

Introduction to *Anticipate Christmas* Daily Readings

One of the highlights for our church each year is the annual celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas. For many Christians around the world it's called *Advent*. It is a season of patient waiting, hopeful expectation, soul-searching, and calendar watching marked by many churches, Christian families, and individual followers of Jesus. There's no biblical mandate to observe Advent. It is an optional tradition that developed over the course of church history as a time of preparation for Christmas Day, the anticipation of celebrating Jesus' coming. That is why our theme at Mountain View is "Anticipate Christmas."

At Mountain View, we'll observe this season starting the last Sunday of November, and it will climax with our Christmas morning candlelight service. Each Sunday we will look at the celebration of Jesus' first and second comings through these four words and themes: *Hope, Peace Joy* and *Love*. Each week we will light a theme candle to remember and anticipate His coming.

The daily readings were written by the pastoral staff at Mountain View to complement and correspond with the four weekly topics. We encourage you to use this time of reading, individually or as a family devotional time, to help prepare your hearts and minds to come and adore Him this season. Together, we will "Anticipate Christmas" while looking forward to Jesus' coming for his Church.

Our prayer is that our daily reading times together might help us, as a forever family, keep Jesus as our focus during this season; that we'll make Him preeminent even in all the rush and busyness that surrounds the season. Let's together anticipate the birth and coming of Jesus – "O Come, Let Us Adore Him."

[All quotes are from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated]

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -26 November 2023

Hope is Born

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself even as he is pure.

[1 John 3:3]

Synonyms for anticipation include ***expectation, excitement and hope***. Expectation is evident in the hearts of Adam and Eve as they named their sons in faith believing one would fulfill Yahweh's promise to Eve before their expulsion from the garden. Excitement sustained Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Moses, who contended with the constant complaining and disobedience of God's people was motivated by hope as they approached the promised land. Expectation sustained David as he anticipated the establishment of his dynasty and reveled in Yahweh's mercy to forgive his grievous sins. Hope sustained the faith of generations of Israel as they awaited Messiah, the fulfillment of prophecies and promises.

Hope encouraged Mary through her pregnancy as she was no doubt the target of ridicule, disdain and shaming. Hope energized the young couple as they made their way to Bethlehem. And Hope was born. They called his name Jesus.

Hope is not an optimistic philosophy or an unsubstantiated wish. Hope is anchored in God's character, prophecies and promises. The writer of Hebrews cites the faithfulness of men and women who walked across the pages of Israel's history. The content is often called the ***Hall of Faith***. Perhaps it could as well be called, ***The Hall of Hope***. After all, that's how the chapter begins. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for...."

Believers today anticipate the blessed hope, the return of Christ for his church. The certainty of the promise should stimulate excitement and anticipation, obedience and faithfulness in the hearts and lives of those who are his.

Does your hope in Christ affect your daily life?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -27 November 2023

A Season of Hope

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ... having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
[Ephesians 2:12-13]

We know when it's the Christmas season by when the decorations start appearing in the shops. Each year it seems to get earlier and earlier as shelves get lined with tinsel, decorations perch in hallways, and trees fill almost every open corner.

But we also know that Christmas goes much deeper than the festive decorations. Christmas is first and foremost a season of hope. This is the very special time of remembering that Christ came to Earth to give us hope by providing a way for sinners to have a saving relationship with God. In Ephesians 2, we see that without God, we have no hope. No hope of salvation, no hope of an eternity with Him, no hope of living a truly worthwhile life. But, for those who have trusted in Christ, those who have entered a saving relationship with God through Jesus and have begun to experience the new life that he bought with his blood, we have hope.

What is this hope? It's the unshakeable hope that our salvation is full and final. It's the hope that we will one day be with our Saviour and Heavenly Father in heaven. It's the hope of eternal life, finally free from the grip of sin. It's the hope that the trials of this life are only temporary and that nothing can ultimately separate us from God. For the believer, this is the hope that permeates this life and it's a hope that will be made perfect in the next life. This is what Christmas is all about, celebrating the day that our Hope, Jesus Christ was born.

As followers of Christ, our ultimate hope is found in Christ alone.

Where is your hope this Christmas?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -28 November 2023

A Living Hope

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [Colossians 1:27]

In Isaiah 7:14, we read a well-known prophecy about Jesus' birth. It says: "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel." Immanuel translates as "God with us".

Often at Christmas time I have this mental picture of baby Jesus in the manger, or the shepherds and Jesus' parents huddled around Jesus in the stable and the bright star overhead. While it's good to remember and think about, I think we often forget that Christ didn't just come to pay earth a visit and leave. He came to die for the sins of the world and to provide a way for those who trust in him and in his sacrifice for them to have an intimate relationship with Him. Those of us that have, done that now have the Holy Spirit residing in them; literally having God with us.

That's mind bogglingly awesome! And although this was a mystery to man for many years, this was always God's plan. A plan that is now fully and clearly revealed it to us through his Word.

Having God with us and in us should change the way we live. It should help us to honour and glorify him in all that we do. But it should also give us incredible hope. Since God is present and working in each of his children during this life, we have the assurance that his Son will one day return, and we will be with him in person forever.

Those who have trusted in Jesus' work of salvation and accepted Him as Saviour share promise and by his Spirit await in hope.

Does the hope of his return make a difference in your life?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -29 November 2023

A Season of Hope

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. [1 Peter 1:13]

Hope is a strange word. These days we tend to use it very casually; and, as a result, it seems to have lost its weight. We hope it'll be sunny for the trip to the beach we have planned. We hope we do well in the test or project. This kind of hope is really just wishful thinking.

Biblical hope is different. Often it can be compared to faith because it is rooted in something greater than us, and it gives us confidence. Biblical hope is a confidence that something is going happen because of what God has revealed to us in his Word. And the foundation of this hope is of course, Christ.

So, what should you and I as believers be hoping for? Is our hope any different from unbelievers' hope? Yes, it's completely different. We no longer live hoping aimlessly, but we fix our eyes on Christ who came, died, was buried, ascended, and promised he will return. Why do we believe him? Because he is God, he is truthful, he has revealed himself to us in his Word, and he has given his life for us so that we can live.

As we saw in yesterday's reading, we eagerly hope for what is to come because we already have God living in us through his Spirit. So, we have very good reason to hope this Christmas. And I believe that living with this hope should spur us on to live expectantly and to live ready, actively living for God and obeying his commands. Be aware of things that may distract you and keep your eyes firmly fixed on that glorious day.

Are you living in light of the hope of Christ's return?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -30 November 2023

Death Through Eyes of Hope

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

[1 Thessalonians 4:13]

If you look at a list of top ten things that people are afraid of, death usually always ranks highly, along with the fear of flying and the fear of small spaces. As humans we naturally protect what is important to us and what's more important to us than our life? This explains why funerals or mourning someone's death is often so heartbreaking because a loved one is no longer with us and no longer exists as we have known them.

Now death may seem like a strange thing to talk about when we are remembering Christ's birth, but I want to remind you today that because of Christ's incarnation, our perspective on death is changed.

Christians trust that because Christ died and rose again, those who have trusted in him will also experience and enjoy life after death. The writer of Thessalonians speaks of the bodies of those who have died as simply having fallen asleep. Their souls are in heaven, but the promise is those bodies will one day wake up, be transformed and reunited with our souls to enjoy eternity with Christ—In bodies like his glorious body (Phil. 3), outfitted for eternity (1 Cor. 15). That truth should affect the way we live this side of death.

This is a great hope and a great comfort. If we've lost loved ones who were believers, we do mourn them. However, we don't grieve as those who have no hope. We eagerly await the day when we will be reunited with them in the Lord's presence.

Does this good news and hope change the way you view death and grieve those who have died in the Lord?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -1 December 2023

The Blessed Hope

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. [Titus 2:11-13]

Throughout this week we have been looking at hope. What it is, how it's different from just wishful thinking, and what we can hope for. But what about now? Does biblical hope affect our daily lives?

Imagine a scenario with me for a second. You've just received word from a family member that someone in your family has passed away and left you a huge amount of money. You may never have to work a day in your life again. Or you've just been to see the doctor who has told you that you have a rare condition and may only have a year left to live.

In both cases there is a certainty that that something is about to happen. In one case it's good; in the other bad. But don't you think that being in either of those situations would change the way you lived going forward? Maybe you'd spend more time doing the things you were passionate about or spend time making memories with loved ones?

Such should be the same for believers. We have this great hope that Christ is coming back to take us to live with Him forever. That changes our focus in this life and recalibrates us to what's important. If Jesus returned tomorrow, we'd want to be found busy living for him, not living like the world. We'd want to be found obeying his commands and sharing the good news of the gospel with others. We'd want to be found faithful (Matt 24:36-51). Hope like this is life changing.

Are you living a changed life as you look forward to the Lord's return?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS -2 December 2023

Hope on Display

But in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

[1 Peter 3:15 ESV]

As we look back over this week of devotions on hope, we can't help but conclude that if we truly live with this hope, we are going to be a people very different from those in the world around us. If you have trusted in Christ and received the Spirit, he is working in you to transform your sinful heart and make you holy. This is a big change and those around us are bound to notice.

Peter encourages us that when people do notice and begin asking questions, we need to be prepared with our answer. We need to be ready to share that our hope is not in ourselves, but in him who lives in us. These golden moments are opportunities to point people to Christ to share the incredible, life-changing hope of the Gospel with someone who may never have heard it.

And what better season to be able to share the source of our hope than during Christmas? As we gather with family and friends, as we have more leisure time, we will have opportunities to display our changed life to those around us. We also need to be ready to tell them about the one who made it possible, Jesus.

This season provides a good reminder to make sure our walk matches our talk. Are we honouring Christ in all that we do? Let's check our motives, what we are prioritising? Check what is the focus our time, money, and resources. Remember that as we eagerly await Christ's return, he expects us to live differently.

Are you prepared to share the reason for your hope this Christmas?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 3 December 2023

Peace on Earth

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. [Luke 2:14]

In the minds of many, peace on earth means a cessation of conflict, social justice, absence of lawlessness and freedom from fear. However, the promise of peace throughout biblical history has emphasised one's relationship with God.

The psalmist wrote: "Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other." There is no peace as long as unrighteousness prevails. God's wrath is poured out on all the unrighteousness of man. But God has provided peace for those who love him. The Old Testament offerings included peace offerings that were to symbolise sins confessed and forgiven, a renewed commitment to the righteousness demanded by the law.

Then Jesus came. Before the crucifixion he promised a peace different from that which the world offers. (John 14:17) After the resurrection he told the disciples, "Peace be with you..." (John 21:21) Paul declares those who have been justified by faith have peace with God. Jesus came to be the ultimate peace offering.

Paul further declares, "he himself is our peace," emphasising peace between Jews and Gentiles who come to him by faith. The Prince of Peace is the author of peace with God and peace among men. He also promises one can experience peace that is beyond understanding. (Philippians 4:7) Those who are at peace *with* God can also experience peace *from* God and are commanded to be ambassadors of peace to a troubled world.

A popular saying, often reproduced on t-shirts, bumper stickers, coffee cups, etc. says simply: *No God; no peace. Know God; know peace.* Such is the secret of peace...in the heart and in the world.

Do you know God; do you know his peace?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 4 December 2023

The Gift of Peace

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. [Romans 5:1 ESV]

When I was young, I found it exciting to go and buy something at the shop. I would carefully take my money out of my pocket, count out the correct amount and hand it to the person behind the counter. They would then give me the item I wanted. It was an exciting exchange! As adults, transactions like this are much less fun now, but they form part of our daily lives.

Scripture tells us that there has been a heavenly transaction for those who've trusted Christ. We come to God in faith in Jesus Christ and he gives us peace with God. What a blessed exchange! All we had to offer him was our filthy lives and sinfulness. But in exchange, we received this great, everlasting gift in return: *peace with God*. That means that while we used to be God's enemies, we are now born into his family and no longer need to fear punishment or judgment for the sins we have committed against God.

I want to stress again what we brought to the table. It was nothing of value, just our dirty, sinful hearts. And that goes to show that salvation is not something that we buy from God. It's not even a fair transaction, but it's a beautiful gift of grace and love through which God demonstrates how much he loves us and wants to have a relationship with us.

During this Christmas, be mindful of this reality and that Christ came as a baby to eventually die for you. This is the priceless present that our Heavenly Father offers to each person who can then experience Peace with God.

Will you accept this gift from God? Although it is free it won't be available forever.

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 5 December 2023

Peace in Trials of Life

*“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. [Matthew 10:34]*

If we think about Jesus' life and mission, one may think that we could sum it up in words like *redemption, love, or peace*. And they'd be right. But if we look at Jesus' words in the passage above, he is talking to his followers and tells them they mustn't be mistaken, he didn't come to bring peace, but a sword. A sword?! Isn't that a bit violent for Jesus? That doesn't seem to fit our mental image of the gentle, lowly Jesus who was born in the manger.

But we don't need to look too far in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to see that throughout Jesus' ministry there were mixed reviews about him. Some loved him and wanted to spend every waking moment with him and even followed him at great sacrifice. Others distanced themselves from him thinking he was strange and counter-cultural. Others even schemed and hatched plans to quietly get rid of him because he was upsetting their way of doing things. There wasn't much unity. And that's what Jesus is referring to here when he says that he came bearing a sword. Just like a sword, he will be divisive.

When we celebrate Christmas, we need to make sure we have a balanced view of who Christ is. Not just the gentle baby in the manger, but also the Lord who judges sinners, and who said that “no one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus also expects his followers to follow him wholeheartedly even if it costs them dearly. Those who are faithful despite these temporary trials will be rewarded in eternity.

Be aware that following Christ may not always be peaceful, but be faithful even when it's not.

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 6 December 2023

Peace that Overcomes

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. [John 16:33]

In the book *Pilgrim's Progress*, a traveller named Christian travels to find the Celestial City (Heaven). But the way there is full of challenging, even dangerous situations. From bouts of despair to temptations of a life of ease and pleasure to persecution and encounters with forces of evil, it's an accurate depiction of what the life of a believer can look like.

Jesus often reminded his disciples they would encounter tribulations. It's a certainty. But he also assures them that they don't need to despair because he has already overcome the world. If they remain in him and obediently follow his Word, then they will know his peace.

The same is true for Christ's followers today. We know that it's becoming increasingly counter-cultural to be a Christian today and we should expect that at some point we may go through times of tribulation as a result. But the strong encouragement is that we need to remain in Christ. He is the Prince of Peace, one who has been tempted in every way as we are yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

Just like the traveller, Christian, we will face trials. But we aren't alone as we go through them because we have Christ. In this journey through this life, keep your eyes fixed on Christ, determined to faithfully run the race to the end. Regardless of what we face, we can find true peace in our Saviour who has already overcome the world.

Where do you turn In times of trial and hardship? Where do you find peace?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 7 December 2023

God's Peace in a War Torn World

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[Isaiah 9:6 ESV]

Peace. We've come face to face with just the opposite this year as we've watched the cruel fingers of war claw through Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine. It has been an ugly reminder of the unrest and the violence that exists in our sinful, fallen world.

It has been like this almost since the beginning of time and it certainly was no different in the years leading up to Jesus' birth. The Israelites were being oppressed, and they were waiting for a Saviour who would come and give them political peace.

The prophet Isaiah seems to speak of the Messiah child as if he was with them at the time he wrote. But this was many, many years beforehand. Nonetheless, look at what Isaiah prophesied about who this Saviour would be.

He would be a child, with political power. He would be a wise ruler, God himself! He would be an Everlasting Father, and Prince of peace. This sounds too good to be true! If only this man could come and save the world!

Do you want to know the best part? He has come, and he will return. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. The baby in the manger grew up, then died for the sins of the world. He was buried and then rose again three days later. By conquering death, Jesus proved his power, and that he alone can offer peace with God to any sinner who comes to him in faith. One day he will rule over creation, perfectly and peacefully. his Kingdom will last forever. Through Christ one can know true, perfect peace.

Are you at Peace with God having trusted in Christ? Are you living at peace with others?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 8 December 2023

Peace as a Lifestyle

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [Galatians 5:22 ESV]

Earlier this year we went through a sermon series that walked through every verse of the sermon on the Mount. If I had to sum up the whole sermon in one sentence, I would say this: “Jesus taught his followers how he expects us to live.” As we went through it we saw that Jesus exacts an impossible standard from us, at least if we attempt it on our own. To properly do what he commands, we need a new heart and the help that comes from the Holy Spirit working in us. Without a changed heart and the Spirit’s help, we cannot live in a way that pleases our Heavenly Father.

Today’s passage identifies the fruit of the Spirit. These are evidence of the Spirit working in us, changing an old, sinful behaviour, and replacing it with a new behaviour that imitates Christ. Nestled in the middle of this list is *peace*.

If we’re honest, peace isn’t something that naturally exists in us. We are prone to get angry, take offense or live at odds with others in our lives. But when we are saved and the Spirit of God works in us, He replaces these things with peace. This doesn’t mean that we are suddenly all zen and unphased by life, but it does mean that we have the ability through the Spirit to live peaceably.

Look for opportunities this Christmas to display the peace of Christ. In times of worry, busyness, anger, or frustration. Trust the Spirit to transform you and to display peace in your life. *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* (Rom 12:18).

Spend a moment in prayer asking the Lord to help you to have done with the old, sinful behaviour and to pursue showing peace instead.

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 9 December 2023

Maintaining the Bond of Peace

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

[Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV]

The church. It's a rag tag group of people from all walks of life. We look different, we sound different, we even like different things. But one thing is the same and it's the only thing that can unite us: that's the Holy Spirit living in us, the result of our faith in Christ.

Because of this, all believers should be united. Interestingly, we don't *create* this unity. Christ has already done that. We are simply called to *maintain* the unity, and we do this by showing love to one another and living as Christ has instructed us.

When we live at peace with each other and love each other, something incredible happens. It's something that we've seen several times over the years at Mountain View. We become strong and resilient. We can stand together during challenging times, encourage one another, and provide for each other, often despite some big obstacles.

And what a witness that can be to the watching world! Let's face it, the world is in turmoil out there and there is very little unity among likeminded people, let alone a diverse group of people. But the church is different, and I think that displaying that to the world can cause them to at least ask questions and at best want to be a part of what the Lord is doing as he builds his church.

What are doing to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace among the forever family at Mountain View?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 10 December 2023

Joy Defined

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

[Psalm 30:5b]

Joy is not the absence of hardship. Joy is a God-centredness that persists even in difficult, seemingly impossible circumstances. David referenced such an understanding in Psalm 30 which might well be entitled “Ode to Joy.” Many of David’s psalms exhibit a similar refrain. Joy filled David’s heart as he spent time in the wilderness to escape Saul’s vendetta. Joy filled his heart when he spent time in the desert, exiled from Jerusalem and threatened with murder at the hand of his own son.

Jesus spoke of joy on the night before the cross. In anticipation of Judas’ betrayal; arrest by the temple guards; trials before the Council, Pilate and Herod he declared his heart was full of joy. The writer of Hebrews further states, “For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross....” The apostles, after being beaten for daring to proclaim the gospel in Jerusalem rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for Jesus name. Paul and Silas sang praises to God at midnight while incarcerated in the Philippian jail. The biographies of Christian martyrs evidence testimonies of joy as they laid down their lives for Christ.

The apostles make reference to the joy that can prevail even in times of severe testing. James says joy can prevail because we are aware our faith is being *brought to maturity*. (James 1:2-4). Peter says joy can prevail because our faith is being *revealed as genuine*. (1 Peter 1:6, 7) Paul says joy can prevail because we are being *conformed to the image of Christ*. (Romans 8:26-29)

Scriptures exhort believers to consider the trials to be a means of testing, refining and manifesting one’s faith. Joy is not the absence of hardship; it is the awareness of God’s desire to conform his children to the image of his son.

Have you experienced “joy in the morning?”

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 11 December 2023

Joy to the World

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 Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

[Luke 2:10 & 11]

One of my favorite Christmas carols is *Joy to the World*. The lyrics were written by Isaac Watts, the music attributed to George Frederick Handel. Its stately music is similar to that of Handel's *Messiah*. One source reports, "Today, the carol is so popular that—as of the late 20th century—it was the most-published Christmas hymn in North America." But I'm certain it does not compare with the angelic rendition the night of Jesus' birth. While the shepherds were with their sheep in the quiet darkness, suddenly the sky was filled with light and an angelic chorus provided the concert of the ages!

Note the significance of joy: the Saviour was born. The fulfillment of prophecies from Genesis to Malachi; the Lamb of God that would take away the sin of the world; Israel's long awaited Messiah was born! I'm certain we cannot fathom the joy that reverberated through the skies and resonated in the shepherd's hearts. We are told their excitement was so compelling they made their way to where the baby was lying in the manger.

Believers, like the angels, are compelled to bring the message of joy to the world. The Saviour, Jesus Christ, was incarnate to become the acceptable sacrifice for the sins of all people. Hence the true joy of Christmas is that of hope for forgiveness and the promised gift of eternal life. This is not a treasure to be hoarded; it is a treasure to be shared. We may not be able to sing the news, but we can spread the message far and wide: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!"

Is "joy to the world" in your heart and on your lips"

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 12 December 2023

The Believer's Joy is the Father's Will

And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.
[1 John 1:4/NKJV]

Some manuscripts are translated “that *our* joy may be full.” There is textual evidence for both, however, the purpose and content of 1 John, I believe, argues for the NKJV translation. My reason: John’s first epistle is a declaration of the Father’s desire to enjoy intimate fellowship with his children. Some have referred to it as the Father’s love letter to his children. That is often missed when reading the epistle. One author has written a book entitled, *The Forgotten Father*, a treatise designed to help believers overcome an unbalanced view of the Godhead.

We’re reminded of Jesus’ words in John 6: “All that the Father gives me will come to me; John 14:6: “No man comes to the Father except through me;” John 17:3: “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God (*the Father*), and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

Joy is the Father’s will for his children. Such joy is known by those who are committed to “walking in the light as he is in the light.” (1:7) The fullness of such joy extends to those who confess their sins (chapter 1); to those who refuse to love the world (chapter 2); to those who purify themselves, “even as he is pure”(chapter 3) to those who love their brothers and sisters (chapter 4); and to those who obey their heavenly Father (chapter 5).

The epistle is, as some have said, profoundly simply and simply profound. John confronted his readers regarding sin, reminding them, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed (read *sperma*) abides in him...” This simple truth is the compelling reason for the content of the letter. The Father desires an intimate relationship with his kids and makes the hope of heaven all the sweeter.

Have you spent any time with your Father today?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 13 December 2023

Joy is the Son's Promise

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. [John 15:11]

The incarnation was a joyful experience for Jesus Christ. Joy marked the occasion of his birth: the angelic announcement, the shepherd's worship, the mother's delight, the magi's visit. Was his a glamorous life? No. Was it without hardship? No. Was it without disappointment? No. Was he faced with suffering? Yes! The historical context of Jesus words to his disciples was the night in which he would be betrayed, arrested, falsely accused, tried in four different courts and ultimately sentenced to death on the cross. Yet he was concerned that his disciples know his joy and know it to the full. The writer of Hebrews reminds us Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

It is evident Jesus was referring to the reality that one can experience "fullness of joy" despite the most difficult of circumstances. His promised joy is that which transcends circumstances. *His* joy is different from the world's idea of joy. His joy is the real thing with an eternal significance so unlike the temporal joy promised by the world's appeal for temporal gratification with counterfeit objects and ideals.

May I suggest Jesus' joy in the crucifixion context, was born out of a love for his Heavenly Father and his delight to provide the all sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. Hebrews 10 quotes Jesus' own words, "I have come to do your will...once for all."

He will come again to receive to himself all those the Father has given him. And we will share his joy!

Is your joy genuine and lasting or counterfeit and temporal?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 14 December 2023

Joy is the Spirit's Fruit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.... [Galatians 5:22, 23]

These words, written to the Galatian believers, are in contrast to the previous verses referencing the works of the flesh. Verses 19-21 list the various indulgences people pursue in their search for joy. They include behaviours that are often addictive e.g. sexual addictions, drugs (“sorcery” is a translation of *pharmakeia*), power, possessions, alcohol, etc. Tragically, the emptiness, sadness and heartache resulting from these indulgences are masked with the promise of immediate gratification. Such is the reality of counterfeit joy.

The joy produced by the Holy Spirit is the supernatural product as the Spirit conforms believers to the image of Christ. Every element of the fruit of the Spirit is a characteristic of the Saviour. Such explains how joy can prevail even in the times of difficulty, opposition, hardship and loss. Jesus evidenced joy throughout his earthly ministry. The Apostle Paul experienced joy in spite of various sufferings described in 2 Corinthians 11 as well as imprisonments in Philippi, Caesarea and Rome. Such is not to suggest joy is somehow the result of a masochistic indulgence of pain. Rather, it is the majestic indication of the Spirit's presence and work.

In many cultures, the joy of Christmas is often thought to result from exchanging gifts, eating lavish meals, etc., a temporal joy rather than the persistent joy of the Spirit. We're familiar with gift returns and exchanges often the next day after Christmas. We are often told the joy diminishes “when the new wears off.” However the joy of the Spirit is a year-round joy related to our new birth in Christ made possible by his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. That joy is enhanced by our expectation of his return for his church. As Paul commended the Thessalonian believers: “Therefore, encourage one another with these words.”

Are you experience/exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 15 December 2023

Joy of Worship

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

[Psalm 16:11]

I came to faith in Christ my matric year and entered varsity at a Christian university nearly a year later. We had dorm devotions every night with a “prayer captain” who shepherded our three-room group of fifteen men. He assigned us verses to memorise as we made our way through the school year. One of the verses is the one noted above. Though I memorised it over sixty years ago it is engraved on my heart.

The psalmist speaks of the joy of intimacy with God in a context of worship. It is a psalm of the *resurrection* from which Peter preached on the day of Pentecost when three thousand people came to Christ. It is a psalm of *relationship* as the psalmist speaks of the intimacy of worship: *pleasant places; a beautiful inheritance*, etc. But such intimacy on this side the cross is that made possible by the death and resurrection foreseen by the psalmist.

Jesus said no one could come to the Father except through him. That is a promise of salvation through Christ as Saviour. But we have access to the throne of grace for worship, confession, intercession and prayer because of our High Priest, Jesus Christ.

No matter how dark the night or how stormy our circumstances, worship enhances our joy. And the day is coming when we will literally be in his presence and know overwhelming joy as we cast our crowns at his feet while singing a great chorus of praise and joy: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”

[Revelation 4:11]

Have you experience the joy of his presence?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 16 December 2023

The Joy of Christian Unity

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [Philippians 2:1, 2]

An abuse of God's character and will is to say, *God wants me to be happy!* Such is not a Scriptural concept. Jesus, in the Beatitudes, says, "Blessed are..." The term "blessed" can be translated *happy*. But consider the context of happiness: meekness, mourning, mercy, persecution, etc. James says "Blessed (happy) is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life." The Godhead desires believers be full of joy—the fruit of the Spirit, experiencing the abundant life, enduring trials, aspiring to Christ-likeness regardless whether one's circumstances contribute to happiness as we perceive it. Sadly materialism and narcissism have succeeded in distorting God's Word and God's will.

The suggestion God wants us to be happy is to view the Christian life primarily from a Western world-view. Nicer things, bigger salaries, titles, prominence and personal successes are viewed as the norm for Christians. I doubt that was the mindset of the apostles who counted it joy to suffer for the sake of Christ (Acts 5:41). Later all but John were martyred. I question whether that is the mindset of believers in "closed countries" today where Christians are persecuted, churches are burned, Bibles are banned and evangelism prohibited. What brings joy to those in such circumstances? I would submit the answer is in today's Scripture. Christians find joy in the mutual encouragement of the forever family. Paul suggests such in his first letter to the Corinthians: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together." The forever family is commanded to be a source of comfort not conflict so as to enhance our joy.

Do you contribute to the unity and joy of the forever family?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 17 December 2023

He Loved us First

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he love us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins,, [1 John 4:10]

Theologians define God's love as *unconditional* and *sacrificial*. The Old Testament reflects his unconditional love in his patience with his people's rebellion and disobedience that persisted for hundreds of years. He delivered them from Egypt, fed them in the wilderness, provided water in the desert, protected them from their enemies and dwelt among them. Yet they lacked faith to believe Yahweh could take them safely into the promised land. Later in the years of the wilderness they whined and complained, worshiping gods they had brought with them from Egypt. In the days of the judges they loved and worshiped idols and abandoned Yahweh. But when they cried out he came to their rescue. Indeed his love is unconditional and sacrificial.

A fitting description of God's love for mankind might well be *unfathomable*. Such is evident in God's giving his Son and the willingness of the Son to give his life to both please the Father and save the sinner. I love the song, "In His Love and in His Pity":

In His love and in His pity He redeemed us.

In His love and in His pity He provided heaven.

Never has another loved us like the Saviour loves.

How can any one suspend himself upon a cross, and die for me?

Die willingly, to set us free?

Though fully grasping the dimensions of his love is impossible, Paul encouraged the Ephesians to endeavour to comprehend its breadth, length, height and depth. Consider: his love is broad enough to reach around the world, long enough to reach from eternity past to eternity future; deep enough to reach the vilest sinner, high enough to satisfy a Holy God. Unfathomable.

Shall we not return the favour, live each day for our dear Saviour?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 18 December 2023

Seasonal Love?

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16]

If there is a “Christmas emotion” affirmed by believers and unbelievers alike, it is *love*. Christmas is a time for exchanging gifts with those we love. Christmas is a time for family reunions. Christmas is a time for sharing with those in need. Christmas is a time to acknowledge God’s love whether it is reciprocated or not. However, it is possible to suppress that emotion the rest of the year.

Probably, the most familiar verse in the Bible is John 3:16. The writer speaks of a love that is *unconditional*. It is similarly a love that is universal. God loved the world! The expression of his love in the incarnation of Jesus Christ wasn’t limited to one specific people group. Though he came to his own, his own did not receive him. Similarly, it is a *sacrificial* love. God gave his son who would give his life that the recipients of his love might receive the gift of life. And who are these? Sinners, aliens, rebels, unbelievers who might at first appear to be beyond the reach of the love of God. Yet Paul says, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) His love is also *perpetual*. That is, he never stops loving, he never stops reaching, he never stops craving our love in return. He keeps on loving; he keeps on giving.

If we would experience “the spirit of Christmas,” it must be that which extends beyond one season of the year. Our daily lives should evidence his love that is neither hypocritical or seasonal. Rather, intentional, sacrificial, perpetual and, like God’s love, expressed to those who love us back or those who hate us or disregard our love. That’s truly a Christmas kind of love.

Do you love with a Christmas kind of love?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 19 December 2023

Practical Love

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.
[1 John 4:11]

Someone once sarcastically observed. "Christmas is a time when we spend time we don't have looking for gifts we can't afford, to give to people we don't like who will probably return or exchange them the day after Christmas anyway." This might summarise the commercialised perception which has corrupted the season, however, it does not represent the spirit of the holiday or its ultimate significance.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ was a very practical gesture on God's part. Mankind was alienated from God by sin; mankind needed to be redeemed; mankind could not provide salvation for himself; God stepped in and provided the Man who could solve the problem once for all.

Christ's birth was not intended to establish a holiday, nor to foster a frenzy of shopping, spending, baking, cooking, partying, and similar activities. Christ's birth was a very quiet event isolated from everyone as it took place in a stable, made known to a chosen view, resulting in worship by both shepherds and wise men. No frenzy, no hustle and bustle. Quiet, family, Christ-centered, worshipful.

Christmas can and should be a time where love for one another prompts us to set aside quiet time for family. A time of worship for the Christ who, as an infant was gifted to a sinful world to ultimately become the giver of eternal life. (Romans 6:23).

Christmas can and should be a time for sharing the good news, behaving as Jesus would among our family, friends and unsaved acquaintances. Since we've been loved, ought we not also to love one another? And...to extend that love to the unloved and unlovely.

Close your wallets but not your hearts. Stash your credit cards but not your compassion. Let's have a practical Christmas!

What can you do to make it a practical Christmas?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 20 December 2023

Motivational Love

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,... [Hebrews 10:24]

The writer of Hebrews has a pattern of exhortation very similar to that of Paul. In chapter 10, verse 19 the writer leaves off his theological instruction with a series of exhortations for his readers to act on what he has written and what they know. One of my professors referred to this section as the inspired “lettuce” patch since the structure is a series of “let us” exhortations. Note: “Let us draw near... Let us hold fast;” then “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”

I often smile at the King James Version’s translation, to “provoke” one another. We don’t have to expend a lot of brain power analyzing situations where believers indeed provoke one another. However, the writer meant the positive impact of life on life. Like electrons in an electrical circuit bounce off one another to create the energy of electrical current, so believers are challenged to create energy expended in love and good deeds. I suggest we consider this kind of mutual stimulation as *motivational* love.

In Western cultures (South Africa being one of those), the pre-occupation with *personal independence* collides with and distracts from the Biblical concept of mutual *interdependence*. Paul emphasises this in his persistent use of the physical body as an illustration of Christ’s church. Salvation is indeed a personal faith response to the gospel however, we are born into the forever family. When Christ returns it will be to collect his bride. “We will be caught up together!”

Someone has sarcastically observed, “To live above with saints we love; Oh that will be glory. To live below with saints we know...well that’s a different story.”

How does your involvement in the forever family stimulate others to love and good works?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 21 December 2023

Mutual Love

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. [John 13:34]

One of the most rewarding “theme” studies of the New Testament is exploring the “one another” phrases. I have a book in my library whose chapters are devotional discussions of many of the appearances. However, they are all variations on the *new commandment* to love one another.

The exhortation to love one another is not new. Even the Old Testament challenged those living under the Mosaic Law to love others. However, the Israelites were commanded to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. Not so the new commandment. The Law of Christ commands us to love one another as we have been loved! How can one do that? First, we are imperfect people. Second, our immaturity is often revealed in selfishness which transgresses the Law of Christ. Third, even Paul said it’s usually impossible to find a person willing to die for another.

But wait! Jesus gave his commandment *before* the cross not *after*. Note he says, “as I *have* loved you.” [Emphasis mine]. Certainly, the cross will be the most significant expression of his love. But the New Commandment references something Jesus already did. What was that? He had just finished washing their feet! Jesus’ is commanding his disciples (and us) to be willing to stoop to wash the feet of another person.

I believe Jesus was commanding something more than a physical *act*. He wanted that kind of attitude to be a spiritual *action*. They had been arguing about who would be greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22). Jesus silenced their bickering with more than words. He washed their feet, even Judas. An old insult says, “Kiss my foot!” The Christ-follower says, “Let me wash your feet.”

What if every Christian obeyed the Law of Christ?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 22 December 2023

Un-hypocritical Love

Let love be genuine. [Romans 12:9a]

Paul's words to the Romans believers follows the theological instruction of the first eleven chapters. He first challenges believers to offer their bodies to God as a living sacrifice (12:1, 2), then to have an accurate opinion of themselves (12:3), then a commitment to the assembly of believers of which they are a part (12:4-8) and finally a list of exhortations including a number of the "one another" phrases.

Paul's concern is a sincere love from the heart. The term translated *genuine* is literally "without hypocrisy." May I suggest this is the way believers are to relate to one another and act toward one another when church "is not in session?" This is the kind of unconditional affection brothers and sisters express to each other as they navigate the challenges, successes, disappointments and/or victories of our daily lives.

One of the first challenges is to love with "brotherly affection." How often have we heard others say (or even thought to ourselves), "I have to *love* you; I don't have to *like* you!" Such a statement is in direct disobedience to Paul's command to have a brotherly affection for other believers. It is also blatantly hypocritical! The term here is *philadelphia*. Such a term is more than a good name for a big city. It is a graphic word describing the relationships of brothers and sisters in the forever family. Perhaps it is better understood as *agapé* love in action. *Agapé* might be understood as the attitude of one's heart. *Philadelphia* might well be the activity of one's hands...to help in time of need, to show affection in times of sorrow, to clap in celebration of another's successes.

The Bible says I have to love you; the Bible also says I have to like you. It's a forever family thing!

Do you *like* those you *love*?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 23 December 2023

Honourable I Love

Outdo one another in showing honour. [Romans 12:10b]

As Paul developed his thesis of genuine love, he challenged his readers to “outdo one another in showing honour.”

Sometimes the word “honor” is used in a context of money. Ananias and Sapphira earned “proceeds” from the sale of their land. (Acts 5:2) Paul told the Corinthians their bodies had been bought at a price. (1 Cor. 6:20)

He wrote that elders who work hard at teaching and preaching are worthy of “double honor.” (1 Timothy 5:17) (Some have suggested a pastor is worthy twice the salary of the average working person in the church!) But Paul was not negotiating a contract. As for the pastor being worthy of double honour, he is worthy of honour as a brother-in-Christ, as noted in our verse today; but he is also worthy of honour as one entrusted with the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. As Paul notes in our text above, every believer is worthy of honour.

The term carries the idea of *honour* beyond cash value. He challenged the Roman Christians to “outdo one another in showing honor.” But how do we “outdo” one another? He is aware how easy it is to paste on a smile and shake someone’s hand for recognition or honor received while thinking ourselves more deserving. Genuine love? Obviously not! Honourable love? Obviously not.

Paul is commending his readers to see the personal value or worth of other believers and encourages them to outdo one another in recognising and affirming that. He told the Philippian believers...”in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:3) It is to assume the attitude of Jesus. His blood, more precious than gold or silver, was spent/spilt to pay the price for us. If he valued us that much should we not also honour/value one another?

How can you find ways to show honour to others?

ANTICIPATE CHRISTMAS - 24 December 2023

Christmas is Christ

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 2:11]

The term *Christ* is the New Testament equivalent for the Old Testament term, *Messiah*. Both mean "anointed one." The verbal form is used in the Old Testament to describe the anointing with oil of priests, kings, the tabernacle, the temple and furnishings. Isaiah prophesied the Messiah would be one anointed by the Holy Spirit. Jesus, speaking in the synagogue at Nazareth identified himself to be the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Many New Testament references include his title, Christ, with his given name *Jesus*. Together they describe his uniqueness: fully God, humbling himself in the incarnation, fully man born of the virgin, Mary. He was anointed to preach the gospel to the poor, liberate captives, etc.. God among men. He healed the diseased, liberated the demon possessed, fed the hungry and gave sight to the blind and died as the perfect sacrifice for sin.

As he sojourned with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus quizzed his disciples about what people were saying about him. They answered with some theological references to Elijah and John the Baptist. Then came the question: "But who do *you* say that I am?" (Emphasis mine). Peter answered correctly: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus commended him for correctly and accurately identifying who he was.

The resurrected Christ today is seated at the right hand of the Father—object of saving faith, high priest interceding for his own and functioning as head of the church. He will come again to assume the throne of his father, David and of his kingdom there will be no end. This is Messiah, Jesus, Christ, the Son of the living God.

Is the Christ of Christmas your Saviour? `