



Unwrapping Advent

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Dec. 1st

SCRIPTURE: He has also put eternity in their hearts, but man cannot discover the work God has done from beginning to end. Eccl. 3:11 (HCB)

THOUGHT: The first of December, the world may say the race is on, but we're choosing to pass on the madness. Go, us! As we set out hearts to seek Jesus more fully this advent season, let's remind ourselves that God is the One who put this eternity shaped desire in our hearts in the first place and be encouraged! The very admission we're making—that the way we worshipped Jesus last year and the year before isn't enough for us any longer—this is setting us up to experience His Presence more intimately than ever before.

ACTION: Let's tell someone today, be it family member or friend, that we're looking to keep Jesus at the center of our Christmas preparations and activities this year, and then let's have the courage to ask them to check in on us from time to time for a progress report!

SHAREABLE: The very admission that what you're experiencing of God is not enough sets you up for more!

Dec. 2nd

SCRIPTURE: But as it is written, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him." I Cor. 2:9 (ISV)

THOUGHT: Yesterday, I was momentarily overwhelmed thinking about squeezing Christmas shopping into my already crazy schedule and keeping it from busting the bank! However, rather than entertaining that familiar anxiety, I chose to think about how God broke the bank (so to speak) to give eternal life to the whole broken mess of us. In Jesus, we have God's all. That's one idea of what keeping my eyes on Jesus means to me; purposefully turning anxiety into Truth. It may mean something entirely different to you, but I'm convinced this advent season holds more eternal value for each of us than we can even begin to imagine if we'll keep our eyes on Jesus, The Greatest Gift!

ACTION: Ask the Lord to help alert you when you're having Christmas "anxiety" and when He does, choose to exchange it for a praise-worthy thought about Jesus.

SHAREABLE: God always desires to conceive in us a bigger vision than the one we're imagining!

Dec. 3rd

SCRIPTURE: Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Matthew 6:31-33

THOUGHT: Talk about a timely Scripture passage! Does this mean Jesus doesn't want us thinking about what to bring to the office party, where we can find a cup of coffee when our shopping mojo flags, and whether or not Mama would wear that cute top on the store mannequin? Of course not, but we are being given God's prescription not only for our Christmas chaos but for all the other stresses of life: When we relinquish our worries by setting our minds on Jesus we get provision and peace.

ACTION: Write down the first thing you think of when you hear the phrase “seek His kingdom

SHAREABLE: When we yield our wills to God's, the question “What's in it for me?” is answered with a resounding, “Everything!”

Dec. 4th

SCRIPTURE: ...and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Acts 20:35

THOUGHT: While it's possible that some super wealthy soul has joined us on this Advent journey, I think it's more likely that most of us here have a limited amount we can spend on Christmas. So, with all of us trying to stretch that shopping dollar, whatever are we to do with all of those donation drives? How do we choose from the plethora of worthy charities? Here's an idea. Let's give first! This year, before we ever buy, let's give. Let's drop our ingrained thinking about what we can do with what we have and give Jesus room to be more than we need.

ACTION: Make a list of people or non-profits you know need resources and ask God to show you where and how much to give. Give before the budget gets any more strained and watch God move.

SHAREABLE: We want Him to conform to our limited ideas of who He is because we're scared of letting Him be I AM.

Dec. 5th

SCRIPTURE: who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father. I also will love him and will reveal Myself to him. John 14:20-21

THOUGHT: If only we could share a cup of coffee in real time on this first Friday of Advent! I'd love that. Granted, I'd probably need to apologize for my super intense eye contact. I get that way sometimes. It's only because I realize that five days in, you may be second guessing this Christmas invitation of mine and I want so badly for you to stay with me. Perhaps you're thinking it'd be easier to hang on and get through Christmas before getting all serious about this Jesus thing. Can I please remind you there will always be another something, that life will keep on coming? If we let Jesus reveal Himself to us today, we can walk with Him into our unknown tomorrows. I pray that's all the motivation you need.

ACTION: Rewrite the bold sentence from today's thought into a personal declaration using the pronouns "I", "me", and "my".

SHAREABLE: When our "Just enough Jesus" turns into "I can't get enough Jesus," we find Him to be a gracious plenty.

Dec. 6th

SCRIPTURE: Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the Lord, to serve Him..." Joshua 24:22a

THOUGHT: Saturday! Chances are most of us will be shopping today. Just for fun, let's imagine what the next few hours might look like if we could make everyone around us do exactly as we pleased. For starters, the car in front of us would get out of the way and the car behind us would get off our bumper! All sale clerks would be helpful, and our delicious lunch would be served in a timely manner. Our phones wouldn't blow up with family problems and no one would cut in line. Cool, huh? Well, consider this incredible thought: God could pull our strings like so many robots, but He gives us the choice to know Him and experience Him by yielding our lives to Him.

ACTION: Every time someone frustrates us today, let's use it as a prompt to voluntarily yield the moment to God, expressing our gratitude to Him for giving us that choice.

SHAREABLE: How awe inspiring it is that a God big enough to compel us to do anything He wishes would restrain Himself from overriding our free will.

Dec. 7th

SCRIPTURE: ...Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now going to be made complete by the flesh? Galatians 3:2b-3

THOUGHT: Pssst...please don't do it. Please don't let this invitation to experience advent hand-in-hand with Jesus become one more thing your enemy uses to keep you from your Beloved. Oh, yes, it could happen. I speak from experience. I know full well how easy it would be to feel good about the days we check off our devotional and crummy about the days we don't. Regardless of what grade we give ourselves, evaluating ourselves keeps our eyes off Jesus and keeps us from the blessed goal of living with Immanuel, God with us.

ACTION: Draw a cross on a sheet of paper. Write your name at the foot of it and a print a huge A+ at the top of the page and give God grateful praise that you are fully accepted and highly favored through Christ Jesus!

SHAREABLE: Our enemy tempts us to give up (disobedience) or try harder (legalism). Both are doomed. Strength is only found at the Cross.

Dec. 8th

SCRIPTURE: Believe in God, believe also in Me. John 14:1b

THOUGHT: Another Christmas prepping, gift wrapping, anxiety offering day is here with all of its noisy demands. Was it just yesterday when God seemed so much more real? It's okay to admit it. Maybe for you it happens for you during Sunday morning worship or Saturday night mass. I'm talking about those moments when we're joined with other believers singing crazy loud praise music, thrilling to the words of an old hymn, or lost in quiet worship songs and it's so much easier to believe that God is actively involved in our lives. We don't have to deny today's feelings. We just need to make them bow to Truth. Jesus was born, not to bring joy to our church services but to bring joy to our world, our workaday full to the brim.

ACTION: Let's make actual physical room for Jesus at our tables, and in our cars, and everywhere we go today, as a way to remind ourselves that He is Immanuel, God with Us.

SHAREABLE: Jesus asks us to take our faith in "God out there" and find peace in knowing the "God right here."

Dec. 9th

SCRIPTURE: But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). Eph. 2:4-5

THOUGHT: Are you thinking today is just another busy day in December? It's not. We're looking at so much more than just another day. If we look, we'll see Jesus today. If we listen, we'll hear Him. As presumptuous as this may sound, I think I might know what you're thinking. Perhaps you believe you don't really "hear" God, that you've never heard Him. I'm thrilled to say that is absolutely not true. None of us initiates relationship with God. He loves first, every time, and always. That tug you felt to cherish Him this advent by participating in this invitation, it wasn't born in your human heart. God called you then and He's calling you on now.

ACTION: Jot down a few sentences about what you were thinking and feeling the day you decided to do this devotional. Thank the Lord for calling you to walk closer to Him.

SHAREABLE: If you've ever felt a desire to know God, you've felt Him move. If you're hungry to know God, you've heard Him call.

Dec. 10th

SCRIPTURE: My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart for they are life to those who find them and health to all their body. Proverbs 4:22-23

THOUGHT: By now, I feel sure you've detected a pattern in these short devotionals but just in case I'm less transparent than I think I am, I'll spell it out. Our daily focus revolves around the Bible. Why? Because we won't keep our eyes on Jesus during the material madness that Christmas has become without keeping His words purposefully clutched to our chests. "But" you might say, "the passage is so brief." This is true, but remember, it's not about how much of the Word we get through, it's about how much of the Word gets through to us. Our goal is to take a nourishing bite each morning and chew on it all day.

ACTION: Today, let's allow every over-hyped commercial and inflated advertisement remind us to thank God for the very real life and health that comes to those who hold onto His Word.

SHAREABLE: Every choice we make to take hold of Scripture provides another opportunity for Scripture to take hold of us.

Dec. 11th

SCRIPTURE: To whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:27 (NASB)

THOUGHT: It's cranked up now, isn't it? Christmas, Christmas everywhere! Everywhere we turn someone is hawking that something special and they're all doing their best to convince us that we need it in the worst way. And if we don't need it, our kids or grandkids need it because this is "the most wonderful time of the year" and who wants to miss the magical moment of the big reveal? If only the big reveal was more than an empty promise, right? Oh, but it is! Christ in us, living through us, these are the miraculous moments we most need to see. With God's help we can ignore the empty promises and share the real One.

ACTION: Through our words and in actions, let's be Jesus to the flesh and blood people around us today.

SHAREABLE: We pine for miracles when God made a way for us to become a miracle through Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Dec. 12th

SCRIPTURE: ...for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Hebrews 11:6b

THOUGHT: Are some of the "actions" in these Advent devotionals harder for you to complete than others? Well, they are for me— and I wrote them! What's more, I knew which ones would be more challenging when I was composing them, but friends, our goal here is worthy. It's why I asked the Lord over and over to help me resist the tendency to do the minimum requirement. We're after nothing less than the reward of living in His Presence. Join me in asking Him to alert us if or when we start going through the motions.

ACTION: After scanning the previous actions, let's write down a prayer about the one we've found the most difficult so far, and listen for the Lord's counsel concerning it.

SHAREABLE: Aiming for the minimum requirement handicaps anyone who wants to experience an authentic, abundant life in Christ

Dec 13th

SCRIPTURE: If you seek Him, He will be found by you. I Chronicles 28:9 (NKJV)

THOUGHT: I realize women are said to be born to shop. I'm pretty much missing that gene. The only consistent exception for me is bookstores. My family will no longer accompany me to a bookstore, for fear they'll die of starvation. (Drama kings and queens, that's what they are.) That said, I've learned to avoid the aimless wandering by deciding what I need to buy for whom before I leave the house. In much the same way, I'm convinced we'll find more of Jesus in our lives this Advent by determining to look for Him than we ever will by letting Christmas steamroll us. Let's be intentional!

ACTION: Take a picture today of a moment when you see Jesus. (Example: I might would take a picture of my dog Hank because he speaks to me of God's unconditional love.)

SHAREABLE: Something amazing happens when we become intentional and determined about looking for God.

Dec 14th

SCRIPTURE: For I long to see you that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. Romans 1:11-12

THOUGHT: Those words come from the great Apostle Paul. It'd be hard to attend church very long without hearing about Paul, and for good reason. His life exuded a contagious passion for Jesus. Indeed, there's plenty about Paul's life that's worth emulating, but for me, the way he treated other believers belongs high on the list. Paul appreciated those who shared His faith in Jesus. He greatly valued those who he referred to as "laboring with him in the gospel." We should, too! Talk to other Christians. Share the journey. Email me! Your experiences with God urge me to keep seeking Him.

ACTION: Schedule a lunch or coffee break with another believer this week and keep it.

SHAREABLE: We are each other's opportunity to trace His hands & feet in this world. Let's draw together and see more of His glory.

Dec.15th

SCRIPTURE: Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live. Isaiah 55:2-3

THOUGHT: It doesn't matter how I've adorned my house for Christmas. Store displays can still make me want to gussy it up a little bit more! Gussy is an old word. The matriarchs in my southern family have always used it to describe someone or something that's all decked out and then some. I see God's fingerprints all over this perpetual longing for more that's common to man and what we do with it can bring life or death. Incessantly reaching for more of what this world offers leads to death. But when we refuse to settle for our status quo religion we find Life Himself. Jesus is the more we're reaching for.

ACTION: Let's resist the pull to wrap the prettiest gifts ever, do our wallets a favor, and keep the emphasis on Jesus by buying yards of cheesecloth and string at the craft store and "swaddling" them.

SHAREABLE: Our restless hearts won't stop longing precisely because there really is more and God wired our hearts to pursue it.

Dec 16th

SCRIPTURE: My mouth is filled with Your praise and with your glory all day long. Ps. 71:8

THOUGHT: Wow. Christmas is less than two weeks away and you're still here. Thank you. I adore you for walking with me through this Advent, looking to keep Jesus at the center of our celebrations. How much more must it please our Father for His love eclipses mine. You can trace the desire of our Creator to do life with us all through the Holy Scriptures. Friend, our schedules may be getting tighter as Christmas nears, and perhaps it's becoming harder to squeeze this devo in, but if Jesus is occupying more of our thoughts, we are winning, big time. Remember, we're not trying to find time in our day for God, we're trying to find God throughout our day!

ACTION: Today, let's try and be aware of how long we go without a thought of God, and close the distance the next time, and the next.

SHAREABLE: Yes! Let's keep setting aside time in our day to seek God, but let's not check it off like one more appt. in the day planner.

Dec 17th

SCRIPTURE: My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you... Galatians 4:19

THOUGHT: As we spend this time watching and waiting for Jesus, I imagine us looking something like Mary, growing in expectation as she watched her body grow with child. This Jesus-seeking, God-honoring Advent we're looking to live is such a worthy and holy mission, as was Mary's. And just as she needs more nutrients as sweet baby Jesus is formed in her and not less, we need the ongoing nourishment of His Word. Just as she needs more rest and not more work, we need to rest in the finished work of Jesus and take no pleasure in our own efforts to pursue Him.

ACTION: As we sip a favorite beverage, and nibble a snack or meal, let's imagine being filled with the Holy Spirit of God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Plan to repeat the exercise whenever we feel depleted.

SHAREABLE: Trying to live for Jesus without living with Jesus is exhausting. Drink from the well.

Dec 18th

SCRIPTURE: 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. Isaiah 26:3

THOUGHT: The beautiful graces of our Jesus are ours for the taking today. Everything He is, He is for us, He is in us. Only, we can't stock Him—no matter how hard we try. We are vessels that are either full or empty. We can't store His peace in us, but we can draw on the Prince of Peace who is ever present. Let's remember this when we hear the countdown today, and we'll surely hear it. From a thousand directions we'll hear the Christmas countdown. Just know that with that "shopping days 'til Christmas" number comes a choice, to feel the pressure or swap it at the throne for today's fresh supply of peace.

ACTION: Every time we heard the Christmas Countdown today, let it be a prompt encouraging us to run to the throne to refuel on the love and peace of Jesus!

SHAREABLE: Don't let yourself be at the mercy of men when you have access to God.

Dec. 19th

SCRIPTURE: Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. Psalm 119:18 (NIV)

THOUGHT: There are plenty things I love about working from home, the dress code being one of them. Casual Friday looks much like Casual Monday around this office so I'm certainly not here to "dog" the practice of dressing down. (Hanky Panky, my spoiled canine and sole employee, was practically begging for that mention.) Still, when the unspoken theme seems to be "not much is expected today" I'm thinking that's probably the unintended consequence. We do tend to live up or down to expectations. It's why I remind us, as Christmas draws ever nearer, to guard against casual celebrations of Who He is and what He wants to do in and through us. Come, Lord Jesus.

ACTION: Today let's expect God to speak to us through nature, through His word, or through other people and refuse to acknowledge coincidence over Immanuel, God with Us.

SHAREABLE: Asking God to show you the wonders in His Word and in His world acknowledges that treasure lies beyond the casual observer's eyes, and you want it!

Dec. 20th

SCRIPTURE: And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls. I Peter 1:8-9

THOUGHT: I plan to be through Christmas shopping when you read this. I really do. But, if I am still shopping, I hope I'm being intentional about it. Why would I say that? Because I know me. I know the closer it gets to Christmas the more prone I'll be to buying ill-advised purchases and this Advent will be like so many others, more about having to buy presents and less about getting to experience Jesus. That's the Christmas that leaves me exhausted and empty. It's also a principle that holds throughout our Christian experience. Following Jesus because we think we have to is ill-advised and life draining. This Jesus life is a get-to!

ACTION: Let's be conscious today of the times we say "I have to" about anything to do with Christmas and purposefully change our language to reflect the privilege we have to experience this Advent season.

SHAREABLE: To know the overflowing life of the indwelling Christ, we must understand that what He asks of us is a get-to, not a have-to!

Dec. 21st

SCRIPTURE: Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23 (NKJV)

THOUGHT: If your shopping list is anything like mine you have people on it who do not need a single thing. Oh, sure, some may think they'll die a slow death without this toy of that latest gadget, but they just have their needs confused with their wants. But then, we're all susceptible to that condition, aren't we? Take our "need" for approval. There's one that complicates our Christmases! It's nice when our party efforts are acknowledged and our gifts are appreciated, but it's not the approval of man we need this Christmas. The Advent we're longing for is built by acknowledging God is this moment, and the next, and the one after that.

ACTION: Today, let's think of someone we suspect might be having a hard Christmas season and leave them an anonymous gift with a note that we are praying for them.

SHAREABLE: The misguided quest of every human heart is the need to be acknowledged, but the fullest life is found in acknowledging God.

Dec. 22nd

SCRIPTURE: If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. Galatians 5:15 (NIV)

THOUGHT: Just when you thought we weren't going there, it's time for Family Feud! Or, rather, it's not time. We can't talk about living with our hearts open to Jesus this Christmas without touching on what can potentially be the touchiest of Christmas traditions—immediate and extended family get-togethers. Regardless of how well we deal with the outside pressures of Christmas, we'll never realize our goal of honoring Jesus this Advent if we allow the sore spots in our family relationships to fester. Thankfully, our aim is also our antidote! The more we celebrate the unmerited grace we've been given, the more easily we'll be able to extend it to others.

ACTION: Let's practice proactive forgiveness ahead of potentially touchy get-togethers by dwelling on how quickly we want to be forgiven when we're at fault and asking God to help us be just as quick to forgive.

SHAREABLE: Every word or act we can't forgive is a word or act we are bound to relive.

Dec. 23rd

SCRIPTURE: ...But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. I John 1:7 (NASB)

THOUGHT: After our family talk yesterday, I thought one last reminder of how the enemy likes to use our very desire to do what is right to create distance between us and Jesus would be timely. Let's say we've already had that family get-together and it was less than pleasant. If so, let's be super quick to confess our part in the whole mess and leave it at the throne of grace. Beware the spiritual quicksand of relying on Christ for salvation and using our evaluation of ourselves as possible merits or demerits preventing or allowing us access to His friendship. Such evaluations frustrate His grace and deny us the sweet balm of Immanuel, God with us.

ACTION: Every time we wash our hands today, let's praise Jesus who ever lives to cleanse us from sin and present us blameless in the company of His Father and ours.

SHAREABLE: Legalism's strength lies in luring us to spend time and energy evaluating me, myself, and I rather than leaning into God's grace.

Dec. 24th

SCRIPTURE: And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

THOUGHT: Christmas Eve. It's finally here. I don't know if you'll be reading these words early in the morning before the house erupts, or late at night after those last minute gift-wraps and kitchen details, but the fact that you've even taken the time for this devotional sobers me. I stagger before the goal of wrapping fresh words around the eternal truth of Jesus' birth. God, born as a baby, destined to die that we might live, our Refuge in this world and our Hope for the next. We might exist. We might breathe in and out, but we can never truly live without feeding on this eternal truth.

ACTION: Find a nativity set. With the baby in our hands, and our knees to the floor, let's ask God to keep stirring the good gift that is in us and never let us settle for what we know of Him.

SHAREABLE: If anything short of realizing God's intimate presence for ourselves is enough, that's all we'll ever experience.

Dec. 25th

SCRIPTURE: But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” Luke 2:9-14

THOUGHT: Merry Christmas! Thank you so much for sharing the miracle of Advent with me. Before we say goodbye, I want to remind us both that the true miracle of Christmas has just begun. We need not be one bit brave to cede ground to the familiar, to settle back into an indistinguishable Christian life, but we’ll need courage to relax our hold on everything familiar and ask Him to keep showing up in our lives without setting conditions for what that will look like. We can do it. He is worthy. Let’s seek Him together, forever. This God Man isn’t meant to be a part of our lives, He is our life.

ACTION: Let’s take the seed from a piece of fruit and set it where we’ll see it again. May it remind us each time that our birth in Christ is just that, a birth, a seed, a divine starting place without a finish line.

SHAREABLE: God has allotted to each a measure of faith. The question isn’t “What’s wrong with my measure?” but “What will I do with my measure?!”