most excellent theme of Advent: *love*.

1. Icebreaker: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word *love*?
2. Can you obey Scripture without love? Why or why not?
3. How is Christian love different from worldly love?
4. What's the most love you've ever felt from someone else?
5. How can you express Godly love to those around you, particularly during the Christmas season?
6. Kid Talk: (For Home): Ask your child what things make them feel the most loved, and why? Talk to them about how love is ultimately from God, because God is love (1 Jn. 4:16).

Takeaways:

1. Mary and Joseph came to the Temple to offer sacrifices in fulfillment of two Old Testament laws.
2. Both Simeon and Anna, two Godly people in the Temple, rightly recognized Jesus while they were there and glorified God as a result.

DEVOTIONAL 7: LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS

CHRIS CUNNINGTON

Christmas in London has a way of stirring up old memories — some warm, some... well, a bit frosty. You can be walking through Covent Garden, hearing a busker singing carols, and suddenly you're thinking about that argument from years ago, or the friend who stopped calling, or the family member who still hasn't apologized. Funny how the season of peace can bring unresolved things to the surface.

But Scripture offers a gentle, slightly uncomfortable challenge for moments like these. Paul writes that "love keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5). No ledger. No tally. No mental spreadsheet of who hurt us, who disappointed us, who didn't show up. It's a high bar, isn't it? Especially when some wounds run deep.

I think of Joseph, standing there in Egypt, years after his own brothers sold him off like unwanted junk at a garage sale. If anyone had the right to hold a grudge, it was him. He had every reason to remember – to keep a record. And yet when they came back into his life, desperate and vulnerable, he chose something remarkable: forgiveness. Not cheap forgiveness, but the kind carved out of years of walking with God. He says, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Can you imagine releasing that kind of pain? That's grace at work.

Around Christmas, we talk a lot about giving. Gifts, time, money. But maybe the hardest gift is the one we give to someone who hasn't earned it – forgiveness. Not pretending the hurt didn't happen. Not letting people walk all over us. But letting go of the right to keep score. Letting love lead instead of pride. After all, isn't that what Christ has done for us? "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

And if you think about it, forgiveness is strangely woven into so many British Christmas traditions. For me, it was pulling crackers with people we've argued with all year. I sat shoulder-to-shoulder at cramped dining tables, passing roast potatoes to the very person who tested our patience. We watch the lights on Oxford Street flicker on, and there's this momentary sense that maybe, just maybe, things can be mended.

This Christmas, maybe God is nudging us to drop the list. To make space in our hearts for reconciliation. To forgive someone who hasn't apologized yet. To choose to love when bitterness feels easier. Christ came into this world not to count our wrongs, but to wipe them clean. If He can do that for us, perhaps we can take a small step in that same direction. May this season not just warm our homes, but soften our hearts — because love, true love, *keeps no record of wrongs*.

SERMON NOTES

WEEK 4

[illegible]

DEVOTIONAL 8: LOVING DIFFICULT PEOPLE LIKE CHRIST

JUNE BARKER

It's the *most wonderful time of the year*, right? Christmas brings a lot of emotions for everyone. It is cozy, full of good food, and decorated well. It is nostalgic, with family traditions and special church services. And it is built in time off to spend with family and friends. What could go wrong? While all of those things above can be real and true, the Christmas season can also bring grief, reminders of broken relationships, anxiety over not having the means to make it special for those around you, and a perfect time for lies to creep in. Lies of loneliness, lies of inadequacy... the list goes on. "*Oh, what fun!*"

Christmas can just be hard, and we all know that hurt people hurt people. In a season when we are supposed to be around those we love most, we often forget how to extend love to those we encounter, and even what showing love can look like. We are around distant cousins who have different views from us, friends who are tagging along because their family is in shambles, grocery store workers who don't care if we live or die, family members offering opinions about our lives that we did not ask for, and that one crazy aunt who has different political views from us. So how do we show love to all of those situations while also maintaining our boundaries and peace?

In 1 Peter 4, we see the apostle Peter writing to the church in a practical way. He gives us guidance we can use in our everyday interactions but especially during Advent. I love that the chapter title in the ESV version says, "Stewards of God's Grace." Love often means a whole lot of grace. After all grace is just an undeserved gift. Read verses 7 through 10. I love how Peter speaks so matter-of-factly. It's like a "how-to" guide for being a follower of Jesus. And the rule is simple: "Above all, love one another earnestly." Earnestly means *intentionally* going above and beyond to ensure those who cross our paths know they are valued not only to us, but to Christ as well. That means even when it doesn't feel convenient and even when someone is impossible to be around. I know this is hard because sometimes we truly do have hurtful situations and people in our lives. Nowhere in Scripture does it say we shouldn't have boundaries. Even Jesus had boundaries! But Jesus could uphold boundaries while still showing love to those around him.

Maybe love is finally communicating your needs to your spouse. Maybe love is spending extra time with your kids when you are exhausted. Maybe love is bringing food to someone you have not seen at church in a while. The bottom line is that love follows the example Christ gave us.

This Christmas, let the difference of being a Jesus believer be obvious and without a doubt to those you encounter. Take time to prayerfully reflect on the situations you are anxious about being put in this holiday season. How can you show love to those you encounter? If you feel something is keeping you

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from showing love, then maybe it is time to tackle some resentments and hurts you have? Ring in the new year with some emotional healing by joining a Freedom Group. Jesus has lovingly given us so many tools to help us navigate hurts. To be honest, I cannot think of anything more difficult than loving those who have wronged us, but then again, Jesus climbed on a cross and looked down at the ones God created and made in His image as they murdered him. He died for those He loves who often do not love him back.