
THE LIGHT
THAT LEADS US HOME
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CHRISTMAS
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Introduction

"'Twas the night before Christmas…" the 19th century poem begins, and goes on to say, "*…the stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there.*"

Saint Nicholas. Known in many countries for over a thousand years as *Father Christmas*, *Pere Noel*, *Weihnachtsmann* ("the Christmas Man"), and, of course, *Santa Claus*, the name of Saint Nicholas has become synonymous with the ideas of winter, generosity, festivity, presents, children, box stores, outrageous sales, and last, but not least – *Christmas*.

A Generous Man

Though legends abound, Nicholas was a real person who lived in the 4th century AD. Nikolaos of Myra, as he was known, was the Greek Bishop of that city (now known as *Demre*, part of modern day Turkey).

Born on March 15, 270 in the port city of Patara (also in Turkey), he died on December 6, 343, and was the son of wealthy, Greek Christian parents. Nicholas grew up in a home full of faith, and after his parents died in an epidemic, he went on to become a priest, and later, a Bishop (a pastor of pastors).

In his lifetime, Nicholas was respected for his acts of kindness and generosity. He was known especially for giving gifts in secret. It was said that he would put coins in the empty shoes of those who were poor when they left them out for him to see.

Legends grew around this great man of faith into the story of the chimney-descending Santa Claus we tell to children today.

The Stories We Tell At Christmas

While our thousands of tales about Saint Nicholas are imaginative, and maybe even fun, are they *true* enough to give us guidance, to give us *light*, for our everyday lives?

And we have other stories of the season we enjoy at Christmas, each with its own bit of light to shed on our path. Maybe your favorite, like mine, is one of the following:

• ***It's A Wonderful Life*** *("Teacher says every time a bell rings…"),*

• ***A Christmas Carol*** *("You may be an undigested bit of beef, …a crumb of cheese..."),*

• ***Miracle On 34th Street*** *("I believe, I believe; it's silly, but I believe…"),*

• ***White Christmas*** *(""How do you do?' 'Mutual, I'm sure.""),*

• ***A Christmas Story*** *("You'll shoot your eye out!"), or*

• ***Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer*** *("…Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?")*

Stories That Give Limited Light

While all of these stories (and the memorable songs attached

to them) are endearing and heartwarming, conveying beautiful truths about family, friendship, and generosity, they all have a limit to their ability to offer *real guidance* to our lives.

• *We never hear someone going through a divorce reciting lines from* **It's A Wonderful Life** *to help them walk through their pain*.

• *We never hear parents, whose teenager is estranged from them, singing* **Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer** *to console themselves that everything will be okay.*

• *We certainly never hear the child of a parent dying of cancer praying to* **Santa Claus** *as their hope for healing.*

Why not? These are not stories from which we can find *sufficient light for our entire life's journey*. Sure, these stories shine some rays of truth on our situations, but they still leave deep shadows unaddressed. They can never truly guide us, with a bright Light, to safety, to peace, to harmony in relationships, to life that lasts forever – to *Home*.

The Light That Leads Us Home

God's Word is called a "…Light to my path" in the Bible (Psalm 119:105). For billions of people over thousands of years, the Scriptures have provided vital guidance to people walking through life's hardest challenges.

The New Testament in the Bible goes further to say that there is a Light that can *live in us* and *be with us* as we navigate life's difficult terrain.

As the truest Christmas Story ever told opens in the book of Matthew, Jesus Christ steps on the scene of human history and says these seven, simple words recorded in John 8:12:

"I am the Light of the World."

The Light we *all* need for life's journey must transcend the passing comfort of Christmas lights, and even the soft glow of family and friends. We need a lasting Light, a guiding Light, that shines in the shadows of our darkest fears and deepest failures, penetrating them with truth and life and faith – and hope for the future.

The Light that we all need to experience this Christmas season is the Light of the World – the Light whose name is *Jesus*.

He is the One that Saint Nicholas bowed down to worship. He is the Light that is available to us through our brightest days and darkest nights. He is here to shine on you this Christmas, to lead you Home.

Enter The True Story Of Christmas

You may be facing some challenges that a cup of egg nog and Christmas cookies can never fix. If that's true, embrace the lasting hope of Christmas once again, with fresh faith – the *faith of a child*.

How To Use This Devotional

Read each weekly devotional on each of the four Sundays of Advent before Christmas Day, and the fifth on Christmas morning. We've also included a New Year's Day devotional to read Dec. 31. Start/use a journal if you can, noting insights each week.

Bless you as we enter, once again, the true Story of Christmas.

Hope: It's More Than A Wonderful Life

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

Your life is part of a bigger story than you ever imagined – and knowing that larger story will help you understand your life's purpose.

Scripture

"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" (Matt. 2:11).

Devotional

In the beloved Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life,* George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart) is faced with a continual stream of failed attempts to rise above his small, hometown existence.

Finally, at the moment of his deepest despair, he prepares to end his life by jumping from a bridge. Before he can leap, an angel appears on the scene to show him how his "insignificant" life has impacted the lives around him.

Not only was this movie the top-grossing film of 1947, but it has gone on to become one of the most beloved films in American cinematic history.

Why? The movie touches a deep chord in every one of us who wants to live a *meaningful life*. We all want to know that the little things we do count – really *count* – in the grand scheme of things.

The three wise men of the biblical story of Christmas must have had the same feeling. They spent their entire lives staring at the details of a story much bigger than them, hoping to find their place within it (Matt. 2:1-12). They studied the Scriptures to discover God's meaning for the world – and for their lives. It was there they discovered that God would send a Messiah – a *Light* – to reveal to all people the meaning of their lives.

Then, at just the right moment, all their hopes came crashing in on them. They realized that the King of the heart they read about in the Scriptures would come to them – in their lifetime!

They packed up their things, and gave up everything to follow a star lighting up the night sky. Like George Bailey, their long journey to find the meaning of life must have been full of discouragement, fear, and even despair – all emotions with which we are familiar.

When they finally saw Jesus, they bowed down in breathless worship. The epiphany that the meaning of life would never be found in the accumulation of riches or prestige, but in knowing God's purposes for the world, filled them with awe.

We all, like George Bailey and the wise men, have a quiet quest going on inside of us for the real meaning of our lives. In fact, that search may have led you to great despair a time or two, when your hopes and dreams were derailed by circumstances beyond your control.

The Story of Christmas answers that primal question within – revealing that God doesn't just leave us on our own to discover our reason for living! The Christmas story tells us that *God pursues us, and meets us, on our journey*. He knows that it's really Him we're looking for – our Creator and Lord – even as we fill our garages with stuff and our bank accounts with paper. He knows your life is *full of meaning and destiny*, and you have a more-than-wonderful purpose held in His heart for you!

God knows that it is in discovering *who He is* that we discover *who we are*; that in learning to know Him we can begin to know, and love, ourselves.

Searching to find God's meaning for our lives will always, ultimately, lead us to Jesus. He is God's way of saying, "I know you're looking for me and why I made you the way you are, and I'm the only One who can show you your calling and purpose."

There is a quiet quest going on in all of us for the meaning of our life.

Ask God For A Gift This Christmas

Ask God to reveal Himself to you in a new way this Christmas season. Believe that God has a calling on your life, and He wants you to be about living it. Take a moment now to pray, to ask God to begin to open your eyes to see His purpose for you.

Act On This Devotional

Want to go further? Get a journal, a private diary of some sort, and write in it once a week after reading each devotional. Write your reflections.

To go further, read the first 3 chapters of the Gospel of John. After you've read, write your answer to this question: *"What is Jesus saying/doing that shows me the meaning of life? What can I do today to discover more about who he is, and more about who he has designed me to be?"*

Peace: Beyond A Christmas Carol

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

Peace in our lives can never be based on all our hopes and dreams coming true. Peace comes when our hearts are at peace within us.

Scripture

"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).

Devotional

Scrooge is the Christmas poster boy for selfishness, greed, and the desire to win at all costs. We love to hate (or at least pity) the Scrooge that appears early in the first half of the story *A Christmas Carol*.

We also love to see the transformation that occurs in him by the end of the story. After meeting the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future, Scrooge is "scared straight." Waking from the most terrifying night of his life, he becomes generous, and turns over a new leaf.

After responding in fear to his first paranormal visitor, Scrooge turns to disbelief about this messenger from beyond the grave. He exclaims, "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"

Any one of us would be in shock if we had a visitation like this. Mary, in the biblical story of Christmas, was no exception. An "angel" appears to her, a celestial messenger from another world, and his first words to her are "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God." Apparently, Mary was *afraid*.

Fear, some have said, is the enemy of Peace. We are in a circumstance that is beyond our ability to *control*, and inside we are in utter turmoil. We believe that the worst will happen to us, and that our feelings are an accurate read on the situation. We scramble for solutions, all the while struggling for air as we are inwardly trapped by a cage of wild emotion. We are *out of control*.

Because many of us live with a lack of inner peace, we try to head off potential fear by bringing outer peace through control. We grip our relationships more tightly, spend our money more independently, and avoid people that make us feel uncomfortable (like needy people who always seem to want something from us).

But Mary – the teenage girl who would conceive Jesus by the Holy Spirit – seemed to have no interest in conquering or controlling her fear!

> God always, always, always, has your best in mind.

In fact, according to the Bible, she was someone who faced her fears, confident that *God was in control*.

When the angel comes to her, we would expect any young woman to run for the nearest exit! But Mary's response was not to control the situation – and peace came quickly.

Why? Unlike Scrooge, Mary had a deep and abiding belief within her that God always, always, always had her best in mind.

When she realized God was giving her a sacred, but hard mission, a purpose in life that would expose her to ridicule, pain, and family rejection, Mary simply chooses to say, "I am the Lord's servant... May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's peace did not come from the *outside in*. Mary's peace came from the *inside out*.

We look for inner peace to come from something or someone around us. We attempt to weed out all uncertainty and discomfort, and hide behind walls of our own making that can't protect us from inward fear.

However, when peace flows out from the *inside*, from knowing that God loves us and has our best in mind, that peace lasts a *lifetime* – and is a light in our hearts that dissolves fear.

Ask God For A Gift This Christmas

This season, ask God for the gift of His lasting Peace to fill your heart, and to convince you of His love for you again. If your heart is not right with God, if you haven't surrendered to Him leading your life, then that is where peace begins for you today.

Act On This Devotional

Using your journal, write down everything you fill your life with to try to bring peace and rest to your heart. Now, take a posture of prayer, asking God to help you surrender each item on your list to Him. Ask God's Spirit to fill you as you completely surrender your life to Him now.

(If you've just done this for the first time, tell someone at the church where you received this devotional. They'll help you take the next step in your relationship with God.)

Joy: The Miracle On 3:16th Street

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

Joy is a gift that comes from God; we can't manufacture it, but we can welcome it. Joy is more powerful than happiness – it lasts, and enters through a simple act of faith.

Scripture

"'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).

Devotional

In a Macy's department store, a strange Christmas happening occurs. In the movie, *Miracle On 34th Street*, an old man going by the name "Kris Kringle" sets about the task of bringing back the spirit of Christmas by filling in as a Macy's department store Santa.

The children love him, but the story hinges on Kris convincing Doris, the store's special events director, that he is the *real Santa Claus*.

With phrases like, "Christmas isn't just a day; it's a frame of mind," and "Faith is believing when common sense tells you not to," Kris succeeds in convincing everyone – including Doris – that *believing is seeing, and true joy comes from faith in things that go beyond the facts.*

The shepherds in the Christmas story are out tending their sheep, doing their job, and enjoying their normal distance from the disapproving crowds. Outcast and mocked, shepherds banded together for some sense of community as they shared in the dirty, smelly work of sheep farming.

While on night shift one evening on the knolls near Bethlehem, the sky lights up and they hear the thundering sound of angels singing! They are told to go into the town to see the King who has been born there.

Filled with a childlike belief in what they've been told, they run off to find Jesus. The angel-party helped, for sure, but they still made a hard decision to leave their flocks.

When they see Jesus, the shepherds are filled with *Joy*: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising

God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told" (Luke 2:20). Ecstatic, an uncontainable Joy was pulsing through their veins that night – all because they simply believed what they heard!

Happiness is a word we use for a temporary state of well-being brought on by positive experiences. We go to Disney World, and we're happy. We get a bonus check at work, and we're happy. We get our teenager to successfully tell us how their day was, and we're happy.

But Joy is a radically different idea in the Bible. Joy is not fleeting like happiness, and does not change with our circumstances. *Joy is a constant state of well-being, learned by believing God is trustworthy, then acting on that belief (faith)*. Joy grows inside of us as we learn to thank God in *all* circumstances, diffusing grumbling with words of praise, appreciation, and faith in God's promises to us.

The shepherds' hearts were filled with a lasting gladness that night. The pebble that started the "Joy avalanche" inside of them was their simple, childlike belief in God's trustworthiness.

Doris finally says in the movie, "*I believe, I believe; it's silly, but I believe….*" Her heart is filled with a newfound Joy in *simply believing* without empirical data. Doris is exerting faith, and her heart is filled with Joy as she believes in something she can't fully understand for the first time.

An act of faith stirs Joy in a soul that is ripe and ready to experience God's love, favor, and kindness.

The Christmas Scripture, John 3:16, tells us "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

This Christmas miracle of *Emmanuel*, meaning "God with us," can fill us again with Joy if we become like a child and *simply believe*.

> Joy enters our hearts through a simple act of faith.

Ask God For A Gift This Christmas

This season, Joy can dominate over the quiet fears and crushing doubts that oppress us daily. Faith begins by believing – believing that Jesus is who he said he is – the Son of God. Whether you've believed this for many decades, or for the first time this moment, exert simple faith again this Christmas, no matter what comes – and let God deliver the Joy.

Act On This Devotional

Using your journal, write down everything you put faith in to keep you happy in your life right now. What things are "passing," and what things stay steady and bring Joy?

Love: I'm Dreaming Of A Bright Christmas

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Your Advent Promise

It is the Christmas quest of every heart to love, and to be loved unconditionally in return. The Christmas story assures us that we begin our lives loved, and will end our lives loved – by God Himself.

Scripture

"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).

Devotional

According to the *Guinness Book Of World Records*, the song "White Christmas" is the bestselling single of all time. Written in 1940 by Irving Berlin in his hotel room, the song has sold over 100 million copies worldwide, and the version sung by Bing Crosby (highlighted in the movie *White Christmas)* has alone sold an estimated 50 million copies.

Written during World War II, Berlin apparently told his secretary, "Grab your pen and take down this song. I just wrote the best song I've ever written – heck, I just wrote the best song that anybody's ever written!"

While some may suggest the power of the *White Christmas* film is in the songs, most of us would recognize that the other significant draw of the movie is the eternally entrancing theme of "love."

Love for a commanding officer, love for a good friend, love between sisters, love between a man and a woman, and a shared love for music and dance – these are all "love themes" that have drawn viewers for 3/4 of a century to this playful, colorful, musical film.

Love is a big idea, and most of us would like to believe we understand it (even though we're not so good at actually doing it). We love those closest to us or who are good to us, but then struggle to love those who hate us (as Jesus did), who are not like us (as Jesus did), or those who place a demand on our lives (like refugees or people in distress). In fact, the term "love" is used so loosely in our time that it simultaneously expresses affection,

affinity, preference, physical attraction, emotional connection, and (perhaps least of all) – mutual commitment.

But here, on a silent night more than 2000 years ago, love is expressed in Luke 2:12-14 as God's commitment to see an ancient promise through – a promise to right the wrongs of the world and to fix the greatest problem of the human heart – *sin*.

Real Love, modeled for us, revealed to us, touching us, changing us – fixes the love-problem of the heart.

Sin is us "missing the mark" of responding to God's love for us. Since the Garden of Eden, we human beings have been looking for our own way, our own benefit, in the short years given to us.

We hurt each other and take from each other (even in our homes) when all along we were designed to experience God's "giving" love and to then redistribute that same love to others – even those who are very different from us.

God knew that love, *real Love*, modeled for us, revealed to us, touching us, filling us, and changing us, would fix the love-problem of the human heart. The plan was simple.

A child, Jesus, would be born. His name would mean, "The Lord saves," and he would show us exactly how to selflessly love one another.

Not only would Jesus show us how to love one another; he would also endure the most extreme expression of love by suffering and dying for us – breaking the grip of sin and death over your life and mine.

In Jesus, we see that Love is constant and sacrificial– it never changes, fails, or keeps a record of wrongs. It always perseveres, it always withstands our greatest failures and successes, and reminds us we are loved because of *who we are* – not *what we do*.

Jesus is ready to take your imperfections and mistakes into his healing hands right now if you will just surrender to his love. That is the true story of Christmas – that Christ's love for you can teach you to love more fully than you've ever known.

Ask God For A Gift This Christmas

The Christmas story is, at its very simplest, about the love of God pursuing you, and healing you.

Ask God to help you surrender to His love, and to show you how to live in love (Ephesians 5:2) toward others.

Act On This Devotional

In your journal, write down how you will respond to God's pursuing love this Christmas. Then, make notes about how you can begin to better love those in your reach.

The Light That Leads Us Home

CHRISTMAS DAY

Your Christmas Promise

This Advent and Christmas season, Christ comes to you as the Light – he is the one you need to dispel the shadows on your path.

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 gives Light to everyone (John 1:4). He walked where men face the shadow of death (Mark 4:16), saw the light of life and was satisfied (Isaiah 53:11), and burst from the grave as the Light of the World – forever.

Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, God's Light sent to us to pierce the dark places of the human heart. Jesus is the Light of the World, and he is here with you, right now by his Spirit, unseen, but real and present nevertheless. He is shining the warmth of his light onto your heart this Christmas morning.

Maybe this Christmas you are feeling particularly good about your personal life, your family, your financial situation, and your extended network of relationships.

Or the opposite may be true.

You may carry a great burden inside you about how you are treating certain family members, or how they are treating you – be they a parent, sibling, spouse, or child. You may be struggling with your job situation, and financial stress is looming over you like a foreboding cloud. You may be in strained relationships with others – or in a strained relationship with yourself.

It is here, in these times of both success or struggle, where the true story of Christmas really shines through.

If all is going well, you are probably aware that such a state of affairs will not remain forever. Most of us don't live charmed lives, where the three

"Fs" – Family, Friends, and Finances – are *always* in our control. (This is why we must enjoy every moment given to us.) Your heart needs more than sufficient material goods and a comfortable home to blossom in spiritual and emotional health.

On the other hand, if this Christmas Day you are in a struggle, the desperation you feel has a purpose in God's plan. Pain and suffering point us to our need for God. When we're at our lowest – that is when God knows our hearts are at their softest to His love. We are ripe for God's strength to meet us when we feel our most weak.

This is the true story of Christmas – not that we ascend to God, but that God descends to meet us in our desperate need. He is the Life-Light that confronts and confounds our darkness – yours and mine.

If you are a Christian, worship this Christmas until your worry is absorbed into the Presence of God.

If you are not yet a Christian, a follower of Jesus, then know this to be true: millions have experienced a love that satisfies the love-hungry heart from the inside out – and you can too. There is no jolly old man, no converted Scrooge, no red-nosed reindeer, no redeemed George Bailey – that can change our hearts. But Jesus *can*, and *will*, if you surrender your life, and *give Jesus full control.*

This Christmas, it's time to give God the greatest gift you can give...

...Yourself.

Today *everything* can change.

Give yourself, maybe for the first time, to the God who is stepping right into the middle of your story, into the middle of our clouded, confused world, saying: "Whoever follows me... will have the Light of Life" (John 8:12).

> It's time to give God the greatest gift you can give – yourself.

Commit yourself to follow Jesus into the bright days and dark nights ahead. He is the Light that will lead you Home to God's loving arms. *This is the Story of Christmas, and it's your story and mine.*

Give God A Gift This Christmas

Jesus is here, right now, to receive the gift of yourself to him again this Christmas. With a simple prayer, from your heart, yield the leadership of your life to the God who loves you.

Act On This Devotional

Take out your journal and write a "Christmas Day Prayer" that says what you are ready to give to Jesus today. *(If this is the first time you are giving your life to Jesus in complete surrender, allowing him to take control, show someone you trust from the church that gave you this devotional the prayer that you wrote.)*

How Can I Prepare For My Best New Year Ever?

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Your New Year Promise

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

Scripture

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

Devotional

There is no better way to begin a New Year than being in a new, or renewed, relationship with Jesus.

The Scriptures tell us that God has an amazing plan for our lives – a plan that is much bigger than our lives, but a plan in which our lives play a very important part.

However, we can get in the way of God's best coming to fruition in our personal lives through old habits and ways of doing life that don't work (even if they did at one time). How can we work with God to see His will done every day this New Year – and to see real change in us?

Psychologists say that each January 1, people around the world make New Year resolutions. Most of those same people, *just 2 weeks into January*, have lost their focus and ability to achieve even one of the goals they set out to accomplish!

Why? *Neural pathways* are apparently the culprit. We have mental and psychological (and spiritual) "ruts" we've created over the decades of our lives. It takes a long, hard effort to change those deep ruts in our brains.

According to brain science, the only way to create a *new* neural pathway is to replace *old, daily, constant actions* with *new*, *daily, constant actions*. These new actions, done consistently over a minimum of a few months, displace the old ones and become *habits*. These new habits begin to – literally – *change our minds*.

So, what does our faith in God and His plan for our lives have to do with having our best New Year ever?

1. We need to admit that our own strength is not enough for us to change ourselves. Sure, we may achieve partial change, with some dramatic or non-dramatic effect.

But that change is often short-lived, and doesn't have the substance to change our hearts for the long haul.

When a heart issue is involved, which it usually is, God's plan for our lives is dependent on us yielding *everything* we value in life to Him.

When we yield these areas to God in prayer, in areas such as overworking, overeating, overspending, or poorly relating to others, we have taken the first step toward securing that our best New Year ever is in front of us.

This year, Christ will give leadership through the knowns and the unknowns ahead.

2. We need to realize that nurturing our relationship with God doesn't happen once a week, or twice a year on Christmas and Easter.

Growing in faith takes *daily* attention – changing our neural pathways by creating new rhythms in our lives where we are *reading the Bible, talking to God consistently (praying), and pausing throughout the day to give thanks in all circumstances*.

In many people's experience, meeting with God in the morning before work or the day begins, to read the Bible and pray for one's family and relational network, is vital and life-changing. (Using the study *How Is Your Soul* from Vineyard Resources can also help you learn this new habit.) Learning the art of thankfulness will move your life from that of a *grumbler* to that of a *giver*.

Daily rhythms like these are worth starting (or starting again), and they will empower you for the year.

3. We need to meet with other Christians consistently in a local church setting to worship, pray, hear teaching about the Scriptures, and share the burdens of our lives. This is crucial to our growth (and theirs).

We just can't grow completely on our own. It is in building our faith with others that we learn from those who are learning to follow Jesus in their unique season of faith and life.

Take a risk, and connect yourself deeply with a local church community by giving your time, energy, and resources to serve others.

Ask God For Delight This New Year

Walking with God, and growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ, is the very best way you can assure this will be your best New Year ever.

Whether you have been a Christian for many years, or a few weeks, these three vital steps will help form you for a lifetime of *delight* in Christ.

Act On This Devotional

In your Advent/Christmas journal you started, write down these three ideas for growth. Make a plan to do them, each, for at least 40 days. Then, write down the results.

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 Jesus life.** 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 Christmas passages you can read, in order.

The Christmas Story



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)



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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.

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