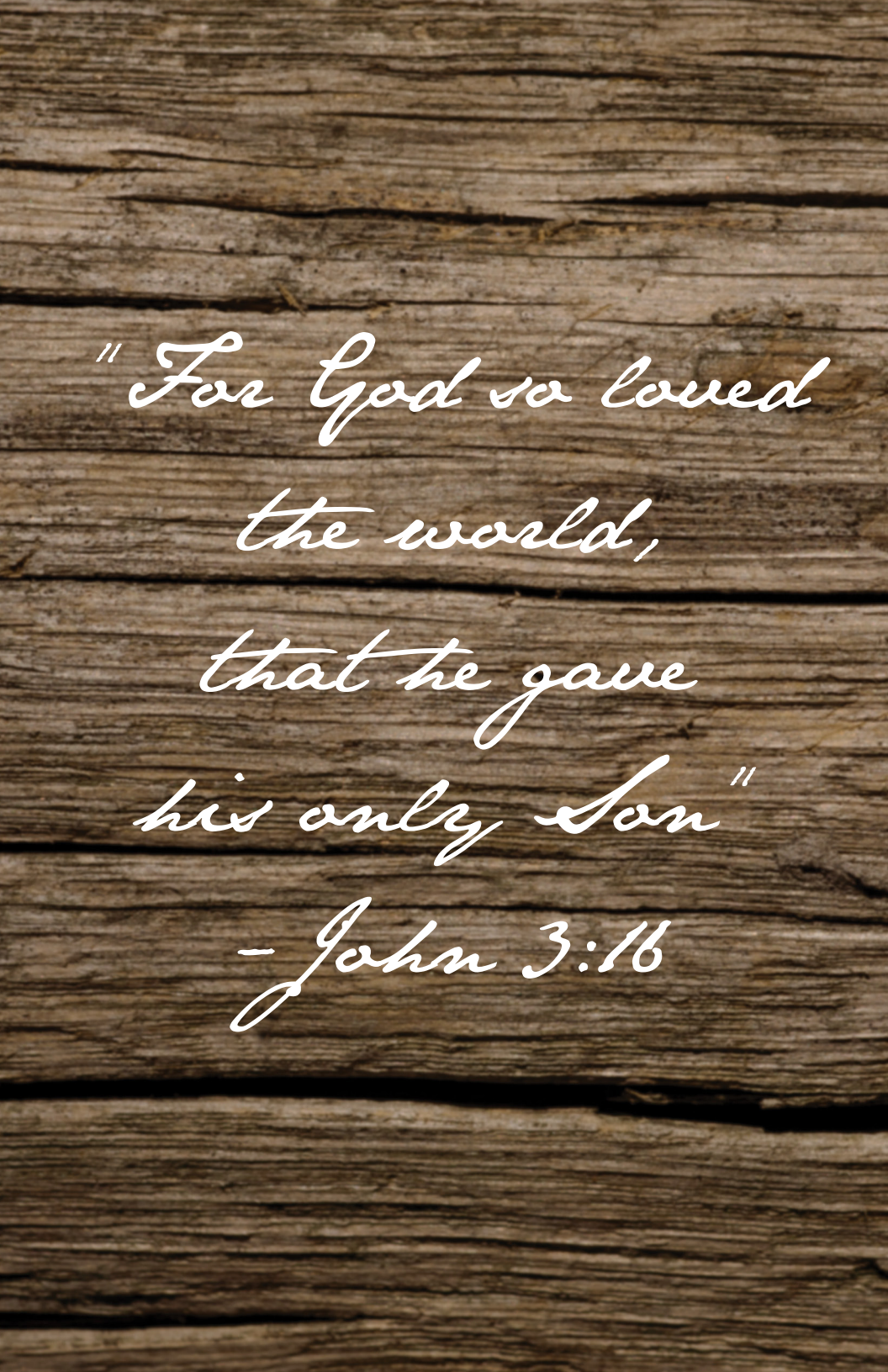
Receive the Blessing

Experiencing Christ's Love at Christmas



vineyardusa


"For God so loved
the world,
that he gave
his only Son"
-John 3:16

Receive the Blessing

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Introduction

Wherever you live in the world, Christmas is in the air – in some form – at this time of year. It is a season of the *heart,* and the central theme of the messages we hear on the radio, the television, and in churches, is often centered around the mystical idea of "love." Love is an elusive term that can mean many different things to many different people. But it remains true that experiencing love, being warmed by love, and sharing love is an idea that connects deeply with people at their emotional center. We may not know exactly what love is, but we often know it when we *experience* it.

Love Comes To Us At Advent

The word "Advent" literally means, "the coming," and Christmas is about Love coming to find us – each of us – *right where we are*.

Receive The Blessing is about deeply experiencing the Love we're all ultimately looking for this Christmas. While people wander the malls this season, searching for the perfect Christmas presents for those they love, the story of the Incarnation in the Bible reveals to us the perfect Gift that God chose for each one of us. That Gift, that Blessing, is a specific kind of love offered and secured for us in the person of Jesus Christ. There is no greater Gift on planet earth that could be given from God to you than this love that heals, forgives, saves, affirms, and ultimately *changes* us – from the inside out.

And yet, even the most devoted of us don't always look for the kind of love we need in the person of Jesus, no matter how often we sing the Christmas songs or hear the lofty sermons. The faintest imitations of love can capture our affections and disorient us from the most magnificent blessing you or I could receive – an encounter with Christ's love.

No deadly despair, lingering loneliness, or freezing fear can stand against the living warmth of Christ's love embracing us at the core of our identity, saying: "You are beautiful, you are special, and you have great value to me. I am committed to you, and all your are becoming. You are mine, and I am yours." As perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible says, "For God so loved..." that "he gave his only Son" (Jn. 3:16). Jesus is the Love of God, expressed to us, at Christmas.

The Love Deficit Within

However, Love expressed does not always mean Love received. Like rain resisted by hard, dry ground, we can each repel love without knowing we are doing it.

We all learned how love works, or doesn't work, in our homes as we grew up. In some homes, love is lavishly given, even when a child is doing things that are selfish and harmful to others. In other homes,

children must perform to receive any shred of affection, knowing it will be withheld if they don't follow all the rules. Most of us intuitively know a purer, more holy love when we see it – noting the compelling bond, utter acceptance, and lack of conditions existing between two people.

Even Christians silently struggle in our own hearts to receive the Love of God. In fact, many settle for a life of "loveless" faith, expecting little of the affections of God to ever reach a place where they would really *feel* it inside, like a warm fire pushing back a cold night.

Why is it so hard to give and receive love? For one thing, our capacity to love, and to be loved, is broken. Our internal instruments are uncalibrated and insensitive, making us people who are love-challenged, always being offered the greatest of Loves, but never knowing how to live *inside of that Love,* like a home.

Jesus Is The Blessing Of God To You

God knew this love-challenge existed in us. For that reason, the concept of "blessing" was introduced in the Bible. A *blessing,* it could be said, is God's Love *with skin on*. It is a real, tangible expression of all the characteristics of Love – affection, affirmation, commitment, consistency, selflessness, presence, and unconditional acceptance. The Christmas story is the most powerful expression of blessing we have in human history. God expressed His love to men and women, His blessing, in the *physical, personal, and prophetic person of Jesus Christ.*

Jesus is the blessing of God, given to you and I at Christmas – and all that he is, is yours.

Blessing is the triumphant pronouncement, by God, of His Love for you. That is why the Christmas story begins with angel choirs filling the sky, and a young virgin worshipping at the news she is with child by the Holy Spirit. It is why the Wise Men bowed to praise, and to offer gifts, at the sight of Love Incarnate.

This Christmas we can dispense with tying blessing to financial reward or personal success (though the winners at every award show push us to make that faulty connection). God's blessing has *already come to us*, and Christmas is the watershed moment of the Blessing's appearance. To welcome Jesus into the rugged places of our hearts, yet again, is to receive the Blessing of Christmas. We are loved. You are loved. End of story – and the beginning of the Christmas story.

Jesus expresses God's commitment to unconditionally love you through all your life circumstances.

Jesus is a Gift to be received, given at the fullness of time, to gift you with a hope-filled present and future.

Jesus is the balm for the wounds of the heart that inevitably come, healing them with a warm, constant inner pronouncement that you are loved – and will be loved forever.

Love is who God is, and what He does so well. Open your heart to receive God's Love, expressed through Christ, again this Christmas.

Receive the Blessing of the Living Water

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the *Living Water* that saturates the dry ground of your thirsty heart – and satisfies your need for affection.

Scripture

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." Jn. 4:10

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs." Isa. 41:18

Devotional

Have you ever seen a dried up river-bed? Cracked and split by the sun, deep fissures have opened up and a place that was once teeming with life has become desert-dead. Though seeds and living things may be sunken beneath the soil, there is no hope of vibrant new life– unless *water* appears on the scene. Water softens, tenderizes, and invites new life – just like *affection* does for the brittle, parched heart.

This past year, have you known the struggle of the *thirsty-heart*?

The soil of our heart becomes dry, and our love-craving causes us to search wildly in desperation for any sign of affection from another.

The teenage girl has a thirsty-heart that leads her to the wrong boys. The executive has a thirsty-heart that leads him to indiscretions with a fellow employee. The lonely, isolated wife has a thirsty-heart that pushes her to find comfort in the promiscuous virtual relationships of soap operas, movies and romance novels.

The thirsty-hearted Christian? We may seek love and affection from others by performing in our homes, ministry roles, or church activities. Yet our anxious soul remains impervious to even the best of human affections. (To mix the metaphor, we are like a bottomless cup – we simply cannot access what is being poured into us.)

A daily lack of God's affection raining on us, soaking our souls to become good, fruitful soil again, is our greatest need. Our capacity to appreciate the affections of others is directly tied to our ongoing experience of the affection of God.

Jesus broke through the dam of the human condition at Christmas as the Living Water. He knew he was the only cure, the only satisfaction, for the heart thirsty for affection.

When we worship, when we quiet our turbulent search for human affection to satisfy our inner drought, then Jesus comes to us as the Water of Life. He advances like a storm of Love toward us, and we begin to put aside our lesser loves in expectation of his presence. Worship invites the rain; and opens us up to the liquid love of God's presence, running through the channels in our soul.

Here, again at Christmas, you and I can experience the affections of God. He is the River of Life, rushing toward you now. He is acquainted with your thirst, and is eager to quench it with His affection for you, expressed through His Word and His presence. Quiet your heart, lower the wall, and welcome Him to flow in.

Christmas holds very good news for the heart thirsty for affection. Jesus came to us as the tender Love of God incarnate – the God of the surprise rains and the faithful flood.

The good news is that you, and I, can be satisfied by God's love today.

Isaiah, the prophet, seeing deep into God's future to Jesus' coming, reminds you and I of this promise:

"I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs"(Isa. 41:18).

Is your soul, this Advent, thirsty for God's affection?

Love is rushing your way. And Jesus, your Living Water, is the one rushing – rushing for *you*.

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, God's love expressed to you this Christmas. Welcome his Living Water to slowly pass over your thirsty-heart, softening any hardness and penetrating your need for affection.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

Is your soul, this Advent, in a dry and thirsty place? How can you open yourself up to God's affection?

Take 30 minutes today to ask the question, *"God, how much do you love me?"*

Receive the Blessing of the Bread of Life

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the Bread of Life that fills your hunger for affirmation.

Scripture

"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry....'" Jn. 6:35a

Devotional

Around the holidays, many of us sit at a table, overflowing with food, and eat until we are just beyond full. We sit back, grateful for the tastes and sustenance that came our way, and declare, "I've had enough." In other words, we are *satisfied*. We can't eat another bite, and wouldn't if something was offered.

Hunger is far from us in that moment. But after a few hours, however, the hunger returns. Our body only carries the food in our bloodstream until its resources are depleted. Then we must go back to the refrigerator – our 'source' – for more.

Maybe you have experienced, or are experiencing now, a *hungry-heart*.

A hungry heart has a slowly growing, growling hunger within for *affirmation*. We crave that moment when someone will look us in the eye and say, "You are special. You have our attention. You're a gift to us all. We are all better, more whole, because of your presence." (Many parents would faint at hearing those words from their teenager or young adult child!)

Hungry for the kind of affirmation that really 'sticks to our ribs,' a valuing of us and our labors that puts a stamp of approval on our hearts (and silences the inner demons that tell us we're really not that significant), we seek our identity from other people, and from what we do. Yet we quickly become hollow again – and must keep going back for more.

Many years ago the church father Augustine said, "My heart is restless, until it finds its rest in Thee." He knew that his heart was a bottomless pit, and there was not enough bread from others, or from his roles in life, to keep him filled.

Sure, a few words of affirmation will sustain us for a short time, but what happens when the accolades pass and things get hard? What happens when affirmation is taken from us, when someone is disappointed, or when a project either ends – or worse yet – fails? Augustine knew the satisfaction that he could get from others' affirmations was unsustainable. We will always need

more than they can ever give.

Imagine that you could so experience the love of God filling your spiritual belly, satiating your hunger and dissolving your need to feast on the affirmation of others, that you stopped pursuing your identity from the tasks that you do. Imagine that the affirmation you now seek from your spouse, children, friends, or co-workers would be met by Jesus – God's affirming love in the flesh? Full and satisfied, you "can't eat another bite" – and people begin to see that

Where are you seeking your affirmation right now?

your sense of value and worth comes from *deep within*. At this point, you are eating Bread that lasts forever.

Generation after generation, families pass down the hunger of insecurity in various ways, and generations of men and women groan through their extended, shattered relationships: "Somebody, please affirm me, please pay attention to me, please *feed* me." God knew there was only one way to break the cycle of the insecure heart, spinning out of control in the pursuit of affirmation since Eden.

Jesus, born in the most loving, yet challenging of circumstances, entered the world as Love incarnate. Born in Bethlehem, which literally means "The House Of Bread," he knew that his affirmation was the only remedy for the disease of insecurity.

Mary Magdalene, a woman forgiven of so much for so long, knew what it was like to be hungry for affirmation. Jesus had pushed through her made-up, put-on, painted-over veneer – and spoke words that convinced her she would never be left or forsaken. When she poured her perfume on his feet, wiping them with her hair and embarrassing herself as only love will do, she was showing the company in the house what it's like to have love inside you, filling you from the center out.

When her spiritual void was filled with the Bread of Life, she simply *wasn't hungry anymore*. She didn't need the bread of others' approval. She had the approval of God.

Today, Jesus is approaching you as the Bread of Life. Will you receive the blessing of God's love, meeting the hunger for affirmation in your heart?

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, God's love expressed to you this Christmas, and welcome the Bread of Life to be your feast, filling your hungry-heart's need for affirmation and satisfying your craving for identity.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

Pause for a moment. Where are you seeking your affirmation right now? Who are you looking toward to affirm your identity, and to fill your need to feel valued? Why is Jesus, the Bread of Life, a better answer to your hunger? In a journal, write down each area of insecurity in your life, and write about how you will turn to Christ for your affirmation in each.

Receive the Blessing of the Way to the Father

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the Way to the Father – the one who cuts a path for you into your future that leads to your destiny in God.

Scripture

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" Jn. 14:6

Devotional

His bank account is close to empty, and his small business is barely surviving. He lives one month away from his resources disappearing, and the stress is beginning to show itself in the aches and pains in his chest. Nothing seems to be going right – and deep down his lifelong confidence in his own capacity to fix tough situations is quietly eroding. A great wave of loneliness overwhelms him one night, even though he has a wife and children. He is beside himself like a distraught toddler who just needs someone to pick him up and hold him. He hears the words of his bitter, late father in his head, still repeating, "You'll never amount to anything. You're worthless." He lies to his wife that he is going out on a business call. In the wee hours of the morning, he can't see a way forward in his circumstance – and in utter despair takes his own life.

This man, like us at times, has a *fearful-heart*.

This tragic story repeats itself time and time again across the world, with teenagers and adults, every day. Have you ever felt the soul-sickness of sheer despair crippling you, telling you there is no way out, no way forward? Have you heard a voice in your head, relentlessly nagging, declaring that the challenge in front of you is impossible to surmount? While you may have never tasted that degree of bewildering fear, we all know the spectre of looming failure hovering before us, and the inner voice telling us we will surely *fail*.

"There is a *way* that seems right," the Scripture says, "But it only ends in death" (Prov. 14:12). In another place we hear, "In their hearts humans plan their *course*, but the LORD establishes their steps" (Prov. 16:19).

Christmas is God saying, *"There is a new Way for you to go forward, and it runs through the heart of my Fatherly love for you. Jesus is that Way. Don't wait for a financial miracle (winning the lottery), a relational connection (the right contact), or some employment opportunity (the perfect job) to set your path. I am your Way. Intimacy with me is the path to hope in your journey, and I lead you to the love and approval of the Father. As you draw near to me, I will guide your steps, show you my loving way forward, and fill you with a deep sense of your Father God's promises for you."*

Maybe right now you are wandering in your calling because you can't hear the voice of Father God, approving of you and calling you forward. Some call it the "drift;" we lose our way because of apathy, a desire to skip struggle and get-rich-quick, or a because of a simple lack of awareness that God loves us and has a design for our lives. The fact is, sometimes God's way of doing something takes too long, and we want to speed up the process (King Saul is our negative role model here). Then, when *our* way fails, a looming wall of fear appears suddenly around us, trapping us in on every side.

But God does have a plan for your life, and the coming of Jesus at Christmas is His declaration, "Hold the course! My Way is the best way! Know my Love for you, and you will arrive at your destination!" We'll always come back to God's Way (his presence, his words, his model for living) being the best Way, and living in the way of Jesus is the only way we will ever ultimately get through our circumstances to God's preferred future for us.

Our Christmas promise is true – there is always a Way forward, because Jesus breaks through all obstacles that keep your heart walled in with fear. He is your Way forward – your Way to the Father's heart for you.

Do you sense the Father's approval in your life?

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, God's love expressed to you this Christmas, and embrace his Way forward in your journey. Let the Father's love heal your fearful heart with his approval, and welcome his better path.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

How is Jesus, as your Way, the answer to each one of the obstacles in your path right now? Divide a journal page into two sections. On the left side, write down what your earthly father said about you. On the right, write what God says about you. Pray through each statement, and ask the Holy Spirit to rescript your mind with God's loving thoughts about you.

Receive the Blessing of the Prince of Peace

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the Prince of Peace who quiets your inner turmoil and fixes your attention on his promises.

Scripture

"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." Is. 9:6

Devotional

It's not the quietest place in the world. An amusement park, when people have packed in and rides are humming along, is one of the least "peaceful" places on earth. In fact, it can seem loud, chaotic, and tumultuous. But it's fascinating to note that when one really listens to what is going on around them, there can be a beauty to the noise and bustle.

Peace, in the amusement park, is not found in perfect quiet and the absence of people – rather it is found in the presence of another perspective, one that sees the bustle as beautiful.

When we are lost in our ability to see God's presence in the midst of turmoil, we are one who carries a *troubled-heart*. Have you carried a troubled-heart at any time over this past year? Maybe you're carrying one in your chest right now. If so, Jesus, Peace Himself, is *here*.

When Jesus came at Christmas, the world was in utter turmoil. A conquering empire was crushing his people under the weight of their progress. He didn't turn a blind eye to it, nor did he rebuke it all and start a revolution to shut down the Roman Empire. No. Jesus looked into the pain of his age with eyes that saw people as image-bearers of God, and valuable treasures in process. He saw beauty in the brokenness, and it enabled him to carry a climate of peace with him wherever he went.

Maybe you're seeking peace in your own life right now. All around you may seem turbulent, even if good things are going on. Have you ever sought peace in your life to the point of medicating it into yourself, drinking yourself toward it, eating until the pain stopped, shutting down others' dreams, or acquiring

more consumer goods? We may be at rest for a moment, but it rarely lasts. Getting peace is something everyone aims for, but few attain.

True peace is a matter of the heart. It is our inner disturbance, our spiritual state of chaos, that unsettles everyone and everything around us. We see the world, like the amusement park, through the wrong lens.

Can you imagine a peace that you carry in your heart, creating a climate all around you?

Jesus came to give us a new lens on life. His peace starts on the inside, and works its way outward. He came to address the stress in our hearts that pushes us outside of ourselves for peace. He showed us that our lack of peace is nothing more than a lack of trust in him to "work all things together for the good" (Rom. 8:28).

Could you become the kind of person who carries around a peaceful heart, changing the climate of turbulence and strife around you? Jesus said that this was possible, that his "new heart of flesh" within you could once again sense his presence at all times, in all situations.

Becoming a person of peace means we have allowed him to work in us the words of the Psalmist:

"But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content" (Ps. 131:2).

Peace is not the absence of strife, it is the Presence of Someone who carries the quiet with Him. We can learn to be still, and quiet our own souls in the presence of God – but it takes practice.

This Christmas, your troubled-heart can give way to his Peace within. Know that He is near now, and has delivered you from fear and anxiety.

Your heart belongs to him, the Prince of Peace. This is the blessing of Christmas.

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, God's love expressed to you this Christmas, by welcoming his "peace that passes all understanding" (Phil. 4:7) into your troubled-heart.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

How has peace eluded you in the past, and what moments have helped you recover it? Can you imagine a peace found by lingering in the presence of the one who is Peace Himself today? Today, set aside 30 minutes of uninterrupted silence in the presence of God. Ask Him to impart the blessing of Christ's peace into your soul. Read promises from Scripture until your spirit settles.

Receive the Blessing of the Light of the World

CHRISTMAS DAY

Your Christmas Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the Light – who reveals all things you need to see in your current circumstances.

Scripture

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Jn. 8:12

Devotional

It is Christmas Day, and Christ has come! Jesus is the Light that enlightens all men (Jn. 1:4), as he walked where men face the shadow of death (Mark 4:16), saw the light of life and was satisfied (Is. 53:11), and burst from the grave as the Light of the World – forever.

Christmas is the miracle of light piercing the darkest of places. Jesus is the Light of the World, yes, but he is also light to the *darkened-heart*.

Have you ever awakened in a completely dark room in the middle of the night? Your mind is fogged with sleep, and your eyes haven't adjusted to the lightlessness. You slowly get up, begin to walk, and… *smack!* Your foot kicks the corner post of the bed. You muffle your pain, and wait for your now-tear-filled eyes to adjust.

Christmas is the moment when, as people all around the world stumbled in the dark, Christ filled the room with the brightest of lights! Some eyes simply hide from the brilliance. Others recoil at the thought of having the darkness within us, and of our actions being exposed. Still other eyes adjust quickly. C.S. Lewis, in his children's book, *The Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, puts it beautifully. The children in the story are headed on the great ship toward Aslan's country, and as they get closer, something profound happens to their eyes: "They could look straight up at the sun without blinking. They could see more light than they had ever seen before" (15.47). These are Kingdom eyes, always looking for the brightness of Christ that

will cast out the darkness within our hearts. We welcome the light, with the innocence of a child.

Life can have a way of making us feel alone. We fall into a dull sleep of daily responsibilities and burdens, lose focus on Jesus, forget our tethers of relationship and family, and wander in a dark, silent room where our spirit feels alone. It is in those moments the enemy of our souls steps in, positions himself as the wise serpent, and whispers into our heart – "You have no one, no hope, and no light for your path."

Into this dark room, Jesus steps. And when Jesus enters the room, Hope enters the room! Christmas is the Light of Hope, pouring into the dark places of distrust and loneliness in our hearts. Just as a single shining star pierced a night sky to reveal the Savior of the world so many years ago, so too Jesus is the star that flings the doors of our confusion open, and casts burning light into the deep shadows.

Even if you've experienced the Light of Christ bringing Hope into your heart at many times along your journey, the heart has a way of wandering back into those isolated rooms, closing the doors, and turning off the lights. We hide from reality, and resist the Light penetrating our spiritual blindness.

But Jesus is the blessing we've been waiting for. He ignores the lock, and calls us to fling the door wide-open, yet again. This Christmas, you

Welcome Jesus to bless you with more light on your circumstance.

can receive the blessing of Christ's presence to you as the Light of the World. Welcome him into the dark, cold, confusing places that are demanding your attention right now, and expect his guidance to displace the darkness.

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, God's love expressed to you this Christmas, and welcome the Light of the World to bring clarity to your decisions and your desires. The Light of the World himself is with you, lighting your way.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

Is the light you have on your life, right now, enough to see the way forward? Take 15 minutes today to pray, and to welcome Jesus to bless you with more light on your circumstance.

Listen to your heart for the little things he reveals, in you and in your circumstance. Write down what he shows you, then act on the renewed clarity you've been given.

Receive the Blessing of Christ the Lord

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Your New Year Promise

This New Year, Christ comes to you as the Lord of all, who will provide leadership through the knowns and the unknowns of the year ahead.

Scripture

"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Lk. 2:11

Devotional

What does Christmas have to do with the New Year? *Everything*. We step into every January 1 with hope in our heart – for relational health, financial peace, and spiritual renewal. Some years, our hopes are realized; at other times we feel as though we've gone backwards. We see the resolutions across the screen leading up to this day.

Then, every New Year's Day, people begin to implement their inner commitments. A University of Scranton study published by Forbes revealed that nearly 40% of people make New Year's resolutions – but less than 8% actually achieve them.

Why? We are *wandering-hearts*, hoping for the best, but wandering from place to place to find success. We start with confidence in our resolves, but then when there is a bit of resistance, or we tire of our pursuits, we fall into old habits that keep us locked in on old results.

We long for better lives, better jobs, better health, and better stories to tell at the end of next year, but we need *leadership* to get there. We need Someone to be in charge of our lives, other than us, to get us to God's best in the New Year.

Christmas is God saying, "Jesus is Lord and Christ, and he will lead you through the days and nights ahead. He sees the end in mind he has for you, and if you'll just respond with obedience to his loving call, you'll arrive where he intends."

God is wanting to weave your story into His great epic of Love this year. He may want to rewrite it in such a way that your character is formed by harder circumstances. He may want to use prosperity and success to hone your heart even further. He may use trials and tribulations to get you thinking about the world his way. Whatever his way, Christ the Lord – Christ The Leader – is ready to take charge if you will let him.

Know, as our wandering-hearts start into this year, that Christ our Lord and Leader is not uncomfortable with messes – especially if they help to form us into his likeness.

When Handel was writing *The Messiah*, one of the most thrilling, classical Christmas works of all time, the process was messy. His servant, who would bring his meals to a

God is wanting to weave your story into His great, epic story of Love this year.

closed door. Often, he would return to see his meal untouched. A friend visiting him once found him sobbing with intense emotion. After 24 days, Handel emerged with 260 pages of manuscript – T*he Messiah* – in his shaking hands.

Like that musical masterpiece, life can be messy business.

A circumstance can break into the beautiful music of our lives, tossing notes right and left, altering the rhythm, and ultimately changing keys haphazardly. There is always dissonance, and a cacophony, in the moment. That is what the New Year could bring, despite our greatest hopes for good to come our way.

But God is working in the messy music. He has planned for this. He is not shocked by the trouble (Jn. 16:33). He knows this experience. Slowly, as we fall into the arms of God, helpless and unable to move ourselves forward, he creates a new "movement" out of the old theme. The chords change, the rhythm picks up again, and what seemed like chaos now becomes part of a living work of art – *you*.

He has overcome the world, and has overcome the challenges in your own world. But only if he is truly on the seat as Lord and Leader in your life.

Today is a day for you to resolve again, with Christ, to accept his Lordship and Leadership in your days and nights. Give him your discontentment, your hopes and dreams, even your wandering in the chaos, and let him have his way.

Receive The Blessing

Receive the blessing of Jesus, and experience God's love at Christmas and this New Year as he gently guides you and leads you in the next adventure of your lifetime.

Spiritual Reflection & Action

What hidden expectations are in you, right now, as you look toward the New Year? In your journal, offer each one to God, and finish by saying, "Not my will, but Your will be done" (Lk. 22:42).

Expect His best to be formed in you in the coming months, and write your own New Year prayer that you can refer to again and again throughout the year.

Why 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 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?

To the right 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)



As a special gift for you this Christmas, **Vineyard Worship** has put together a **free download** of some new Christmas songs, just for you.

Just visit the link below, and receive the blessing of some fresh songs for your personal worship this season.

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The Vineyard Movement, since birth, has valued seeing individual Christians experience God in their daily lives. Through spiritual practices such as worship, fellowship, mission, the reading and application of Scripture, soul care, family care, healing of the broken, cultural influence, the compassionate ministry of the Holy Spirit, and loving our neighbors, the Vineyard community of churches seeks to be intentional about nurturing the lives of those who call us their family.

To find out more about the Vineyard, visit **www.vineyardusa.org.**

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