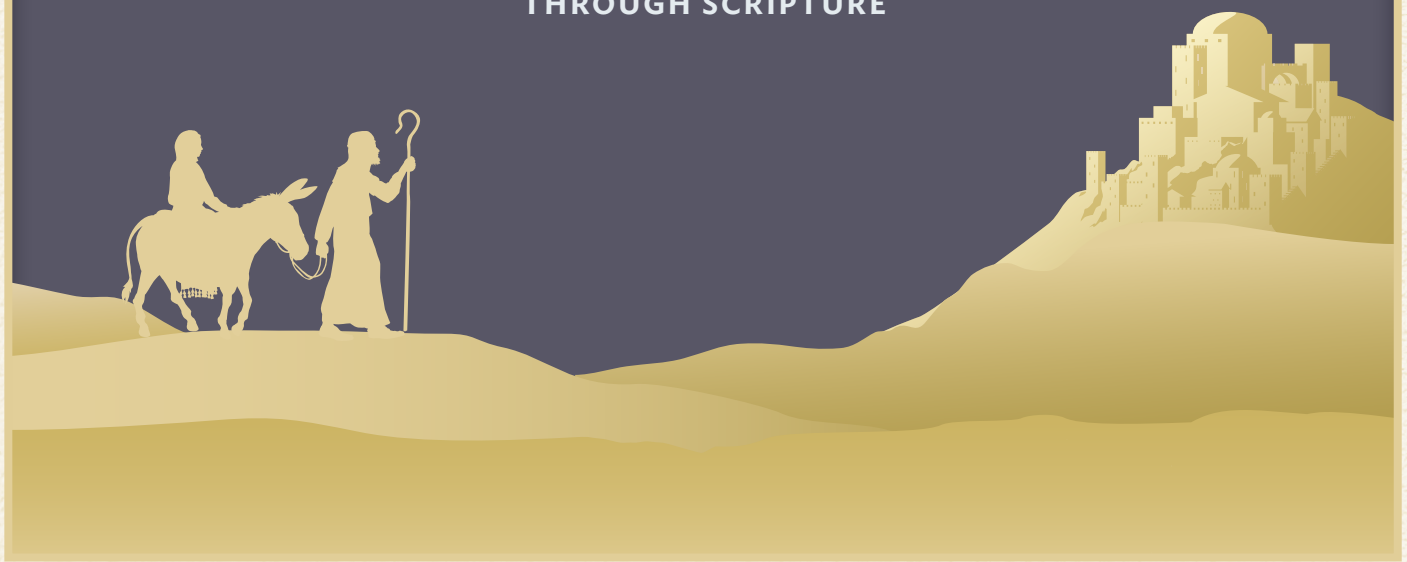
An Advent Journey

DISCOVERING

God's hope, peace, joy* AND *love

THROUGH SCRIPTURE



FOCUS ON THE FAMILY® *Canada*

Week One

Hope

AN ADVENT JOURNEY

Day 1

The first promise of a coming Saviour



Scripture Genesis 3:14-15 | Romans 8:19-25

ADVENT BEGINS WITH THE THEME OF HOPE. This isn't the kind of hope that people most often speak of, a sense of wishful thinking, like "I hope I get that job" or "I hope I do well on my test." Hope in the Scriptures means a confident expectation based on the character and promises of God, especially his promises to send a Saviour who will redeem his broken world and rule it with justice and mercy.

God started giving these promises from the very beginning, from right after Adam and Eve disobeyed him. The woman received the first promise of hope from the Lord: She and her offspring would be eternal adversaries of the serpent and his offspring, until one day in the distant future, one of her descendants would crush the serpent's head.

This was the first promise of the coming Redeemer who would triumph over the devil and destroy his works, putting an end to sin, suffering and death. God had planned all this before he ever created the universe. From this point on, he would unfold that plan throughout history, revealing it one promise at a time through his prophets and in his Word.

Prayer

God, your faithfulness is evident throughout all of history. Even from the first moment when Adam and Eve sinned, you always had a plan to save us. Even when we stumble and fall today, we know you will keep your word. In you, we put our hope and wait patiently for all your promises to be fulfilled. Amen.

Day 2

The offspring of Abraham



Scripture Genesis 22:15-18 | James 1:2-4

MANY CENTURIES PASSED BEFORE GOD BEGAN to unfold his plan in more detail. The Lord called Abraham to leave his community and his people behind and emigrate to a new land, the land of Canaan, where God would be with him and bless him. As Abraham travelled around in Canaan, God gave him several promises about his future and sealed those promises with an oath and a solemn covenant ceremony.

After putting Abraham's faith to a final and serious test, God assured him that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. In addition, one of Abraham's descendants would triumph over his enemies and all nations of the earth would be blessed through him.

This was now God's second great promise of redemption for the world and hope for humanity, more specific than the one he had made to Eve in the beginning. Although the fulfillment of this promise was still about two thousand years away, the descendant to be born would be God's chosen Redeemer. He would provide salvation not just for Abraham's physical descendants, but for people of every nation who would trust him, just as Abraham had done.

Prayer

Lord, you are a covenant God. Even when we walk through trials and challenges, when we feel like our faith is being tested, we hold on to the truth that you never forsake us. You are doing a new work in us and even when we don't understand, we will continue to put our trust in the hope of your faithfulness. Amen.

Day 3

A powerful prophet like Moses



Scripture Deuteronomy 18:15-18 | John 1:14-18

TRUE TO GOD'S PROMISE, Abraham's descendants began to multiply greatly, but they were also enslaved in the land of Egypt. Yet the Lord had compassion on their suffering and heard their cries for freedom. In time, he sent Moses to liberate his people from Egypt and bring them into the land of Canaan, the land he had promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This act of deliverance, known as the Exodus, is the central event in the history of the people of Israel. It was a spectacular demonstration of God's power, and of the fact that he will never break his promises or abandon those on whom he has set his love. More than that, it pointed ahead to what would be the central event in world history, when God would send his Son to save his people from their sins.

Just before the Israelites entered Canaan, Moses reminded them of God's faithfulness and urged them to remain faithful to the Lord. He told them that in the future God would raise up another prophet like Moses for them, from among their own people. This prophet would speak God's very words to them. In fact, he would be God's Word himself, Jesus the Messiah.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the only way, the only path to freedom. You came with grace and truth for our salvation. Even now, when we feel lost or confused or uncertain, we can look to you as our deliverer. Thank you for always being there to guide us through our own wilderness into your comforting presence. Amen.

Day 4

The royal descendant of David



Scripture 1 Chronicles 17:11-14 | Luke 1:26-33

AFTER GOD HAD SETTLED THE ISRAELITES IN CANAAN, he continued to narrow the focus of his redemptive plan by raising David to the throne as their king. The Lord promised David that one of his sons would build a house for God and establish David's dynasty forever. This was partially fulfilled by David's son Solomon who built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem and ruled Israel at the height of it power. However, due to the nation's ongoing sin, that temple was eventually destroyed, and the people scattered into exile.

Even so, God hadn't forgotten his promise to David, although its ultimate fulfillment was still a thousand years off. There would indeed be a descendant from the line of David whose Kingdom God would establish forever. He was to be the one who would prepare an eternal home for his people and rule them with peace and justice for all eternity.

From David's time onward, the people of Israel began waiting in earnest hope and growing anticipation for this promised descendant from the royal line. He was to be called the Messiah, which means anointed one, because God would anoint him as the ultimate ruler of his people.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are a God of your word. You never forget a promise and you never break a covenant. Jesus is indeed the Son of David, the new King, just like you said all those years ago. I may not always understand your timing but forgive me for when I doubt you. Thank you for saving us through your Son, the true King. Amen.

Day 5

Immanuel born of a virgin



Scripture Isaiah 7:10-14 | Matthew 1:21-23

ONE OF GOD'S BEST-KNOWN PROMISES about the coming Messiah took place under the strangest of circumstances. Ahaz was a king of Israel who neither trusted nor obeyed God but led the nation into sin. Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord graciously invited Ahaz to ask for any sign that would help him believe, but Ahaz refused. In response, God gave him and the people a sign anyway: A virgin would conceive and bear a son who would be called Immanuel.

It's not readily clear how this promise was fulfilled, even in part, during the reign of Ahaz. What's certain is that it was fulfilled seven centuries later at the birth of Jesus. In a unique and miraculous historical event, a young virgin named Mary, a descendant of David, did in fact conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and gave birth to a son with royal blood.

God's promises of a Saviour who would bring hope and healing to the world had begun to take on a divine dimension. The child wouldn't just be a great human king who would reign forever. He would also be the Son of God, deity in human form, whose prophetic title Immanuel means "God with us."

Prayer

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, sometimes you fulfill your promises in ways we'd never expect, but we can hold on to the hope that you do indeed fulfill them. Thank you for becoming Immanuel, God with us, for taking the humble form of a newborn child, and for continuing to be with us through your Spirit. Amen.

Day 6

God's righteous and gentle servant



Scripture Isaiah 42:1-4 | John 1:1-5

THROUGH THE PROPHET ISAIAH, God gave more numerous and detailed promises about the Messiah to come than he did at any other time before the birth of Jesus. Taken together, these promises began to form a more concrete image of the nature, character and mission of the one whom God would send. The most dominant feature of Isaiah's messianic portrait is that of a servant who suffers and sacrifices on behalf of his people.

In keeping with God's earlier promises, the Redeemer would be powerful and glorious, a King from the royal line of David who would establish an everlasting dominion based on righteousness and justice. But he would also be humble and gentle, patient and kind, a servant who would treat the weakest and most broken of his people with tender compassion.

Most wonderful of all, the Messiah's righteous reign wouldn't be limited to the nation of Israel. The hope and promise of his gentle redeeming love wasn't to be reserved only for the Jewish people. He would bring justice to the whole world, and the people of every nation would wait expectantly for his teaching and would hope in his name – just as God had promised Abraham many centuries before.

Prayer

Saviour Jesus, you are God incarnate. You are the fulfillment of every promise about the coming Messiah. You are strong and gentle, powerful and humble, righteous and patient. Thank you for being a light in our dark world. Help us to show your light, love and hope to our family, friends and neighbours who so desperately need it. Amen.

Day 7

An eternal ruler from Bethlehem



Scripture Micah 5:2-4 | Philippians 2:5-11

IN LIGHT OF GOD'S PROMISES AND ACTIONS over the centuries, messianic expectation had begun to run hot and build to a boiling point among the people of Israel. Mostly they were just expecting a powerful monarch who would defeat their enemies and restore the nation to its former glory under David and Solomon. The concept of a suffering servant didn't mesh with the ideal image of kingship, and the staggering cosmic details of God's promises were likely too much to grasp.

Yet for those with eyes and ears of faith, God's promises spoke to their sense of reality as well as their sense of wonder. The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, combined these two threads in a single brief promise from the Lord.

The Messiah was to be born in the little town of Bethlehem, a detail which for the first time tied his arrival to an actual physical location. At the same time, the coming Redeemer was described as having existed from ancient times, from all eternity. More than just an exceptional human monarch who would live forever, he would be God in the flesh, the Creator who would enter his creation to redeem it and give it hope.

Prayer

Lord God, you are King of kings and Lord of lords, but you also humbled yourself by coming to make a sacrifice that no one expected a king to make. You came to turn our world upside down, to usher in your new Kingdom. Help us to show humility as you did, to be generous as you were, and to point others to your living hope. Amen.

Week Two

Peace

AN ADVENT JOURNEY

Day 8

The Prince of Peace



Scripture Isaiah 9:6-7 | John 16:33

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT FOCUSES ON PEACE. We tend to think of peace as the opposite of war, an absence of hostility or an end of conflict. But the scriptural words translated as peace, the Hebrew *shalom* and the Greek *eirene* (pronounced eye-RAY-nay) include far more than those ideas. They encompass the concepts of order, stability, well-being, human flourishing and fulfilled potential, of everything being the way God intended it to be.

This peace cannot be achieved by human effort, but only by the will of God. Once again, it's through the prophet Isaiah that God revealed the identity of his chosen instrument of peace. Speaking of the child to be born of a virgin, the Lord described him as Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah's messianic portrait leaves no doubt about the nature and character of the one whom God had promised to send from the very beginning. He is perfectly good and wise, infinitely powerful and eternal, one with God the Father himself. As the descendant of David and the Prince of Peace, he will establish and sustain an everlasting Kingdom that will encompass all creation and be built on vast and endless *shalom*.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, in you we find our shalom, *our* eirene. *Even though we face troubles and heartache and difficulties, we have the assurance that you have overcome the world and we know we can come into your presence and find peace. Thank you for this precious gift. Amen.*

Day 9

Peace on earth



Scripture Luke 2:13-15 | Romans 5:10-11

LUKE'S ACCOUNT OF JESUS' BIRTH gives us perhaps the best-known image of peace associated with Advent. After the angel declared the good news to the shepherds, a heavenly host appeared, praising God and declaring glory to him and peace on earth. The image has graced countless Christmas cards and decorations: A group of bright angelic beings in the night sky, their eyes downcast, their mouths shaped like O's, the words "Peace on Earth" in old-fashioned script floating above their heads.

But what exactly is a heavenly host? In the original Greek, it refers to a vast heavenly army. This description adds a powerful and ironic edge to the scene that is otherwise missed: A large and formidable army of God, appearing to a small group of shepherds and declaring peace.

Taken out of context, "Peace on Earth" is often read as a synonym for world peace, but the meaning is much broader than that. The primary sense is of God making peace with humanity, out of which will flow peace among people and genuine human flourishing. Through the baby born in the manger, God would reconcile his world and his people to himself and grant them true and lasting *eirene*.

Prayer

God, we echo the words the angels sang on that night so many years ago by giving you praise and glory. When sin first entered the world and fractured our relationship with you, you had a plan for restoring that relationship. Thank you for the precious gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we experience reconciliation with you. Amen.

Day 10

Peace to the nations



Scripture Zechariah 9:9-10 | Romans 12:1-2; 18

THE PEACE THAT GOD PROMISES is first and foremost between himself and us. Because we're broken and fallen, as is all of creation along with us, our greatest need and that of our world is to be reconciled to God, to be forgiven and restored to what God intended us to be.

However, God's peace also includes reconciliation on a human level: The restoration of proper and healthy relationships between individuals, within communities and among nations. Through the prophet Zechariah, the Lord offered vivid imagery of an end to warfare and a proclamation of peace to the nations. Beyond the end of armed conflict, this peace also encompasses harmony and justice on political, economic and societal levels.

The one who will accomplish this total and lasting peace is God's anointed King, the Messiah, whose dominion will extend from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth. Despite his boundless authority and power, he will also be humble and gentle, portrayed as riding on a donkey, specifically on a donkey's colt. Five centuries after the time of Zechariah, this messianic portrait would be fulfilled when Jesus rode into Jerusalem a week before his death and resurrection.

Prayer

Lord, you are a God of peace. While we live in a broken world, you have gifted us your Holy Spirit to help us experience peace, even as we face hardship. Whether in our own minds or in our relationships, we ask for your Spirit to continually transform us so your shalom will be evident in all we do. Amen.

Day 11

Peace in heaven



Scripture Luke 19:29-38 | 2 Corinthians 8:9

IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, A TRIUMPHANT KING would ride into his newly conquered domain on a majestic warhorse to display his power and authority over his subjects. In contrast, Jesus rode into Jerusalem a week before his death and resurrection on a donkey to demonstrate his gentleness and humility.

This event, known as the triumphal entry, fulfilled the prophecy God had given through Zechariah five hundred years earlier. Throughout his time on earth, Jesus repeatedly stated that the Kingdom of God had arrived, and he called people to believe this good news, turn from their sin and submit to him as their Lord and King. Unlike earthly monarchs, he was humble and compassionate, not seeking to destroy his enemies but to give them peace and eternal life.

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, a large crowd of his followers shouted words that mirrored those spoken by the heavenly host at his birth. They praised God as well as the King whom he had sent, and they declared glory to him in the highest. Whereas the angelic army had spoken of peace on earth, these disciples announced peace in heaven, the peace between God and humanity that Jesus was about to accomplish on the cross.

Prayer

King Jesus, you are worthy of our praise. In a world where it can be easy to become kings and queens of our own lives, we remember that you are our ultimate ruler. Help us follow the example of your humble servant-leadership, serving others with gentleness and humility, so they too may experience your peace. Amen.

Day 12

The peace that Jesus gives



Scripture John 14:27-29 | Philippians 4:6-7

ON HIS FINAL NIGHT WITH HIS DISCIPLES, Jesus spoke to them at length after the Last Supper, offering fresh promises and final words of encouragement before he was to leave them. Among other things, he assured them that he would send the Holy Spirit to comfort and teach them, and that he would prepare a place for them in his Father's house, where they would be with him forever.

Jesus also told his followers that he would leave his peace with them and give it to them as a gift. This would be a different kind of peace than what people normally experience in the world. That peace is fleeting, and it hinges on our circumstances, evaporating whenever problems come into our lives.

However, the peace Jesus promised isn't like that. It doesn't depend on our situation and doesn't vanish when trouble appears. In fact, it flourishes in the midst of trouble and is unaffected by whether we feel bad or good. This peace is anchored in Jesus, who has promised to never abandon us, and who is the same yesterday, today and always. That's why we can have peace and hope, no matter what may be happening in our lives.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, there is so much you do in our lives every day that we cannot begin to understand. The peace that you freely offer is one of those indescribable miracles. Even when we are faced with difficulties, the hope of your promises and the knowledge of your goodness fills us with a peace that passes all understanding. Thank you. Amen.

Day 13

Peace with God



Scripture Romans 5:1-5 | 2 Thessalonians 3:16

JUST AS HOPE AND PEACE ARE TIED TOGETHER during the Advent season, so they are also connected in Scripture. In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul wrote that we have peace with God through Jesus, and as a result, we rejoice in the hope of being in the presence of God's glory.

According to Paul, we have this peace with God because we have been justified, or made right with God, through our faith in Jesus. Not only are we made right with God, but we also have direct access to God and his grace through Christ by our faith in him. The result of this is unbridled joy as we wait with expectant hope of experiencing the glorious presence of God and his Son forever.

This Advent hope and peace isn't just connected to the birth of Jesus, but to his entire life and ministry on our behalf. Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, died an atoning death in our place, rose from the grave, ascended to heaven and will come again for us at the end of this age. The faith that brings us hope and peace embraces Jesus in everything that he is for us.

Prayer

God, every year we set aside time at Christmas to celebrate the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, and we thank you and praise you that you give us peace at all times and in every way throughout the rest of the year. Give us courage to share this good news with those in our lives who need to hear it. Amen.

Day 14

Peace through Jesus' sacrifice



Scripture Colossians 1:15-20 | Genesis 1:31

THE PEACE THAT GOD OFFERS US through faith in his Son reconciles us to him as well as to one another. But this peace has an even larger and more cosmic dimension. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians, the peace which God established through Christ has reconciled all of creation to himself. This includes everything in heaven and on earth, the entirety of the physical universe as well as the spiritual realm.

As a human being, Jesus was able to take our place and pay the penalty that our sins deserved. As God, he was able not only to save us but to heal his broken world and redeem his entire cosmos. He accomplished all of this by sacrificing his life and making peace through his death on the cross.

Such a peace from God is truly beyond our comprehension. The eternal Son of God, through whom the universe was created and by whom everything from atoms to galaxies holds together, entered his broken creation so that he might reconcile it in peace to his Father. Jesus not only gives us his peace, but he himself is our peace. He is in every sense the Prince of Peace.

Prayer

God of all creation, when you created mankind in your image, you said it was very good. But then sin entered the world and that goodness was ruined. But you are a God who heals and restores. Through your Son, you make all things new, and for that we praise you. Amen.

Week Three

Joy

AN ADVENT JOURNEY

Day 15

Mary's song of praise



Scripture Luke 1:46-55 | Matthew 1:18-20

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT IS ALL ABOUT JOY. Like the hope and peace that God offers us, this joy is different from what people normally experience in the world. Rather than depending on our circumstances, it's a bright, unshakeable, incandescent joy, based on our faith in who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This is reflected in the third Advent candle, which is lighter and brighter in colour than the other three.

There is no better expression of this joy in Scripture than in Mary's *Magnificat*, recorded in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. During Mary's visit with her relative Elizabeth, the older woman uttered a prophetic blessing on Mary and on the messianic child in her womb.

Mary, apparently a young woman with considerable poetic talent, responded with her joyful song of praise to God. In her song, she magnified the Lord as her Saviour, who had chosen her as the instrument to fulfill his plan of redemption that he had promised through Abraham and his descendants long ago. In fact, it was God's earlier promise to the first woman, Eve, which the Lord was now fulfilling through a distant daughter of Eve.

Prayer

Lord God, the joy you freely give us is so much richer than what this world offers. Forgive me for the times I forget or take it for granted, and fill me with your Spirit so I too may overflow with praise and worship, just like Mary did all those years ago. Thank you for always fulfilling the promises you make. Amen.

Day 16

Good news of great joy



Scripture Luke 2:8-12 | John 3:16-17

THE FIRST PEOPLE TO HEAR ABOUT THE BIRTH OF JESUS were a group of shepherds guarding their sheep at night in the countryside near Bethlehem. When an angel of God suddenly appeared to them, accompanied by a shining display of the Lord's glory, the shepherds were understandably terrified.

The angel, however, quickly calmed their fears by bringing them good news of great joy that would be for all the people. The Saviour whom God had promised from the beginning through all his prophets had been born for them that day in Bethlehem. He was not only the Messiah, but the Lord himself, God in the form of a human baby. Rather than announcing the birth to priests or rulers, God had chosen to reveal it first to a group of outsiders living on the outskirts of town.

The birth of Jesus isn't merely a historical event to acknowledge or a heartwarming tale to stir up sentimental feelings during the holiday season. God's eternal plan to save his broken people and restore his fallen creation had finally been put into motion. Just as the angel had announced, this was the best news of the greatest joy, intended for all the people.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Saviour of all people. You came to earth to save human beings from every corner of the world, so we all may experience the joy of eternal life in your presence. Fill me with your Spirit and give me courage to share this good news with everyone in my life so they too can be restored. Amen.

Day 17

The Magi rejoice and worship



Scripture Matthew 2:1-12 | Matthew 28:18-20

WHEN GOD ANNOUNCED THROUGH HIS ANGEL that the joy of Messiah's birth was for all the people, it's exactly what he meant. He backed up his promise by choosing some of the unlikeliest people in that culture as the first to share in his joy: Elizabeth and Mary, a pair of pregnant women rejoicing over their miraculous children; Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, leaping in her womb; a motley band of shepherds living on the fringes of society.

Unlikeliest of all were the Magi, a group of wise men from the east who had travelled to Jerusalem to worship the recently born King of the Jews. These men were gentiles from Babylon or Persia who specialized in interpreting dreams, ancient texts and signs in the heavens. The star they saw led them to Bethlehem, to the house where Jesus and his mother were staying. They presented the child with gifts customary for a new monarch, fell to their knees and worshipped him.

In contrast to Herod and the religious leaders of Israel, these pagan Magi were filled with overwhelming joy when they found Jesus. Their joyful worship demonstrated that God's promises of a Redeemer King were meant for people from every background and nation.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, inviting a group of outsiders to the birth of your Son was no accident. You had a plan from the beginning that people from every nation would come to know you. And you call us to be part of that work by making disciples. Give me eyes to see the opportunity for sharing your Gospel with those in my own life who need to hear it. Amen.

Day 18

Filled with the joy of Jesus



Scripture John 15:9-11 | Psalm 30:4-5

DURING HIS TIME ON EARTH, Jesus spoke often about joy – his own and that of his Father, as well as the joy he intended for those who followed him. On his final night with the disciples, mere hours before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus comforted and encouraged them, assuring them of many astounding and wonderful promises that God had in store for them.

In the midst of those dark and stressful hours, Jesus showered his disciples with invitations and assurances of joy. Soon he would be taken from them, and they would experience deep sorrow. But then soon after, he would see them again, and their sorrow would be turned to joy. Just like the peace he promised them, this joy would be permanent and would never be taken away from them.

Most of all, Jesus assured his disciples that everything he had told them during those final hours was for one purpose: That his joy might be in them and that their own joy might be made complete. Even in his prayer to his Father on their behalf, Jesus repeated his desire to see his own joy fill them and be made perfect in them.

Prayer

Lord, you are a promise-maker and more importantly you are a promise-keeper. We can trust that even when we walk through deep sorrow or we experience seasons of weeping, joy comes in the morning. The darkness of night always gives way to the brightness of day. We hold fast to these assurances during those dark seasons. Amen.

Day 19

Anointed with the oil of joy



Scripture Psalm 45:6-9 | Hebrews 1:1-4; 8-9

ALONG WITH THE PROPHET ISAIAH, the book of Psalms contains the highest concentration of messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, mostly found in psalms either written by David or written about him. These psalms typically have a double meaning, addressing the circumstances of David's life but also pointing ahead to his distant descendant, the Messiah.

Psalm 45 is a royal wedding psalm, probably addressed to David or possibly to his son Solomon. With vivid poetic imagery, the author extolled the glory, power and justice of the king, as well as the beauty and splendour of his bride. Then in words that can only apply to the future Messiah, he equated the king with God who rules forever but also described him as the one whom God anointed with the oil of joy.

The New Testament book of Hebrews explicitly connected these verses to Jesus the Messiah, whom God has anointed as his eternal King. More than that, the king's joy is tied to his delight in his bride, and she in turn is urged to focus her desire and affection on him. The king and his queen symbolize the relationship between Christ and his people, and the mutual everlasting joy they have in one another.

Prayer

King Jesus, you are the anointed one, the long-awaited Messiah. You are crowned with power and glory, the appointed heir of all things. And yet you look on us, broken and troubled as we are, with great love, kindness and gentleness. Without you, we are nothing, but because of your great love, we can experience great joy. Amen.

Day 20

The Lord will return with a shout



Scripture 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 | Hebrews 9:28

THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD IS A GRAND NARRATIVE written by God that unfolds across four chapters: Creation, Fall, Redemption and Restoration. Like all great stories, of which it is by far the greatest, it contains high drama, shocking reversals, painful tragedy and thrilling triumph.

As the story builds toward its climax, the dramatic tension and sense of anticipation become almost palpable. God is the protagonist and Jesus is his eternal champion through whom he will redeem his people and remake his creation, which will be that much more beautiful for once having been broken. But how long, Lord? How will it happen, and how much must the world still endure before it does?

God offered a partial answer through his servant Paul: In an apocalyptic burst of triumphant joy, the Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, raise the faithful dead and call all his beloved people to join him in the air and thus live with him forever. Like a good movie trailer, it's only a tantalizing hint, free of any major spoilers. God has revealed it to give us a preview and to encourage us as we continue to wait for the joyful day of our Lord Jesus.

Prayer

God, you are sovereign over everything – past, present and future. We may not understand everything, but we trust that you do. We may not be able to see every outcome, but we trust that you do. Thank you for being Lord of our lives. Help us to wait patiently, and expectantly, for the joyful day of your return. Amen.

Day 21

The marriage of the Lamb



Scripture Revelation 19:6-8 | Ephesians 5:25-27

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, God portrayed his relationship to his people as that between a husband and wife. Ideally a marriage is built on love, trust, faithfulness, mutual respect and genuine affection. However, in a broken world, real marriages often fall short of this ideal. While God was always a loving and faithful husband to his people, they were constantly unfaithful to him, setting their heart on other things.

The New Testament developed this relational image, picturing Christ and his Church as a bridegroom and his bride. This portrait introduced an element of joyful anticipation, as the young couple looks ahead to their wedding day when they can come together at last.

The final chapters of the book of Revelation bring this imagery to a climax in the marriage of the Lamb. Although the bride, his Church, has continued to trip and stumble her way through history, her faithful bridegroom is also the Lamb who sacrificed himself to make her perfect through his work on the cross. Finally, at the end of this age, she will be ready as a bride on her wedding day, wearing a radiant white dress of righteousness, luxuriating in the everlasting joy that she will share with her bridegroom.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for loving us as a bridegroom loves a bride, as a husband loves a wife. You cherish us, wait patiently for us, and are faithful, even when we walk away from you or wander down dangerous paths. We pray for your restoring love to reach us once again and transform us with everlasting joy. Amen.

Week Four

Love

AN ADVENT JOURNEY

Day 22

No greater love than this



Scripture John 15:12-17 | Genesis 1:27

ADVENT CONCLUDES WITH THE THEME OF LOVE. From beginning to end, the story of Jesus is the story of love. The eternal Son of God became a man and entered the world so that he might save it. This was God's plan from before he created the cosmos, and as Jesus spent his final hours with his beloved disciples, he loved them to the very end.

Because we're made in God's image, we're wired for love. More than food or shelter, our deepest need is to love and be loved. We talk and sing about love, we laugh and cry about it, we tell stories about it. But it's only Jesus, the embodiment of God's love, who can show and tell us what perfect love looks like.

On his way to be arrested and crucified, Jesus told his followers that there is no greater love than for a person to give their life for their friends. He then assured them that they were his friends, whom he'd chosen and taken into his confidence, revealing to them everything the Father had told him. This is the kind of love he had in mind as he commanded them to love one another as he had loved them.

Prayer

God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, thank you for showing us what love is. From the beginning, you made us in your image so that we too may experience relational love with each other and with you. Thank you for the ultimate expression of your love for us – your sacrifice on the cross. Amen.

Day 23

Jesus' love within us



Scripture John 17:20-26 | Matthew 7:7-11

JUST BEFORE JESUS WAS TAKEN FROM HIS DISCIPLES, he prayed to his Father for them and for everyone who would believe in him through their testimony – which includes us. It's by far the longest prayer of Jesus recorded in Scripture, filled with soul-stirring truth about God the Father, God the Son, and their relationship with those who belong to them.

The scope of Jesus' prayer is eternal and cosmic. He appealed to the glorious, loving relationship he has shared with his Father since before the universe existed, and he acknowledged the authority that the Father has delegated to him, to grant eternal life to everyone whom the Father has given him. Lest there be any doubt, Jesus defined eternal life as knowing the one true God and the Messiah he has sent.

Jesus asked his Father to guard and protect all of us who belong to him, and to keep us growing in faith and love through the truth of his Word. Most of all, Jesus desired that his own love would be in us so that he might be in us, thus uniting us with himself and with his Father in a perfect bond of love.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us. Thank you for showing us a true father's heart for his children. Many have experienced imperfect fathers, but we are so grateful to be gifted with your perfect love. We ask that you fill us with that love so we may show the world a glimpse of you through our love for them. Amen.

Day 24

God as a gentle shepherd



Scripture Isaiah 40:9-11 | Matthew 18:10-14

ISAIAH BEGAN THE FORTIETH CHAPTER OF HIS BOOK with tender words of comfort from God and started to unfold the vision of a coming servant who would bring forgiveness and deliverance to his people. This servant would display the glory of God for all of humanity to see. In response, the prophet urged the people of God to rejoice and spread this good news far and wide, from the cities to the mountaintops.

The image of a king as shepherd of his people was common in the ancient world and the authors of Scripture often applied it to God. In this passage, Isaiah spoke of God's anointed servant as the shepherd, equating this messianic figure with God himself who would live among his people.

Through his servant, God would come as a powerful King who would rule with strength and justice. However, he would also be the gentlest of shepherds, caring for the smallest and weakest among his flock, carrying them in his arms and holding them close to his heart. Jesus applied this tender picture of God's love to himself as the good shepherd who seeks his lost sheep, rejoices when he finds it and carries it home on his shoulders.

Prayer

God, you have always had a shepherd's heart – just like the shepherds who came to see the Christ child. Your love is one of sacrifice – leaving the 99 to find the lost one – and rejoicing when you are reunited with those who fall astray. Thank you for loving us even when we stray and for always being there to carry us home. Amen.

Day 25

God's joyful song of love



Scripture Zephaniah 3:14-17 | Philippians 4:4-5

ABOUT A CENTURY AFTER ISAIAH, the prophet Zephaniah received a much shorter and less well-known vision from the Lord. Despite its brief length, his book contains messianic imagery similar to Isaiah, although in much more concentrated form. The Messiah will come and restore the fortunes of his people, forgiving and purifying them, causing them to live in joy and peace. He will rule them with justice, and his domain will extend over all peoples to the ends of the earth.

Nestled within this brief prophecy is a stunning portrayal of God's love that is unique to Zephaniah. Through his Messiah, the Lord God will be among us, a mighty warrior who saves his people. Thus far, the messianic imagery is not too different from that of the other prophets.

Then comes the unique part: God will rejoice over us with great gladness. He will quiet us and renew us in his love. He will delight in us with loud singing. It's an almost shocking but entirely wonderful picture of God expressing his love for us with raw, uninhibited emotion. We can only imagine the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit joining in a song of love to celebrate the ones they've redeemed.

Prayer

Lord God, thank you for your spectacular, overwhelming love. Forgive us for the times we forget it or take you for granted. May we respond with our own rejoicing and thanksgiving through prayer and worship. Thank you for the gift of this intimate relationship with you, our Lord and Creator and Saviour. Amen.

Day 26

A mother's love for her little ones



Scripture Isaiah 66:12-13 | 1 John 4:18-19

ON A HUMAN LEVEL, IT'S HARD TO THINK OF A WARMER, more nurturing and heart-melting expression of love than that of a mother for her children. Even the most hardened individuals often have a soft spot when it comes to their mother. Throughout history and across cultures, people have spoken of their cities and homelands as their mother, the place that nourishes and protects them.

The Old Testament prophets often applied this feminine metaphor to Jerusalem, the city where God had chosen to dwell among his people and cause them to thrive. Near the end of his book, Isaiah combined this maternal imagery with the coming of Messiah and projected it into the future, to the New Jerusalem where God would be present with his people and live with us forever.

In this vision, God compared his love for us to that of a mother nursing her little ones, carrying them on her hip and bouncing them on her lap. It's a lovely image that we don't typically associate with God. Of course, in a broken world, mother-child relationships are not always what they should be. Nevertheless, we have God's promise that he will comfort us just as a mother comforts her sons and daughters.

Prayer

Lord, we know what a mother's love should look like because of the comfort and nurturing you show us. Even if our own mothers have not loved us in this way, we are so grateful that your perfect love casts out all fear – just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, so you too protect us in your loving embrace. For this we thank you. Amen.

Day 27

Jesus as shepherd and lamb



Scripture Revelation 7:13-17 | John 1:29-32

DURING THE ADVENT SEASON, we not only look back to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we also look ahead to anticipate his return at the end of time. The book of Revelation, through highly symbolic imagery, offers us some tantalizing glimpses into the Messiah's return and his eternal reign.

The apostle John, to whom God gave these apocalyptic visions, repeatedly refers to Jesus as the Lamb. It's a description that shows up in other places of Scripture: Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; he's our Passover Lamb who was sacrificed for us; he's the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world. In other words, God had planned to sacrifice his Son to save us from our sins before he ever created the cosmos.

But since God works in wonderful and mysterious ways, his sacrificial lamb is also our good shepherd at the same time. Not only did Jesus demonstrate his ultimate love by dying for us, but he lives forever for us, gently leading us, protecting us and providing for us. As the eternal Son of God, his love for us is infinite and everlasting.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are both fully human and fully God. You are the shepherd and the lamb. You showed us both a father and mother's love. You are beyond both our expectations and understanding. But we know everything we could ever need is found in you. Thank you for loving us in this mysterious way. We love you in return. Amen.

Day 28

God's eternal union with his bride



Scripture Revelation 21:1-6 | 1 Corinthians 13:4-13

GOD'S NARRATIVE OF CREATION, FALL, REDEMPTION AND RESTORATION began in the Garden of Eden. It will end in the Eternal City, the New Jerusalem. After the Fall, the Lord made his first promise to Eve, that one of her descendants would redeem the creation broken by sin. On the cross, Jesus fulfilled that promise by giving his life for the world. And at the end of this age, God will complete the story by remaking the cosmos as the New Heaven and New Earth.

From beginning to end, God's story is a story of love. Like the best love stories, it concludes with a wedding, celebrating the eternal union of the Lamb with his bride. That bride is made up of all his people, his Church, pictured here as the New Jerusalem, adorned for her husband.

God will live among humanity forever and wipe away every tear from our eyes. There'll be no more pain or death because the previous things will have passed away. In the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, "The birth, death and resurrection of Jesus means that one day everything sad will come untrue." This is our Advent celebration, our hope, peace, joy and love while we await the return of our Lord.

Prayer

Jesus, you are God incarnate and you are love incarnate. You were there at the beginning and you will be there at the end. You are our constant through every trouble and every weary moment in our lives. Your love is patient, kind and enduring. Thank you for your incredible gift of life and love that we celebrate at Christmas and all year round. Amen.

Create your own greeting cards

STEP 1 Print | **STEP 2** Colour | **STEP 3** Cut out | **STEP 4** Fold




Peace

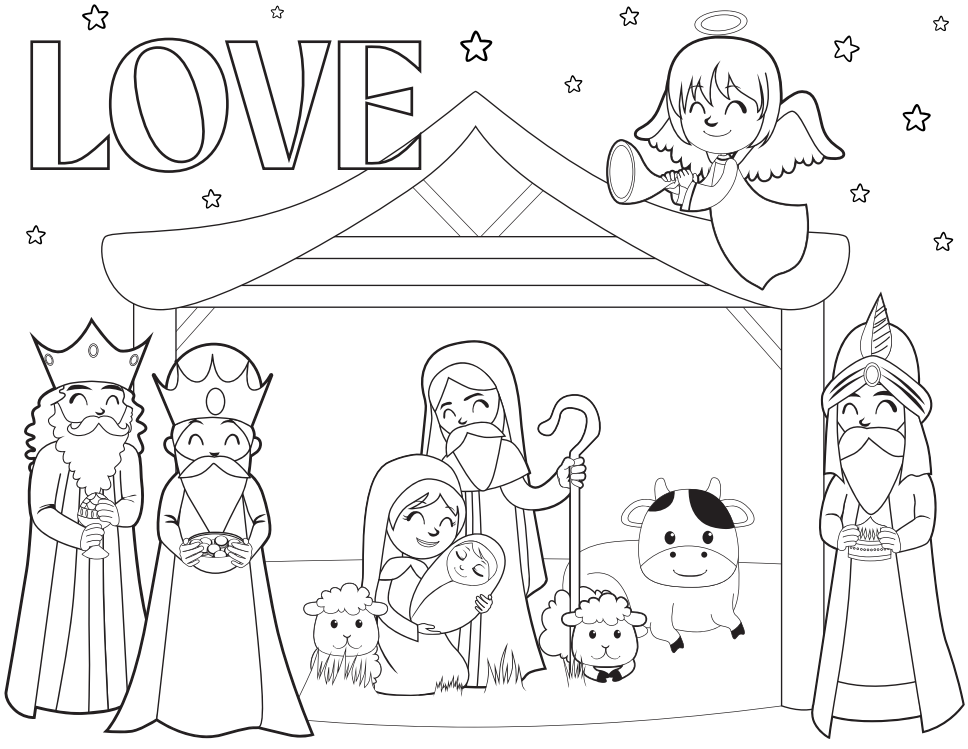

Joy


Love


HOPE


PEACE


JOY


LOVE

Merry Christmas

FROM FOCUS ON THE FAMILY CANADA



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