

# PROMISES

*A Season of Advent*





# Introduction

In the fall of 2023, I found myself looking for an Advent devotional resource for the City Church family. After a thorough perusing of catalogs on my shelf and a gaggle of Googled websites, my search came up empty. Everything I found seemed plastic and impersonal; obviously that was not what our staff was looking for to enrich our congregation's Christmas season. And then a brilliant solution was dropped straight in my hands from one of our City Church elders, Carl Woodall (Yes, Carl Woodall!). He dropped by the church office one morning to show us a devotional book from his son's church. I knew this was our answer! We immediately agreed City Church could do this!

We contacted our Pens & Praises Group and shared with them the idea of writing a special devotional book for our church family to read during the season of Advent. They enthusiastically took up the mantle of the project. Pens & Praises is a creative writing and art group at City Church. We are so very grateful to Mrs. Patsy Forrest and Rev. David Williams for overseeing this project for the better part of the last year. They did a phenomenal job as did ALL the contributors! Our own Angie Davis exceeded all expectations with the beautiful layout and printing. Please express your gratitude to them for blessing us with this special resource this year.

If you enjoy writing (poetry, short stories, testimonies, etc) or if you are a budding artist, I encourage you to get involved with Pens & Praises. Our God is an imaginative Creator and when we create artistically we are imaging God's goodness and reality in the world. I hope you will consider making a contribution to next year's Advent devotional.

I know I speak for everyone who had a part in the development of this year's Advent devotional book when I say we hope and pray it will be a blessing to you and your family. May it enrich your worship of Christ our Savior during this Christmas season.

- Pastor Luther Stanford



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## *The Advent Candles*

by Charlotte Kunkel

As we come into the Advent Season, we need to know it is not the “Season” of the first person in our neighborhood to have our Christmas lights up. It is the time to prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the Messiah. I did not find anywhere in the Bible where it talked about the Advent Season. But it has long been a practice in the Christian Churches.

The Advent Candles all have significant meaning. The white candle which typically sits in the center stands for light, purity, and restoration. We should all be aware that this broken world should be praying for the Lord to come and bring Heaven and Earth together.

The first candle of the Advent Season is the Hope Candle, sometimes known as the “Prophet’s Candle” in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. We need to be more ready than ever in anticipation for the Messiah to return.

The second candle of the Advent Season is the Peace Candle, sometimes called the “Bethlehem Candle.” It represents the peace that the birth of Jesus brought in the hearts of so many. We should also remember He came to bring peace into all our lives.

The third candle of the Advent Season is the “Joy Candle,” sometimes known as the “Shepherd’s Candle.” The shepherds were waiting for the Messiah. The color of the “Joy Candle” is pink. Joy is mentioned several times in the Bible, meaning to be joyful about the Advent Season is a blessing that was bestowed on us. We need to use that gift to bring joy and love to all men.

The fourth candle is the “Love Candle,” sometimes known as the “Angels’ Candle.” After you learn to love, the most precious gift is a friendship with God.

As we enter the Christmas season with all the exciting goings on, let us take a few moments to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas; Jesus born in a manger to come into the world to be there for each of us every day.



# Hope

*<sup>6</sup> The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;  
and a little child will lead them.*

*<sup>7</sup> The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*

*<sup>8</sup> The infant will play near the cobra's den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.*

*<sup>9</sup> They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.*

*Isaiah 11:6-9*





# Jesus is Our Hope

by Angie Davis

Hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. Life has taught us to manage our expectations. We do this because we fear the reality of our situation and know that as much as we try to control our lives, we ultimately have no control.

Most of us learned fear and disappointment at an early age. Some of us don't even believe in the first part of that statement. We skip the "hope for the best" and go straight to the "prepare for the worst." For some of us, this is so deeply ingrained that it has become generational. We teach our children this way of living. Our trust in goodness is gone. We have no hope.

This lack of hope is like an emotional kudzu in our lives. It starts small, but as life goes on and we continue experiencing disappointments, left unattended, it will completely overtake us. So what's the answer? Self-help books, podcasts, daily words of affirmation, or ice cream? (That last one is my preferred method!)

As a Christ follower, we already have the greatest hope there is...Jesus! Unfortunately, we come from a culture of instant gratification where we only want to put forward the very least amount of effort, but gain the biggest reward...and fast! That's just not how Jesus works.

Throughout the Bible, God has made promises to His people, promises of peace, love, forgiveness, and hope. All these promises were given in the form of his Son, Jesus. Jesus spent his time on earth showing us over and over how to receive the promises of God. He taught healing and meekness, forgiveness and strength, prayer, and love. His ways are more than a cute sign hanging on a kitchen wall, they are more than Sunday mornings and Wednesday Nights, they are for all a way of life. They are the path of restoration that brings us back to God.

Jesus is our answer to a life without hope.

We no longer hope for the best, because Jesus is better.



## *The Gift of Hope* by David Williams

When our youngest son, Paul, was in his later pre-teen years, he was still very much a “tweener.” He was smart and maturing rapidly but he also remained a boy, in true Peter Pan fashion, in many ways. Even today, when it comes to holidays, as grown men, both of our sons “expect” their mother to send them special treats (stuffed stockings and Easter basket goodies) during the holiday seasons. It is a lingering tradition old dad scratches his head over.

One Christmas, while Paul was past asking Santa for things, he did let his parents know that he HOPED for a, newly issued, box set of the Star Wars Trilogy. He was a good kid and had grown accustomed to receiving, with regularity, his typically reasonable, requested gifts.

Christmas morning arrived and the family gift exchange took place at my In-law’s beach condo. Two gleefully expectant boys proceeded through the presents with reckless abandon as grandparents and parents took in the fleeting experience. I don’t remember that it was intentional (I am not beyond such a prank) but the long hoped for Star Wars Trilogy sat wrapped, covered, and out of sight behind a couch. With each round of gifts, Paul’s face was beginning to show a level of disappointment that approached heart breaking for a parent. In my fading memory, His smile flattened, his eyes watered a little, and his lip maybe quivered a little. But he waited patiently, greatly anticipating his hoped-for movie collection. He was well mannered, not asking or demanding, but certainly assuming the gift was at hand. As gifts dwindled and time passed, his affect flattened as he prepared himself for the possible reality his hope might not be fulfilled this Christmas. The desired gift apparently remained “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.” At some point, amidst reams of torn paper and shredded bows, the box was produced, the package was unwrapped in a flurry and smiles returned as hope was fulfilled. His countenance changed. He was, as every child should be on Christmas morning, joyful!

I sometimes imagine how Israel of old must have felt. They knew, from stories passed down through families and words read in synagogues from ancient scrolls, that God was faithful to His people. A promise had been made and God keeps His promises. They waited for centuries, as lifetimes and generations scrolled quickly down the rolling screen of human history. The promised gift had not arrived. Even the most hopeful, had to be realistic. It might not happen in their lifetime. Yet, through Scripture, we continue to see God’s people hope and persist with an unwavering confidence in God. Finally, hope was fulfilled as, “God became flesh and dwelt among us.” As He did, Kings trembled, Angels sang, lowly shepherds stood in awe, the heavens brightened, a majestic star marking the spot, and a little baby opened his eyes upon the world He created and came to redeem.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord More than those who watch for the morning— Yes, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is mercy, And with Him is abundant redemption. Psalm 130: 5-7



# *Hang On, Promise Expected*

by Cressa Serreyn

What does this word mean to you? Perhaps you hope for a good report at the doctor's office. Or do you hope the boss notices all your extra work and gives you that promotion? Or do you hope that the local ice cream shop has your favorite flavor? These examples are often how we use the word hope, but for a Christian, hope holds a way deeper meaning.

I've started to replace the word hope with "Hang On, Promise Expected" when I read it in Scripture. It has taken on a whole new light within me that way. Our hope in Christ is an assurance of His promises that will occur. It is not a wish or a dream, it's a promise made by the infallible Creator of the Universe and Sustainer of All! If God says it, I can believe it!

Therefore, when the Bible says:

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

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise You more and more. (Psalms 71:14)

You can read it as Hang On, (and often I even insert my name here), Promise Expected and it gives me courage to hold on to whatever I can for strength in that moment knowing that I can expect Him to be faithful!

The Doctor might have bad news, but God is the Master Physician and Greatest Healer. For the Believer, even death itself has no hold over us because of the promise of everlasting life!

If you are overlooked for the promotion at work, God sees and knows what is done in private and great will be your reward in Heaven!

And if that local ice cream store only has vanilla, thank the Lord for His promise of never tempting us with more than we can handle, and when we are tempted His promise to provide a way out, so that we can endure!

It's all a reframing of our understanding of hope, it's not a wish, it's an assurance, an expected promise is coming, dear reader, just hang on.

# The Hope of a Sigh

by Patsy Forrest

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

<sup>33</sup> After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. <sup>34</sup> He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). <sup>35</sup> At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

<sup>36</sup> Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. <sup>37</sup> People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." - Mark 7:31-37

Mark tells the story of Jesus' encounter with a man who could not hear nor speak plainly. In the story, Mark made a point to tell us that Jesus sighed deeply as He looked to heaven and said, "Ephphatha" which means "Be opened." When Jesus spoke that word, the man was healed. But why did Jesus sigh?

I sigh when I feel a sense of "not again" or when I'm tired, or when I think "not one more thing". Yet in the story of healing this man, He sighed deeply. Was He thinking of the man's infirmity, of living his life in silence and not fully understanding his world? The Bible does not tell us.

What I know about Jesus is He feels our pain and weeps for us because He experienced the perfection, the glory and the joy of heaven and we do not. Jesus wanted that experience for the deaf man, and He wants it for us.

Because of that desire, He came to make a way for us. While on earth He brought comfort and healing and through His life, death, and resurrection, He brought the hope of heaven's perfection.

Today and every day He sighs for us as He daily lives our lives with us through His Spirit.

Scottish poet James Montgomery reminds us, "Prayer is the burden of a sigh, the falling of a tear; the upward glancing of eye, when none but God is near." (Montgomery J. , 1771-1854)

So, let us lift our hearts in prayer and join Jesus in our own sigh of hope – that confident expectation of experiencing the perfection, the joy, and the glory of heaven.

# *He Is the Light of My Life*

Words and Music by David Williams

Look into the pictures of your mind.  
Can't you see a star that's brightly shining,  
Somewhere in the darkness of the night?  
It tells of One who comes from God  
To bring His love and give us life.

He is the light of my life.  
He is the door to my dreams.  
He is my hope for tomorrow.  
He is my everything.

I can just see that lowly manger scene.  
I can just hear all those angels singing.  
"Glory to God in the Highest, peace on earth,  
Good will to all men."

He is the light of my life.  
He is the door to my dreams.  
He is my hope for tomorrow.  
He is my everything.

*Listen Here...*





# *A Testimony of Hope*

by Vee Weaver

The beauty of family is truly given to us by the Lord. We honestly do not realize how blessed we are to have a family that cares, inspires, accepts, but most of all extends grace. Grace is something the Lord gives us every single moment we take a breath. Grace is a concept that is difficult. Grace is one of the most empowering promises in the Bible, however what does grace mean in day-to-day life?

I learned after years of abuse and uncertainty that the reason that I am still walking on this earth is because He created me for a purpose. I heard these words once, “if you have a pulse, you have a purpose.” Those words gave life to a new beginning. So, once I truly embraced that I was created by Him, my heart exploded in acceptance and love.

What message do you really send that actually sparks a change? We spend so much time in judgment and pointing the finger. We forget grace when it comes to someone else when they wrong you, but you want or even beg for it when you need it. My journey to some people was a difficult one, I was an outcast from the beginning, darker than my other family, my hair coarse vs their fine hair, and my inability to please. I put pressure on myself to appease anyone that I may have offended regardless of what they did to me.

Then I heard an inspiring sermon that was geared towards being weary and burdened.

*“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” - Matthew 11:28-30*

I learned we love with a limit, but JESUS loves till the end. And I learned we live with expectations God never put on us.

Our time on earth is a gift and He decides when He takes us home. We feel some are taken too early and some have suffered a “journey” of the world wondering what the purpose of the suffering truly means. but we fail to remember the suffering of the cross for those who were far from worthy of this sacrifice. We continue to repeat using His Word for “our purpose,” causing division like color and political parties, but most of all the accusation “your sin is way worse than mine.” We hold people to these unreasonable standards if they profess to be a child of God, waiting for people to fail so we can rub in their faces that they fall short, only to be reminded when it’s our turn to face that judgment there is only one judge and everyone finds a way to “validate” their stand.

*“And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.” - 1 Peter 5:10*

There is hope in Christ Jesus and our mission on this earth is to spread the gospel of Jesus so that people realize “if they have a pulse, they have a purpose.”

# Hope for A World in Waiting

by Pastor Luther Stanford

When I was a kid, the best part and the worst part of Christmas was the waiting. On the one hand, Christmastime was here! But on the other hand, the clock and the calendar seemed to slow to a snail's pace the day after Thanksgiving. Everywhere you went there were reminders that Christmas is coming...department stores played Christmas carols, houses were covered with lights, but it seemed like it would never get here.

But our waiting for Christmas is not all that bad because we know December 25th is going to arrive. We can find it on the calendar and say, "It's on this day!" It may feel like forever to a 5 year-old, but it always gets here.

But that's not the way it was in the first century as God people waited for the Messiah to come. Some had waited, longed, and hoped their entire lives. In times of turmoil & chaos, they would remind themselves, "One day!"

The promise was this:

*<sup>12</sup> When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. - 2 Samuel 7:12-13*

They believed God would one day send a KING who would sit on the throne forever! And He would bring justice to all who are oppressed, healing to all who are broken, and forgiveness to all who are unworthy and guilt-ridden.

But many had grown weary in the wait. They wondered why God was taking so long. Some had grown accustomed to the silence and lost all their energy for anticipation. They had lost hope.

In the birth of Jesus, the entire, grand sweeping story of the Old Testament is now reaching its conclusion. This story looked as if it had been lost. God had seemed silent. The story seemed to have taken so many wrong turns, could it ever get back on track again? Most said no. But now something extraordinary is happening. Hope was being realized.

Matthew & Luke tell us, "This is it! This is what we have been waiting for!" Even though we never imagined it would be like this! This is where the story of Abraham's family, and the promise to David's offspring, and the restoration of God's kingdom was going all along.

Jesus came to a world waiting for God to show up. Do you ever feel that way? You know that He will show up. He always does. You just don't know when or how. Don't lose hope! God comes in ways and in times we could never imagine. Our God is full of surprises! Trust Him and watch, and wait when necessary, He will show up for you too.



# Peace

*<sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
<sup>7</sup>Of the greatness of his government and peace  
there will be no end.  
He will reign on David's throne  
and over his kingdom,  
establishing and upholding it  
with justice and righteousness  
from that time on and forever.  
The zeal of the Lord Almighty  
will accomplish this.*

*Isaiah 9:6-7*





# Peace

by Clint Logan

“Peace, be still.” “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” These are words we see in Scripture. Jesus has a way of telling His followers that peace is a way of life for those who follow Him. Peace is not just a good idea or an ideal life goal; it is something Jesus directly promises to His people.

Many of us today, when we think of the word or idea of peace we think about the need for global peace—peace from war and violence. But peace is not only a goal that we strive and long to reach for the world; it’s something we need daily in our personal lives.

Imagine, for a moment, being on the journey to Bethlehem, knowing you have no reservations, no foolproof plan for what is to come and to top it all off, there is a high chance for a child to be born along the way. How does one find peace in that? The answer is total reliance on God and who He says He is. God set a plan before Mary and Joseph as they journeyed, eagerly awaiting the arrival of their son, Jesus.

Today, many of us are also on journeys filled with unknowns. What will happen when we get the results? What if I lose my job? What if this doesn’t work this time? What if...?

Peace, be still. When the storms of uncertainty push against your ship, remember that Jesus came to bring you peace—if only we will find refuge and rest in Him.

Prayer:

In a world of uncertainty, I come to You, seeking the peace that only You can give. Still my heart and quiet my mind as I lay down my worries and fears before You. Teach me to trust fully in Your promises and to rest in knowing that You hold my life in Your hands.

When storms arise, remind me that You are my shelter, my safe place. Let Your peace, which surpasses all understanding, fill me from within, bringing calm to my soul. Grant me the courage to face each day with my trust in You, and thank You for Your presence that steadies me. In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.

Passages:

Mark 4:39, John 14:27, Psalm 59:16-17



## Peace

by Jim Watson

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled and do not be afraid". - John 14:27 NIV*

Put your credit card away, overspending doesn't bring peace.

Put the bottle down, one more drink won't bring peace.

Stop over-extending yourself, always saying yes doesn't bring peace.

Stop binge eating, one more burger certainly doesn't bring peace.

Avoid frantic holiday rushing, it doesn't bring peace.

Avoid holiday dinner perfection, it won't bring peace.

Having daily quiet time with Jesus brings peace.

Emulating the life of Jesus brings peace.

Realizing you're loved by Jesus, that absolutely DOES bring peace.

*"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and my burden is light". - Matthew 11:28-30 NKJV*

# *The Innkeepers Wife*

by Cressa Serreyn

“Levi would you please go answer the door, my hands are full waiting on our guests!” Helena pleaded with her husband. It had already been a long week and people were still coming into town for the census, it was good for business but tough on her; tending the rooms and keeping guests happy was hard at her advanced age!

She was up each morning before sunrise to fetch water at the town well. She would start the fire in her outdoor kitchen to make matzah and fish for the guests before they headed out for their daily activities. Their five guest rooms were filled, and they even had made up temporary cots in the living space for single travelers willing to pay a reduced price for less-than-ideal conditions.

But now it was nearly bedtime. She had been awake, working every moment, since 5 am and was certain she would be unable to even fake a welcoming grin to yet another guest, going out of her way to make them comfortable. The only thing she wanted was her own bed!

She went out back to finish up the final dinner dishes as she heard Levi’s irritated holler at the incessant knocking, “I’m COMING.” Helena was able to grin at that, now maybe finally he will understand a bit of the pressure I have been feeling this week!

“Do you have anywhere left for my wife and I; we’ve just gotten to town...” the voice trailed off. Helena pulled her head back; peering thru their home to the front door she saw a worn-out man who looked as bad as she felt! Levi stood there shaking his head, the man’s face fell, and he turned to walk away.

“What was that about and why are they arriving so late?” Helena shouted as Levi shut the door and turned back to his wife. “Poor guy, he said it had a been a long day, apparently it took them longer because the woman is pregnant and get this, she’s in labor! How’s that for terrible timing!” Levi shook his head and chuckled in disbelief.

“WHAT!” In an instant Helena forgot all about her desires and exhaustion. How she remembered childbirth with her three sons, and she got to do it in the comfort of her own home! Her heart was broken for this poor woman, needing to travel from their hometown for this census while in labor. There had to be something they could do to help! Right then the craziest idea popped into her head.

“Levi, go, GO, tell that man that we will make space.”

“And where exactly are you suggesting we put two more? And if we let them inside and she makes a ruckus we may lose our current paying customers, Helena, you’re not thinking straight!”

“Go run and find him! I will clear an area in the stable and take linens out to try to make



them as comfortable as possible. At least they will have a private place to lay down to wait for the arrival of their child!”

“The stable, now I believe you really have gone crazy, but the businessman in me won’t ever turn down an opportunity for a bit more money so I will go find him and offer it.”

Helena quickly gathered spare linens and arranged a few left-over morsels of food into a tiny basket before grabbing the broom and heading to the stable. She moved the animals together into the back stalls which would allow the front one to become a makeshift “room.” Her heart ached for this new family, how terrible it was to be in this predicament and how sad that this is how a new life would begin. The thought crossed her mind that maybe she and Levi should take the stable and give up their bed, but she quickly came up with a list of reasons why that wasn’t possible.

She was just finishing sweeping the final straw and fodder as Levi rounded the corner with the expectant couple. The young lady already appeared weary from their journey in addition to the repeated contractions she was enduring. Helena awkwardly welcomed them into the stable and let them know if they needed anything to feel free to come and ask. The couple was more than gracious to their hosts and assured Helena that they would not be trouble for them.

Helena returned to her outdoor kitchen to finish up her chores. It was much later than usual for her to be outside, yet the sky seemed brighter tonight. Levi came outside to keep his wife company. “What a day it has been, thanks for being so creative and for setting up the stable for that couple. Crazy to think we will be making money even from a stable stall turned hotel room!”

Levi reclined back on the cushion to gaze up at the stars, relishing the evening air. “WHOA, Helena, check out this star!” Helena joined him and looked up to discover why the sky seemed brighter. There was the most brilliant star, and it seemed to be directly over their home. “How strangely beautiful is that star, maybe we should stay up later more frequently,” she joked before returning to her work.

As they drifted off to sleep that night, Helena continued to think about the young couple. Was she progressing in labor? Helena was too embarrassed and worn out to check, she would wait until morning. Morning came quickly for Helena, her work wouldn’t do itself, so she donned her sandals and headed for the water jars. She decided to stop by the stable. As she approached the door she heard voices, was that singing?

As she opened the stable door, alongside the sweet couple were several shepherds. One was holding the tiny baby, and they were all singing the most beautiful song, “Glory to God in the Highest, Peace on Earth, Goodwill towards men.”

# Peace Restored

by Patsy Forrest

*Lift up your eyes on high, And see who has created these things, Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, By the greatness of His might And the strength of His power; Not one is missing. Isaiah 40:26 (NKJV)*

Sometimes my mind, my eyes, and my heart focus on circumstances. I am overwhelmed, tired, and feel out of control and lose my joy and peace. The tears come and words of hopelessness escape my mouth. I search for a way out of the darkness surrounding me, but my imagination is lost. I am unable to see God, the Father, who wants to embrace me with His love and restore peace in my heart.

Isaiah 40:26 reminds me to look up and see the stars, to imagine the living God who created them, who knows each one by name, and can account for the whereabouts of every individual star. In the following verses, Isaiah reminds me that God is mighty and powerful, active and alive. He assures me that God gives power to the weak and increases strength to those who have no might (v.29). With these words, Isaiah reminds me of God's promise of renewal:

*But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint. - Isaiah 40:31 (NKJV)*

*When I am overwhelmed, tired, and weary, the solution is to stop, engage my imagination and see the living God who created the stars and knows them all by name; listen to the God who wants me to "Be still and know that He is God" - Psalm 46:10*

I remember the loving God who wants me to wait on Him and allow Him to renew my strength and restore His peace in my heart.



# God, Give Us Peace

by David Williams

Rebellion, insurrection, and hostility. The pages of history are cluttered with the words and realities of wars and rumors of war. War between armies, families, ideologies, races, systems, supposed saints and sorry sinners. Bullets fly, missiles soar, blades cut and bombs explode.

God, Give Us Peace...

Battles over land, water, borders, resources, choices, preferences, principles or hurt feelings. The fight ensues, blood is shed, people are hurt physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Winners prevail for a day, the battles ensue tomorrow, and clarity prevails, no one has truly won anything of real significance.

God, Give Us Peace...

Wars fought on battlefields, in societal institutions, through media, both modern and ancient. Destructive payloads delivered by ship, aircraft or armor-clad vehicles. Lives shattered with spoken word, pen, paper, pictures, text and screens. House to house, church to synagogue, and lecture hall to mosque.

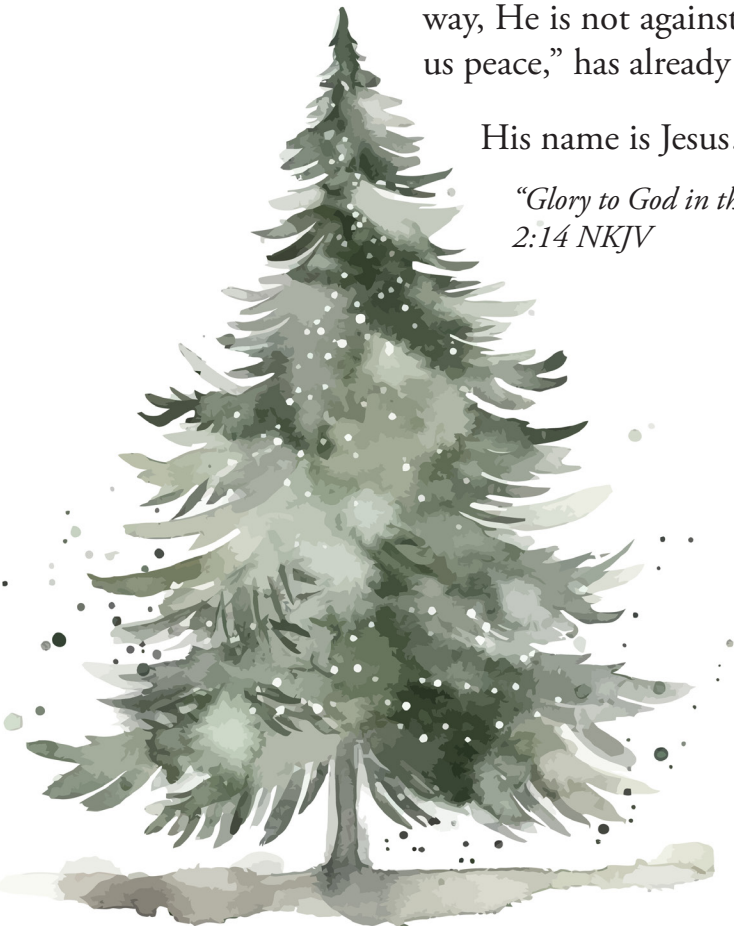
God, Give Us Peace...

Shout the Good News. God has moved into our war-torn lives to restore, renew, and remake. Deity, "veiled in flesh," has entered our broken world to show us in the most perfect

way, He is not against us, He is for us. The oft prayed prayer, "God, give us peace," has already been answered.

His name is Jesus...

*"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" - Luke 2:14 NKJV*







## *Howard's Mill*

Written by Patsy Forrest & Illustrated by Bob Forrest

Howard's Mill holds a special place in my husband's heart because it is part of his family's history. His grandfather Bob worked in the mill grinding corn into cornmeal for the community and his uncle Emmitt ran the nearby General Store.

His grandfather died at the age of 40, but in his short life he raised three sons and a daughter all the while working a farm he didn't own, as a sharecropper and at Howard's Mill. His family grew up to be hard workers who also learned to love the Lord, to serve Him and to share Him with their own children.

Family is important to all of us, but more importantly, being part of the family of God gives us a life full of the promise of hope, peace, joy, and love. But even more wonderful is our personal relationship with Jesus who lives within us all.



# Shalom, Shalom

by Patsy Forrest

In the quiet stillness of the cool Christmas night, I hear the faint refrain of “Let there be peace on earth” and “let it begin in me.”

Peace? Surely peace does not begin with me!

Did peace begin when an angel with a multitude of heavenly host praising God appeared to shepherds in the field declaring “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!?” (Luke 2:13-14)

No!

Peace began with the birth of a Baby Boy on Christmas. That Baby Boy was with God from the beginning, the Son of God who would be called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). His name is Jesus and He came to redeem the world and bring peace to God’s own through reconciliation to Him.

This peace is not dependent on circumstances but is a combination of hope and trust leading to quiet in the mind and soul. It is the same peace proclaimed by the Angels on the night of Jesus’ birth. It is the peace Jesus proclaimed when He said “Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

It is the same peace He promised His disciples as He prepared them for His departure, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” (John 14:27)

It is the greeting of peace He offered the disciples as He appeared in their meeting room after His resurrection. Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19)

This is the peace Jesus offers us on this Christmas Eve and everyday of our lives as we trust Him.

*<sup>6</sup> “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; <sup>7</sup> and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” - Philippians 4:6-7*

Thank You, Dear Jesus, for perfect peace or as You would say in Hebrew, “Shalom, Shalom.”

# *Peace: Something We Long For*

by Pastor Luther Stanford

*On the night of Jesus' birth, the angels filled the sky and declared,  
"Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."*

This thing that is happening is bringing God His highest glory! Because of the birth of Jesus, God is bringing peace to all the world. And boy does our world need it.

The greatest source of turmoil in our world is not hurricanes or diseases, but the human heart. The hatred that exists between nations, between people groups, and between family members, began in the dark hearts of human beings. But now, in the coming Messiah, peace is being made possible. But what is peace?

Peace is not just serenity. It's wholeness. It's the restoration of God's original, good intention for his world. When there is peace, or shalom, as the ancient Jews would have called it, there's no conflict between people. Nothing is mangled, nothing is deformed. Everything is as God's intends.

From the opening pages of Scripture, we learn that the world is not as God intended. It was GOOD as God created it. But now, it is cursed. It is broken, marred, and mangled.

The cause of the curse is humanity's rejection of God, our source of life. We have rejected the God who created us, the God who sustains us. And so we are like a plant which has withered because it's been denied sunlight. We are like a human body which has been denied oxygen. But it's not just that we have been denied God, we denied Him ourselves. We said "no" to God's life. The story of every human is that we have shaken our fist in God's face and declared, "We will be our own sunlight! We will be our own oxygen!"

But God would not give up on His world. He would not give up on you and me. In Christ, God has started His massive project to restore humanity to one another, and more importantly, to restore humanity to God.

One day God's peace will cover the earth like the oceans. Peace will saturate every place and every thing. Bodies destroyed by disease will leap and run in perfect health. Reputations that have been ruined will be restored. All the wrongs will be made right.

In that time, all the disappointments, pain, and injustices of the world get swallowed up in the peace God is accomplishing for His world.

The gospel is the good news that something has happened, and because of it, everything will now be different. Now, peace is possible.





*Preparing to Celebrate the Birth of Jesus*

by Bob Forrest

*"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." - Luke 2:11*



# Joy

<sup>17</sup> *“See, I will create  
new heavens and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.*

<sup>18</sup> *But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I will create,  
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight  
and its people a joy.*

<sup>19</sup> *I will rejoice over Jerusalem  
and take delight in my people;  
the sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard in it no more.*

*Isaiah 65:17-19*





# *Advent for a Shepherd*

by Chaise Logan

When? Why? How? These questions flood my thoughts at night,  
The worries, the fear, the battles I fight.  
I find myself thinking where it all went wrong—  
My life, my family, all feel so far gone.

The cold wind bites on the hillside, a break from the storm,  
My life, once whole, now fractured and torn.  
Joy escapes me now buried by mistakes,  
“I want to go home, I want to be free”  
But the chains of addiction are tearing at me.

I wonder, I panic, is this all that I have?  
Outside the city, I am sleeping in rags.  
A shepherd on this hillside, I own clothes and a sack  
No home, no money, no way to go back.

Cold, dirty, hopeless, does God fellowship here?  
If things were different, would I feel Him near?  
They say He doesn't see us, they say He doesn't care  
Just shepherds, forgotten, we put ourselves here.

It was our lives we ruined; we're outsiders now.  
The world moves on, but we've been left out somehow.  
The sheep breathe slowly, the others sit by the fire,  
But tonight I feel the weight of my soul beaten and tired.

My darkness, my hurt, can't be warmed by this flame  
I try all I can to numb all the pain.  
Hopelessness consumes me, my heart hard as a stone,



Under this tree, I am forsaken and alone.

As I close my eyes, I hear the sheep start to wake,  
Something has them startled; the ground begins to shake  
Eyes shut, I hear the sheep stirring with fright,  
The earth shakes around me; Glory piercing the night!

The night sky rips open brighter than the stars,  
An angel appears, splitting the heavens apart!  
Declaring a message to the lowest of men  
Hope is coming to earth in the form of a man.

With words full of joy, too good to believe,  
This message of hope; it includes even me!  
My past comes into focus, fears long forgotten arise,  
Shame locks me in place, I can't look in His eyes.

In this moment, He sees me, His eyes pierce my soul,  
I feel ashamed and broken, unworthy to be whole.  
But with one sentence, it all falls away:  
“Fear not, good news of great joy for all men is coming today!”

Joy flooded my heart, broke the chains of my shame,  
The weight of my guilt fell off like mud in the rain.  
In that one sentence, I knew it was true  
Redemption has come, for me and for you.

Redeemed and restored, I rush to my feet,  
The promise of joy has made me complete.  
On a cold, quiet night, God heard my call;  
To a shepherd forgotten, JOY has come for us all.

*Joy*  
by Jim Watson

In moments of sadness  
In times of despair  
A joyful heart comes through  
Praises to God fill the air

Yes, your heart is heavy  
It's a weight you can feel  
Tell God in prayer  
Your soul He wants to heal

But the devil wants to beat you down  
Your demise is his delight  
He won't slack up  
In your strength you cannot fight

Stay strong in your faith  
Daily your Bible to read  
Let God speak to your heart  
A weary soul He loves to feed



# *Down in My Heart*

by Sandi King

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I've got the JOY, JOY, JOY, JOY down in my heart,  
(WHERE?) down in my heart,  
(WHERE?) down in my heart.  
I've got the JOY, JOY, JOY, JOY down in my heart,  
down in my heart to stay.

I've got the LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS,  
down in my heart,  
(WHERE?) down in my heart,  
(WHERE?) down in my heart.  
I've got the LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS, LOVE OF JESUS  
down in my heart, down in my heart to stay.

~~~~~

When I was about eight years old, my Air Force dad was transferred to Dobbins AFB, Marietta, GA. That summer I went to VBS with our new neighbors and sang this little song every morning for a week. That was my first introduction to what real joy means - the love of Jesus in my heart.

Now, all these years later, we are still singing about joy. During the Christmas season we sing "Joy to the World the Lord has come." A wonderful worship song we sing here at City Church is "The joy of the Lord, the joy of the Lord is my strength." While we sing these words of worship, let's remember that joy IS the love of Jesus.

The dictionary defines joy as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." Those of us that have the love of Jesus in our hearts know what this joy feels like, but what does this joy look like to others? Paul wrote: "Be full of joy in the Lord always, I will say again, be full of joy. Let everyone see that you are gentle and kind. The Lord is coming soon." (Philippians 4:4-5) According to Paul, our joy is seen through gentleness and kindness toward others. This change of character is what we Christians strive for – sharing our joy in the Lord by being gentle and kind, not just during this advent season, but always.



# *Joy After the Storm*

by Patsy Forrest

Christmas music floods the kitchen as I put away the last of the Thanksgiving leftovers. This reminder of the coming season's activities of decorating, gift buying, parties, and meal planning is less than welcome. My quest to create the "perfect family Christmas" steals the joy of Jesus' birthday celebration, and I dread it.

Year after year I tried to create the movie version of the "perfect family Christmas" with tree and lights, Christmas candles, and various decorations collected during the thirty-plus years of marriage. To allow Jesus to attend the celebration, we placed an antique manger scene prominently in the living room. Every year baby Jesus remained in His manger adored by angels, shepherds, wise men, Joseph, and Mary.

But one October morning in 2018, our "perfect family Christmas" lay strewn about the yard, as hurricane Michael blew the storage building apart and destroyed the Christmas decorations in a matter of hours. I picked up broken bits and pieces and found little golden angels shining in the grass. Thankfulness overshadowed my sadness for the storage building was the only thing destroyed.

That year, we celebrated thanksgiving, truly thankful to be together in our slightly damaged home. Our thanks also included the restoration of water, electricity, internet, and cable. But we were most grateful for God's protection and His mercy.

Christmas music flooded the kitchen as I put away the last of the Thanksgiving leftovers, thankful that no unwelcome reminder came. Hurricane Michael exposed the lie I lived year after year. I gave the joy of Jesus' birthday celebration away and replaced it with that lie. The truth of the "perfect family Christmas" came into view. From now on, Jesus will be the focus our family Christmas and we will celebrate with joy God's gift of His only Son.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, ... Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:8-11





*I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go into the house of the LORD." Psalms 122:1*

Bob Forrest  
8-6-25



*Let Us Go Into the House of the Lord*  
by Bob Forrest

When the doors of the church open, we brothers and sisters in Christ gather to worship the One and Only Living God. Songs of praise and worship ring out and the joy of the Lord fills each of us with our own personal love message from God.

Gathering during the Christmas season brings special memories. The Carols of Christmas evoke memories of sharing Christmas with family and friends throughout the years. What joy they bring our hearts as we sing about the birth of our Savior, Jesus. He came from heaven to live as a man, to redeem us through his sacrifice on the Cross, and give us the hope of His coming kingdom. Come, Lord Jesus, Come!



# Joyful Memories

by Adam Klanjac

When I think about advent and the four themes of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, I think back to my growing up days at Christmas time. I remember on Christmas Eve how we would go to church for the Christmas Eve service. After the service, we would go home to eat Christmas Eve dinner where we had all of the staples of steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans or asparagus and then dessert.

After dinner we would go over by the Christmas tree and my mom read the Christmas story to us. Each of us boys, my brothers and I, would get to open a present. Then we would get in the car and look at Christmas lights in the neighborhood.

I remember coming home and having to go to bed very quickly so that Santa could come and visit. I was so excited for Santa to come that my brothers and I could not sleep at all, and we could not wait for Christmas morning to come.

Finally, Christmas morning arrived, and we rushed down to the living room to see what Santa had brought. It was exciting and so much fun. Then we would eat Christmas breakfast. Mom always made breakfast casserole and cinnamon rolls or Nassau grits. After a while we would go over to my Grandma's house for Christmas lunch with all the Christmas fixings to eat. All my family and extended family would sit and eat and then open presents from each other.

So, when I look at Christmas and I look at my family, I know that we had Hope and Love and Joy and Peace. Then I think about what Christmas meant to people in Jesus's day. How He would be the promised Messiah to those who believed and how He would change everything. He would save His people and change the world for Good. They could not have known anything better than that because He brings Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace.

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## Nassau Grits Recipe

Recipe by Gail Klanjac

### Ingredients

- 1 pound of bulk sausage
- Quaker, five minute grits, use the six serving recipe off the box
- Half of an onion, chopped
- Half of a green bell pepper, chopped
- Half of a large block of Velveeta cheese
- Crystal hot sauce
- Everglades seasoning, optional

### Directions

In a large pot, brown the sausage with the chopped onion and bell pepper. Drain fat. Add water to the meat mixture along with the grits when boiling. Cook as directed on the package of grits. When you finish cooking the grits, add in the cheese, salt and pepper along with a few dashes of crystal hot sauce.

# *Manger Scenes*

by David Williams

Some modern preachers, teachers and theologians seem to be on an Anti-Manger Scene campaign. They remind us often that there are problems with our traditional manger scenes we put out at Christmas.

I know that all those characters and creatures; shepherds, wisemen, angels, sheep, cows, goats, and chickens, were not likely there at the same time and same place, glaring adoringly down at the Christ child. I doubt that angels sat in the loft over a cow, though I believe as the Bible says, they shared “Good news of great joy” with some shepherds in a field, on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

I know it’s hard to combine the presence of a Holy God with the landscape of a smelly barn. I doubt Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus had hula hoop halos that were brighter than whatever lamps or candles burned around that moonlit barn.

Despite all this, I still love manger scenes! My wife has quite a collection and they adorn the inside and outside of our house every Christmas season. They are usually brought out sometime around the Alabama – Auburn Iron Bowl and are taken down sometime after College Football playoffs and Championship games are played. They remind me to be a little less demonstrative as a fan so I don’t break something that would be hard to replace.

Manger scenes serve a far greater purpose. They remind us, in artistic visual fashion, the truth of the Gospel. He came! God came down, in simplicity and humility. He took on human skin to enter the world in a new way. It was part of His plan that began in His heart before creation and before sin entered the world. Manger scenes remind me how much God does with so little. The little baby, in simple impromptu lodging arrangements outgrew that feeding trough to become the sinless sacrifice required so that we might Know God and follow Him.

Do with manger scenes what you wish. They help draw me closer to my Savior. I’ll enjoy them as I sing in my heart:

## **Away In a Manger**

Away in a manger no crib for His bed.  
The little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head.  
The stars in the sky looked down as He lay.  
The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.

*-Anonymous*

# *The Joy of Being Included*

by Pastor Luther Stanford

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God."*

The angel Gabriel was busy during the events of the first Christmas. He began in the temple with Zechariah and then it was off to the remote village of Nazareth to visit a young, unmarried woman named Mary.

Mary is from meager, agrarian roots. Galilee was not a respected region; it was hardly the place where one would expect God to show up. But show up He does, via His angelic messenger, and what a message! "You are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Like anyone, "Mary was greatly troubled at his words."

It wasn't the appearance of an angel that frightened Mary, it was his message...the message to her and about her. God had graced her with His presence. The word "favor" in v.28 at its most basic root stem is "grace." Mary has been shown God's grace, or favor, and she doesn't yet realize all it will mean. How could she? None of us can possibly conceive of our life story's potential once Christ our Savior enters the picture.

Mary has never thought of herself in this way. Never thought of herself as favored by anyone, except maybe by Joseph. But never in a million years did she conceive of herself as favored by God. Who thinks of themselves that way? Well, some really annoying people, perhaps. But most people would respond with the same shock as Mary. She is highly favored not because of her own merit or because she has done anything particularly special, but simply because she is the chosen vessel for God through whom He will demonstrate His grace.

This part of the Advent story reminds us: God doesn't recruit from the pedestal, He recruits from the pit. He doesn't go to the best schools to look for His servants, He goes to the shadows. He's not looking for super stars. Regular, everyday, ordinary people will do just fine.

God sees in us what others do not. He sees in us what we could never see. In His great love and grace, He includes us in His work! And if we respond like Mary, "I am the Lord's servant," we will discover the same JOY she discovered! The joy of being included.



# Love

*<sup>2</sup>He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
and like a root out of dry ground.*

*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*<sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by mankind,  
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*

*Like one from whom people hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*<sup>4</sup>Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,*

*yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.*

*<sup>5</sup>But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:2-5





# *Let Love Shine*

by Austin Rhodes

Love. It's difficult to describe. Go ahead take one piece of paper and try. We desire it, long for it, search for it, and fight for it. We believe we know how to give it, yet it feels like we constantly need to be reminded of the difference it can make. It's so important, yet fleeting when needed most. When love feels like it's missing, we have to remember the source of it in the first place, and it's not ourselves.

In Galatians 5:22, Paul is writing to the church to describe the fruit which should be growing in the life of a Jesus follower; he describes the result of the transforming work of God in our lives. The first one he names is Love. It shows us Loving the way God intends is learned and something which must grow. Love is not natural to us apart from God working in us. Loving the way God intends is unstoppable, even in a broken world amongst broken people. Loving the way God intends always shines through darkness. Loving the way God intends brings hope to all who experience it.

Christmas time is a season of celebration. In the Christmas Story we find a world which is broken and people who are running out of hope, and a God ready to love something imperfect in an extraordinary way. A love willing to put something back together He didn't break. A love willing to do more than just fix it but restore it to being just as He created it to be.

The birth of Jesus is Love coming to Earth and shining to the future of the world; a world where the love of God is not just celebrated in December, but on full display, shining brightly in the lives of God's people wherever they go. May we continue to learn what love looks like in God's world and shine it brightly in the way we live. God has invited to us be a part of loving the world the way He does. God has invited us to love others who are imperfect in a way which brings them hope and points them to God.



*Give Love*  
by David Williams

Wrap it up, give it away, spread His love today.  
It's needed where children wait for absent parents.  
It's needed in mansions where materialist aren't sharing.  
It's needed in worship houses, where earnest people search.  
It's needed in busy places, where doubting minds work.  
Across this hostile world, in lives dark or bright,  
Love shared from healing hearts can bring a healing light.

In the love you give to others, God is seen.  
In simple acts of kindness, He reigns supreme.  
When it feels you have nothing, you have more than it seems.  
To know and share His great love, means everything.

Wrap it up, give it away, deliver it, in person, today,  
To the widowed one, living alone and afraid.  
To the orphan child with no desire to play,  
To the prisoner who thinks God has nothing to say.  
To the sick, lives broken, body, soul and mind,  
Take His love to the unlovely, for we are all that kind.

We have a great commandment, not hard to comprehend.  
It's for all who have the heart to hear and obey Him.  
Love God first, and others next, and yes, love yourself.  
The One who gave the greatest gift, expects nothing else.



# *Ignorance is a Gift of God's Love*

by Jim Watson

*"So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today." Matt 6:34, NLT*

If God had given us the ability to see into the future, up to 24 hours, but not have the ability to alter the events, I wonder how having that knowledge would affect our relationship to God.

Given our sinful and wishy-washy nature, I would imagine for many of us our relationship to God would be based on us deciding if the future events were good or bad, if the events would cause us to shout praises to the Almighty or cause us to crumble on the floor in a fetal position, weeping.

If we deemed the future 24 hours were good, would that knowledge encourage us to a more grateful heart, filled with praise and celebration, more apt to share the gospel with those we came in contact with? Would we spend a little more time than usual in prayer and Bible reading, focusing on the verses that proclaim the goodness of God? I would imagine all those to be true.

But, what if we determined the future events were going to be bad, or at least less than desirable, such as the death of a loved one, or losing our job, leaving us no viable income, or a major natural disaster were going to strike, leaving our home and community in total shambles, would we distance ourselves from God, and hold a grudge? Would we point our finger heavenward and give God a piece of our mind, by reminding Him that He's supposed to be a loving God, while we quote Bible verses declaring His goodness?

I think one of the greatest acts of God's love toward mankind is not being able to possess the knowledge of personal future events. It causes us to rely on God, to daily look to Him for comfort, peace, and wisdom to know that His grace is sufficient and abundant on a daily basis.



*The Gift of Love*  
by David Williams

With a few decades clouding my mind, I am not sure she was as unlikeable a person or as tough a teacher as I remember.

Thinking of her English Composition class, all those years ago, two valuable lessons remain. First, Dr. B. (who shall remain anonymous) had an unwavering hatred for overuse of “To Be” verbs. She seemed to take great joy in giving poor grades to former “A” students that had never been truly humbled in their academic lives, especially if they had the audacity to overuse the verb “to be,” demonstrating what she referred to as, “diarrhea of the mouth.” I am sure she would unmercifully edit this account with red circles, checks, and degrading notations.

The second and more meaningful take away came the day Dr. B. walked into class, and announced through a seldom seen smile, “I know my husband loves me!” She asked a stunned class of 18- and 19-year-old students trying to keep their GPA out of the gutter, “how do I know?” Before anyone dare utter a reply, she answered her own question, “Because, He gave me THIS!” At that point she held up her extended hand, flashing a double-digit carat ring that made the Hope diamond look dainty.

I remember thinking, at the time, her display of materialistic greed bordered on pitiful. Then a deeper truth dawned on me, there was an element of spiritual truth in her obnoxious display. Love is indeed expressed and manifested by acts of extravagant giving. To some, giving is a “love language.” I decided I did not need to judge Dr. B., no, it was much more valuable to look at the truth of God’s love!”

As Christmas approaches, I’ll smile and announce boldly to the world, “I know God loves me, because He gave me His Son.” Jesus is the incomparable, indescribable, and extravagant gift of God’s love for pitiful, fallen sinners like me.

*“Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” - II Corinthians 9:15 NKJV*

*The Unique Gift*  
by Presleigh Dunagan (16 years old)



I love art. I love everything from painting to drawing or just plain sketching. I love being able to just create something with the wonderful imagination that God gifted me with.

I can use my art in many different ways. I mainly love just making people happy; it makes me happy! It fills me with joy when I make somebody's day with my artwork. And I can use this wonderful gift to show people about God's wonderful creations!

Art is my getaway, like whenever I don't feel okay I go to art, or when I just want to be alone I'll just grab my pencil and start sketching! It's sometimes hard when you're 1 of 8 siblings, it gets frustrating, but not to worry I have my art!

I have this Bible verse I always go to when I forget the love that God has for me. "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that fully well." (Psalm 139:14) And another verse that keeps me going is pretty famous! "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) It reminds me that I am loved no matter what people tell me.



# The Way

by David Williams

Mary stood in silence. How could it be? The Promised One, The Messiah, would be the offspring of her virgin womb. Whatever questions she had, whatever fear she felt, all melted away as she surrendered in faith to the will of God delivered through His angelic messenger. The message was clear. She would deliver the Son of God. This was her way to Him.

Joseph felt the stinging, heart dropping, stomach churning anxiety down to his soul. He wanted to believe his beloved, his betrothed. But how? His pride was battered. He decided not to make a public spectacle out of her, but his dreams were dashed upon the rocks of disappointment. Then the angel set him straight; Joseph knew, this was his way to God.

The Shepherds in the fields, smelling of sheep and all that sheep produce, were awestruck at the shining brilliance and the fearful sight of the heavenly messenger. How could such a holy word be brought to such an unclean group, they thought to themselves. But, they listened, they believed, they went to where they were told and saw the Child. He was their way to God.

The mystical, majestic trio with their vast learning and valuable gifts for the newborn King, followed the prophet's map and the glowing star's magical mark. They would not be misguided by an evil King, they followed the star and followed their hearts and found themselves kneeling beside the Baby, Mary, and Joseph. They came so far. He was their way to God.

I stand broken in the mirey clay of earthly life. I look at my image and contemplate all I am, all I've done, most of it worthless, to be consumed by the judgment fires of time and space. Yet I look in the mirror, not at what I see, but who I am because of Him, the baby, the sinless Savior, the resurrected Lord. I am His child. He is my way to God.

Two thousand years later now, amidst the howling noises of modern culture, the shredded wrappings of menial gifts, and the tensions of people trying to get along, may we come to a moment, after gifts are exchanged and delicacies are devoured, to stop and kneel in our imaginations before the baby in the food trough, and remember,

He is our way to God.

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."  
- John 14:6*

# *Twenty-Five Words*

by Patsy Forrest

Twenty-five words of pure love from God.  
Twenty-five words that express the way God loves.  
Twenty-five words that changed the world.  
Twenty-five words of love that change a life.  
Twenty-five words that introduce Jesus to God's children.  
Twenty-five words memorized by my six-year-old self.  
Twenty-five words that brought Jesus into my life.  
Twenty-five words that offered me new birth into God's family.  
Twenty-five words that changed my life.  
Twenty-five words I will never forget.

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. - John 3:16*



## *Love: The Heart of God at Christmas*

by Pastor Luther Stanford

It's been said, "The gospel is good news for everyone who's life is full of bad news." We need only to look at the people and the circumstances of Jesus' birth to realize this is the work of a God with a heart full of love for all people.

The actual birth place of Jesus is unknown. Despite popular traditions, it was probably not an inn, nor a barn, nor a cave. It was almost certainly small, humble, and poor. Jesus was probably born in a single-room dwelling, separated from the animals by a sheet hung to give privacy. Mary and Joseph are most likely staying with family and they are doing the best they can.

The circumstances say something profound about the character of God. A humble abode. A vulnerable new-born. Bewildered parents. Even frightened shepherds. This is not a God of pomp and circumstance.

Luke said it this way...

*<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."*

That the birth of the Savior was first announced to shepherds should not escape us either. We tend to romanticize the shepherds in the story. We think of them in sentimental terms as we set our nativity on our mantle each December. But that is not how they were thought of in the first century.

The prevailing sentiment was, "Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys...or shepherds!" No respectable father would have given his daughter in marriage to a shepherd. According to the rabbis, the "despised occupations" were: gamblers, money lenders, pigeon trainers (a popular betting sport), Sabbath-violating farmers, and SHEPHERDS!

It was assumed that shepherds were dishonest thieves, willing to break the law, whether God's or man's. Shepherds could not even bear witness in a court of law. If you were accused of a crime while you were at the movies with two shepherds...too bad!

But because of God's great love, when He rescued His world through Jesus Messiah, He stooped down to tell the lowest of the lows about it first. He told the shepherds before He told anyone.

Jesus is good news for all the people. However our lives have been beaten and banged up. No matter what terrible mess we may have made of ourselves, God has offered us forgiveness and restoration. It was the shepherds then, but it's you and me now. Remember, "the gospel is good news for everyone who's life is full of bad news." And what's the news? God loves you.



# Christmas

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:8-14





# Something Like Christmas

Words and Music by David Williams

*“Away in a manger no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down His sweet head. The stars in the skies  
look down where He lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay...”*

I look out my window on a cold winter morning  
and stare at the snow on the ground.  
All the lights, all the sights and all the sounds of the season,  
but in my life, no joy is found.

I need something like the baby, on His bed of hay,  
Something like a savior to take my sin away,  
I need Someone like You, oh Lord I must say,  
I need something like Christmas today.

Now I see her Bible all tattered and worn  
And I think how she’s prayed for me there,  
All those times, all the nights, that she’s gone to her Lord  
And lifted me up in prayer.

I need something like the baby, on His bed of hay,  
Something like a Savior to take my sin away,  
I need Someone like You, oh Lord I must say,  
I need something like Christmas today.

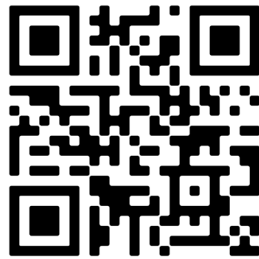
I kneel by this fireside, Lord I lift up my eyes  
And I ask you Lord, please forgive.  
Take my life Lord and save me, take me, Lord make me,  
Just what you want me to be.

Yes, I believe in the baby on His bed of hay,  
And trust the Christ of Calvary to take my sin away.  
I believe in You, oh Lord I must say,  
I want to thank you for Christmas, yes

Thank You for Christmas, Lord,  
Thank You for Christmas, today.

*“Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care and fit us for Heaven to live with Thee there.”*

*Listen Here...*





# Jesus: the Greatest Story Ever Told

by Pastor Luther Stanford

Do you want to be the main character in a really small story? Or do you want to be a part of the greatest story ever told? Most of us have settled for the former. We might have the starring role, but it's the starring role in our own little story. Is it possible to live a better story?

Author Donald Miller says you wouldn't cry at the end of a movie about a guy who wants a Volvo. If he worked, saved, and finally at the end was able to buy it. You see him driving off the lot, testing the windshield wipers and turning on the radio. You wouldn't cry because you wouldn't care. You wouldn't tell your friends about a movie where the guy who wants a foreign car with all of his heart. In fact, you may even feel a bit robbed by that kind of movie.

But many of us spend our lives living stories just like that. Really small stories about ourselves, about our meager accomplishments, and then we wonder, "Why does my life feel empty?" I always say, "Blame the author."

When we read the birth narrative of Jesus, it's obvious we have entered a story much greater than our own. We can only imagine what Mary must have been thinking when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, telling her that God had chosen her to bring the Messiah into the world. Talk about a greater story! The conversation went like this:

*<sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.<sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,<sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

*<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

*<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

No, God isn't inviting you to be the mother of the Messiah. But He does invite us to be a part of His work in the world. And just like Mary, we need to remember, "When Jesus enters your story, impossible things become possible." And our tiny little stories become filled with amazing possibilities, even miracles. The same Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary lives in you! Maybe it's time we give the pen to God and let Him be the author of our lives.





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