

THE wonder OF Christmas

THE 2023 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



BUCKNER®

Hope shines here.®

Wonders OF His Love

There's something special about seeing a child light up in anticipation of Christmas. They often spend weeks leading up to it imagining what they might receive and making special crafts for their loved ones. Children bring a unique wonder to the Christmas season – but what if we as adults stopped to soak up this time in the same way?

As we grow older, we tend to get less excited and less joyful than when we were younger.

As we approach the birth of Christ this year, what if we looked toward Christmas with the anticipation,

excitement and pure joy that children do? We are recipients of the greatest gift and miracle: Jesus.

Throughout the Bible, we're reminded of the power of having child-like faith. What if you saw Christmas through the eyes of the young child you once were? Or through the eyes of the children around you?

This Christmas, find joy in the little things like baking Christmas cookies or the wonder of beautiful Christmas lights around the neighborhood. But most of all, remember the wonder you had for Christ when you first experienced his love for you.



Let us approach
the Advent season
with a

*Childlike
wonder.*

WEEK ONE

THE *Thrill*
Hope OF



DECEMBER 3

The hope in Jesus' birth

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." – Jeremiah 29:11 (ESV)

During this Advent season, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior. The first candle we light on the Advent wreath symbolizes the hope we find in Christ. Hope is a divine gift that guides us through the seasons of life.

The Scriptures remind us in Jeremiah of the plans God desires and has for our lives.

In the midst of a world filled with uncertainty and challenges, the birth of Jesus reminds us that God has always had a plan of hope for us. He knows our thoughts, our concerns and our deepest longings. In this verse, God assures us that his thoughts are of peace, and his desire is to give us a future filled with hope.

My prayer is that, in this season of Advent, we thank God for the hope we find in his word. In a world that often seems dark, let us trust that God has a plan of peace and hope for our lives. I pray God will help us keep our eyes on him, knowing he is the source of our hope.

I challenge you to take a moment today to meditate on the promises of hope God has written in his word. Consider how you can share that hope with those around you, illuminating their lives in these dark and challenging times.

Remember the hope we find in Christ transcends circumstances and guides us toward a future filled with peace and purpose. May this Advent season fill you with hope and joy as we await the birth of the Savior. **The hope is in Jesus' birth!**

Sergio Ramos is the church engagement denominations & institutions leader for Buckner International.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: *Being with my family reflecting on the significance of this event, participating*

in traditions that highlight who we are in Christ and remembering how much God loves us.

“My prayer is that, in this season of Advent, we thank God for the hope we find in his word. In a world that often seems dark, let us trust that God has a plan of peace and hope for our lives. I pray God will help us keep our eyes on him, knowing he is the source of our hope.”

A needed interruption

"He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us." – 2 Corinthians 1:4 (NLT)

It had been a long and beautiful day, and we had no real reason to argue. Yet, as my mom and I headed home after attending a loved one's wedding, we found ourselves in a heated debate. We were discussing something we probably actually agreed on, but due to fatigue and poor communication, there we were, each of us trying to have the last word. As we entered my neighborhood, our staccato words were interrupted by what sounded like someone sobbing.

We looked over to see a young man sitting on the sidewalk, crying out loud in the darkness. Without a second thought I pulled the car over and jumped out. My mother began to pray.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I approached. He was cradling his head in his arms, and without looking up, he said, "Nothing. I'm ... I'm alright."

"Please, can I do something for you?" Again, he resisted. "No. I'm OK."

"At least let me pray for you ... please," I begged. He finally acquiesced with a quick nod. I prayed for him, and he quietly listened. Then I touched his arm and walked away. I never saw his face, and I still don't know who he was or why he was crying.

The discussion I had been having with my mom faded

away into the night, suddenly irrelevant, as we thought about the young man and his despair, his aloneness, his hopelessness.

Perhaps the next day was different for him. Perhaps he realized God saw him and truly cared for him because he'd sent strangers to pray for him. Perhaps that comforting thought brought him some hope.

God needs us to spread comfort and encouragement that brings hope to others. Too often I'm caught up in my own little world, too busy to notice, too selfish to act. This Advent season, may we open our eyes to see the wondrous hope-filled assignments God has destined for us.

Tabi Upton is co-host of the daily radio show, "Mornings with Tom and Tabi" on 88.9 Moody Radio Chattanooga.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season:
The refreshingly fun activities to be experienced, sweet treats and the joy in the air.



DECEMBER 5

Believe 📌 Joy & Peace 📌 Hope

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." – Romans 15:13 (NKJV)

The Apostle Paul ends his prayer asking for Christians in Rome, who were being persecuted because of their faith in Jesus, to be filled with joy and peace. But for this to happen, they had to believe. While it is God who provides joy and peace, it is our confidence and trust in him that enables God to bless us as he does. Then, the joy and peace he gives results in an overflow of hope in our life. Our job is to continue to trust him. Everything else is in his hands and he never fails.

As you go through life's difficulties today, I pray like Paul, that you believe God. There is a difference between faith and hope. Hope is a feeling. Faith is an action. **Hebrews 11:1** says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

Faith leads me to do something, to take action. And that action consists of obeying the last thing God told me to do. So ask yourself, "What is that?" Once you determine what that is, do it; and do it knowing what you hope for will come and that what you can't see is real. When we obey, the Lord keeps his promises and fills us with joy and peace.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for how you speak to me. Don't let me forget that because you love me, your will is always the best for me. As you lead me on what step to take next, help me trust you and do what you ask me to do, regardless of what that is.

When I do, please fill me with your endless joy and peace, so I may hope again.

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Dr. Gabriel Cortés serves as chief of staff at Baptist University of the Americas in San Antonio, Texas. His wife, oldest son and daughter-in-law are public school teachers and his youngest son is a videographer. They are originally from Puerto Rico, where many feel like the Christmas season never ends.

The worst day of the year

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” – Luke 2:14 (NIV)

The best day of the year – Christmas Day! Weeks of staring at the Christmas tree. Brightly wrapped packages begin to appear with name tags! “Kenneth, David, Michael and, the best – Rickey!”

Shake them, heft them – guessing what it is over and over again! I must say that the imagination gets a great workout. One year, there were two big boxes under the tree. My brothers and I decided that it was a go-kart in one box and the motor in the heavy box. We could only hope!

My mother was smart – lots of Christmas snooping experience so these boxes were double wrapped! Finally, Christmas Day arrived and our parents saved those two big boxes for last. We couldn’t wait – here it comes, zipping through the neighborhood, kids looking on in awe as I drive by ... Finally, we get to open the boxes ...

Encyclopedias and a bookshelf. Yep, Collier’s Encyclopedias. Hopes dashed.

We got a lot of miles out of those books. But it wasn’t a go-kart. The worst day of the year, by the way – Christmas Day afternoon. All the presents are opened and, well, if that is all it is then that was all there is. Then I received the greatest gift of all.

God’s favor rested on me and now what is the best day of the year? The day I was saved in July 1963. Since then, Christmas gifts are nice but the Incarnation – that tops them all. (Even better than a go-kart!) Hope made real.

Rick Webb is the chaplain at Buckner Westminster Place in Longview, Texas.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: *The gift of God as a human baby! My second favorite is seeing all the Christmas lights through the neighborhoods.*



DECEMBER 7

There's hope in a name

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means 'God with us') – Matthew 1:23 (NIV)

Knowing who you are brings hope, joy, peace and love. The Bible talks about several levels of identity. We were powerless, ungodly, God's enemy and sinful (Rom. 5:6-8, 10). Jesus spoke of our identity as servants before he upgraded us to friends (John 15:15). Paul expounded on our identity as being adopted sons/daughters and heirs (Rom. 8:14-17).

But Jesus had several special names: Immanuel, Messiah (Christ), Prince of Peace, Alpha and Omega (to name a few). We celebrate his coming, and each name reveals part of his true identity. Do you have a special name that belongs just to you, a name that existed before the foundation of the world? Think of all the biblical characters who got a new name while they were living! There is a "you" you do not even know yet as you are conformed to the image of Jesus (Rev. 2:17)!

How do you know who you are? God must reveal that to you. You don't brand yourself or make yourself who you want to be. You listen for the name. You're particularly good at listening to negative names. Most of us have heard names through painful experiences: loser, failure, insufficient, alone, powerless. Those are common names the enemy wants us to buy into. He steals, kills and destroys.

Take those ugly names to your loving Father and confess your thoughts to him. Be real and specific. Then ask simply, "What do

you say? Tell me the truth."

Now listen to what he says in your spirit. Ask him what name he will give you! Part of redemption (Immanuel, God with Us) is giving us a new identity that is part of the identity of Jesus. Listen and receive your name!

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How do you know who you are? Most of us have heard names through painful experiences: loser, failure, insufficient, alone, powerless. Those are common names the enemy wants us to buy into. Take those ugly names to your loving Father and confess your thoughts to him. Be real and specific. Then ask simply, "What do you say? Tell me the truth."

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Doug Riggs is the executive pastor of Open Door Church in Burleson, Texas.

There's hope in God's presence

"Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine." – Psalm 33:18-19 (ESV)



Bringing a baby home for the very first time is made up of more parts than a 60,000-piece puzzle (notably the world's largest puzzle size). There's equal parts fear, excitement, cluelessness and absolutely unending pure love – plus plenty of other emotions that sometimes you can't even name.

For me, I've always dreamed of becoming a mom. I truly believe that calling was placed in my heart from the Lord. But during the bleary-eyed midnight (and 2 a.m. and 5 a.m.) feedings, it was hard to remember that truth.

I look back on that newborn season and remember the nights half-asleep in a rocking chair asking God, "When will this

get easier? When will the hard end and the good begin?"

And sometimes, in the quiet, I'd hear a whisper that God was with me and that's all I needed to settle back in for the second half of the night.

His eyes are always on us – even when we're in the midst of challenges unlike ever before. Because of his presence and his relationship with us, we can have hope.

Can you imagine Mary when Jesus was born and first laid on her chest? I'm sure she questioned if she was the right mother for the Son of God. But maybe like me, she heard a soft, reassuring whisper, "I'm with you."

This Christmas, I'm so thankful for the gift of motherhood that Jesus has given me. But more so, I am reminded that while I'm not a perfect mother – the perfect Son was born and died to give me and you the gift of salvation – and a hope that won't disappoint.

Emily Ahrens is the director of marketing communications for Buckner International.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: Enjoying holiday movies, baking Christmas treats and looking at Christmas lights around town, and attending the Christmas Eve service.

DECEMBER 9

The thrill of hope

“... for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” – Luke 2:30-32 (ESV)

I have a confession to make. I love Christmas. And in the polarizing debate of when it's too early to start listening to Christmas music, I'm team “as early as possible.” In our household we often pull out the Christmas records and start decorating before we have even packed away our Halloween costumes. After a year of anticipation, we can let our guard down and embrace the hope of the season.

Within the canon of Christmas songs, “O Holy Night” is my favorite. It connects me to that historical truth that the HOPE of all mankind was here in the form of a child. I've always been fixated on the line, “A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices.”

In this context, a thrill represents a sensation – even a physical response – to an emotion. Most of us understand that on a personal level. But consider a thrill of hope for the whole world – all in a single moment?

It reminds me of another song we find in the New Testament. The book of Luke recounts that shortly after Christ's birth when he is presented in the temple, Simeon sings a canticle also known as the *Nunc Dimmitis*: “for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

These words beautifully capture the moment when Simeon held within his very hands the long-awaited hope of mankind. Can you

imagine what a thrill he must have experienced in that moment? May it be the same with us. I pray in this season we all let our guard down to embrace the long-awaited hope we have in Christ.

Shawn Spurrier is the director of Buckner Shoes for Orphan Souls®.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: *Playing Christmas music and decorating “way too early” with my wife and 8-year-old daughter.*



*Embrace
the hope of the
season*



WEEK ONE

ADVENT ROULETTE

The Advent season is a great time to find a few moments with your family to enjoy some quality time and make memories together. It's not always easy to come up with new fun things to do together, so we thought a list of ideas might help! Cut out the following ideas (or just the ones you think would be fun for

your family), place them in a bowl (or hat, jar, etc.) and take turns throughout the month picking one to do.

Do you have fun ideas we didn't include? Send them to bucknercommunications@buckner.org to be shared next year.



Make some hot chocolate for the whole family and enjoy a fire outside (or on the TV) and read Christmas stories.

Attend (or create your own) Christmas Eve service featuring candlelight and the story of Jesus' birth.

Find ways to enjoy Christmas with the whole family - maybe a special dinner where everyone comes over or even a group Zoom or FaceTime.

Make a countdown chain to count down the days to Christmas.

Bake and decorate Christmas cookies together.

Make hot chocolate with all the fun fixings and put on your favorite Christmas movie.

E. ACTIVITY

Scan the code below with your smart phone to download the activity or download it at buckner.org/adventroulette.



WEEK TWO

Peace
THAT PASSES ALL
Understanding

DECEMBER 10

Peace defined by God

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” – John 14:27 (NIV)

We all want to live in peace. In our Western context, peace means avoiding troubles or even the absence of conflict.

We all want to live in peace, but this peace is temporary and based on the circumstances around us. As we have learned in recent years, no one has control over what happens in the world, and our lives can change from one moment to the next without us being able to do anything about it.

The good news is that God defines peace in a totally different way. The biblical concept of peace (shalom) refers to the fullness of life. Not just the avoidance of conflict but the full enjoyment of the life God gives us. This peace or flourishing does not depend on our circumstances but comes from God, who sustains and gives meaning to our lives. God wants us to live in peace, in the Shalom that only comes from him.

For this reason, even today, when Jews greet each other, they wish “shalom” to each other instead of a simple and temporary “good morning.”

However, our peace or shalom is imperfect and has been affected by sin. For this reason, Jesus, the promised Messiah, is the

“Prince of Peace,” as Isaiah 9:6 so aptly declares. Christmas reminds us that true peace has come to stay permanently with all of us. Jesus promised to give us his peace, different from what the world offers (John 14:27). Only in the peace of Jesus do we find the true fullness of life.

When our daughter was born, my wife and I named her Salma. Salma means “peace” and has the same etymological root as “Shalom” in Hebrew or “Salam” in Arabic. She reminds us of the true peace in Jesus, and we hope that she, like all of us, will be an instrument of peace to all around her.

Octavio Javier Esqueda is a full professor of Christian higher education and director of the PhD and EdD programs in educational studies at the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in Southern California. He is an academic leader and practical theologian with worldwide experience and is an avid soccer fan.

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DECEMBER 11

A relationship with God brings peace

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." – Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)

As the angels came to welcome the Savior of the world, they said God would receive the glory and peace was available to those in whom God's favor rests. Does this mean God is selective to who he offers peace to? Remember who the angels are talking to. Their audience is a group of shepherds. Jesus was born in a barn in a feeding trough. There isn't one person who doesn't have access to God's peace.

Why would God offer us peace? We were natural enemies of God. Though we deserve death, he offers us grace and mercy when we don't deserve it.

Acceptance of this free gift is what brings us peace. Peace is not just found at salvation, but it's found as we become aware of who God is. It comes when we don't focus on the circumstances of life that could weigh us down. When we set our eyes on Jesus instead of the world, we can have peace. Knowing he is our provider, protector, deliverer and so much more can bring us peace.

You likely have already read Psalm 23 at some point. But today, take some time to focus on the environments David finds himself in. They will fluctuate from good to bad in this chapter. However, recognize what doesn't change: God's presence.

Aaron Smith is a teen program coordinator for Buckner Children and Family Services in Houston, Texas.



Peace? Sure, no problem. Then life happens.

“Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth ...” – Luke 2:14 (NLT)

The assignment: a 300-word devotional on peace for the Buckner Advent Guide.

No sweat. I write a 1,000-word editorial every week.

And then, life happened. And it wasn't peaceful. The work and the worries and the weeds preoccupied the moments and days. My mind's so full of everything needing to be done that it's hard to find a mental moment of peace.

Perhaps you set out at the beginning of Advent to read each day's devotion, not missing a single day. No sweat. How hard could it be?

And then, life happened. Peaceful doesn't quite describe it. You're meeting yourself coming and going, and when you're not busy trying to keep all the plates spinning, you're fitfully sleeping. Somehow, you've managed a spare moment to read this page.

The assignment: Give birth to a child. Oh, and the child will not have a human father, and yes, we know your community does not stand for that sort of thing.

No sweat? Hardly.

I'm not one who prays to Mary, but I would like to ask her, “How'd you do it?”

“How'd I follow through with the pregnancy and all of that?”

“No. Well, yeah, I guess that, too. But no, I mean, how did you tell the angel: ‘I am the Lord's servant; may it be done to me according to your word?’ How'd you do that?”



Whatever her answer would be, I am certain it would sound like peace.

How do I know? Because peace and its Prince are all I know that can carry a person through such troubled waters.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He previously served as a professor, pastor and collegiate missionary.

DECEMBER 13

Peace in the storm

“Then Peter called to him, ‘Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water.’” – Matthew 14:28 (NLT)

Though not for certain, the following quote is sometimes attributed to C. S. Lewis:

**Life with God is not immunity from difficulties,
but peace in difficulties.**

Regardless of the author of this quote, it certainly has meaning. This quote reminds me of Jesus’ words in John 16, “I have spoken to you that you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Whatever we face today, whatever struggle, whatever difficulty, whatever loss, whatever uncertainty, Jesus is there to bring peace. Perhaps we need to understand the definition of peace. Sometimes we want to think peace is the absence of difficulty. A more biblical definition is that peace is the presence of Christ in the midst of whatever struggle we face.

The Gospel of Matthew (chapter 14) tells the story of Jesus coming to the aid of the disciples who were struggling with their boat in a ferocious storm. As Jesus walks on the water to them, Peter jumps out of the boat to go to Jesus. While Peter focused on Jesus, he too walks on the water. When Peter focused on the sound of the thunder, the size of the waves, the pelting of the rain, and the howling of the wind, he began to sink.

The lesson is the same for us. When we focus on Jesus, the storm becomes small. I have come to understand that Jesus does not

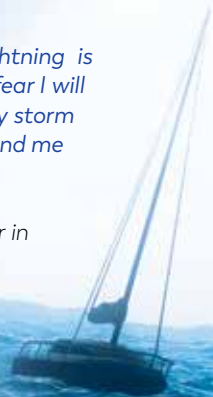
always take my storms away, but he does promise to be present with me in whatever I face. And isn’t the message of Advent that God is Emmanuel, God with us?

I don’t know what storms you may face today, but I pray you feel Jesus’ presence with you in the midst of that storm. After all, Jesus says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you!” (Hebrews 13:5b). Let’s trust him today.

Dear God,

Today, the thunder booms loudly. The lightning is scary. The rain comes in torrents. Sometimes I fear I will drown. Help me trust in you. Bring calm to my storm and bless me with your calming presence. Remind me that you are “God with us.” AMEN.

David Mann is chaplain for Ventana by Buckner in Dallas, Texas.



DECEMBER 14

Peace without escape

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

Have you ever wanted to yell out, "Get me out of here!" when you found yourself in an embarrassing situation, frustrating experience or a painful time in life? Have you ever felt a quick escape would be the best answer to your pain or problem?

Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17:13-15 leaves out a plea of, "Father, get them out of here!" and closes the lid on escape hatch rescues.

In fact, Jesus promised that "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Jesus could have whisked the disciples out of the world and away from trouble. Instead, Jesus asks of the Father, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world" (John 17:13a).

In the midst of a troubled world, his promise is, "But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Jesus wanted the disciples – and you – to hear his prayer and know that a full measure of peace would be available even when an escape from the world is not.

How can we have peace without escape?

Escaping trouble is not the only means to experience God's intervention on our behalf. God extends his protection to us in the midst of trouble.

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God's truth protects us from deception. His strength protects us from weakness. His peace protects us from anxiety. His grace from self-destruction. His presence from loneliness. Even sin and death succumb to his protection: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55, NIV)

Do you think you would feel better if you could just get away from all of this? Instead of looking for life's ejection seat lever, join Jesus in his prayer. Ask God for his peace today.

**Lord, in the midst of my trouble,
help me to experience you and the full
measure of your peace.**

Jesse Rincones is executive director of the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas.

DECEMBER 15

What peace?

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace” – Isaiah 9:6 (ESV)

For someone named the Prince of Peace, Jesus sure did cause a lot of conflict. You may have experienced this in your own life and wondered if Jesus is the Prince of Peace, why do we face trials or strife? This can especially be true during the season we celebrate the Prince of Peace but often feel more stressed than any other time of the year. So how can we experience peace?

We have to remember Jesus promised us peace, but not the easy way. In John 16:33, Jesus tells us we will have trouble in this world. Yet, we can feel peace because he has overcome the world. We can rest knowing no matter what we face, Jesus has overcome it and with him, we can as well.

Next, we need to regularly take an inventory of our lives, relationships and spiritual well-being. Sometimes when we're not experiencing peace, it's not because of the world around us or that God is testing us, but it's because we have our priorities out of whack and have allowed sin to take control. To experience peace, we have to seek God with all our hearts and live in the Spirit as we follow Jesus.

Finally, we must remember that experiencing peace is an active process. Jesus had hard conversations with the religious leaders and his disciples. He had to pray, fast and face temptation. He had to

face the cross and overcome the grave. If we want to experience the blessings of peace and allow others around us to as well, we need to be actively involved in the process. We don't experience or bring peace by hiding in our bubbles and avoiding the darkness and pain of the world. Instead, we experience peace by actively engaging in that darkness and pain and being the hands and feet of Jesus.

In this season where we celebrate the Prince of Peace, I encourage you to slow down and take a moment to reflect on whether you feel like you're experiencing the peace of Jesus and consider whom around you haven't yet experienced that peace. Refocus your life on being the hands and feet of Jesus and bringing peace to a hurting world around you.



Buck Baskin is the technology director for Sunnyvale ISD. He has been a foster and adoptive parent with his wife Stephanie for 12 years. They have one biological child, Selah (8), and two adopted children, James and Niki who are 11.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: Christmas movies.

Hide and seek

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" – Psalm 139:7 (NIV)

Hide-and-seek might just be the most famous, longest lasting game that spans generations and is still relevant to children today. I have no doubts that you played this game as a child. I can also confirm the students in my church's youth ministry continue this game's legacy. What is it about this simple game that's so captivating and timeless?

You start with a bunch of friends and a big space, maybe a neighborhood, an empty church, the whole house – anywhere with space and a bunch of nooks and crannies. You select one seeker from the group. Ready, set, go! Everyone scatters to silently select "the best" hiding spot to conceal themselves from the rest of the group, especially the seeker. The seeker closes their eyes, then starts the count down. Upon reaching zero, what do you shout? "READY OR NOT, HERE I COME!!!" Game on.

Think back to your best hiding spot – the one where you were the last to be found. The one where the seeker had to walk around shouting, "I give up! Come out! You win." Close your eyes and go back there. Remember the surroundings. What did you hide behind?

There is something awesome about sitting there, knowing you

are unfindable. It feels safe, doesn't it?

While that might be nice in a kid's game, we are not meant to be unfindable. God has designed us with a desire, a need to be known and seen – known by family, by friends, known by our co-workers – known by God. The whole story of God and humanity is him seeking and finding us, especially when we don't want to be found.

He seeks us not to win a game or expose our terrible hiding spots and weaknesses. He seeks us because he knows that a relationship with him is the

ultimate safe spot. You can't escape his Spirit. He knows where you are, he knows where you are going. I pray you will recognize God's presence right now and experience the peace that knowing him provides – a peace beyond all comprehension (Philippians 4:7).

Chris Cato is the director of missions at Buckner International, connecting churches and volunteers with meaningful service opportunities around the world. He and his wife Jamie love traveling to the mountains with their family on countless outdoor adventures which may include a game of hide-and-seek with their young kids.

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God has designed us with a desire, a
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co-workers – known by God.
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WEEK TWO



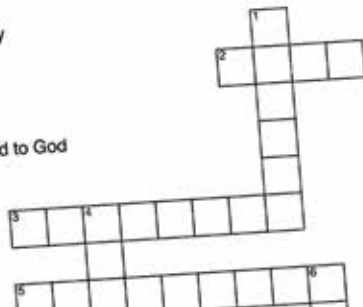
BUCKNER®

Hope shines here.®

THE *wonder* OF *Christmas* CROSSWORD PUZZLE

ACROSS

- 2 feeling of expectation and desire
- 3 picture or model representing Jesus' birth
- 5 How Joseph, Jesus' father, provided for his family
- 8 yellow precious metal
- 10 angel sent by God to Mary
- 12 tranquility
- 13 perfume
- 16 where Jesus was born
- 17 a word of gratitude or request for help addressed to God
- 18 makeshift crib for Jesus when he was born



ACTIVITY

Scan the code below with your smart phone to download the activity or download it at buckner.org/adventcrosswordpuzzle.



WEEK THREE

NO
Greater Love



DECEMBER 17

The love of God at Christmas

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”—John 3:16 (NIV)

As a child I experienced Christmas with great anticipation. I awaited the season of Christmas knowing I'd be off school for a few weeks, I imagined what my gifts might be, and I recall enjoying time with my family. The bonus for me was that my birthday landed exactly one week before Christmas. So, this time of the year was always extra special.

While my birthday was a day I looked forward to, the celebration of the birth of Jesus always carried meaning beyond me, outside of my life, and focused my thoughts toward God's love. The birth of Jesus came to explain God's love for me, my family, my friends, my community and my world.

The wonder of the birth of Jesus, sent into the world, orients our thoughts toward God's love. The sacrifice through his death on the cross demonstrates God's love for us. The power of the resurrection of Jesus at Easter reminds us of our hope for this life and the next. All these gifts are made possible because God broke into our world in a manger in Bethlehem in the form of a child, born of a virgin.

Everything about Christmas serves to orient our thoughts toward God's love. The Christmas decorations, the lights, the gifts, the wonderful food, treats and meals, and the gift of friends and family make Christmas a highlight of the year. May you enjoy all these gifts, special meals, decorations, family gatherings and time to rest and celebrate. I hope every hint of Christmas this year

reminds you of God's love for you and your family.

Albert Reyes is the sixth president & CEO of Buckner International in over 144 years. He is married to Dr. Belinda Reyes and they are parents of three adult sons.



DECEMBER 18

There is hope and healing in the love of Christ

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!" – Ephesians 2:4-5 (CSB)

Every Christmas, we're reminded of the birth of Jesus Christ. Each year I'm reminded of the incredibly precious experience of love that erupts in a parent's heart at the birth of a child. I remember well the moment our oldest daughter Grace was born. At that moment, no words were flowing from my mouth but a geyser of joy burst within my soul.

Oh, how this father loved his newborn baby girl!

How does one express this experience other than to call it love? Love is a simple word that can feel surface level but also plunge to the depths. We might use love to describe our affection for pizza, a song, a home, a friend or our family. Love is a simple word with deep meaning.

The Bible tells us God is love and he loved the world so much he was willing to send his one and only Son to express the depths of his love. This type of love plunges beneath our superficial use of love and challenges us to consider God's sacrificial love for us. God's love is the purest, richest and deepest expression of love that humanity could ever experience.

"But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." – Romans 5:8 (CSB)

God's love was fully displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At the birth of Christ, God's love was laid in a manger. Then God's love was laid on the cross. Sadly, God's love was laid in a tomb. Miraculously God's love was raised again! God's love on display is the hope the broken world desperately needs to experience.

Thankfully God was, and is, willing to lavish his love on us. This costly and deep love is where we find hope and healing in this broken world. This Christmas season I hope you have a lot of moments that you love. From food to gifts, to friends and family gatherings. Ultimately, I pray you

and your family will experience the depths of God's love and share it with those around you. Remember God deeply loves you!

Steven Gaither serves as the lead pastor of First Baptist Church in McAllen, Texas.

“
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DECEMBER 19

The witness of love

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” – John 13:35 (NIV)

Christmas is a season of joy and celebration, a time when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the ultimate embodiment of God's love for humanity. But as we exchange gifts and gather with loved ones, let's remember the essence of this season lies in the love we share with one another.

In John 13:35, Jesus provides a profound revelation about what it means to be his disciples. This verse reminds us that our love for each other is a powerful testimony of our faith in Christ.

The love Jesus speaks of is a way of life. It's a love that transcends differences, forgives and serves selflessly. Just as Jesus came into the world to demonstrate God's love, we are called to reflect his love in our interactions with others.

Christmas is a time when we have a unique opportunity to demonstrate this love. This love should shine so brightly through us that it becomes a beacon of hope for those around us.

When we love one another as Christ loved us, we become living testimonies of his grace. It's through our acts of love people see the transformative power of the Gospel in action.

This Christmas, let us embrace the call to love one another unconditionally. In a world filled with division and discord, may our love be a testimony that points people to the Prince of Peace. As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, let us also recommit ourselves to living as his disciples, known by our love for one another and

sharing the message of his love with the world.

Stephanie and her husband Buck are current foster parents with Buckner. They have been fostering for 12 years (and counting). They have three children, two who have been adopted, and have fostered several children in their tenure with Buckner.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: *A tradition that started with my parents, and it continues today: each child selects a new ornament each year. Once they chop down their tree, the family decorates together.*



DECEMBER 20

Perfect love for imperfect people

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." – Romans 5:8 (ESV)

The Bible says God loved us even while we were still sinners. While I am grateful for this kind of love, I did not understand it. It wasn't until I became a foster parent when I caught a glimpse of the unconditional love God has for us as imperfect people.

My first foster placement was two siblings. These innocent children craved attention; they needed love, and it was easy to give love to them. However, I can't say I instantly loved their mother. I had never met or spoke to her. I only knew the bullet point version for why the children were removed. I knew their mother on paper – not as a human with complex emotions and history.

The first time I spoke to her was during a conference call with CPS. I was nervous to join and hear the voice of the woman I only knew through the actions that resulted in the removal of her children. The call was emotional as they discussed her service plan and goals for reunification, and for the first time, I met my foster children's mother as a person.

I heard her hesitation, fear and sorrow in every word she spoke. I heard love in her voice when talking about her children. She was imperfect and scared. And while the reasons the children were removed

were legitimate, I began to wonder if I would be any different if I didn't have the steady guidance of stable parents growing up. It was in that moment, I loved her.

My foster children's mother has a lot of work to do for reunification,

but every night I pray for her with a heart filled with love. If this is how I feel about someone who I've had minimal interaction with and is ultimately a stranger to me, I can only imagine (and still not fully comprehend) the depth of the love Christ has for us. A love so strong, he willingly came to Earth to sacrifice himself for imperfect people to have a chance to spend eternity in Heaven with him.

It's overwhelming if you really stop to think about it. This Christmas when I look upon the nativity, I won't just see a baby in a manger; I will see love.

“ I can only imagine (and still not fully comprehend) the depth of the love Christ has for us. A love so strong, he willingly came to earth to sacrifice himself for imperfect people to have a chance to spend eternity in heaven with him. ”

Aimee Freston is a new foster parent through Buckner, currently fostering a 5-year-old and an 8-month-old. She is learning to function with minimal sleep, on-the-go meals, late-night showers and the Bluey theme song on repeat.

DECEMBER 21

We didn't know who you were

"...that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." – John 1:4b-5 (NIV)

I love to sit in the glow of my Christmas tree, but dragging out all the decorations feels like a chore. I'm one of those people who will start listening to Christmas music way too early – until I've heard the same songs so many times my ears ache for anything else. My calendar is full, but I'm genuinely trying to be still enough to consider the miracle of Jesus' birth. Each year, the Christmas season feels like an experiment in contrasting circumstances.

Mahalia Jackson's Christmas album includes the song, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy." Written in the style of a spiritual, it includes these lyrics:

The world treats you mean Lord

Treats me mean too

But that's how things are down here

We didn't know it was you

A victim of someone else's sin and cruelty is saying to Jesus that we all didn't realize who he was.

Jesus is the light in the darkness for those who have been victimized, abandoned or abused. That light is also for those who have victimized, abandoned or abused someone else.

Hard to swallow, isn't it? That's what makes this light completely different from any form of goodness that we can muster up. Jesus' redemptive and restorative presence is infinitely better than our ability to show goodness, kindness or love. The Light is truly for any sinner who believes.

We can't prevent or dispel the darkness ourselves, but we can know and share the Light who does.

Susan Williams Simmons has worked at Buckner for almost 17 Christmases. One of her favorite Christmas memories is getting to lead a Christmas mission trip to Peru. Her family all got alpaca sweaters for Christmas that year, even though alpaca wool is too warm for a bunch of Texans.



DECEMBER 22

The power of love's door

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." – 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (NIV)

It's Christmas Day and the house smells like cinnamon apples and pinecones.

As I leave my room, I'm joined at the top of the stairs by a child, now my sibling. We don't have the same biological parents or similar features, but we're experiencing the same loving home. As we both run down the stairs in excitement, we're met by another child, who moved in the week prior. Their excitement is compounded by the joy on our faces.

Waiting next to the tree is my other sibling, different biological parents as well, who has experienced Christmas in this home for a few years now and knows exactly what to expect.

All my Christmas memories are filled with watching the joy on my foster siblings' faces as they opened gifts that held meaning and purpose from my parents. Christmas lists were an opportunity for my parents to show my foster siblings how much they cared about them in our home.

Christmas was OUR favorite time of the year. Our home exuded affection and attention for each child present. This was my encounter with a visual display of unconditional love. My parents were foster

parents, from the time I was 8 years old until I was in my mid 20s. I witnessed the love Christ requires of us, under my own roof.

Every child felt the same love, compassion and nurturing spirit. There was no wrong that could be done to change the way my parents loved us. There were no words that could be said to alter their desire to nurture us, and this would become the very reflection of the love I would soon learn that God had for me.

The meaning of Christmas and the love that filled my childhood home have so many parallels. My parents were determined to share the love of Christ by opening the doors to their home, and the door of salvation was opened the moment Jesus was born.

I am a firm believer in the power of love's door once it is opened. This holiday season, take time to reflect on the memories of when love's door was opened in your life, and how that experience drew you closer to Christ.



Keri Pettis is the director of compliance and strategic initiatives for Buckner International. She's married with one son and loves to spend time with family in nature. She enjoys serving God's people and hopes that all who encounter her, encounter love and acceptance.



The Greatest Gift

DECEMBER 23

The greatest gift

"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 (NIV)

Christmas is a time for giving and receiving gifts as we celebrate the arrival of the greatest gift of all - Jesus Christ. In John 3:16, we read the encapsulation of the Christmas story and what it means for us.

God's love for us is unlike any other. It is unconditional, passionate and eternal. We often struggle to comprehend this kind of perfect, sacrificial love because his love is not like yours and mine. Our love oftentimes is fickle, emotional and measured. But Christmas allows us a glimpse into its meaning as we reflect on God sending his own Son into the world.

Jesus reveals the fullness of God's love. Out of love, God intentionally and miraculously put on flesh through Christ coming as a baby. While we were still deep in our sin and rebellion, Christ died on the cross to make us compatible with God, bridging the gap between God's holiness and our sinfulness.

We could never be good enough to earn God's love. But he poured out his love on us anyway through the gift of his Son. All we have to do is accept this free gift by believing in Jesus, trusting in

his sacrifice for our salvation.

The Christmas story seems almost too good to be true - that the all-powerful God would humble himself to dwell among us as Emmanuel in order to save us. But this miracle of love is the gift of

Christmas. It's available to every one of us, no matter who we are or what we've done.

May the true meaning of Christmas – the coming of our Savior – fill each of our hearts with joy, gratitude and wonder. Let's receive God's gift of Jesus while sharing his love with everyone we meet this Christmas season.

Dr. Tony Celesi has been president of Stark College & Seminary for nearly 18 years. Tony has been married to Deanne Smith Celesi for over 30 years and they have two sons: Ren and his wife Jessica, and daughter Airibelle, and Castleton and his wife Natalie. Tony and Deanne enjoy boating and traveling with their family.

“
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WEEK THREE

ADVENT MATCHING GAME

Print out as many copies as you'd like of the designed cards. Print at least two so each cartoon has a matching card.

Cut out the cards and lay them out face down. On each turn, a player will turn over any two cards (one at a time) and will keep them if they match. If they successfully match a pair, they get to go another turn.



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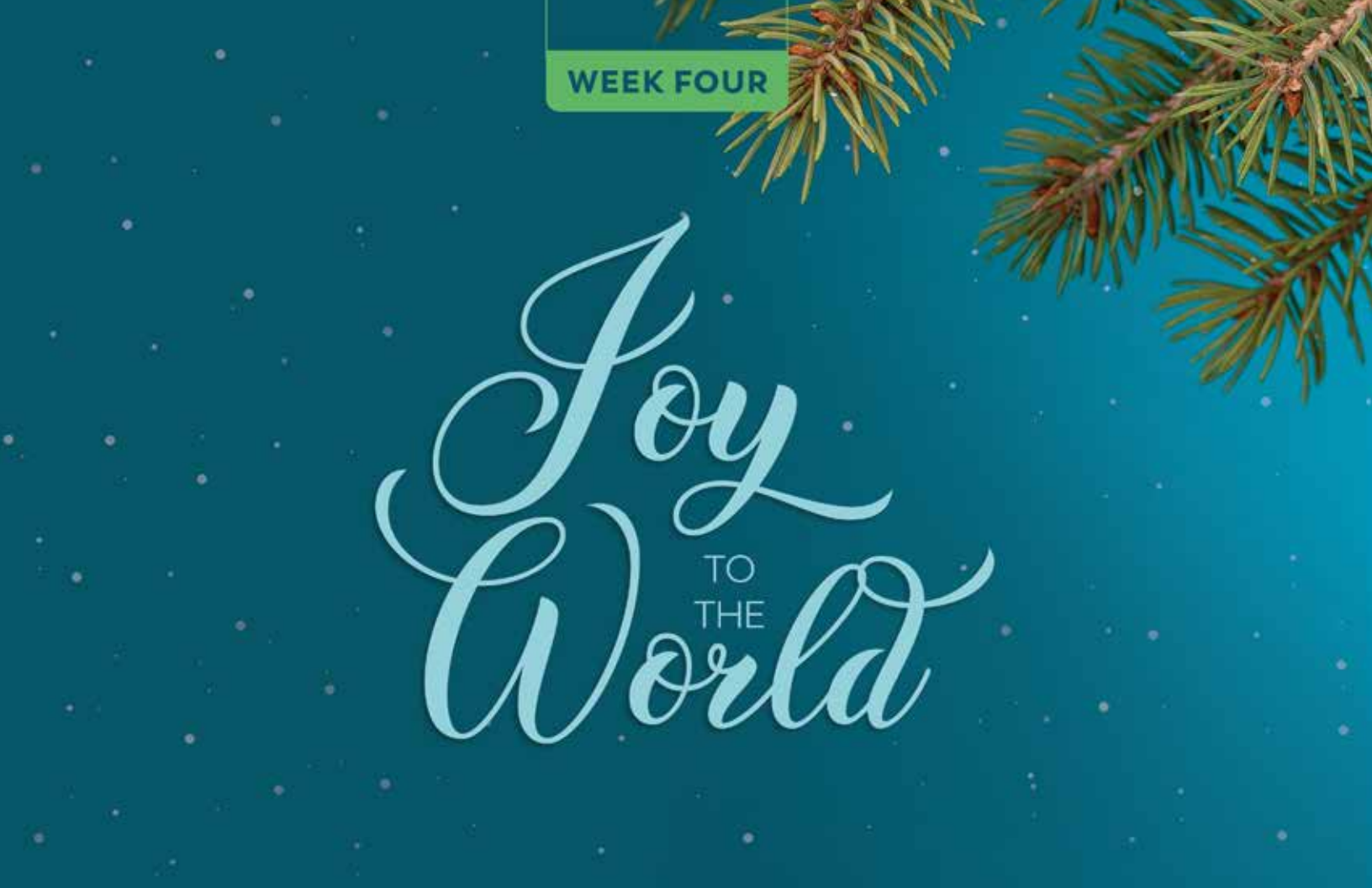
Hope shines here.™



FREE ACTIVITY

Scan the code below with your smart phone to download the activity or download it at buckner.org/adventmatchinggame.





WEEK FOUR

Joy
TO
THE
World



Incorporating joy each morning

"This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." – Psalm 118:24 (ESV)

How do you typically start your day? I'd imagine you have some sort of a routine. Wake up, brush your teeth, fix your coffee, get dressed and so on. Regardless of the steps, I'm sure each morning comes with routine. How you approach this routine is likely to be influenced by whether or not you are a morning person. Apparently, the world can be divided into two groups of people: early birds and night owls. Which are you? Your answer probably determines if your mornings are met with enthusiasm or sluggishness.

Yet these morning routines are important. They may seem insignificant, but they're opportunities to incorporate meaningful liturgies that can shape the rest of the day. During this Advent season, evaluate your morning routine and incorporate a moment of worship that fills your day with joy.

As a child I remember my grandmother's favorite verse was Psalm 118:24. I loved hearing her recite that verse. Now as an adult, I've sought to make that verse a part of our family's morning routine. As the children run around the house getting ready for the day, we take a moment to pray as a family. After we pray, we do a quick call and response.

I'll say, "This is the day the Lord has made." And my children will

respond, "I will rejoice and be glad in it." It's brief but it provides each of us with an important perspective: today is a gift and an opportunity to be joyful.

During the Advent season, we often find ourselves looking beyond today. We are constantly waiting for tomorrow, with our eye toward Christmas. While there is good reason Advent is filled

with anticipation, I want to remind you today is a gift. Jesus is worth far more than a once-a-year remembrance but an everyday celebration. Whether good or bad, easy or difficult, exciting or boring, early bird or night owl, no matter what each day holds and how you approach it, choose joy. This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice

and be glad in it.

Jerimiah Smith has served as pastor of University Baptist Church Fort Worth for the past seven years. He has an amazing wife and three incredible children who are constantly creating new memories of joy.

My favorite thing about the Christmas season: Time with family and the candlelight worship during the Christmas Eve service.

“Morning routines are important. They may seem insignificant, but they’re opportunities to incorporate meaningful liturgies that can shape the rest of the day.”



WEEK FOUR

Merry Christmas!



R ACTIVITY

Scan the code below with your smart phone to download the activity or download it at buckner.org/adventcoloringpages.



DECEMBER 25



**Watch an Advent message from Albert L. Reyes,
CEO of Buckner. Click anywhere on this spread
or visit youtu.be/8eSzKyneQEE to view it.**

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’).” – *Matthew 1:22-23*



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Hope shines here.®