

*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.
Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
(Isaiah 9:6–7a)*

As a society, we know how to prepare for Christmas. Children write Christmas lists. We shop and buy presents. We choose and decorate a Christmas tree. We take family photos and send out Christmas cards. We bake cookies. We get together with friends and family. We listen to Christmas music and watch Christmas movies. All of these are wonderful, and all of them can serve as a reminder that we can prepare for Christmas in other ways too.

This devotional is an opportunity to meet with God each day in the Advent season—to prepare our hearts to see and hear God in new ways as we meditate on the fact that Christ our Savior was born in Bethlehem, that the Holy Spirit is here with us now, and that Christ is coming again. Advent is a time to remember some of the gifts that Jesus brings to us: Joy, Peace, Light, Hope, and Love. We hope your heart receives these gifts in greater fullness throughout this Christmas season.

December 3, 2017

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. (Isaiah 9:2)

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.” (John 8:12)

We all have seasons of darkness in our lives. Even the very fact that God ordered creation to have seasons, including the dark season of winter, points to the reality that darkness is an inevitable part of this life on Earth. But God doesn't leave us in darkness; He doesn't turn His back on us there; He doesn't forsake us. The good news is that Jesus is the light of the world, and when He came, His light dawned on us.

What feels dark in your life right now? Or is there a friend or loved one who is living in a dark season? Take some time to ask Jesus to show himself to you in your darkness, to help you see His light. Or ask Him how to help bring some light and love into your loved one's life.

December 4, 2017

Your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name. He has called you like a wife forsaken, like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off. God says: "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you. My steadfast love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace shall not be removed." (Isaiah 54: 5–10, edited)

God's desire from the beginning had been for heaven to marry Earth. But Israel, His bride, betrayed Him and had been taken captive to Babylon. By that first Christmas, though she had physically returned, reconciliation was by no means complete. She and God were not on intimate terms.

She could not make peace with her husband. He would have to make the first move. The angel told the shepherds what form it would take. A baby wrapped in swaddling clothes somehow meant Peace on Earth!

As you contemplate Christ's first coming, how are you getting along with God? Do you know that He will always make the first move to make peace with you? Is there a part of your heart where you need to see that God is offering you His peace?

December 5, 2017

And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10–11)

And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. (Matthew 2:9–10)

The British Dictionary defines *joy* this way:

1. a deep feeling or condition of happiness or contentment
2. something causing such a feeling; a source of happiness
3. an outward show of pleasure or delight; rejoicing

During this time period Israel is struggling under Roman rule and have been crying out to God for deliverance. Out of all the possible measures of relief God could bring, he starts with joy.

Consider the above definition of joy. How is your experience with joy different? God knows what we need better than we know what to ask. How might this joy be just what the shepherds and people of Israel need to address their situation? God wants to bring us joy through Jesus by repairing the breach in our relationship with him. How does this bring you joy personally?

December 6, 2017

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended... (Isaiah 40:2)

Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda was a Japanese soldier in the Philippines during WWII. He hid in the jungle and continued to fight for almost 30 years after the war had ended. Leaflets were dropped telling him of the Japanese surrender, but he thought it was a trick, so he fought on. He wasn't looking for peace and he missed it when it came.

That first Christmas Eve, Jerusalem was an uprising waiting to happen. The zealots, like Onoda, weren't looking for peace. Peace was about to come, but they, like him, would miss it when it came.

God's solutions can sometimes look so different from what we want, from what we are expecting, that we can miss them when they come. A baby? What does a baby have to do with winning a war? Those who don't know Christ are still fighting to win their war.

In this season, how can you help those in conflict see that peace is truly possible? Is there someone you know who desperately needs to know that peace can be theirs? Pray that God opens their eyes to know that God's peace can still come on earth.

December 7, 2017

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22–23)

Joy comes to us as a result of receiving God's Spirit, along with the promise of becoming fully alive, yet we often feel bereft.

What aspect of your day or personal situation feels draining? Offer your emptiness to the Lord. If you would like to, imagine God sitting with you in your emptiness, and the tree of your life beginning to grow the fruits of the Spirit.

December 8, 2017

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14–16)

Just as Jesus is the light, we are also called to be the light of the world. As we approach Christmas and the New Year, it's a wonderful time to reflect on the past year and to consider how we might make different choices in the year ahead.

In what ways do you fulfill God's call to be the light of the world? In what ways do you hide your light? Ask the Lord to show you how you can spread more of his light. You might consider asking him for something specific you can do during the Christmas season to shine his light on those who are hurting.

December 9, 2017

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. (Ephesians 2:11–15a)

Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. (1 John 2:9–10)

The people of Israel waited centuries for the Messiah. We have little idea of what it was like for them to wait with such longing and anticipation. Yet we receive the same Messiah—the one we didn't know we needed. Before we were born, he planned for our reconciliation and paid the price for it.

Spend some time meditating on the Messiah who himself is your peace. Ask yourself if there are people in your life who you are not at peace with. Then ask the Lord to show you what steps you can take to bring peace. This Christmas season remember what Jesus did to bring peace and consider how you can participate in bringing peace into your relationships or community.