FROM DARKNESS TO DAWN

A CHRISTMAS ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Introduction

Preparing Our Hearts for Christmas

Christmas is one of my favorite times of the year. I love the decorations, the traditions, the music, and the opportunity to spend time with family and friends. But if we're not careful, Christmas also can become one of the busiest times of the year. Between shopping, parties, family gatherings, school programs, and everything else on the calendar, we can spend so much time preparing for Christmas that we forget to prepare our hearts for Christ.

This time of year is when Advent comes in. The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word "adventus", meaning "coming" or "arrival." For centuries, Christians have observed Advent as a season of preparation leading up to Christmas. Advent includes the four Sundays before Christmas Day and gives us an opportunity to slow down, reflect on God's promises, and remember why the birth of Jesus matters. Advent reminds us that Jesus has come, Jesus is with us, and Jesus is coming again. We look back with gratitude at His birth in Bethlehem. We look around with confidence in His presence and work in our lives today. And we look forward with hope to the day He will return and make all things new.

Traditionally, Advent focuses on four themes: **hope, peace, joy, and love**. Many families and churches use an Advent wreath with four candles, lighting one additional candle each week. Some also light a fifth candle, called the Christ Candle, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. The candles aren't magical, and lighting them isn't a requirement of following Jesus. They are visual reminders of the promises we celebrate, pointing us to Jesus, the Light of the World.

This year's Advent theme at Mission Grove is "From Darkness to Dawn", inspired by Luke 1:78–79. In this passage, Zechariah celebrates God's mercy and describes the coming Messiah as the rising sun from heaven, bringing light to those living in darkness and guiding our feet onto the path of peace. Think about what happens when the sun begins to rise. Slowly, the first light breaks over the horizon. What was hidden becomes visible. What seemed uncertain begins to take shape. And suddenly, there's a new day. That's the story of Christmas. For generations, God's people waited for the promised Savior. They experienced suffering, disappointment, and uncertainty. Yet God had not forgotten His promises. And at just the right time, Jesus came. **Christmas reminds us that darkness may be real, but darkness doesn't have the final word.**

During the next four weeks, we'll explore the Christmas story through the experiences of people who encountered God's faithfulness in unexpected ways. We'll discover hope through Zechariah and Elizabeth, peace through Joseph, joy through Mary and Elizabeth,

and love through the humility of Jesus. Then, on Christmas Day, we'll celebrate the incredible truth that the Light of the World has come.

Each week includes a Scripture reading, a short devotional, reflection questions, a prayer, and a simple Advent candle moment you can experience individually, as a couple, or with your family. You don't need a perfect routine or a beautifully decorated Advent wreath to participate. You just need a Bible and a willingness to make some room for Jesus.

As your pastor, my prayer is that this devotional becomes more than one extra thing on your Christmas to-do list. I hope it helps you slow down, open God's Word, and have meaningful conversations with your family. Most importantly, I pray that you will grow closer to Jesus.

From darkness to dawn. From waiting to worship. From knowing about Jesus to experiencing true life with Him. Let's prepare our hearts for Christmas.

FOR you,



Jon Kragel



Visit **missiongrovechurch.com/christmas** for short videos from Mission Grove Church staff, created to accompany each week of our journey to Christmas.

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Have You Received the Gift?

Hope in the Darkness

Luke 1:5–25

Have you ever noticed how much of life involves waiting? We wait in traffic. We wait in line. We wait for our kids to get ready. And thanks to Amazon, we've somehow reached the point where waiting more than two days for something to arrive feels unreasonable and infuriating. But there's a big difference between waiting for a package and waiting for God to answer a prayer. Maybe you're waiting for a relationship to improve, a diagnosis to come back, or an opportunity to open up. Maybe you've been praying for someone you love to come to know Jesus. And if we're being real, **sometimes the hardest part of waiting isn't the waiting itself. It's the silence.** You pray. You trust. You try to do the right thing. And yet, nothing seems to change. So what do you do when God seems quiet?

The Gospel of Luke begins his telling of the Christmas story in an unexpected place. Not with Mary and Joseph. Not with shepherds or a manger. He begins with an older couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke tells us they were both righteous in God's sight, faithfully following His commands. But then he shares a painful detail. They had no children, and both were well along in years (Luke 1:6–7).

In their culture, having no children could bring not only personal grief but also social shame. Yet despite their disappointment, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued faithfully following God. Don't miss this: **Their disappointment didn't stop their devotion.** Trusting God when life is going according to plan is one thing.

Keeping trust in Him when the very thing you've prayed for remains unanswered is another.

Then one day, while Zechariah was serving in the temple, an angel appeared with an incredible announcement: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard" (Luke 1:13). Elizabeth would have a son. His name would be John. And he would prepare people for the coming Messiah.

Here's what I find fascinating about this story. Zechariah and Elizabeth were waiting for a child, but Israel was waiting for a Savior. For generations, God's people had been longing for the fulfillment of His promises. The angel's announcement connects John's coming ministry to the prophecy in Malachi 4:5–6. God was answering a deeply personal prayer while also advancing His plan to redeem the world.

Zechariah and Elizabeth couldn't see the whole picture. They only knew the part of the story they were living. And isn't that true for us? We see our circumstances. We know our disappointments. We know what we're praying for. But we don't always know what God is doing. Now, this doesn't mean every prayer will eventually be answered exactly how we want. Scripture doesn't promise that. But it does remind us of something important: **God's silence doesn't mean God's absence.**

Christmas is the greatest reminder of that truth. After generations of waiting, God sent His Son. Not because

humanity had earned His favor, but because God is faithful to His promises. There's a difference between hoping for something and placing your hope in Someone. Biblical hope is more than wishing things would turn out differently. This type of hope confidently trusts the character and promises of God. And ultimately, **our hope has a name. His name is Jesus.**

Reflect & Respond

1. What's something for which you're currently waiting on God? How has that waiting affected your faith?

2. What can you learn from Zechariah and Elizabeth's faithfulness in the midst of disappointment?

3. How can you shift your focus this week from what you're waiting for to the One you're trusting?

A Prayer for This Week

Heavenly Father, thank You for being faithful, even when life doesn't make sense. You know the prayers we've prayed and the disappointments we carry. Help us trust You when we can't see what You're doing. Remind us that our hope isn't found in perfect circumstances but in Jesus, our Savior. Give us the strength to remain faithful in the waiting. In Jesus' name, amen.

Advent Candle Moment

Light the first Advent candle, which represents hope. Read Romans 8:24–25 together.

Family Conversation

What's the difference between wishing for something good to happen and trusting God with whatever happens?

This Week's Challenge

Encourage someone who's going through a season of waiting. Send a text, pray with them, or find a simple way to remind them they're not alone.

A Declaration of Peace

Matthew 1:18–25

I'm guessing most of us have experienced what happens when life doesn't go according to plan. You have an idea of how things are supposed to work out. You've thought through the details, made your plans, and maybe even convinced yourself you've got everything under control. And then life happens. An unexpected phone call. A financial setback. A relationship that gets complicated. A situation you never saw coming. Suddenly, the future you pictured looks very different from the one you're facing. **How do you find peace when life doesn't go according to plan?**

I think Joseph knew something about that. When we talk about Christmas, Mary usually gets most of the attention. And understandably so. But I've always found Joseph's part of the story fascinating. Matthew tells us that Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary when he discovered she was pregnant. And he knew the child wasn't his. Now, we know the rest of the story. We know this child was conceived through the Holy Spirit. We know Jesus is the promised Messiah. But Joseph didn't know any of that yet. All he knew was that the future he had imagined was falling apart. In first-century Jewish culture, betrothal was more binding than our modern idea of engagement. Ending that relationship required a divorce. Joseph faced a situation with serious personal, social, and legal implications.

Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man who didn't want to expose Mary to public disgrace. So he

decided to divorce her quietly. Then God interrupted his plans. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, explaining that Mary's child was conceived through the Holy Spirit and that he should take Mary as his wife. **God didn't give Joseph a detailed explanation of everything that would happen next.** He simply told him what to do. Joseph didn't know about the journey to Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men, or the danger that would eventually force his family to flee to Egypt. He didn't have a five-year plan. He had a promise from God and a decision to make. And Matthew tells us that when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel commanded. He obeyed.

Sometimes we think peace comes when all our questions are answered, and everything finally makes sense. But biblical peace is something much deeper. The angel reminded Joseph that the child would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). The promise wasn't that Joseph's life would become easier. In fact, following God's plan would bring its own challenges. **The promise was that God had come near.**

God didn't send Jesus simply to improve our circumstances. He sent Jesus to rescue us from sin and restore our relationship with Him. Through Christ, we can have peace with God, and because of His presence, we can experience peace even when life feels uncertain. Maybe this Christmas you're facing something you didn't plan for. Maybe you're carrying questions you can't answer or decisions you're not sure how to make.

You don't have to figure out your entire future today. You can simply take the next step of obedience.

Trust God's character. Follow His Word. And remember that you're not walking into the unknown alone. Peace isn't found in having everything figured out. Peace is found in knowing God is with you. That's the promise of Immanuel. This week, may your obedience declare God's peace and presence in your life.

Reflect & Respond

1. What's one area of your life where things haven't gone according to plan?

2. What does Joseph's response teach you about trusting God when the future is uncertain?

3. What's one step of obedience you can take this week, even without having all the answers?

A Prayer for This Week

Heavenly Father, thank You for being with us in every season. You know the questions we're asking and the uncertainty we're facing. Help us trust You when life doesn't make sense. Give us the courage to obey Your Word, even when we can't see the whole picture. Thank You for sending Jesus, our Immanuel and Prince of Peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

Advent Candle Moment

Light the first two Advent candles, which represent hope and peace. Read John 14:27 together.

Family Conversation

What's something that makes you feel worried or uncertain? How does knowing God is with us change the way we face those situations?

This Week's Challenge

Instead of trying to control one situation that's causing you stress, spend a few minutes each day surrendering it to God in prayer.

A Discovery of Joy

Luke 1:39–56

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to connect joy with our circumstances? We say things such as, "I'll be happy when things settle down." Or, "Once we get through this busy season, then I'll be able to enjoy life." And Christmas has a funny way of making this even more obvious. We want the decorations to look right, the gifts to be perfect, the family gatherings to go smoothly, and everyone to get along. If you've ever hosted Christmas with extended family, you know that having everything go perfectly might be asking a lot. But here's something I've been thinking about. **What if joy isn't something we have to wait for until everything goes right?**

In Luke 1, we find Mary in a situation that was anything but ordinary. An angel had just announced that she would give birth to the Son of God. That's incredible news, but imagine the questions running through her mind. How would she explain this to Joseph? What would her family think? What would happen to her future? Mary had received an amazing promise, but she was also stepping into an incredibly uncertain season. So what did she do? Luke tells us she hurried to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was also experiencing a miraculous pregnancy. When Mary arrived, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she spoke words of blessing over Mary: "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!" (Luke 1:45).

I love this moment in the Christmas story because it reminds us of something important about the Christian

life. **Sometimes we need other people to help us recognize what God is doing.** Mary was carrying a promise she couldn't fully understand. God used Elizabeth to encourage her faith. That's one of the reasons I love the local church. We're not meant to follow Jesus alone. We need people who will pray with us, encourage us, remind us of God's promises, and help us see His faithfulness when life gets overwhelming. That's what authentic community is all about.

Mary responds with a beautiful song of praise, often called the Magnificat, from the Latin word for "magnifies." She begins by declaring, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46–47). Notice something about Mary's response. Her circumstances hadn't suddenly become easier. She still faced uncertainty. Difficult conversations were still ahead. She still didn't know exactly how everything would unfold. And yet, she worshiped.

Why? Because **Mary's joy was rooted in God's faithfulness, not the predictability of her future.** She looked beyond her immediate circumstances and remembered what God had done and what He had promised. That's the difference between happiness and biblical joy. Happiness often rises and falls with our circumstances. But biblical joy can remain because its foundation is Jesus.
You don't have pretend that everything is wonderful in life to have joy. You can experience grief and still have joy. You can face uncertainty and still trust God. You can walk through a difficult season and still find reasons to

worship. This Christmas, don't wait for everything to be perfect before you celebrate God's goodness. Look to God's faithfulness in the ordinary moments of your day, and surround yourself with people who will encourage you to find joy in Jesus.

Reflect & Respond

1. Have you been waiting for certain circumstances to change before allowing yourself to experience joy? How has God been faithful to you this year?

2. Who has been an Elizabeth in your life, encouraging you to trust God's promises?

3. Who is one person you can be an Elizabeth to this week and encourage him or her to trust in God's promises?

A Prayer for This Week

Heavenly Father, thank You for the joy we can experience through Jesus. Forgive us for the times we've allowed our circumstances to determine our perspective. Open our eyes to Your faithfulness, even in difficult seasons. Surround us with people who strengthen our faith, and help us become that kind of encouragement to others. In Jesus' name, amen.

Advent Candle Moment

Light the first three Advent candles, which represent hope, peace, and joy. The third candle is traditionally pink or rose. Read Luke 1:46-49 together.

Family Conversation

What's one thing God has done this year for which you're thankful?

This Week's Challenge

Reach out to someone who has encouraged your faith. Tell that person how God has used him or her in your life.

The Dawn of Love

Philippians 2:5–11

Christmas is a season when we spend a lot of time thinking about gifts. We make lists, search for deals, wrap presents, and try to find something meaningful for the people we love. Here's what I've noticed about the gifts: the best and most meaningful gifts are the ones that are personal. They say, "I know you. I see you. I care about you." One of the most incredible truths of Christmas is that **God didn't simply tell us He loved us. He personally came to show us.**

When we think about the Christmas story, we often picture Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and little baby Jesus lying in a manger. But in Philippians 2, the apostle Paul gives us a different perspective. He takes us behind the scenes of Bethlehem and helps us understand the significance of what happened when Jesus was born. Paul explains that Jesus, who is truly God, didn't use His divine status for His own advantage. Instead, He humbled Himself, taking "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). Jesus didn't stop being God when He became human. He willingly entered our world, taking on human nature while remaining fully divine. The eternal Son of God stepped into the limitations, struggles, and suffering of human life. Think about the contrast. The Creator entered His creation. The King became a servant. The One who deserves all worship came to serve. And He did it because of love.

Here's what makes Philippians 2 especially interesting. Paul wasn't originally writing this passage to explain

the Christmas story. He was writing to a church about how they should treat one another. In the verses leading up to this passage, Paul encourages believers to reject selfish ambition, practice humility, and look to the interests of others. Then he points to Jesus as the ultimate example. **In other words, the incarnation isn't simply a truth we're supposed to believe. It's a love we're called to live.** Jesus humbled Himself, becoming obedient even to death on a cross. His birth was the beginning of a mission that would ultimately lead to His sacrifice for our sins. The manger points us toward the cross. And through His death and resurrection, Jesus has made a way for us to be reconciled to God. That's how far God's love was willing to go.

Don't let the busyness of the season distract you from the beauty of what God has done. The greatest gift of Christmas isn't something we purchase, wrap, or place under a tree. It's Jesus. What would it look like to love someone the way Jesus has loved you? What if this Christmas was the dawn of a new day, a new life, and a new way of treating people? Maybe that means forgiving someone who's hurt you. Maybe it means serving your family without expecting recognition. Maybe it's noticing someone who feels overlooked or reaching out to someone who's spending Christmas alone. Love isn't simply something we feel. Love moves us toward people. May this Christmas remind us that God's love didn't remain distant. Love came near in our time of need. And His name is Jesus.

Reflect & Respond

1. What does Jesus' humility in Philippians 2 teach you about the character of God?

2. Where might pride or selfishness be affecting your relationships?

3. Who is one person you could intentionally serve or encourage this Christmas?

A Prayer for This Week

Heavenly Father, thank You for loving us enough to send Jesus. Help us never lose sight of the wonder of His birth, His humility, and His sacrifice. Teach us to love others with the same humility and generosity Christ has shown us. May our lives reflect Your love this Christmas and throughout the year. In Jesus' name, amen.

Advent Candle Moment

Light all four Advent candles, which represent hope, peace, joy, and love. Read 1 John 4:9-11 together.

Family Conversation

What's one way Jesus showed us what real love looks like?

This Week's Challenge

As a family or individually, choose one intentional act of love. Serve someone, give generously, or encourage a person who may be struggling this Christmas.

Christmas Day | Advent Theme : Christ Candle

The Light Has Come

John 1:1–14; Luke 2:1–20

Merry Christmas, Mission Grove family! I hope today is filled with meaningful moments, good food, and time with people you love. Christmas morning can be a lot of fun. But before the day gets away from us, I want to encourage you to take a few minutes to remember why we're celebrating. Christmas is about so much more than a baby born in Bethlehem. Christmas is the story of God coming near. Throughout Advent, we've been talking about the journey from darkness to dawn. We've remembered the hope of God's promises, the peace of His presence, the joy of His faithfulness, and the love revealed through Jesus. And today, we celebrate the moment that changed everything. The Light has come. I love the way John begins his Gospel. Unlike Matthew and Luke, John doesn't begin with the familiar details of the Christmas story. There's no journey to Bethlehem, no shepherds in the fields, and no manger. Instead, John takes us all the way back to the beginning.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John wants us to understand something incredibly important about Jesus. The child born in Bethlehem wasn't simply another person entering the world. He is the eternal Son of God, the One through whom all things were created. Then John makes this astonishing statement, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The God who created the universe entered the world He created. The One who spoke light into existence stepped into a world filled with darkness. The infinite became an infant. The Creator entered

His creation. Jesus didn't come because everything was going well. He came because we needed a Savior. John tells us that in Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. Then he writes one of my favorite descriptions of Christmas: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Sadly, we live in a world where darkness is very real. People experience pain, loss, disappointment, and uncertainty. And for some of you, Christmas may be especially difficult this year. Maybe there's an empty chair at the table. Maybe you're carrying a burden nobody else knows about. If that's you, I want to encourage you today: **Jesus came because the world needed light.** God's light is stronger than the world's darkness. That's the hope of Christmas. Not that life suddenly becomes easy. Not that every problem disappears. But that **through Jesus, sin and death don't get the final word.**

John 1:12 tells us that those who receive Jesus and believe in His name are given the right to become children of God. Christmas isn't simply about remembering something that happened two thousand years ago. It's an invitation to respond to who God is and what God has done. Beyond the Christmas nativity scene, Jesus would go on to live a sinless life, die on the cross as payment for our sins, rise again on the third day, and thus provide salvation for all who trust Him as Lord and Savior (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10). The greatest gift of Christmas isn't something

we could ever earn or deserve. It's the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. And like any gift, it must be received.

So as you celebrate today, my prayer is that you will experience more than the excitement of Christmas morning. I pray you will experience the hope, peace, joy, and love that can only be found in Jesus. And as we move beyond Christmas, may we carry His light into our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities. The Christmas story doesn't end in Bethlehem. It continues through people whose lives have been changed by Jesus. Let us go and shine boldly for Him. And remember. . .

Darkness doesn't get the final word. Jesus does.
Merry Christmas, everyone!

Reflect & Respond

1. What does John 1 teach us about who Jesus really is?

2. Why is it significant that Jesus entered a broken world rather than waiting for the world to become better?

3. Have you personally received the gift of salvation through Jesus? If so, how can you reflect His light to someone else?

A Prayer for This Week

Heavenly Father, thank You for the incredible gift of Your Son. Thank You for entering our darkness and bringing us hope, peace, joy, and love. Help us remember that Christmas isn't ultimately about what we receive under the tree, but about what we've received through Jesus. May our hearts be filled with gratitude, our homes be filled with Your presence, and our lives be filled with Your light. In Jesus' name, amen.

Advent Candle Moment

Light all four Advent candles, and then light the center Christ Candle. Read John 1:4-14 together.

Family Conversation

Which Advent theme (hope, peace, joy, or love) has meant the most to you this year, and why?

Christmas Challenge

Thank God together for the gift of Jesus, then identify one way to share His love in the coming week.

A Final Invitation

Have You Received the Gift?

As we come to the end of our Advent journey, I want to leave you with one final thought. Throughout these weeks, we've talked about hope, peace, joy, and love. We've explored the stories of people who waited on God, trusted His promises, and experienced His faithfulness. And as we close this devotional together, I don't want you to miss this: Christmas isn't just about a Savior who was born. It's about a Savior who came for you.

The Bible tells us that God created us for a relationship with Him. But all of us have sinned. We've chosen our own way, fallen short of God's perfect standard, and broken that relationship. Romans 3:23 reminds us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We can't fix that separation through good behavior, religious activity, or simply trying harder. That's why Jesus came. He lived the perfect life we could never live. He died on the cross for our sins. And three days later, He rose again, defeating sin and death and making a way for us to be reconciled to God. **The baby in the manger became our Savior on the cross.** Because of His resurrection, we can experience forgiveness, new life, and the hope of eternity with Him. That's the Gospel. That's the good news of Christmas.

Salvation isn't something we earn. It's a gift we receive by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9). So let me ask you a personal question. Have you received that gift? Not just heard the Christmas story. Not just attended church. Not just believed that Jesus was a real person.

Have you personally placed your trust in Him as your Lord and Savior?

If you've never made that decision, I want to invite you to do that today. You don't need to have your entire life figured out. You don't need to clean yourself up before coming to Jesus. You simply need to recognize your need for a Savior, turn from your sin, and place your faith in Him. If that's the desire of your heart, you can express that faith through a simple prayer.

A Prayer to Receive Christ

Dear Jesus, thank You for loving me and coming into this world to save me. I admit that I've sinned and fallen short of Your perfect standard. I know I can't save myself, and I need Your forgiveness. I believe You are the Son of God, that You died on the cross for my sins, and that You rose again. Today, I turn from my sin and place my trust in You as my Lord and Savior. Forgive me, come into my life, make me new, and help me follow You. Thank You for Your grace, Your love, and the gift of eternal life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Your Next Step

If you prayed that prayer and sincerely placed your faith in Jesus, God has welcomed you into His family. You don't have to figure out what comes next on your own. We're here to help because at Mission Grove Church, we exist to help every man, woman, and child experience Jesus. Please let us know of your decision to follow Jesus. We want to celebrate with you, help you grow in your faith, and encourage you as you take your next steps through baptism, community, and serving others. And if you're still exploring faith or have questions about Jesus, that's okay, too. Keep asking questions. Keep reading Scripture. And know that there's a place for you here.

