
ONE STAR,
ONE HOPE.
An Advent & Christmas Devotional
for Individuals and Families
vineyard usa

A **Christmas** greeting to you and yours from the **Vineyard** family.

Dear Friends,

As we celebrate Advent and Christmas, the word "Hope" is on the minds of people all over the world. So many put their hope in all kinds of things – from political leaders, to jobs, to bank accounts – none of which can satisfy.

But real Hope, Christmas Hope, is bigger than all of that. "Hope," the Bible says, "…is an anchor for the soul, firm and secure" (Heb. 6:19). It is the "expectation of God's goodness" that enables average people to live above-average lives. Hope is what Christmas is all about.

This devotional is about people in the Bible who learned to radically put their Hope in something, *Someone*, beyond themselves. In that first Christmas story, everyone was risking their lives to be a part of what God was doing – and the cost was very high. It was Hope – Hope that God heals, delivers, and rescues us – that kept them all going when the going got tough.

"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Isaiah 9:6-7

The church of Jesus Christ is an ideal spot to carry Hope to a world spinning its wheels trying to find a little bit of peace and joy in life.

My prayer for you this Christmas is that you would find the Hope that has been giving new life to millions across the world for thousands of years. Jesus Christ is our only true Hope, and he is the only one who can fulfill every promise he's made. This Christmas, may this devotional help you and your family find your Hope in Christ again. Jesus is your Hope and mine – and the only Hope for the world today.

Have a wonderful Christmas season, from my family to yours.

Phil Strout
National Director, Vineyard USA

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There is only one **Star** we can trust to guide us all safely **home**.

Have you ever had the experience of seeing one solitary star, in a clear night sky, outshining all the rest? Like a diamond floating on a ocean of darkness, the star shimmers, beams, and hypnotically holds our gaze.

Over two thousand years ago, one such star graced a deep evening sky. Eyes in many places were lifted from the ground as it rose high above a small town in the ancient land of Israel. That first, brilliant Christmas star:

+ Filled desperate souls with *Hope*,
+ Quieted anxious minds with *Peace*,
+ Lifted heavy spirits with *Joy*, and
+ Carried vulnerable hearts with *Love*.

Many Hope seekers found their greatest dreams realized when they saw it in the Bethlehem sky. They'd been expecting it, searching for it, *all their lives*. Some didn't even know they'd been looking for it, but their hearts were waiting, watching for God to *do* something in their lives. When that star of

"Out of His fullness, we have all received Grace."

John 1:16 NIV

Hope appeared, their eyes were ready to behold it. Wise men trusted that star, and crossed a desert with only its light as their guide. Shepherds were awestruck as a choir of countless angels used that bright celestial object as a theatrical backdrop. A young mother and her husband, nestled in a small shed full of animals, felt its light on their faces as they looked on at the miracle of new life before them.

That first Christmas star was pointing to *Jesus*, and was a vivid symbol, a sign, that God was *acting* in the midst of the darkness of their day. What those first stargazers may not have known was that God was lighting up the darkness of every age, shouting by starlight, "Your shadows have been pierced with the light of Hope! Embrace the joy of knowing Christ Jesus!" Ever since his birth over 2000 years ago, Jesus – God's presence in flesh and blood – has been filling hungry souls with Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

No other star in history – no pop star, political star, tv star, or religious star – has ever outshined the One who the timeless Scriptures call "Immanuel" (meaning "God with us" – Matt. 1:23). During Advent (the 4 weeks leading up to Christmas), we remember that Jesus is God's Star, heralding God's love and forgiving power to you and me.

Each devotional here is for one of the Sundays leading up to Christmas. The fifth, and final devotional, is for Christmas Day. Use these short reflections around a meal table, or on your own. More than anything, lift your eyes to God's Star – *Jesus* – as your Hope this season.

The **Hope** of the world will ultimately have His way – and His way brings **life**.

ADVENT WEEK 1

HOPE is a word that gets a lot of airplay in the music, movies, political pulpits, and marketing arenas of our day. We are told that if we buy the right product, listen to the right music, vote for the right politician, or choose the right church, then all things will go well for us – we'll get *our* way. We'll be happy, laughing like the people in the commercials or in the posters displayed in the mall. But what if *our* way, isn't the *best* way?

In the biblical story of Christmas, there were three sages, or wise men, who were by all accounts astrologers and magicians. They weren't concerned with everything going *their* way. In fact, as they studied the Scriptures day and night by the dim flicker of an oil lamp, they were discovering how all of human history was meant to go *God's* way. On the day these men discovered God's plans to reveal himself to them and to the world, they must have felt the power of Hope stirring, drumming, deep within their souls.

When they saw that distant, pulsing star in the night sky, they were ready

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

Matthew 2:11

to respond. They packed their treasures and crossed a threatening desert to follow a foreign star – to find the promised child who was to be born. They weren't just looking for a King who would be over all other kings – they were looking for *their* King. They wanted to be a part of God getting his way – in their lives and in the life of the world.

We often find that for which we are looking, when we look with everything we've got. What are you looking for? In what have you placed your hope? God is interested, this Christmas, in getting his way in your life, because he knows his way will bring life to you. Like the Magi, choose this Christmas to yield, once again, to God's purposes for your life. There is no safer path to walk, whether you're crossing a desert, or facing the day ahead.

Apply This In Your Life

The Wise Men of Matt. 2:1-12 were committed to finding the One who was guiding them by His star. Are you actively looking for God in your life right now? If so, know that he is always at work. What is he doing right now? How is he showing himself to you? Is there Hope in your heart?

A Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, like the Magi, I want to be as committed to finding you at work in my life as you are committed to doing that work. Fill me with the kind of faith that will cross deserts to find you. I am looking for you.

Suggested Songs: *Humble King; O Come, Come Emmanuel*

Our **hunger** for a quiet heart can only be satisfied by knowing a **Person**.

ADVENT WEEK 2

PEACE is an elusive treasure for many people in our generation. We are restless, seeking to fill the vacuum of meaning in our lives with garages full of stuff, hearts full of appointments, and heads full of fantasies.

A young girl named Mary, from a small village in Israel, was not interested in finding her inner peace through the latest fashions, a popular group of friends, or through an endless stream of social media. She wasn't filling her hours standing in front of a mirror, dreaming of stardom, or soaking in the dull roar of a permanently powered-up television or smart phone. Mary was a girl of intimate prayer – and her life's dream was to learn how to stay near to God. For Mary, a peaceful heart was achieved by knowing a *Person*.

One night, when an angel visited Mary, the celestial being found her ready and waiting for God to use her to do great things. Mary's knowledge that peace, lasting peace, could never come from anyone or anything other than her loving God, bred in her a constant confidence. That confidence would

"But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

Luke 1:30-33

carry her through the days of embarrassment and social stigma required for her to bear the Son of God for a misunderstanding world.

Mary understood, as we must, that peace is not found simply in the absence of difficulty. True peace is found in the presence of Someone who loves us beyond measure, and can be completely trusted with our lives. She could suffer any trial, fulfill any dangerous mission that God might dream up, because her peace was forged in an intimate, ongoing relationship with him. Young Mary, just a teenage girl with a tender heart, was ready for *anything* that first Christmas.

Apply This In Your Life

What do you do to keep 'peace' in your life? Are you finding your peace in "stuff," activities, or by creating a comfortable life? Consider today that the most peaceful life on earth may not be found by avoiding our inner turmoil, but by bringing it to the One who is called, "The Prince of Peace" in the Scriptures. He, Jesus, is the one who holds the peace you desire.

A Closing Prayer

There is no greater peace found, Lord, than in your loving presence. Forgive me for looking for peace in so many places other than in my walk with you. I choose to stay close to you as my source for a quiet, calm heart.

Suggested Song: *O Come, All Ye Faithful*

The essence of **Joy** is found in experiencing the presence of **Christ**.

ADVENT WEEK 3

JOY is a constant sense of well-being that doesn't depend on what is in our checking account or on every one of our relationships being "perfect." Joy, according to the Christmas story, is tasted when we are drawing our sense of well-being from the *presence of God in our lives*. Thankfulness teaches our eyes to see every situation through the lens of joy, and joy slowly starts to become a more normal experience in our daily lives.

The shepherds in the Christmas story were *not* known for being joyful people. In fact, they were considered to be the bums, the thieves, and the fringe of proper society in first century Palestine. Dismissed by their own culture as morally questionable and spiritually empty outcasts, the shepherds found their sense of (smelly) community with one another and the sheep they tended. We can imagine that a shepherd might look up into the starry sky, night after night, wondering, *"Does God even care about what happens to me?"*

To this group of heavy, laboring hearts, God draws near. On the night

"'This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.'"

Luke 2:12-14

that Christ is to be born, the sky parts like a theatrical curtain, and a star-studded spectacle with a celestial fireworks display fills the night. As a million voice angelic choir sings (we could imagine that being what "a great company" means), one angel triumphantly announces the birth of Jesus to these aimless wanderers. The shepherds are truly in "shock and awe" as vast numbers of heavenly singers proclaim: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

In that moment, no shepherd could have felt outcast, marginalized, on-the-outside-looking-in, or unloved by God. He had come to *them!* The miracle was announced to *them!* With a personal invitation to the first Christmas Party, the shepherds threw off their fears and got connected to God's plan.

Apply This In Your Life

The shepherds are an example of how God comes to those who are lonely and disenfranchised, and shows them how much he cares about them. Are you feeling on the outside, looking in? In God's heart for you, there is no outside. There is only *in* – you are right in the middle of his love for you.

A Closing Prayer

Lord, my joy is in knowing that you love me, are with me, and are guiding my life. I choose to lean into your presence, so that I can begin to experience the real, timeless joy of being Your child.

Suggested Songs: *Glory To God; Angels We Have Heard On High*

The extravagant **love** of our Father God gives all for those in His **care**.

ADVENT WEEK 4

LOVE is the ingredient that makes a life worth living. We all are designed to love and be loved, and to know we are treasured and valued. The most healthy families are those in which people can be themselves – and be loved anyway! But love in a home only works when people have learned how to sacrifice their preferences for the sake of others in the family.

Joseph was a man who understood extreme sacrifice. Like the father in the famous story of the Prodigal Son (prodigal means "wastefully extravagant"), Joseph's heart was full of extravagant, sacrificial love for his little family. The prodigal son story should actually be called the story of the "Prodigal Father!" A father who loves this deeply is ready to be wastefully extravagant with his care to see another grow strong and full of Hope.

Joseph, like most fathers, was willing to waste his life to see his precious Mary and baby be safe. When he was first confronted with Mary's pregnancy, he was dumbfounded. He was going to separate from her quietly

"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them."

Luke 2:6-7

to give her any dignity he could. Then, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and he became convinced that God's lavish love was behind Mary's wild story. Joseph wanted in. He risked *everything* that mattered in that day – his reputation, his business partnerships, his family relationships, and his standing in his faith community – to take the heat and keep Mary as his wife.

Like our Father God, Joseph stayed consistent and unchanging in his off-the-charts love. He led Mary and his child on a long journey, made a warm, makeshift bed in a humble stable, and carefully parented the Son of God, Jesus, to adulthood. Your entire life, God's extravagant love will follow *you*.

Apply This In Your Life

Can you see the heart of your Father God in the life of Joseph? His love for you is so extravagant, so caught up in who you are, that he is willing to do anything to see you become who he has made you to be. Say yes to God's love for you today, and build your life on the foundation of his care.

A Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, show me how much I am loved this Christmas. Let your "perfect love drive out fear" as the Bible says, and lead me to the fires of your great love for me.

Suggested Carol: *The First Noel*

The **birth** of Jesus brings Hope to the **world** – and to your life and mine.

CHRISTMAS DAY

The birth of Jesus Christ is the surest sign that God is with us, is calling us, and is ready to lead us to the day when the Scriptures say "all things will be made new" (Is. 65:17-18). Because of Jesus, *you* and *I* can be made new.

In God's story revealed in the Bible, the world is not headed toward a time when people all learn to love each other from their own strength. It's also not headed toward a time when people meaninglessly disintegrate the earth and each other out of greed, hatred, or a nuclear fistfight. God's story tells us he is ultimately in charge of our future, and that we are headed toward a day when, with Jesus in charge of the world at his return, all things will be restored and renewed. This world will be turned right side up, as it was meant to be, guided and led by Jesus – who is Love and Hope incarnate.

So, Merry Christmas – Jesus is the Hope of humanity! Because Jesus came at Christmas, and because he is coming again, there will one day be no tyrants, children sold into slavery, or debilitating illness. There will be no more

"The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 1:14

broken families, broken relationships, or broken hearts. At the end of all things, Christ will restore all that the Bible tells us was lost when human beings rebelled against God at the beginning of time. But the really good news today is that you are receiving a Christmas gift from God. Here it is.

One of the things that was lost, that God came to restore at Christmas, is *you*. God loves you – and there is nothing you can do about it! In offering your life to Jesus Christ, he will make you new – into the person he has designed you to be. Give in to His love again this Christmas, and find the Hope that will last a lifetime. Be a true Stargazer today – and seek Jesus, the One Star, the One Hope, of the world. He will be found if you look for him with all your heart. The light of his love will guide you home.

Apply This In Your Life

Like the wise men, Mary, the shepherds, and Joseph in the Christmas story, make it your mission to follow Jesus as your Star of Hope. Don't look to other "stars" that can't deliver on their promises. Rather, look to Jesus. He will always be your source for what you truly need in this life.

A Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, I choose to follow you (again) today. As Christmas declares your love for me, for my family and friends, and for the world, so too I am ready to declare my love for you. I am ready to step into your plan for me.

Suggested Carol: *Joy To The World*

Why should we celebrate **Advent** and **Christmas**?

"It's the most wonderful time of the year..." ring the words of an old Christmas song. But why? Why does celebrating Christmas, and the season of Advent that leads up to it, matter?

In the early centuries of the Church, it became clear that the rhythms of time – days, weeks, years, and lifetimes – could be used to help Christians remember and reclaim the saving events of the Gospels. Jesus' birth (the Incarnation), and Jesus' triumph over death (the Resurrection), were the two obvious themes that would shape the year.

By repeating certain "cycles" each year, based around these two themes, Christians could begin to orient their entire lives around remembering, reclaiming, and retelling what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. This was called the "Christian Year," or for our purposes, the Worship Year.

Two cycles take us through the year, and enable us to order our lives around a Christ-centered spirituality. The *Cycle Of Light* includes Advent (anticipation), Christmas (celebration), and Epiphany (proclamation). The *Cycle Of Life* includes Lent (anticipation), Easter (celebration), and Pentecost/After

"But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

Luke 1:30-33

Pentecost (proclamation). Advent is the official beginning of the Worship Year, and is a season of hope, of expectation, and of waiting. In Advent we remember the longing for deliverance from evil and oppression experienced by the ancient Jews, and the anticipation of God's Kingdom breaking in on their behalf.

Like a child who loves to have a story read over and over again, we reclaim the powerful saving events of Christmas by retelling them – the Story of God's love breaking into our reality in Jesus. Have you ever considered reading the Christmas story aloud with family or friends on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day? Here are the main Christmas passages you can use.

Luke 1:26-38
(The Angel visits Mary, Mary's response, the Magnificat - Mary's song of worship)

Matthew 1:18-25 or **Luke 2:1-7**
(Matthew: The engagement, Joseph's dream; Luke: Census and short birth narrative)

Luke 2:8-20
(The Shepherds see the Angelic Host)

Matthew 2:1-12
(The Wise Men come from the East)

The **songs** of Christmas keep us centered on God's great **Story**.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel

O come, O come Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel;
That mourns in lowly exile here,
Until the Son Of God appear

Rejoice, Rejoice,
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel

Traditional, Public Domain

O Come All Ye Faithful

O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come, ye, o come ye to Bethlehem;

Come and behold Him,
Born the King of angels,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him,
O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

John Francis Wade, Public Domain (1751)

Angels We Have Heard On High

Angels we have heard on high,
Sweetly singing o'er the plains;
And the mountains in reply,
Echo'ing their joyous strains

Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo

Come to Bethlehem and see,
Him whose birth the angels sing;
Come adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord the newborn King

Gloria, in excelsis Deo
Gloria, in excelsis Deo

Traditional, Public Domain

The First Noel

The first Noel, the angel did say,
Was to certain poor shepherds
In fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,
Born is the King of Israel

W. Sandys, John Stainer, Public Domain

Joy To The World

Joy to the world, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart, prepare Him room

And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

He rules the world, with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove;
The glories of His righteousness,

And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders of His love.

Isaac Watts, Public Domain

Humble King

You are the God of the broken
The friend of the weak
You wash the feet of the weary
Embrace the ones in need

And I want to be like you Jesus
To have this heart in me
You are the God of the humble
You are the humble King

Here in this dusty ground
I bow with kings
Where wise men laid before
Their offerings
I lay no golden crown
Here at Your feet
Just this my broken life
I offer Thee

Oh kneel me down again
Here at Your feet
Show me how much You love humility

Oh, Spirit be the star
That leads me to
The humble heart of love
I see in You

Brenton Brown/Humble King 1999
Vineyard Songs (UK/EIRE) CCLI 2650388

Glory To God

Peace on earth
There is hope for everyone
Tell the world
That the saving King has come

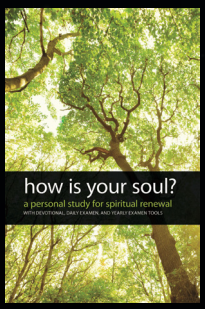
And His light is here
For all who live in darkness
And His love is here
For all the broken hearted

Glory to God, glory to God
Glory to God in the highest
Glory to God, glory to God
Glory to God in the highest

Jesus, Messiah the promise fulfilled
The hope of the world born for us
And all who believe Him
And all who receive Him
Are children born of God

Brenton Brown/Terry Butler - Humble King 2002
Vineyard Songs (UK/EIRE)/Mercy/
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