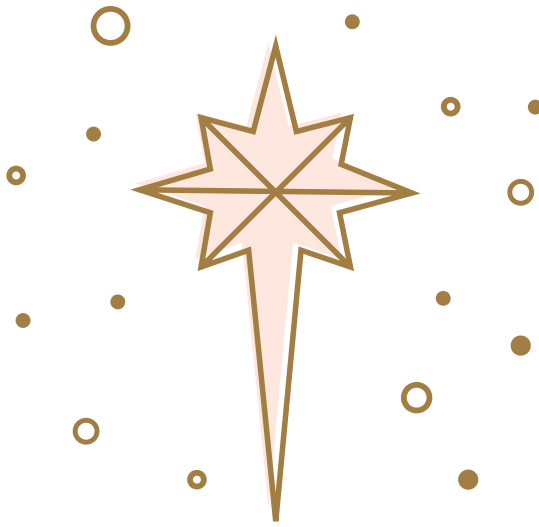


*Expecting*  
CHRISTMAS



*Expecting*  
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# *Expecting* CHRISTMAS

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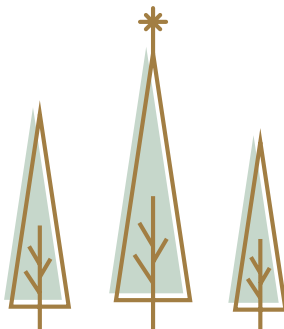
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# *Harvest Happenings*

Join us this Christmas for many wonderful events happening right on our campuses! Visit **harvest.church** for the latest events and information.

## **HARVEST GROUPS**

As much as we love gathering as a whole for corporate worship, there is something unique about an intimate gathering around a living room, a small classroom, or a dining room table. We are better when we are connected relationally.

Find your group today by going to **harvest.church/groups**.

## **RESOURCES AND PODCASTS**

For more resources, including Pastor Greg's sermons and devotions, visit our website at **harvest.org**.

Our men's and women's ministry weekly podcasts share thoughts to reinforce our Bible study as we collaborate with Pastor Greg's weekly teaching through the Bible.

***Men: Harvest Men Podcast***  
**(harvest.church/men)**

***Women: The Virtue Podcast***  
**(harvest.church/women)**

# Jesus' "To Do" List for You!

## FROM COLOSSIANS 3

With all the rushing around we do during the Christmas season, it is important to continue to share the love of Christ with others.

As you set out in your day, take these eight reminders from Colossians 3 with you. You will be glad you did!

---

### **JESUS' "TO DO" LIST FOR YOU! FROM COLOSSIANS 3**

- 1.** Set your mind on the things above (verse 2).
- 2.** Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (verse 12).
- 3.** Make allowances for one another's faults (verse 13).
- 4.** Put on love (verse 14).
- 5.** Let the peace of Christ rule your heart (verse 15).
- 6.** Be thankful (verse 15).
- 7.** Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you (verse 16).
- 8.** Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of Jesus (verse 17).

# Practical Strategies for a Simpler Christmas

***“You are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed...”***

***—Luke 10:41–42 NKJV***

- Remember that time spent with loved ones is more valuable than the need for the “perfect” setting.

*(Jesus’ birth did not depend on fancy decorations, cleanliness of the house, or gourmet goodies).*

- Don’t cram in too many organized activities.

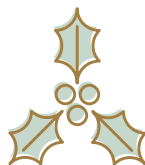
*(Setting aside time to relax and unwind will help you cope with those busy times).*

- Don’t overdo it on crafts and baking during the Christmas season.

*(It’s okay to be creative and to use your skills, but too much will put you in a stressful position and keeps you from enjoying the season.)*

- Leave the home remodeling or refurbishing projects for next year.

*(The potential rewards of a new look aren’t worth the time crunch, decision-making, expenses, or stress at an already busy time of the year.)*



- Focus on making simpler meals and prepare enough for leftovers.

*(When time is at a premium, having leftovers on hand makes meal preparation easier.)*

- Try shortening your Christmas card list by only sending cards to the people you do not see regularly.

*(Another idea would be to send cards to half your list this year and to the other half next year).*

### ***And Last but Not Least...***

- Begin each day in prayer, offering the day back to the One who gave us the greatest gift.

*(Having and keeping the right perspective of whose day it is can alter our attitudes and conduct).*

We don't have to let the busyness of the season rule our hearts. We can be less like Martha and more like Mary, who relaxed in the Lord's presence. Ultimately, only one thing is essential to our Christmas celebration: Jesus!



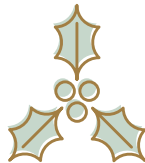


# Christmas Prayer Guide

Imagine this. You're settling down to Christmas dinner with your extended family or friends. Suddenly, everyone is looking at you. They want you to pray for the meal.

Leading a group in prayer before Christmas or any formal dinner can be intimidating. Maybe you're the only believer in the group and the others want the "religious one" to pray. Or perhaps no one wants to pray, and you feel like someone should. Even praying in front of a group of Christians can be daunting.

It doesn't have to be a burden. You have been given an opportunity to bless people, whether they're fellow Christians or nonbelievers. Here are some things to keep in mind as you prepare to pray:



### ***DON'T TRY TO DO TOO MUCH.***

Everyone at the table might be listening to you, but this is not the time to launch into a mini-sermon with an altar call. You also don't want to make it any longer than necessary, or else your guests will get upset that you're keeping them from eating.

### ***KEEP IT SIMPLE AND GENUINE.***

Be heartfelt in your words and don't use 50-cent words or religious jargon. Just like when you pray every day, you're having a conversation with God. Talk to Him the same way you would among your friends.

### ***MAKE HIM KNOWN.***

Don't be afraid to speak the name of Jesus Christ. You're not preaching to your guests, but you don't want to hide Jesus either.

### ***DON'T UNDO YOUR PRAYER.***

Even if you've given the best prayer you've ever prayed, you can unravel it with an action or a misspoken word. Remember that you are an ambassador of Christ at that table and act accordingly.

**Don't forget to use the model Jesus gave us for how we should pray in Matthew 6:9-13.**



# One-Minute Message

*“But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!” —John 9:25 NLT*

God tells us that it’s important to share our faith with other people (see Matthew 28:20). One of the best ways you can do that is by telling them your story. When you let others know how God has changed your life, it lets them see that you were once in their shoes but have now been changed by the power of Christ.

Another word for your story is your testimony. Here are some things that can help you share your testimony with your friends, family, or other people you know. Use these talking points, so you’ll never be caught off guard.

## **THREE KEYS OF A ONE-MINUTE MESSAGE**

### **1. MY LIFE BEFORE CHRIST**

Don’t glorify your past, but talk about what it was like before you became a Christian:

“I felt empty inside and nothing could fill it” (see *Ecclesiastes 3:11*).

“I felt separated from God” (see *Isaiah 59:2*).

“My life was dominated by sin and with pleasing myself” (see *Luke 15:11–24*).

### **2. MY LIFE CHANGED BY CHRIST**

Talk about how you came into a relationship with Christ. Be sure to mention the important parts of the gospel:

“I realized that I’m a sinner” (see *Romans 3:23*).

“I recognized that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins” (see *Romans 5:8*).

“I repented, or turned away, from my sins” (see *Acts 3:19*).

“I received Jesus Christ as Lord of my life” (see *Revelation 3:20*).

### **3. MY NEW LIFE IN CHRIST**

Talk about how your life is different now that you are a Christian.

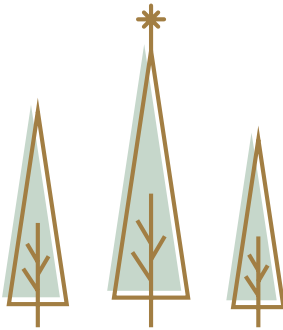
“God has given me peace” (see *Romans 5:1*).

“God has a wonderful plan for my life” (see *Jeremiah 29:11*).

“I know that I’m going to Heaven” (see *John 3:36*).



# *Introduction*



So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. . . . From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another.

– John 1:14, 16 NLT

The picture of Christmas for many of us today is this: We string our lights, we decorate our tree, and we run around buying gifts for those we love (and more gifts for those we don't love) because we feel pressured to do so. We go to countless events and run around like crazy people. But then we have to ask ourselves the question: Has God's only begotten Son become God's only *forgotten* Son? Have we lost God at Christmas? Is that possible?

Yes, it certainly is, and many of us have experienced such a loss.

We can lose God in the holiday season. But here is something to consider. If you feel far from God, guess who moved? God hasn't gone anywhere . . . but maybe you have. And in the busyness of the season and in the so-called celebration of the birth of Christ, we can forget all about Him.

You know how it is. . .on Wednesday there's a "white elephant" party at the office. Then on Thursday, there's that special Christmas movie you wanted to see with the family. And the weekend? Yikes! You haven't sent Christmas cards yet. . .and there's so much shopping. . .how will you ever get it all done?

And somewhere in it all, we lose track of our Lord.

I'm reminded of the words of Jesus to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2 when He says,

***"I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.***

***Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent."*** (Rev. 2:2-5 NKJV)

To read this account, it sounds as though the First Church of Ephesus was a busy, active, productive church. They wouldn't tolerate false teaching, and they seemed to have all their doctrinal ducks in a row. But somehow, in all that activity, work, and study, they had lost sight of Jesus. And the Lord Himself has to say to them, "You have left your first love."

Work had taken the place of worship. Perspiration had taken the place of inspiration. So the Great Physician, our Lord Himself, writes them a prescription for renewal or revival. The first step is to remember.

Remember Him. Remember from where you have fallen.

Have you lost sight of Jesus?

Let's make a real effort to remember Him by taking time for the Word of God. And by that, I mean to carve out time for Bible study. Don't just try to work it into your busy schedule. Change your busy schedule and make time for God's Word.

Let's remember Him by taking time each and every day for prayer—a time to spend in the presence of God, listening to His voice as well as baring your heart to Him and bringing your petitions to Him.

Let's remember Him by our involvement in church with His people. Not just working it in when you can find time, but understanding that there is a priority in gathering with God's people for worship and prayer. Church is not just a place where we take in. It is also a place where we give out. It is a place to use the gifts that God has given to us, seek spiritual accountability, and listen to the advice that others can give to us. It is a place to invest our finances and share in what God is doing.

Remember Him also as you look for opportunities to share your faith with others. The Christmas season is such a natural time to speak about Jesus and to tell others about the One who has been born and crucified and has risen again from the dead. Share the gift He has given you.

The real gift of Christmas isn't something we put on a wish list or under the tree. I'm not talking about Christmas presents here, but rather Christmas presence. His presence. The presence of God in our lives. Immanuel, God with us.

It boggles the mind to think how God could have been a baby. I'm reminded of my sons and grandchildren when they were newborns. They needed constant care. They needed to be nursed, changed, and cared for. And when I think of Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, as a tiny, helpless little baby, it fills me with wonder.

C.H. Spurgeon, the great British preacher, put it this way: "Infinite yet an infant, eternal yet born of a woman, supporting a universe yet needing to be carried in a mother's arms. Heir of all things and yet the carpenter's son."

It can all be summed up beautifully in 2 Corinthians 8:9, where Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

The promise of Christmas is so tantalizing, so appealing. It promises fulfillment and cheer and brotherly love. And sometimes it delivers. We hear those familiar songs that we remember from our childhood, and it gives us a good feeling. But then there is the reality when you go to the mall, and people are literally fighting over that one empty parking space. Then you get those gifts under the tree, and maybe you didn't receive what you were hoping for. You left hints for your parents. You left detailed maps to the store. But somehow, they missed it, got you something else, and you're disappointed.

Christmas promises so much, but it just can't deliver. It just can't be what you hope it will be, because at best, it is a promise of something else—a promise nothing on this earth can fulfill or satisfy.

C.S. Lewis put it this way, "All the things that ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of Heaven. Tantalizing glimpses. Promises never quite fulfilled. Echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. . .if I find in myself the desire, which no explanation is that I was made for another world. Earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy. But to arouse, to suggest the real thing."

The "real thing" Lewis was speaking of is Heaven. When it's all said and done when the food has been consumed, the parties are over, and the tree goes out on the curb for the garbage truck, it's not about the Christmas presents.



It is about His Christmas presence in our life. Christmas is not about giving a gift as much as it is about receiving a gift. The Bible says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23 NLT). It goes on to say, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15).

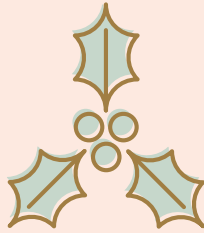
When someone offers you a gift, all you need to do is take it, open it, and appreciate it. His wonderful presence can be yours right now and forever.

So let’s not lose Jesus this Christmas. Don’t forget about Him in all the parties and celebrations—and even church services. Find those quiet moments in quiet places where you can draw near to Him, speak to Him, and hear His voice.

It is my prayer for you that this resource will help you and your family keep your focus on Jesus throughout the busyness of the season.

In Him,





WEEK 1

# *The Name Above All Names*

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us  
a Son is given; And the government will be  
upon His shoulder. And His name will be  
called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

– Isaiah 9:6 NKJV

# Reading Plan

**READ ONE PASSAGE EACH DAY THIS WEEK**

**DAY 1:** Philippians 2:9-11

**DAY 2:** Hebrews 1:1-4

**DAY 3:** Hebrews 4:14-16

**DAY 4:** John 14:27

**DAY 5:** Colossians 3:15-16

**Do the following with each passage:**

- **ASK** God to connect with you here. In prayer, invite God to be present and show you what He has for you today.
- **READ** the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that stand out to you.
- **REFLECT** on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?
- **RESPOND** to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

---

## Song

Listen to this song this week. Look up the lyrics (if you don't know them) and reflect on the fulness of the song's meaning.

***What Child Is This***

*“And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).*

Jesus. It means “Jehovah is salvation.” It is the name above every name. It is a name of great power. The Bible says that one day, at the name of Jesus Christ, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father (see Philippians 2:10-11).

There is so much in the name of Jesus for us to discover. I think we will have all eternity to do that, and we will never come to the end of its majesty and wonder. But the prophet Isaiah begins that process through the words penned seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. In this prophetic passage, Isaiah gives us a glimpse into the mighty Name.

*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given;  
And the government will be upon His shoulder.  
And His name will be called  
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).*

When you stop and think about it, each of these descriptions of Jesus’ name deals with an important area of our lives.

**HIS NAME IS WONDERFUL.** That takes care of the dullness of life. You no longer have to look to this world for shallow excitement or cheap substitutes for fulfillment. We were created to interact with an all-wise, all-powerful, infinitely beautiful, constantly engaging God. Apart from Him, nothing in this world will satisfy the deepest needs of life. Jesus Christ makes life wonderful.

**HIS NAME IS COUNSELOR.** That takes care of the decisions of life. You no longer have to be baffled by the problems of life, wondering what step to take next. He knows the future as intimately as He does the past. He has known you from the foundations of the world and wants to direct you. With Jesus Christ as our Counselor, we have the wisdom we need to make the decisions, both great and small, which confront us each day.

**HIS NAME IS MIGHTY GOD.** That takes care of the demands of life. Sometimes we can be overwhelmed with all that life dishes out. But we must

never forget that no matter what we face, we are linked to the Mighty One, the all-powerful Lord Jesus. He lives within us, helping us to follow Him and live the life He calls us to live. And Scripture reminds us that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).

***HIS NAME IS EVERLASTING FATHER.*** That takes care of the future. Knowing that as Christians we will spend all eternity with Him, we don't have to be afraid of death. You have an Everlasting Father who has a plan for your life (Jer. 29:11), loves you, cares for you, and will always be there for you.

***HIS NAME IS PRINCE OF PEACE.*** That takes care of the disturbances of life. Even when chaos rages all around, even in the middle of the storm, you can have peace because the Lord is your peace. Jesus said, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27 NLT). Certainly, we live in frightening times, but with Christ in residence in the very center of our being, we can know a peace that is far greater than anything we can understand (Phil. 4:6-7 TLB).

***AND THE GOVERNMENT WILL BE ON HIS SHOULDERS.*** We're still waiting for this to come to pass. The day is coming when He will rule and reign on the earth in righteousness (Dan. 7:14). There will be no scandals, no economic meltdowns, no grandstanding for the media or political shenanigans. But that day is still coming.

Before Jesus takes the government on His shoulders, He had to first bear a cross upon His shoulders. He surrendered His life to save us from our sins and from our futile, empty lives. We like to think of the sweet little Baby in the manger and the singing angels and the visiting wise men, and all of those things are true. But if we miss why He came, we miss everything.

But you don't have to wait for the return of Jesus Christ to experience His rule in your life. You can experience it today because this Mighty God wants to be your Everlasting Father. He wants to show you how wonderful He is as He counsels you and floods your life with His peace that passes all human understanding. The government of your life can be on His shoulders, setting you free to live the life God intended for you from the beginning.

Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. And above all, Savior and Friend.

# Reflection Questions

**1.** What is your favorite Christmas tradition? Why?

**2.** Which of these titles—“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”—particularly describes God as you have known Him during a time of difficulty?

**3.** Of the promises these names of Jesus imply, which are you in need of most today?

**4.** How have you tried to fit Jesus into your idea of who He should be or how He should act?

**5.** What would you like to do in these weeks approaching Christmas to focus your mind and heart on the wonder of Christ’s names? Take a moment to praise Him for who He is.

# *The Names of Jesus*

Creating these stars is a great way for you and your family to stay focused on the character of Jesus throughout the hustle and bustle of the season!

## **THINGS YOU'LL NEED**

- Cardstock paper
  - Star stencil
  - Markers or pens
  - Tape or a hole punch and string
- 

## **INSTRUCTIONS**

- Trace stars on pieces of paper (or draw free hand!) and cut out.
- Write “Jesus is...” on each star.
- Then you and your family write words that describe Jesus on each star.
- Either use tape or the hole punch and string to hang these stars around your home where you can be reminded of who Jesus is.

# *Peanut Butter + Celery Reindeer*

A perfect snack to have out while entertaining guests or to take to a Christmas party!

## **INGREDIENTS**

- Celery
  - Peanut Butter
  - Candy Eyeballs (Raisins or mini chocolate chips work too)
  - Mini Pretzels
  - Raspberries
- 

## **DIRECTIONS**

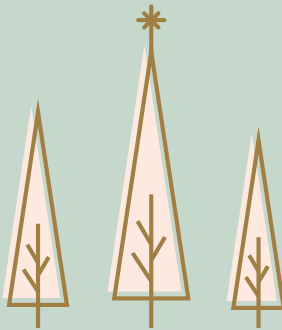
- Cut celery stalk to 5" length; spread with peanut butter.
- Break a mini pretzel in half; gently snip the curved part to form 2-3 antlers. Tuck into the peanut butter at one end of celery stick.
- Add candy eyeballs (raisins or mini-chips work well, too) and a raspberry to form the nose.

***To see a picture of the finished recipe, scan the QR code:***









WEEK 2

## *A Surrendered Life*

And Mary said, “Behold, I am the  
servant of the Lord; let it be to  
me according to your word.”

– Luke 1:38 ESV

# Scripture Reading

**READ ONE PASSAGE EACH DAY THIS WEEK**

**DAY 1:** Philippians 2:5-11

**DAY 2:** Romans 12:1-2

**DAY 3:** Mark 10:28-30

**DAY 4:** Psalm 37:3-11

**DAY 5:** 1 Peter 5:6-7

**Do the following with each passage:**

- **ASK** God to connect with you here. In prayer, invite God to be present and show you what He has for you today.
  - **READ** the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that stand out to you.
  - **REFLECT** on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?
  - **RESPOND** to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.
- 

## Song

Listen to this song this week. Look up the lyrics (if you don't know them) and reflect on the fulness of the song's meaning.

***In The Bleak Midwinter***

Mary is the most privileged woman who ever lived, but she didn't live a privileged life. In fact, she lived in what you might call a "nothing town" in the middle of nowhere.

She lived in Nazareth. Nazareth, along with Bethlehem, has been romanticized by believers down through the years. But what was it really like when Mary and Joseph lived there?

Nazareth at that time was overrun by Roman soldiers. It was a place where pagan temples had been raised for the worship of countless false gods. It was a place known for wickedness and sin. The fact is, Nazareth was one of those places that you pass through when you are on your way to somewhere else!

Nevertheless, God picked Mary and this obscure place to accomplish His purpose. He picked an unknown girl, who was possibly as young as fourteen, living in an unknown place to bring about the most known event in human history: the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here's the point: God can use ordinary people. In fact, God prefers and delights to use people like you and me to get the job done and advance His kingdom. So don't ever think of yourself as a nobody out in the middle of nowhere. God knows exactly who you are and where you are. He cares very deeply about you, and He can use you in ways beyond what you have imagined.

Mary is a prime example. He chose an unknown girl from a poorly regarded place to give birth to the King of kings.

***"Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus.' . . . Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word'" (Luke 1:30-31, 38 NKJV).***

In our lives, there are many times when we want to know God's Will before we will submit to it. We want a detailed explanation and want to read the fine print before we sign on the dotted line.

The fact is, if you want to know God's Will for your life, you need to first surrender yourself to Him – without detailed information. Without a roadmap. It is the man or woman with a surrendered heart who will know the Will of God. And like Mary, rejoice in hope of God's great plan (Luke 1:46).

Mary did that. She submitted her will to God, despite not knowing the details and despite the complications. And there certainly were complications.

When she said, "Let it be to me according to Your word," she really had no clue what it would all mean or how it would all work out. At that moment, she didn't know how Joseph would respond. . .or her family. . .or her community. The only important thing at that moment was submitting to the Lord's Will. This is the kind of attitude God is looking for in His servants. A childlike faith and obedience. A surrendered life.

Mary's head must have been swimming. How would she explain this to her husband-to-be, Joseph? This is a reminder that when we are in the Will of God, He will open doors for us and also confirm His Will. When Joseph found out about Mary's condition, he was of course devastated. But God wasn't going to leave it like that. Because Mary had submitted to God's Will, He would take care of the details with Joseph. According to Matthew's Gospel, one night while Joseph was sleeping, Gabriel appeared to him in a dream and told him the whole story (Matthew 1:18-25). God had clearly spoken to Mary. And He confirmed it to Joseph.

Despite all of the uncertainty Mary faced, she was considered to be the most blessed among all women (Luke 1:28 NKJV). And that shouldn't surprise us as there is much joy in living a life completely surrendered to the Lord.

Corrie Ten Boom once said, "There are no 'ifs' in God's world. And no places that are safer than other places. The center of His will is our only safety—let us pray that we may always know it!"

Perhaps you, like Mary, would like to be used by God someday and in some way. Then follow her example! To the best of your ability seek to live a godly life in this ungodly world. Completely surrender yourself to the Will of God before you know what it is. Having discovered it, obey it. Know that the Lord will open doors for you and confirm His Will in your life.

# Reflection Questions

**1.** Do you like change? Why or why not?

**2.** How do you tend to respond when things do not go according to your plans?

**3.** What does a life completely surrendered to Jesus look like? How closely does your life align with the ideal that you articulated?

**4.** There is joy in living a surrendered life. How have you experienced that as you have surrendered your plans to the Lord?

**5.** What particular outcomes do you need to surrender to the Lord? What can you learn from Mary's response?

# Countdown to Christmas

Counting down the days to Christmas always builds so much excitement and anticipation, and using a paper chain link is a fun way to do it. Bring God's Word into this excitement by writing Scripture on each paper link to help you and your family focus on the truth of God's Word this season—and memorize Scripture as well!

## THINGS YOU'LL NEED

- Construction paper
  - Scissors
  - Tape, stapler, or glue
  - Markers or pens
- 

## INSTRUCTIONS

- Count out the days until Christmas.
- Cut the paper into strips of about 1" x 11"—as many as days until Christmas.
- Write a verse on each strip of paper. If you want to do a whole passage of Scripture (i.e. the Christmas story in Luke 2:1-20), write one verse on each strip.
- Take one strip and connect the ends of it with tape, a stapler, or glue.
- Feed your next strip through the middle of your first chain link. Connect the ends of the second strip with tape, a stapler, or glue.
- Continue this pattern until all of your strips of paper are used. If you have any passages of Scripture on a few strips of paper, make sure those strips are all linked together consecutively.
- Hang the paper chain link somewhere in your home.
- Each day leading up to Christmas, remove one link. Put that strip of paper on the refrigerator or a door, so everyone can see it and work on memorizing the Scripture on it!

# *Cut Out Sugar Cookies*

Making sugar cookies can be messy, but it's a really fun way to get the whole family involved and a creative way to share Jesus with others! Decide together who you can deliver the cookies to. Include a card sharing Jesus and invite them to church.

## **INGREDIENTS FOR COOKIES**

- 1 cup margarine (softened, not melted)
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp vanilla
- 1 ½ to 2 cups flour

## **DIRECTIONS FOR COOKIES**

- Blend margarine, sugar, and egg.
- Mix in baking powder, vanilla, and flour until combined.
- Separate into 2 balls and refrigerate at least 1 hour.
- Roll out 1 ball at a time and use various cookie cutters to cut out cookies (try not to handle dough too much – it will start to crumble if over-handled).
- Place cookies on greased cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees for 8-12 minutes, until golden brown.
- Cool on cooling racks.
- Once cool, decorate with frosting and sprinkles.

## **INGREDIENTS FOR FROSTING**

- Powdered sugar
- Milk
- ½ tsp vanilla
- Food coloring

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FROSTING**

- Start with about 1 cup of powdered sugar.
- Add vanilla.
- Add milk until desired consistency is reached.
- Add food color as needed.







### WEEK 3

## *The Presence of Joy*

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

– Luke 2:8-11 NKJV

# Reading Plan

**READ ONE PASSAGE EACH DAY THIS WEEK**

**DAY 1:** Romans 5:1-5

**DAY 2:** Philippians 4:4-8

**DAY 3:** Habakkuk 3:17-19

**DAY 4:** James 1:2-4

**DAY 5:** Psalm 148:1-14

**Do the following with each passage:**

- **ASK** God to connect with you here. In prayer, invite God to be present and show you what He has for you today.
- **READ** the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that stand out to you.
- **REFLECT** on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?
- **RESPOND** to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

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## Song

Listen to this song this week. Look up the lyrics (if you don't know them) and reflect on the fullness of the song's meaning.

***Hark! The Herald Angels Sing***

Most of us aren't really tired of Christmas, we're tired of what it has become in our culture. But when we set all the accoutrements and add-ons aside and just go back into the simple account of our Lord's birth in Scripture, joy springs up like an artesian well. And that's exactly what we need to get back to.

Here's our main problem: Many of us try to find joy and happiness in Christmas when we really need to find the joy and happiness in Christ Himself. And that is a very big difference.

When you place your hopes and expectations on a particular celebration or special day on the calendar, you'll find yourself disappointed again and again. But when you place your hopes and expectations on the Lord Himself, He will never let you down.

The shepherds heard the angels say to them, "We bring you good tidings of great joy." Not just joy, but great joy. This famous second chapter of Luke's Gospel offers us three specific ways to discover (or rediscover) joy in Christmas.

**THE CONDITION OF JOY.** If you want to have joy this Christmas, don't be afraid (verse 10). Why? Because fear and anxiety can rob us of our joy. We think of the times we live in today as fearful times because of what we see happening in the world around us. But it wasn't exactly a Sunday school picnic in first-century Israel, either.

Those shepherds had a lot to be afraid of. They were living under the reign of the tyrant Herod, who could execute people at will. As Jews living in a land occupied by a foreign power, there was always uncertainty about the future—would Rome ever leave? Would they ever be free again?

Maybe you've been wrestling with some personal fears as well. What if I lose my job? What if the economy goes south? What if my health gives out? What if my marriage crumbles?

Are you anxious or filled with fear right now? The message of Christmas is, "don't be afraid. Instead, let great joy fill your heart." The condition of Heaven-sent joy is to let go of your fear.

**THE CALL OF JOY.** In essence, the angel was telling the shepherds, "Go ahead and rejoice whether you feel like it or not, because your world has just changed forever!"

Did you know that having the joy of the Lord is one of the most powerful magnets in your life for the gospel? It is a powerful testimony when Christians reflect a calm and joyful spirit even in the midst of adversity. The nonbeliever has nothing like it. Sure, they have their occasions of happiness, but those moments are completely dependent on circumstances. The joy that we experience in Christ can be ours whether we are in good times or bad.

When the Bible speaks of joy, it speaks of an abiding joy that's there no matter what. Maybe you're going through some deep waters right now, and it's a difficult time for you. It's hard for you to identify with "good tidings of great joy." You might say, "How can I have joy? I'm having a hard time this Christmas. I can't be joyful."

Yes, you can. And here is why. . .

**THE CAUSE OF JOY.** Look at Luke 2:11, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." What is this saying? If you want to have joy, have it for this reason. . .

You have a *Savior*. Jesus came to save you from the power and penalty of sin. Whatever you are going through in life, remember that you have a Savior. He has forgiven you of your sin and has put it as far away from you as the east is from the west.

You have a *Christ*. The name Christ means "anointed one" or Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish people to send His Son as the Messiah. It is a reminder that God keeps His promises.

You have a *Lord*. Not just a companion. Not just a buddy. You have a Lord, which means you have a Leader to tell you which way to go in life. Someone who will direct you in the way you should go and protect you as you head down that road. And someone who will welcome you into Heaven when you have finished this course.

If you are looking to this world to make you happy, you never will be. If you are looking to your husband or wife or friends to make you happy, you never will be. If you are looking to Christmas to make you happy, you never will be. You need to know Christ. That is the answer.

The message of the angels was joy. And it's yours for the asking.

# Reflection Questions

**1.** What one thing, big or small, has God done for you that gives you joy?

**2.** Read Psalm 16. What is the source of joy and delight in your life? How have you experienced joy in God's promise and presence?

**3.** How have you experienced joy in unlikely circumstances because of Christ?

**4.** Meditate on the angel's message to the shepherds in Luke 2:10-11. How should these words produce in you a joy that is deeper and more permanent than any circumstance you face?

**5.** How is God inviting you to more fully enter into the "great joy" He promised to the shepherds?

# *Christmas Card Prayers*

In the busyness of the season, we can sometimes get caught up in focusing on ourselves. Help your family focus on others by making use of those Christmas cards received in the mail.

Have each person in your family choose a card each day. Then pray together for that person or family.

Choose a time of the day that works best for you and your family to do this—maybe it's in the morning or at the dinner table or in a quiet moment at the end of the day. Be intentional. This will be such a blessing for everyone!

# Grinch Fruit Kabobs

So cute, even the pickiest appetite is sure to grow three sizes!

## INGREDIENTS

- Green Grapes (jumbo sized are best)
  - Strawberries
  - Bananas
  - Miniature marshmallows
  - Toothpicks
- 

## DIRECTIONS

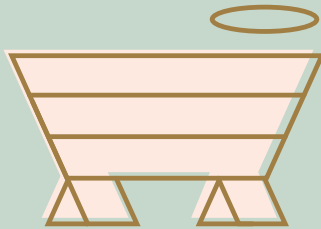
- Cut banana into ½ inch slices; trim strawberry tops to form a hat.
- Using a toothpick, skewer the banana and strawberry in place; slide the grape onto toothpick, being careful not to let the toothpick poke through the bottom of the grape.
- Top off the last tip of exposed toothpick with a mini marshmallow.

***To see a picture of the finished recipe, scan the QR code:***









## WEEK 4

# *God With Us!*

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

– Matthew 1:22-23 ESV

# Reading Plan

**READ ONE PASSAGE EACH DAY THIS WEEK**

**DAY 1:** John 6:37-40

**DAY 2:** Psalm 23:1-6

**DAY 3:** Isaiah 40:11; 41:10; 43:1-2

**DAY 4:** John 14:16-21

**DAY 5:** Romans 8:38-39

**Do the following with each passage:**

- **ASK** God to connect with you here. In prayer, invite God to be present and show you what He has for you today.
- **READ** the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that stand out to you.
- **REFLECT** on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?
- **RESPOND** to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

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## Song

Listen to this song this week. Look up the lyrics (if you don't know them) and reflect on the fulness of the song's meaning.

***Come Thou Long Expected Jesus***

(This song was written by Charles Wesley. It alludes to one or more Scripture passages in virtually every phrase. Remembering Christ's first coming while praying for his return are reflected in the text. Stanzas 1 and 2 recall Advent prophecies in the Old Testament; stanza 3 speaks of Christ's birth and kingdom, and stanza 4 is a prayer for Christ's rule in our hearts.)

God. . .the Almighty. . .the Creator. . .the King of the Universe is with us!  
And not only with us, but His Holy Spirit lives in us. That is the astonishing message of Christmas. Every other depiction of Christmas pales before this radiant reality.

The Messiah has come. And His name is called Immanuel, which means God with us.

What a staggering thought that is. “God with us” is the very essence of the Christian experience. In contrast to all the other religions of the world, Christianity doesn’t say “do,” it says “done”! Our salvation was accomplished by God Himself, for us. How? It was because of Immanuel, God with us, the God who became a man and took our penalty on Himself.

Christmas can be a lonely time of year for many people. Some people dread the month of December, wishing they could skip right from Thanksgiving to New Year’s Day. Maybe there are parents with an empty nest who miss the hustle and bustle of Christmases past. Maybe someone has lost a loved one to death, and memories of Christmas only seem to make the pain and desolation harder to bear. Maybe things at school aren’t going well with classes or friends. Or perhaps a marriage broke up or has been strained, and all the holiday celebrations seem empty and sad.

Is that a description of you? Is this a time of anxiety or sadness for you? Are you lonely and feel as though you have no one at all?

That is why the name Immanuel is so inexpressibly powerful.

GOD . . . IS . . . WITH . . . YOU.

He didn’t just say that; He named Himself that. You are not alone, and that is what God would have you understand right now.

Here is what Jesus has promised to every man or woman, boy or girl who has ever put their faith in Him: “I will never leave you nor forsake you. . . . And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV; Matthew 28:20, NLT).

That is the bottom line of life itself. Jesus, and Jesus alone, will meet your needs—not Christmas presents, not even family and friends. People, even good people who love you, can't always be there for you. They will let you down in some way, shape, or form. You and I have let down people, and we have been let down by people in turn. But Jesus never will let you down. He alone is the answer to loneliness, and He will live with you, beside you, and within you.

In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

Jesus is saying, "Come on. Let's drop the pretenses. Let's get real here. I want to be your friend. I want to have fellowship with you. I want to spend time with you." He's saying, "I want to hang out with you. We'll order dessert and some coffee. I've got all the time in the world, and I'm interested in everything you have to say. I want fellowship, friendship, and intimacy with you."

That is "God with us."

The very thought of this should touch us deeply. Just to think that God—the Almighty Creator of the universe—would be vitally interested in each of us! To think that He actually wants to be a part of all we say and do! How could it be true? And yet, it is true.

Christmas is coming, and . . . Christmas is almost over. The presents will be opened, and all that pretty paper will be in the trash can at the curb, along with the tree. You will soon be tired of those new toys and gadgets, and you'll move on to other things.

But if you have Immanuel, what does it matter?

Christmas comes and goes, but Immanuel stays forever.

# *Reflection Questions*

**1.** What is your favorite part of Christmas?

**2.** Think about the words “God with us.” What thoughts or feelings arise when you think about Immanuel?

**3.** As Christmas draws near, examine your heart and your desires. Do you crave more stuff, or do you crave more of Jesus?

**4.** God is always with you. How can you best seek to experience God’s presence in your life?

**5.** What reminds you that God notices and loves you?

# Handprint Wreath

This is one of those keepsake Christmas decorations, and it is easy to create! Once you make one, you'll probably want to make more to give to loved ones!

## THINGS YOU'LL NEED

- Pen
  - Colored construction paper—you can use traditional green of a wreath or be creative!
  - Red Cardstock (or red pom poms would be really cute!)
  - A paper plate
  - Scissors
  - Glue or tape
  - Small round circle punch
  - Ribbon
- 

## INSTRUCTIONS

- Trace your family members' hands on the construction paper and cut out. Make around 10-12 hand cutouts.
- Take the paper plate and cut out the center of it.
- Glue or tape the handprints around the rim of the plate to make a wreath. Overlap the hands and put the larger ones on the bottom with the smaller ones on top.
- Cut out red circles (or use pom poms) and glue or tape them in bunches of three in a couple of places on the wreath.
- Use a hole punch to make a hole at the top and string the ribbon through it.
- Then hang it up somewhere in your home or give it as a gift!

# Have Yourself a Very Veggie Christmas

With cookies and sweets galore this time of the year, this is a fun way to remember to eat your veggies!

## INGREDIENTS

- Broccoli crowns
- Yellow Baby Bell Pepper
- Cherry tomatoes
- Pretzel Sticks
- Cauliflower florets
- Veggie Dip of choice

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## DIRECTIONS

- Choose a platter or cutting board large enough to accommodate whatever size tree you plan to create.
- Starting from the bottom, arrange cauliflower florets to form a base of “snow” for your tree. Use string or a rubber band to bundle several pretzel sticks together to form tree trunk. Tuck it into the cauliflower.
- Add broccoli crowns, forming the shape of a tree; tuck in cherry tomatoes for the garland (or scattered like Christmas balls).
- Add the finishing touch: Arrange thinly sliced yellow baby bell pepper for the star on top!
- Serve with your favorite veggie dip.

***To see a picture of the finished recipe, scan the QR code:***







