

BETHANY CHURCH STAFF

the words of Jesus



A 25-DAY ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

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Preface

Merry Christmas! The babe in a manger is such a display of joy-filled grace! The Father sent us His Son out of love to rescue us. Without Jesus, we are without light, without life, without hope. But with Jesus, we are free! We do not fear our future nor despair our present. Immanuel! God is with us!

We are praying that our Lord will use this Christmas devotional to draw us near to Him in power and joy. We need spiritual revival! And Christmas is a great time to seek a new work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Revival would be a great gift to open on Christmas Day. May God use this devotional to help us follow Jesus together!

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded saying the little phrase “Truly, truly” on 25 different occasions. Jesus does not just say, “truly.” One “truly” from the Son of God would be enough to get our attention. But Jesus says, “Truly, truly.” He uses these two words together whenever He is about to say something that is so profound that it is hard to believe.

This expression of the word “truly” is the Greek word for *amēn*, taken directly from the Hebrew word *āmēn*. The word literally means “so be it.” It is used as an expression of complete and total agreement. When used at the end of a statement it carries the meaning of endorsing what has just been said. We most often use the term at the end of a prayer as a statement of agreement, like saying, “Yes, that is true!”

However, Jesus turns this on its head by using it at the beginning of His statements. Used in this way He is saying, this is true. However, using it twice in a row communicates

something even more profound: that what He is saying is so sure that He has first-hand knowledge of it. Like saying, “Believe me, this is true, I’ve seen it personally!” Jesus isn’t just communicating truth, He is the author of it.

These words prepare us to receive from Jesus truths that we will have trouble accepting. So this Christmas, we decided to produce a devotional for our church family that helps us to lean into Jesus and listen intently as He teaches us marvelous things!

How to Use this Devotional

Included in this book are 25 devotionals for the days leading up to Christmas. Each one contains five different parts. First is the passage or “truly, truly” statement for you to read and meditate on. Second is the devotional itself written by one of our staff. Third is a pastoral prayer that you can pray along with to help you reflect these important truths back to God. Fourth are questions for you to consider and help you apply each passage personally each day. Finally, the Bonus Community Step.

This is an extra step to consider taking to help our church family make the most of reading this devotional together. Often it will involve a simple idea on how to take action and advance the gospel hope you’ve just considered and share it with others. You may only find yourself taking these steps occasionally, but may you find encouragement in knowing that others are doing the same. **These steps are broken down into four themes over the next four weeks focusing on the four basic life-stages in our church family: older adults, adults, students, and children & families.**

DAY 1

Our Ladder to God

And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."
John 1:51 (ESV)

What a wonder that anyone comes to know the Lord! He is in heaven and we are on earth. He is holy and we are sinful. He is Creator and we are creature. He is unchanging and we are ever-changing. He is infinite and we are finite. Yet He lovingly bridges the eternal span between us and Him to know us and be known by us! We are right to bow in astonished adoration that He would set His love upon us.

After Jesus set His love upon Philip, a great zeal rose up in Philip's soul to share the Messiah with his friend Nathaniel. Philip described Jesus to Nathaniel, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." May God grant us open doors this Christmas season to follow Philip's example and point friends to Jesus!

Truly, Truly

Yet when Nathaniel first learned of Jesus, he was skeptical and doubting. Enter a personal interaction with Jesus! Though Jesus had not yet met Nathaniel, He described very personal facts about Nathaniel that no stranger could possibly know. Nathaniel, first bewildered, but then believing, cried out with joy, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Do you know that the Lord knows you intimately? He knows your trials, temptations, troubles, triumphs, and testings. How good to have a Savior who is not distant, but takes specific and saving interest in our lives!

While Nathaniel had just cause to believe in Jesus as his King and Savior, Jesus promised an even a firmer foundation for our faith: “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:50-51 ESV).

Jesus took Nathaniel back to the familiar story of Jacob sleeping on a rock when he had a dream about a ladder that reached from the earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending it.

God was at the top of the ladder receiving His messengers into His presence and then sending them out as His servants to the earth. When Jesus referenced this story, He was telling us that He is the ladder! He is the one who provides the path for us to meet the Lord and know Him! He is the one who sends us into the world on an eternal mission. With Him we have everything!

Truly, Truly

Pastoral Prayer

Father, teach us to fix our eyes upon Jesus today. We rejoice that He is our ladder into your very presence. Without Him we would have no access to you, nor would we receive a mission from you. Open doors this Christmas season to tell our friends and family about Jesus so that they too would have a part in your heaven.

Application Questions

What opportunities might the Lord be giving you this Christmas to share about Jesus?

Bonus Community Step

Send a message of encouragement to an older adult (go to bethanycentral.org/trulytruly and contact us for a list).



DAY 2

A New Heart

*Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
John 3:3 (ESV)*

God gave a promise that one day He would give His people a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). This would be a heart that would be accompanied by a new spirit. This is not something that man can do on his own, but is a work of God that is solely dependent upon Him. Just as the creation had no power to create itself in Genesis 1, so too man has no power to recreate this new heart within himself. Only God can cause man to be born again and therefore give them the right to become children of God (John 1:12-13).

This new heart cannot come about by any bloodline. There is no spiritual pedigree that gives anyone an advantage to enter into the kingdom of God. This new heart cannot come about by any will or trying of ourselves. We cannot live in any way, no matter how moral, that would merit an ounce of acceptance in the kingdom of God. This new heart cannot come from anyone but God Himself. Who you know, who you are connected with, or how long you have been a part of a church have no bearing on your spiritual life. Our only hope is to be born again.

Truly, Truly

This new heart comes exclusively because of God and His abundant grace. This new heart now beats to spiritual realities that the old never could. It's no wonder that Paul calls anyone in Christ "a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), because that is exactly what God's work of salvation does. It makes us new. It regenerates us. It gives us new life. We can now truly know and love God. As we ponder the miracle of Christ's first coming, let us praise and wonder at our God this Christmas, that He has made us "born again."

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3 ESV).

Pastoral Prayer

Father, we praise you for your work of giving a new heart, making someone who trusts in you truly born again. We marvel at your love for us, that you would reveal your beloved Son to us. Thank you for giving us the grace to see and behold Jesus as Lord and Savior, and find eternal life in Him.

Application Questions

Why might it be hard to accept what Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3? What are the surest proofs that a person has truly been born again? Have you wrestled with whether or not you were born again? If so, how did you work through that and what scriptures helped you?

Bonus Community Step

Do something practical to bless an older adult (help with a chore, write a note, ask them to share a fond memory or word of wisdom, or bring them a gift).

DAY 3

Entrance Requirement

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

John 3:5 (ESV)

What is our most basic need? Abraham Maslow famously asserted that our most fundamental needs are physiological: food, water, air, sleep, and shelter. He argued that other needs cannot be met until these needs are addressed. Maslow then ranked the other kinds of needs in their order of priority: safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. While Maslow's hierarchy has some benefit, the story of Christmas rejects it.

The God who created us tells us that our most basic need is spiritual. More than we need bread for our bodies, we need bread to nourish our souls!

Nicodemus seemed to understand his spiritual need when he approached Jesus at night to ask Jesus some spiritual questions. Nicodemus came with a hungry heart. He knew that there was a hole in his soul that he did not know how to fill.

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Nicodemus began the conversation politely. Jesus responded with something other than superficial courtesy, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

What a gift from God to be granted the very life of God in our dead soul! Through the gift of new spiritual birth, we are not only qualified to enter God’s kingdom, but we are invited into personal knowledge of God Himself. This new birth gives us access to a real relationship with the living Lord!

Let us dwell for a moment on all that comes to us through this new birth that Jesus offers us. We can enjoy the love He has for us. He can speak to our souls through His Word. It opens the door for us to receive the comfort He provides in our distress. We are liberated to love those who have hurt us and freed from the fear and shame that our sin places on us. It brings joyful praise to a heart that grumbled and complained. And we are equipped to be able to help others receive this new life too!

Christmas declares that we need more than just a better version of ourselves. We need the miracle of new life!

Praise God for His Son who came that we would possess this life and have it more abundantly! The virgin birth of Jesus precedes the new birth of His disciples and brings a new birthright to the door of our hearts!

Truly, Truly

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, thank you for giving me new life. Without your love through Jesus, I would be dead in my sins. Help me to love my new life and hate my old life. Help me to listen by faith to your Word and feed my new life through your Word. When I fellowship with your church, help me to relate in love so that my new life strengthens your family. Amen.

Application Questions

How do you evaluate the health of the new life that you received when you first came to Jesus?

What might help you to strengthen this life from God that is in you?

How might you use this new life to bring glory to Jesus?

Bonus Community Step

Consider our homebound list from the church office to pray for, contact, or visit one of them with a meal (go to bethanycentral.org/trulytruly and contact us for a list).



DAY 4

The Royal “We”

Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony.

John 3:11 (ESV)

“We’re going to wait until Christmas to open the presents.” That’s a sentence similar to the ones I frequently heard from adults as a young child—phrases that included the dreaded royal we. While it can convey a sense of endearment and solidarity, it often carries a tone of authority, condescension, and appeal to an elusive background group in an attempt to bolster credibility.

It’s that last usage that appears to be what Nicodemus uses to initiate his conversation with Jesus in John 3.

The religious ruler came to Jesus at night, presumably alone, and began speaking to Him with the plural pronoun, “Rabbi, **we know that you are a teacher come from God ...**” (John 3:2).

Nicodemus seems to want to convey some respect to Jesus while retaining credibility and association with his fellow Pharisees. But his agenda and misconceptions about Jesus

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become clear once we remember that the immediate context of Jesus's piercing discernment about the unstable heart of man has set the stage for this encounter (John 2:24-25).

Despite Nicodemus's use of "we," Jesus initially responds to him in the singular: "Truly, truly, I say to you [singular] ..." (John 3:3). However, after a few rounds of theological back and forth, Jesus follows Nicodemus's pattern in our text today, "Truly, truly, I say to you [singular], we [plural] speak of what we [plural] know, and bear witness to what we [plural] have seen, but you [plural] do not receive our testimony" (John 3:11).

Such plural nouns almost serve as verbal fig leaves — an apparent attempt to impress the hearer and protect oneself from the discomfort of facing the piercing truth of God Himself.

But in the end, it only leaves the user more exposed. The decisive challenge is whether or not they will choose to drop their cobbled grammatical shields, and instead acknowledge and trust in Christ as the one true and living God.

The wonder of Christ incarnate is both the intense righteousness of God on display, but also His amazing tenderness. With Nicodemus in the end (John 19:39), we see God's saving grace on display.

The wonder of Christmas is that Jesus knows how to meet us precisely where we are, and yet not leave us there. He alone is able to fully expose us and then in love invite us to truly follow Him. The question is: Will we?

Pastoral Prayer

Father, please forgive us for the mental and verbal games we play to try to hide from truth. Thank you for your persistent love. May you tenderly expose our hearts, that we might turn from our self-trust and run to the hope found in you alone. Amen!

Application Questions

Where are you trying to impress or hide from God?

What might it look like for you to believe that while God is neither deceived nor impressed, He still wants to talk with you and is calling you to follow Him?

Who in your family needs to hear the testimony of Jesus this year?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Share a favorite Christmas carol with an older adult (whether sending one electronically with a message, writing one out, or organizing a Christmas carol sing).



DAY 5

The Best of Gifts

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”
John 5:19 (ESV)

When I was a boy, I read with delight the famous short story by O. Henry, “The Gift of the Magi.” Impoverished newlyweds approached Christmas day with no money to purchase gifts for each other. The wife’s beautiful long hair was her most treasured possession. The husband’s gold watch that had been passed down to him was his most treasured possession.

Unbeknownst to each other, the wife cut her hair and sold it to purchase a gold watch chain for her beloved. Likewise, the husband sold his watch to purchase tortoise-shell combs for his precious bride.

Each one was thinking of a gift that would bring the other the most joy. Each was willing to yield the very thing that brought them the most joy. A generous love guided them to similar sacrifices for the good of the other. I remember feeling warmed

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by this couple's love. I also remember feeling a bit sad that neither was able to enjoy the fine gifts purchased at such a high cost. The wife had no hair to comb and the husband had no watch to secure. Yet that is not the point of the story. The point of the story is that love itself is the greatest treasure.

How much the Father loves us! Far more than the sacrifice of hair or gold, the Father willingly yields His priceless Son to us so that our joy might be made full. He sends His only Son out from heaven and down to the earth. Out from a place where the Son receives undiminished glory to a place where few see anything special about Him.

Jesus reminds us, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of His own accord." While the Son of God did not leave heaven against His will, our Lord's incarnation is not self-initiated. The Father initiated the giving of this best of gifts! He willingly parted with His most treasured Son. What mystery that in the eternal counsel of our Triune God, the plan was set forth for the glorious omnipotent Son to clothe Himself with frail humanity.

Take some moments to dwell upon the Father's love for you. To be sure, Jesus is most useful to us. He is the means by which our sins are forgiven.

He is the light that guides us out of our darkness. Unlike the combs and the gold chain, when the Father gives us His Son, we immediately benefit! But equal to the benefit is the discovery of the heart of the Father to us. Our God loves us to such a measure that He does not withhold even His own Son so that we may have life.

Pastoral Prayer

Father, thank you for loving me. Please grow my knowledge of Your love for me. I desire to experience more of its height and depth and length and breadth. I know that my love for you will grow as I experience your love for me. Amen.

Application Questions

How would you describe the Father's love for you?

How can you grow in your knowledge of His love?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Consider an older family member whom you might call or send a letter to in order to offer gospel hope for the Christmas season.



DAY 6

The Word Gives Life

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 5:24 (ESV)

The words of Jesus consistently incited the hatred and opposition of the religious leaders in Israel. What offensive claim was He making? Equality with God.

As opposition increased from the religious leaders, Jesus did not shrink back from His claim. Instead, He embraced it and sought to prove it! If Jesus's claim of divinity was true, then His words possessed divine authority.

If Jesus's words possessed divine authority, then they carried the weight of eternal life and death. This was not something that the religious leaders were willing to believe. For this reason, Jesus called the Jews to listen carefully to His words in John 5:24.

They were not to take any word lightly, but rather allow the word of Christ to expose their hearts and pierce their souls (Hebrews 4:12-13).

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Jesus made it abundantly clear that only those who believe His words and the Father who sent Him have eternal life.

The words of Jesus are the words of life. Jesus demonstrated this already in the chapter when He healed the paralyzed man by His word (John 5:8).

Later in John 11:43, He raises Lazarus from the dead simply by His word. The words of Jesus possess divine authority and power. This, most importantly, extends to the destiny of every person. John 10:10 says that Jesus came that we **“may have life and have it abundantly.”** Before anyone can experience eternal life from God, they must be confronted with the words of Jesus.

The words of Jesus are the great obstacle that prevents some, like the Jewish religious leaders, from receiving life. To reject the words of Jesus is to reject God and invite judgment & condemnation.

For those who receive the words of Jesus by faith, they “[have] passed from death to life.” Praise God that Jesus was sent by the Father to bring us the words of life!

The question is, what will you do with Jesus’s words? Are you finding any of Jesus’s words hard to receive today? Are you tempted to search elsewhere for help and hope of a different kind?

May we respond to the words of Jesus like Simon Peter: **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”** (John 6:68-69).

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the precious words of Jesus. Thank you for sending your Son to reveal to us the way of life. May we cherish the words of Jesus this advent season and develop a greater love for Him. May we consider the great blessings we have because of the incarnation of Christ. Give us soft hearts to respond to your Word with joy and obedience. Amen.

Application Questions

How do you develop a soft heart that wants to do what God's Word says?

How will the claims of Jesus change how you think and act this advent season?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Consider some older adults in your neighborhood and community who might be blessed by a holiday visit, gift, or encouragement.



DAY 7

The Dead Will Hear

*Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming,
and is now here, when the dead will hear the
voice of the Son of God, and those who hear
will live.*

John 5:25 (ESV)

God speaks to dead people. Thank Him for that! We are born in a condition of spiritual death and we are unable to help ourselves. Yet the God whom we are sinning against speaks words of life to us. Everyone who hears Jesus's voice will live! What a promise is given to us.

It is not our doing that brings life to us, but our simple hearing. It is not our striving by human will, but our receiving by faith that gives us access to the life of God in us. This past summer, Kimberly and I joined our son's family at a Bible conference center in Michigan. Every morning our four-year-old grandson went to the children's hour where they would play games, sing songs, and listen to Bible stories.

One afternoon I asked him, "What Bible story did you learn about today?" He looked at me with intensity, wanting to have the right answer. He said, "Well ... they did teach us a story ... and I was listening ... but I did not hear."

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When my grandson shared that confession with me, I thought to myself, “Ritch, how often do you read the Bible in the morning and by noon would not be able to share with anyone what you read?” I often open the Word, but do not hear the voice of Jesus speak to me. And that is a big loss of opportunity!

Jesus is a Savior and a Shepherd who desires to speak personally into our lives every day. And when we hear our Savior speak, His words carry the power of life to our souls.

We may wonder why we sometimes feel so very lethargic in our devotion to God or very joyless in our worship of Him. The answer lies here in Jesus’s promise: “Those who hear will live.” That promise is true at the beginning of our spiritual life with God and it is true every day after.

It is not our mere “listening” to sermons or our “reading” scriptures that accomplishes any eternal and profound impact in our soul. It is the “hearing” — the receiving by faith of the Word that Jesus lovingly speaks to us.

Our natural hearts don’t always like what Jesus says or how He works in our lives. The Jews of John 5 persecuted Jesus for the healing He offered to a man in need because it offended their way of life. Does your heart ever push back, feel dull, or even dead to the words and works of Jesus? The promise of John 5:25 rings out for all who will truly seek to hear — here are words that have power to offer life even to the dead!

When we open our Bibles, let us open them with expectancy and faith saying, “Speak, Lord! Your servant hears!”

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Pastoral Prayer

Father, open my ears that I may hear wonderful things from your Word. Please help me to see any part of my life that hinders my hearing. Help me to repent and turn from every deafening thing in my life. Thank you for speaking to me personally by your Spirit through your Word. Amen.

Application Questions

How have you experienced the voice of God speaking personally to you through scripture?

Why is our hearing of God's voice to be tied to His written Word?

***Bonus* Community Step**

This Sunday at church, look for an older adult to bless by greeting them, having a conversation, and/or inviting them to sit with you in the morning or at the Christmas night of worship.



DAY 8

“Not My Jesus”

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

John 6:26 (ESV)

Jesus Christ is generally recognized as one of the most significant and even well loved figures in human history. Even across world religions and worldviews, many who condemn disciples of Jesus and Christianity still celebrate Jesus. They celebrate Him as a good person, a great teacher, or at least a positive character out of legend. Jesus is loved for His moral teaching, His kindness to the poor, His exemplary leadership, and more. These people love Him today for what they can get out of Him. But they fail to love Him for who He truly is. They fail to love Him as God in the flesh.

This was true in Jesus’s day as well. Jesus knew that His popularity with many was because they had experienced the blessings of His miracles. They took the bread, but missed the meaning behind the gift. They received the gift, yet dismissed the giver.

In doing so, they opened themselves up to twisting the Jesus they saw into what they wanted Him to be. He was a prophet,

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He was John the Baptist, He was a good teacher, or maybe He was a miracle worker. But He certainly wasn't the God-Man who was worthy of worship.

Today, whenever we hear the biblical Jesus dismissed by the phrase, "That's not my Jesus," it is a symptom of a heart that has sought the gifts of Jesus without embracing Jesus Himself for who He truly is: God in the flesh who speaks sufficiently with authority and clarity. Let us be different. Let us see the signs from the Bible itself. Let us love the Jesus who does not fit neatly into our 21st century secular mold. When we behold Jesus in the teachings of His prophets and apostles, let us say, "That is my Jesus," no matter what it might cost us.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord Jesus, we worship you. You are not a figment of our imagination. You are not a mere man. You are God of very God. We want to follow you and be changed by you. Expose our blind spots and our ignorance. Confront our sin. Wash us clean so that we might worship you in spirit and in truth. We want to be filled with the real Jesus.

Application Questions

Do the teachings of Jesus ever make you uncomfortable? Why or why not?

How might you discern that you are beginning to love the benefits that flow from Christ more than Christ Himself?

What do you love about Jesus that might surprise your unbelieving friends or neighbors?

Bonus Community Step

Pray for our children's ministry workers (go to bethanycentral.org/trulytruly and contact us for a list).

DAY 9

Nourishing Bread

Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.”

John 6:32 (ESV)

My mom was such a good cook! My memory bank is full of the tasty aromas flowing from her kitchen and filling our house. Christmas dinner was an especially pleasing meal. We savored basted turkey, mashed potatoes, creamy gravy, green bean casserole, stuffing steaming from inside the bird, cranberry sauce, and fruit pies. Most everything was made from scratch with love. Right before dinner was to be served, I would often “visit” my mom in the kitchen.

She knew that I was there to take some samples from the feast about to be devoured. She often would say, “Ritchie, the food is not ready yet.” And then a little later when the food was ready, she offered me some small portions while the food was still on the stove. These first fruits stirred my appetite all the more for the meal! I marveled as a child how my mom knew how to put dishes together without recipe cards.

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She crafted her offerings to us out of the creativity that God gave her, and always served the meal with affection for those who sat at our table.

Christmas reminds us that Jesus is the “true bread from heaven.” He is given by the Father to satisfy the hunger of our hearts. We are hungry and need nourishment. We cannot provide for ourselves. We do not know how to prepare food that satisfies the yearning of our souls.

Not even Moses knew how to make the bread that we need. But God does. In love, God prepared a spiritual feast for us in the womb of Mary. And in the fullness of time, the Father sent His true bread down from heaven to us. This bread — and this bread alone — satisfies our deepest cravings.

Bread that is not eaten will not nourish us. Many during the Christmas season gaze upon the bread, think about the bread, even smell the bread, but fail to partake of the bread that the Father offers us.

Such a one wonders why Christmas feels “hollow” or “exhausting.” We must feast on the Person of Christ! Jesus is not merely a savior. He must be our Savior. Jesus is not merely the life. He must be our Life.

The imagery of bread reminds us of our helpless dependence on God. We cannot feed our own souls. We cannot benefit from the bread that the Father sent through our own labors or our own merit or our own working. We benefit from this bread simply through receiving by personal faith. We come to Christ and we receive Him. The bread must be eaten to benefit!

Pastoral Prayer

Father, please grow my hunger for you. As I hunger, may I look in faith to your Son. Please use me as your instrument to help others discover the bread that you give, the true bread that gives life. Amen

Application Questions

How does the imagery of “bread from heaven” remind you of your need for spiritual nourishment? In what areas of your life do you need to rely on God’s provision rather than your own strength?

In what ways have you been “looking at the bread” (thinking about or acknowledging Jesus) rather than “eating the bread” (actively relying on Him as your personal Savior)? How can you make your relationship with Jesus more personal and meaningful?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Pray for our children’s ministry programs throughout the year. Thank God for the volunteers He sends.



DAY 10

Wish Lists

*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes
has eternal life.
John 6:47 (ESV)*

What is your greatest Christmas wish? We often have wish lists we create and share with one another. As children, many of us mailed our wish list off to a mystical figure at the North Pole, expecting every item on the list to magically appear beneath the tree on Christmas morning.

While we would like to imagine we've grown beyond such immaturity, the way we often relate to God is not much different. We treat Him like a cosmic Santa or genie who exists to solely meet our wish [demand] list.

Watching the people talking with Jesus in John 6 is like looking into a mirror. After the miracle of the loaves and fishes, they clamored after Him to use His power in ways that served their own immature appetites — totally missing the far greater gift of eternal life.

The people in John 6 were understandably eager for temporary earthly satisfaction and stomach filling, but so much so that they worked to manipulate Jesus into becoming their genie. The point the miracle was designed to serve — Jesus's compassion and authority as God — was completely disregarded by them. For all Jesus's provision, they still weren't ready to accept this

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local young man as who He claimed to be. They were happy to eat His bread, but this offer of Himself as the bread of eternal life was a promise too big for them to swallow.

While this passage is not intended to serve as the foundation for the practice of communion, the common theme of Jesus as our source of eternal life is surely here. From the Garden of Eden to today, we are a people ever consumed by taking and eating what is forbidden. But here is one who offers Himself and says take and eat and be satisfied.

The people in John 6 preferred temporary carnal satisfaction to unending spiritual fulfillment. Are we much different? This Christmas season, are there trinkets or traditions that tempt us to settle for earthly gifts when God Himself is freely offering us eternal life? What do we really believe?

Pastoral Prayer

Father, forgive us for looking for perishable gifts to provide what you alone can offer. Help us to believe the gift of life found in Jesus and share that hope with one another boldly. Amen!

Application Questions

What “wishes,” if granted, might seem like enough that you wouldn’t need Jesus? (Fill in the blanks: “If only _____, then I would be happy.” Or, “I just wish _____.” Or “All I want is _____.”)

How can you use this season of gift-giving to share about the greatest free gift ever given?

Bonus Community Step

Take a moment to pray for the salvation of young children in your family or in families you know.

DAY 11

Born to Die

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."

John 6:53 (ESV)

When we were physically born, we received from God the hope of life. We were nothing, then God made us something inside our mother's womb.

Without our birth, it would not have been possible for us to be alive. That truth may seem so obvious as to not be very profound, until we think about Jesus.

Christmas reminds us that what is true of us is not true of our Lord Jesus. Jesus was eternally alive before His birth. There never was a time when He was not.

He possesses life in His own divine Person. He did not receive life at birth; He IS life. He was the only human ever to have life prior to His conception in His mother's womb. Thus, unlike us, Jesus was not born in order to live. Unlike us, Jesus was born in order to die. Jesus is the only human in all history to be born for the express purpose of dying. But why?

Truly, Truly

Jesus plainly tells us, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”** This shocking statement offended those who were listening to Him in John 6. And many like them do not want to think about His flesh and His blood today.

But without the teaching of His flesh and His blood, we would not benefit from His coming to us from heaven. It is the shed blood that we need to have our sin-stained hearts made clean.

When Jesus speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, He is pointing us to His atoning death on the cross. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. Without forgiveness of sin, there is no hope for life with God now, nor life with Him in eternity. The birth of the Messiah finds meaning in the death of the Messiah.

Christmas makes Easter possible. Easter makes Christmas purposeful. When we travel to Bethlehem this Christmas season, note that the path from the manger leads us to the foot of the cross. The Child is born of a virgin so that He would be the sinless sacrifice.

The Child tenderly swaddled in a cattle stall becomes the Man cruelly crucified at Calvary. He must be! We need Him to take our place in receiving the judgment of the Father for us. Truly, truly, unless we receive the bloodied atonement He made for us, we have no life! We must believe in Christ crucified to benefit from His coming.

Pastoral Prayer

Father, help me to understand more of the cross of Jesus. Help me to linger long over it and learn of your love for me through it. Help me to see all that is mine as the result of Jesus's shed blood. Thank you for giving me your Son so that I can be clean and forgiven. Amen

Application Questions

Why is there no Christmas without the cross of Jesus? Why does the cross lose its power without Christmas?

How does the truth that Jesus was "born to die" impact your view of Christmas? In what ways does knowing that His birth was meant to lead to the cross deepen your appreciation of His sacrifice?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Take a moment to pray for the workers in our community who help care for children at schools, hospitals, and law enforcement.



DAY 12

The Gospel Liberates

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."

John 8:34 (ESV)

What a sober truth! A person with habitual sin who goes without confession and repentance exposes a heart enslaved to sin. What a dreadful master! What hopelessness and loss to be a slave of sin! What helplessness we all once had by serving this master. Yet Christ entered into this hopelessness. He came that we would no longer be bound in sin's chains, but that both the punishment for sin AND the power of sin would be broken in us. The one whom the Son sets free will be free indeed! The believer is free of guilt, free of shame, free of punishment, free of wrath, and free to now serve another.

In *A Gospel Primer for Christians*, Milton Vincent says regarding freedom from sin's power, "The Devil knows that if he can keep me tormented by sin's guilt, he can dominate me with sin's power. The Gospel however, slays sin at this root point and thereby nullifies sin's power over me. The forgiveness of God, made known to me through the Gospel, liberates me from sin's power because it liberates me first from its guilt, and preaching such forgiveness to myself is a practical way of putting the Gospel into operation as a nullifier of sin's power in my life."

Those Christ redeems are no longer slaves to sin, but are now bound to another master who is full of goodness and kindness; a master with a burden that is light and a yoke that is easy.

Truly, Truly

To be a slave of Christ is to be truly free. What blessing and freedom come from submitting to Christ! What joy comes from being in service to Him!

“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. ... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus”
(Romans 6:6-7, 11 ESV).

May we consider ourselves dead to sin, and now alive to God in Christ Jesus, for that is truly now what we are!

Pastoral Prayer

Father, we give you thanks and praise for bringing freedom from sin’s punishment and power. Please bring conviction, repentance, and new faith to those still under the master of sin. May those of us who have been redeemed from sin trust what you have said about the power the gospel brings. Help us live in that freedom today. In Jesus’s powerful name, amen.

Application Questions

Do you find it difficult to determine if someone is a slave to sin or to righteousness? Why or why not?

Why does guilt play such a factor in believers not experiencing gospel freedom? How can you consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God to serve Him today?

Bonus Community Step

Take a moment to pray for those serving in foster care and helping with orphaned or vulnerable children. Look for a place to donate or give gifts to those in need. Contact the Open Hearts Open Homes ministry for specific requests.

DAY 13

No Fear of Death

Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.
John 8:51 (ESV)

When Kimberly and I lived in Texas, the apartment in which we lived had a problem with cockroaches, which meant that we had a problem with cockroaches. When we turned on the lights to our kitchen, these little creatures would scurry behind the stove or any other place where they could avoid the light.

They hated the light and did everything in their power to avoid it. I think they knew that with light would come judgment!

We should not be surprised or angered when our world attempts to hide Jesus from view at Christmastime. We hear of companies who forbid the words, “Merry Christmas,” or schools that allow for Christmas trees but not manger scenes.

As believers, we are right to remember that Jesus was ridiculed in His day because He brought light into a dark world. He was accused by the religious leaders of having a demon! The strong rejection of Him testifies to the brightness of the light that He shines.

Truly, Truly

What is a follower of Jesus to do when the world turns away from our Lord and even hurls insults at Him? First, we remember that when Jesus was reviled, He did not revile in return. May we too bear with patience the reproach that Jesus receives in our day at Christmastime.

Second, Jesus prayed for those who persecuted Him. May we too lift up our petitions to our Father that those who are walking in darkness would experience God's blessing.

And finally, Jesus continued to proclaim the hope of His salvation. May we also look for open doors to tell our world of Jesus's love and saving grace!

Above all, put on love in these frustrating times. Let us not grow exasperated with our world, but grow in our witness to our world.

The world may hate us to the point of seeking to hurt us. What hope Jesus gives to us when we face strong opposition from the world!

Jesus promises, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."** We hold precious the promise that every person who listens to Jesus and responds in faith will never see death.

Though we are sinners, we do not scurry away when God shines His holy light upon our lives. We do not fear judgment because our Savior has borne our sin away from us. We now walk in the light as He is in the light! What joy to be free of the fear of condemnation and death!!

Pastoral Prayer

Father, give me strength to not fear man. I want to be free from the concerns of other people's opinions of me and of the temptation to conform out of a longing for approval. I desire to please you and you alone. Thank you for freeing me from the fear of condemnation! Amen

Application Questions

How might the fear of man influence your life? How can we be free from the fear of man in our lives?

What claims of God do you find difficult to believe?

Who in your life might benefit from some encouragement about the eternal hope of heaven?

Bonus Community Step

Call a local pregnancy center and thank them for what they do and ask if there is any way you can pray for them.



DAY 14

More Than a Prophet

*Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you,
before Abraham was, I am."*

John 8:58 (ESV)

What separates Jesus from all the prominent religious leaders of history? If you take any basic world religions class you will find out that Jesus is put on the same plane as Buddha, Muhammad, and Confucius. We are taught that they all had compelling ideas to share and unique contributions to make.

They are commended for their novel perspectives and highlighted for their historical significance. But was Jesus more than a renowned religious sage?

Is He more than a blip on the radar of history? In John 8, the comparison is made between Abraham and Jesus. Abraham was the forefather of Israel and the Jews relied upon their physical connection to him in order to justify themselves before God.

Jesus points out that they may have descended from Abraham physically, but they did not belong to him spiritually. In other words, they were not safe before God because of their pedigree.

Truly, Truly

Predictably, the Jews were outraged. On what grounds could Jesus say this? Who was Jesus to say that they were not true descendants of Abraham? How could Jesus place Himself above the great patriarch of Israel?

Jesus replied in verse 58: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”** The meaning of Jesus’s words were clearly understood by His Jewish audience. It was so clear that they even tried to kill him (v. 59).

Jesus was not merely stating that He existed before Abraham, He was making the claim of eternal existence. Furthermore, Jesus made the claim in the most provocative way possible for a Jewish audience. He uses the name that God revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

What was Moses to call the living God? **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Exodus 3:14). God claimed to be the One who is and always will be. As one writer points out, it is a name that points to God’s self-existence and eternity. When Jesus used the phrase **“I am,”** He was identifying Himself with the God of the Old Testament. He was claiming to be Yahweh.

Jesus’s reply to the Jews in John 8 reveals that He is more than a respected religious leader. It declares Him to be more than a prophet. It proclaims Him to be more than a patriarch. It announces to the whole world that Jesus is the incarnate God!

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the truth that Jesus is more than a mere religious teacher. If that is all He was, then we could not be saved from our sins. May we marvel at the person of Jesus this advent season as we celebrate His incarnation.
Amen

Application Questions

What makes the person of Jesus so unique? What sets Him apart from another other religious teacher?
How does the eternal nature of Christ make His ministry to you so much greater?

***Bonus* Community Step**

This Sunday, look for a parent and ask them how you can pray for them. Consider planning time to write a note of encouragement and prayer to that father or mother.



DAY 15

Stranger Danger

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.

John 10:1 (ESV)

Christmastime for many can become filled with traditions that have become so familiar to us that we sometimes forget how strange they can seem to people from other countries and cultures.

Some customs are easier for the uninitiated to understand: like enjoying far more sweet treats than normal, or splurging on generous gifts for loved ones.

While others are less easy to explain: wrapping highly-flammable trees with reams of cheap electric lights in our living rooms, or stooping to kiss our spouse under a parasitic plant.

But perhaps few traditions are more difficult to explain than how parents can so casually talk with young children about a bearded stranger sneaking into their house at night through the chimney.

Truly, Truly

An enjoyable Christmas tradition to some, but cultural norms aside, people entering spaces by creatively circumventing the main door typically arouse some suspicion. Such is the case of the robber or thief in Jesus's parable who scales the wall not to tend the sheep, but to fleece and feed on them.

Here Jesus demonstrates His care for His people by tenderly referring to them as sheep and by confronting the failure of their current religious leaders.

After the religious leaders' harsh and tragic expulsion of the healed blind man from their gathering in John 9, one cannot help but sense Ezekiel's looming condemnation of false shepherds and the need for a good true Shepherd who is to come (Ezekiel 34).

In John 10, Jesus explains the telltale sign of the illegitimate imposters amongst His flock: they don't enter by the door. The religious leaders' rejection of the one true and good Shepherd is a clear sign that they don't belong and will one day receive their just recompense.

It's no wonder many take offense and disregard Jesus despite the plain miracle they've just witnessed (John 9:20-33; 10:20-21).

But this dark reality actually serves as a backdrop to highlight the true wonder of the Good Shepherd whom God's sheep can know and enjoy; the one who is not only the door, but who lays down His very life for His sheep (John 10:7, 11; cf. Isaiah 53:5-7; Hebrews 13:20-21; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4).

Pastoral Prayer

Father, thank you that you are our good and great Shepherd. Even though we wander and stray, you shepherd us so perfectly and tenderly. Thank you for our faithful pastors. Help them to shepherd as you would have them. Give us a shared passion to follow Christ together and call others to join as we rejoice this season over the greatest gift ever given. Amen!

Application Questions

How has Jesus proven to be a good and gentle Shepherd in His care for your soul?

How can you model the genuine love and tender care of Jesus in your spheres of shepherding influence (spouse, children, workplace, community group, ministry teams, etc.)?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Write a note of encouragement to a fellow church member.



DAY 16

The Precious Door

*So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I
say to you, I am the door of the sheep."
John 10:7 (ESV)*

You can tell a true disciple of Jesus by their affection for Jesus. And you can tell a person's affection for Jesus by how they relate to Him daily. In particular, disciples rely on Jesus. John 10:7 provides us with a picture of this reliance.

In Jesus's figure of speech, He compares Himself to the door of a sheepfold. One of the main functions of such a door is simply to provide a way or a means by which a sheep can pass in or out. Sheep might want to pass into their fold to find safety and rest. They might want to leave their fold to find food, water, and exercise. But whether they are going in or out, the door's functionality is constant and essential. The sheep rely upon the door of the sheepfold.

A disciple relies on Jesus for safety and rest in a thousand ways. When we reject our feelings of self-condemnation in favor of our Master's overtures of love, we have passed through the door into the fold. When we steel ourselves against the lies of the world in favor of Jesus's commands and promises, we have relied upon our precious door. When we rest in Jesus's

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promises of future reward and ultimate deliverance in the face of cultural decay, the suffering of our lives, and the reality of evil in our world, then by the door we have walked.

A disciple also relies on Jesus for life, pleasure, and meaning in a thousand ways. When the life of Jesus invites us to rise up in the morning and joyfully talk with Him and hear Him speak to us about His concerns and His will, we have passed through our door into the pasture. When our love for Jesus causes us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have relied upon our magnificent door. When our passions and dreams are conformed to His commission and plan for the world, then by the door we have walked.

Pastoral Prayer

Jesus, we know that we can trust you. You came from heaven to earth to bring forgiveness and wholeness to us even though we were in rebellion against you. You died for us so that we could live with you. There is nothing in all of our lives or in all of this universe that is as trustworthy as you are. Teach us to reject our idols. Help us to rely upon you for safety and life. We are your sheep. You are our precious door. We love you!

Application Questions

Do you sense affection in your heart for Christ?

How do you relate to and rely upon Jesus daily?

What do you find yourself relying on for rest, pleasure, or meaning besides Jesus?

What might it look like for you to increase your reliance upon Jesus today?

Bonus Community Step

Ask a fellow church member who are two people close to them, but far from God whom you can join them in praying for this holiday season.

DAY 17

Up Is Down

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12:24 (ESV)

Jesus teaches us that the way we naturally think about life is upside down from God's perspective. We think that the way to become rich is by laboring to be rich. We think that the way to overcome evil is to fight against it with greater ferocity. We think that the way to power is by exerting power. We think that the way to ascend in life is by climbing the ladder. We think that the way to find life is to strive for life.

Yet Jesus teaches us that the way to riches is by becoming poor. The way to overcome evil is through combating it with good. The way to power is through weakness. The way up is down. The way to life is through death.

The key reason why these paradoxes are true is rooted in the majesty and wonder of Jesus. The main message of Christmas is that Jesus accomplishes every good thing that we desire. Jesus provides us with lasting riches.

Jesus provides us with complete victory over evil. Jesus provides

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us with glorious power. Jesus provides us with honored ascension. Jesus provides us with eternal life.

If we seek to attain these blessings through our own efforts and energy, we will not depend upon Jesus for them. If we do not depend upon Jesus for them, we will not experience them as our own. So Jesus urges us to lose our life so that we might find it in Him!

Jesus does not ask us to do what He Himself has not done to show us the way. In Jesus's earthly life, He gives us an illustration of this very principle at work.

Jesus receives greater glory for Himself by taking the form of a bondservant as a man. Jesus receives resurrected life by dying upon the cross. Jesus receives multiplied joy by lowering into the sorrows of a manger. Jesus allows His body to be planted dead in the earth and through His death He bears the fruit of life for everyone who trusts in Him! His dying is the source of life to the world.

Christmas reminds us to yield every part our lives into Jesus's hands. When we die to our own self-governance, He promises to do something with our lives that we never could.

He promises the hope of heaven to all who give themselves to Him. And more! He promises that our lives will "bear much fruit" to our eternal happiness. The way to life is by presenting our life to Him.

Pastoral Prayer

Father, I commit my entire self into your bountiful care. Forgive me for withholding any part of myself from you. Forgive me for thinking that I will benefit from self-rule. You alone provide for the needs of my heart and soul. I happily lose my life in you, for only then do I find it.

Application Questions

How does Jesus's teaching about finding life by losing it challenge the way you approach your own goals or ambitions? Are there areas where you might be striving independently instead of depending on Him?

What does it mean to "hate" our life for Jesus's sake? How do we know if we are loving or hating our life?

What parts of your life are hardest to surrender to Jesus? What steps can you take to offer those areas into His hands, trusting Him to bring purpose and fruit?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Sign up for the Together Day by Day email and begin praying for others in the church family and the GO partners around the world.



DAY 18

Follow the Leader

*Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not
greater than his master, nor is a messenger
greater than the one who sent him.*

John 13:16 (ESV)

Christmas is a time for games and celebration. One of the games we played as kids was Follow the Leader. Children would line up behind a “leader” and copy them as they paraded around the house doing silly things.

But inevitably, some leader would test their true influence by doing something ridiculous, embarrassing, or uncomfortable, and the chain would momentarily break down until the leader resumed approved actions. No one wants to follow a leader when it involves discomfort or suffering.

Jesus was a true servant-leader. If we’re to follow Him, we cannot imagine ourselves free of difficulty. Following Him will not place us above menial work or harsh treatment, but right in its midst. As Carson says,

“The point of the aphorism in this context is in any case painfully clear: no emissary has the right to think he is exempt from tasks cheerfully undertaken by the one who sent him, and

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no slave has the right to judge any menial task beneath him after his master has already performed it” (Carson, 468).

John’s exhortation to us is simple: If you’re committed to being a follower of Christ and servant of the Lord, don’t be surprised if people treat you like one.

Jesus’s path was one of sorrow, suffering, and persecution (Isaiah 53:3). It was a path of sacrificial love (Ephesians 5:25). One that was modeled by Paul, who assures us that it is a path that all who truly follow Jesus must be willing to walk (2 Timothy 3:12). If we truly have heard Jesus, these challenges should come as no surprise (Matthew 16:24; Luke 14:25-33; John 15:20).

If we’re ready to truly follow the leader, we need to embrace everything that means, including His example of servanthood and suffering. A hard call to be sure, but a challenge far outweighed by the shared reward at the end.

“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:16–19 ESV).

Pastoral Prayer

Father, help us to keep an eternal perspective in view and walk by faith. Grant us courage to trust you even when following Christ means servanthood and suffering. Help us to share the gospel without fear and in faith that our reward in Christ is sure. Amen!

Application Questions

What kinds of servanthood or suffering tempt you to shrink back from following Christ, taking a moral stand, living with integrity, putting other's preferences first at home or church, or sharing the gospel with unbelievers?

What is one act of servanthood that Christ might be calling you to today?

How can Christ's example help you prepare to respond in a godly way when you face moments this Christmas season where others treat you more poorly than you feel you deserve?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Ask the church for a list of specific prayer requests that you might pray for or needs that you might be a part of helping to meet.



DAY 19

The Pain of Rejection

*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives
the one I send receives me, and whoever
receives me receives the one who sent me.”*

John 13:20 (ESV)

When godly old Simeon saw Mary carry her infant son into the Temple, he understood what no one else did that day. By the Holy Spirit, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed God, saying, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32 ESV).

Mary beamed with joy at this marvelous prophecy. She knew her little One was special, but did not fully comprehend all that is true about Him. She likely wanted to hear more from Simeon!

Yet what Simeon shared next brought her heart to a sad and serious place:

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword

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will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35 ESV).

God’s Son knew that He would be a man of sorrows. He understood that He would be acquainted with grief. Throughout His perfect life, He received special hatred from people at every turn.

He is fully human and He was not immune to the deep internal wounds that such hatred brings. When Judas betrayed Jesus, our Lord experienced a new kind of bitter pain — the betrayal by one who acted so convincingly as a trusted friend. “Truly, truly, ... one of you will betray me.”

What love Jesus has toward sinners! He extends the possibility of repentance and renewed friendship to Judas in the offer of bread at the Passover meal. He is our example when we are mistreated.

What sympathy our High Priest has toward His own who suffer similar betrayal! He feels for us when we are forsaken and misused because He understands the depth of our pain. He is our example of how to suffer well.

At Christmastime, many feel the pain of rejection in family and brokenness in relationships. We are hurt by those who now refuse to sit in loving fellowship at our table.

Friends, let us rejoice that we have a High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, one to whom we can turn to receive grace to help us in our time of need.

Pastoral Prayer

ather, help me to be at peace with all men. I do not wish to be the cause of any brokenness in any relationship. Show me how I can love more completely. Teach me also to endure wounds like Jesus. When He was reviled He did not revile in return. He blessed those who cursed Him. He prayed for those who mistreated Him. Teach me to be hurt without being darkened in my soul by it. Amen.

Application Questions

How does hurt often darken our souls?

How can we be free even when we are mistreated or rejected?

Who in your life has shown good reception of the gospel that you can rejoice over or encourage?

Is there a betrayal in your life you need to entrust to the Lord?

Bonus Community Step

Send a verse and prayer of encouragement to someone in your Community Group or Adult Bible Communities (ABC).



DAY 20

A Tale of Two Betrayals

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

John 13:21 (ESV)

There is no doubt Jesus knew who was going to betray him. He knew that Judas would receive the bread from His hand just a few moments later. This was a disciple who had been with Jesus from the beginning – three years of friendship and following – now to fall away and betray his Lord. We may think, how could he have done such an awful thing? And yet every deliberate sin and broken promise we have made to God shows we also have hearts prone to leave our Lord. We say like Peter “I will lay down my life for you,” but deny Him with our words and actions.

Though Judas and Peter both betrayed their Lord, their stories could not have ended more differently from each other. Judas perished; Peter was restored, became a pillar of the church, and was faithful to Christ to the end. What made the difference between the two?

John MacArthur says, “It was love for Christ. ... Sin and guilt do not produce true repentance. Judas was sorry; it didn’t make him repent. ... Peter was sorry; but even his sorrow did not make him repent. ... It is not seeing your sin that causes repentance but seeing your savior. Peter truly loved the Lord.”

Like Peter, may we truly love the Lord from a pure heart. May

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we remember that what Jesus did for Peter He also does for us. He prays for us. Satan demanded to sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31), but Jesus says “**But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers**” (Luke 22:32 ESV).

We have a Great High Priest who prays for us right now! Jesus keeps our faith! No one can snatch us out of His hand (John 10:28). Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith who is able to keep us even from stumbling (Jude 24). It is Christ who holds us fast, not ourselves. Praise God Jesus prays for us!

Pastoral Prayer

Lord Jesus, we look to you today as the one who keeps our faith. Apart from your grace, we would be like Judas; we would desire something other than you and our future would be forever apart from you. Thank you for calling us to yourself and for praying for us, that our faith may not fail. In moments we are discouraged and our faith is weak, help us look heavenward to see the glory and beauty of our Great High Priest who prays for us. Amen.

Application Questions

Can you remember a time like Peter when you made a promise to God that you couldn't keep? How did you feel when you knew you had not kept it?

When have you experienced betrayal before? How did Jesus meet you in that?

How does knowing Jesus prays and intercedes before the Father impact you? Are there times that you lived as if that weren't true?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Share a prayer request with a trusted fellow member and ask them to pray for you.

DAY 21

The Reliable Rooster

Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times."

John 13:38 (ESV)

Chickens are more reliable than we are. Jesus knew that when the rooster got up in the morning, he was going to crow. The rooster was not fickle, crowing one morning but not crowing the next. The rooster was not going to take a day off because he got discouraged or lazy or fearful.

The rooster crowed faithfully every morning. Peter, on the other hand, was fickle. One moment he would shine with the character of courage and then the next melt under the frailty of fear. We are more like Peter than we are like the rooster.

Like Peter, we would do well to distrust the appraisal of our own lives, especially when our assessment is favorable! We are not as right as we think we are. We are not strong as we think we are.

We are not as wise as we think we are. And we are not as faithful as we think we are. There is weakness in our hearts

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that we cannot see or fathom. If we do not confess to the Lord our inward inability, we will experience the same failure that devastated Peter.

Peter likely felt confidence in himself because he was so often faithful. His past successes likely tempted him to think of himself as a man of unwavering loyalty. But his downfall was in forgetting the first lesson of Christmas.

The world's story tells us that Santa arrives to bless homes where the children are nice and not naughty. But the true story tells us that Jesus comes to bless those who are naughty. God sent His Son to our world to save helpless sinners.

Peter, in a flurry of self-confidence, forgot that he desperately needed Jesus. "Truly, truly, ... the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times." As Luther reminds us in his famous hymn,

Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing;
were not the right Man on our side,
the Man of God's own choosing.
You ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He;

Christmas's first lesson is that we are in a desperate state. Christmas's second lesson is that Jesus came to make us new. Though Peter stumbled by his self-confidence, Jesus restored him by His saving love. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Pastoral Prayer

Father, thank you for being my strength. You made the heavens and the earth by your outstretched arm and by your great power. Nothing is too difficult for you! I turn away from confidence in my self and I turn in dependence upon you. Thank you for providing me with everything I need to live a godly life in this ungodly world. Amen

Application Questions

What are some symptoms of a life that confides in its own strength? How can we depend upon Jesus more and ourselves less? Are there any sins God is convicting you of that you should plan to make time to confess and turn from? Is there a victory from your life that you can share of a struggle or sin that God has mercifully delivered you from and redeemed?

***Bonus* Community Step**

This Sunday, make a note to try to meet someone you've never met before to wish them a merry Christmas and ask them what their plans are for the holiday.



DAY 22

Even Greater Works

*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes
in me will also do the works that I do; and
greater works than these will he do, because
I am going to the Father.
John 14:12 (ESV)*

The ministry of Jesus was marked by supernatural works of great power. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, calmed the storm, resurrected the dead, and granted forgiveness to sinners. As John 20:30-31 points out, Jesus performed many signs to show that He was truly the incarnate God. Jesus is shown to be trustworthy because His ministry was authenticated by miraculous signs and wonders. His ministry was the real deal! In John 14:12, Jesus tells His disciples to pay close attention because they will do “greater works.”

What is Jesus promising to His disciples? And how could their works be greater than His? It must be understood that Jesus was not telling His disciples that they would perform greater works of power. Who can top the miraculous works of Jesus? Instead, Jesus is saying that their works will be greater in their extent around the world. The ministry of Jesus was primarily contained to a small geographic location, but after His ascension, the gospel goes forth “**in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**” (Acts 1:8). What makes this promise possible? Jesus says it is because “I am going to the Father”

Truly, Truly

(John 14:12). The only reason why the follower of Jesus can do “greater works” is because of the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit provides the necessary strength, boldness, and comfort to bring the gospel to an unbelieving world. After Christ ascended back to the Father, the Holy Spirit descended and now indwells all believers in Christ.

The Holy Spirit now works through believers to proclaim the excellencies of Christ to a spiritually dark world. The extent and scope of this work is greater than what was possible during the earthly ministry of Jesus. During this advent season, we have many reasons and opportunities to share the hope we have in Christ with unbelievers. May you consider this promise from Christ as you rely upon the strength of the Holy Spirit to proclaim Christ boldly to others!

Pastoral Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the work you are doing to advance the gospel around the globe. We thank you for our many GO Partners who are bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. Strengthen us and give us the boldness this advent season to share Christ with others. Amen.

Application Questions

What comfort and encouragement does the Holy Spirit give us to help us share the gospel with others?

What kind of opportunities will you have to share the gospel with unbelievers this advent season?

Bonus Community Step

Pray for the students from Bethany who are away from families over the holiday. Consider sending a note of encouragement to one you know (go to bethanycentral.org/trulytruly and contact us for a list).

DAY 23

Sorrow Before Joy

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.
John 16:20 (ESV)

When we visited Israel, my wife, Kimberly, asked our Jewish guide, “Eiki, you know more of the New Testament and the stories of Jesus than most Christians. Why do you not believe that He is the Messiah?” Our guide smiled and said, “That is easy! In the Bible, God says that when Messiah comes, He will bring peace on the earth. Look around you! You see soldiers with guns and walls with checkpoints. There is no peace on earth.”

Our guide was right to read the promise of peace on earth in the Old Testament. But he was mistaken in his understanding of the Messiah’s suffering. Jesus will bring peace to the earth. He is the Prince of Peace. But in order for us to enjoy the peace that He will bring to the earth, He must endure death in our place.

If He did not first suffer for sins, no one would be qualified to enter the kingdom of peace that He will establish. We would all be condemned and removed from His kingdom. Jesus establishes the order: first suffering, then celebration.

Jesus did not minimize nor hide His sufferings from His disciples. He told them plainly, “In a little while, and you will see me no longer.” He realized that this news would bring

Truly, Truly

weeping to their eyes and lament to their hearts. And this sorrow would be intensified by the fact that the cause of their grief would cause the world to celebrate. Sometimes the very thing that makes a believer weep is the thing that causes the world to laugh. But is this how the story ends? No! **“Truly, truly, I say to you, ... You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy”** (John 16:20 ESV).

To confess the present woes of our world makes us reel. To confess the future wonders of Jesus’s kingdom makes us rejoice. If tears flow from our eyes over the pain of this present temporary brokenness, let us remember that the glories that follow will make them shrink into nothing. **“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”** (Romans 8:18 ESV). Is it good that we remind ourselves of this? It is.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, you are good all the time. You are good when my life is falling apart. You are good when losses stack high against me. You are good when sorrows roll over me like the waves of the ocean. You are good all the time. I know that you have a glory for me in Jesus that will make these momentary troubles seem small. I look in hope to that future day! Amen

Application Questions

How do your sufferings tempt you away from faith in God?
What can you do to strengthen your faith in times of trial?
When was the last time you offered a prayer of lament to God?

Bonus Community Step

Pray for international students in our city who are away from their families. Consider inviting them to a gathering or sharing a note of encouragement.

DAY 24

Anything We Ask

*In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly,
truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the
Father in my name, he will give it to you.*
John 16:23 (ESV)

Is it hard for you to believe this statement from Jesus? It seems like it is the most amazing blank check that has ever been written.

I wonder if it was hard for the disciples to believe. On one hand, they had seen Jesus perform many miracles. But they had also seen God seemingly say “no” when they tried to cast demons out of a boy while Jesus was on the Mount of Transfiguration. Like the disciples, we have all experienced God seemingly responding with a “no” to many of our requests.

So then, how do we make sense of this promise? I think the phrase, “in my name,” is the key. I used to think that praying in Jesus’s name simply meant literally saying “In Jesus’s name” at some point in the prayer. However, I’ve learned that there is a lot more to it than that. When our prayers accord with the will of Jesus and are prayed out of sincere faith in Jesus and for the sake of Jesus, then it can be said that we have asked for something in His name. The tricky thing is that sometimes the will of God is surprising and unexpected. And therefore what we might expect to be His will may not always be the case.

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I am reminded of Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane, where He honestly asked the Father for what Jesus wanted. Yet Jesus was praying in the name of His Father and concluded that His heart's desire was supremely that the Father's will would be carried out. And it was.

Let us both pray like Jesus did in Gethsemane and take heart to what He promised in John 16:23. In doing so we can boldly pray to our Father for the things that we want and need. Let us ask Him in Jesus's name, knowing that if we should accidentally ask for a snake, our Father will still graciously give us bread. The Spirit will guide us if we are willing and the power of God will be released often through our work that is done upon our knees.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy Spirit, shape us into the image of Jesus. Teach us through the Word to pray for the things that are desired by Jesus. Help us to exalt prayer as the awesome and mighty work that it is. Teach us to trust You to guide us in prayer. May we be a church that prays together in Jesus's name so that we might worship the Father as He gives us what we ask Him for.

Application Questions

What do you think keeps you from prayer?

What might prevent your prayers from being in the name of Jesus? What are three audacious requests for God that you believe could be requested in Jesus's name?

Bonus Community Step

Pray for school administrators and for ministry leaders serving youth and college students locally and globally — for the gospel to go forth powerfully. Send a note of encouragement to one of those leaders.

DAY 25

Take Up Your Cross

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.

John 21:18 (ESV)

When my mom was entering her last days on earth, I prayed, “Lord, would you grant my mom comfort in her dying hour? Would you please keep her from the kind of pain that is nearly impossible to bear?” In discussing her future death, Mom and I talked about the Lord’s sovereign control over every part of our lives. We affirmed that God might not answer this prayer the way we desired. We confessed that we could trust His love and wisdom to do what pleased Him. Thankfully, when my mom breathed her last on earth, God allowed the process to be free of intense discomfort.

For Peter, God ordained an awful death. And Jesus told him so. Jesus uses the most descriptive terms to inform Peter that he will die by the same brutal means by which Jesus suffered death.

Truly, Truly

At first glance, Jesus's prophecy may seem cruel. Why tell of a future death filled with pain? The answer lies in the glorious person of Jesus. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we rejoice that He foreordains our steps. He will always lead us to a place of eternal joy, even if the path He chooses is filled with sorrow. Because Jesus is the Suffering Savior, we rejoice that death does not hold us.

The One who suffered in our place will provide for us when we drink the bitter cup. Because Jesus is the Resurrected King, He is worthy of any cost to our person. We rejoice to offer Him a death that glorifies Him in the dying. Because Jesus is the Lord of Life, He promises to be with us in our death. We rejoice that we will not be alone when we die, even if we die upon a cross like Him.

While Peter seemed to stumble over Jesus's words when he first heard them, he later grasped them with joy. Perhaps Peter meditated upon this very prophecy when he wrote,

"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Peter 4:12-14 ESV).

May we receive with confidence and joy every hard thing that our Lord ordains for us. This is the path to a Merry Christmas.

Pastoral Prayer

Lord, help me to know that everything that comes to me first flows through your loving hands. You have ordained the hard with the easy, the painful with the pleasing. I do not always understand your ways. I am too small to understand. But I trust you. For you are good and you love me. I praise you Father that this is so! Amen

Application Questions

What can we do when we do not understand the workings of God in our life?

Why might God ordain very hard things for us?

Who are you tempted to compare yourself with and what truths from today's passage can help you in those moments?

***Bonus* Community Step**

Consider sharing a favorite verse or book as a recommendation or gift with a written note to a student to read over their break.



