



ADVENT

THE WHOLE STORY

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HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

It just doesn't work to start in the middle of a story. You can't walk into a movie theater halfway through the featured film and make sense of what you're watching. There will be conversations and decisions and reactions that make no sense to you because you missed the beginning of the movie. In the same way, you can't start the Christmas story with the baby in the manger in Bethlehem. If you do, you will miss key elements of the narrative that make all the difference in your understanding.

This resource includes four short Advent devotionals, accompanied by Reflection Questions that can be used personally, for your family devotion time, or with a small group or Bible Study. A fifth bonus devotional is included - entitled 10,000 Little Moments - to help you think biblically about the New Year and the resolutions that come with it.

There is no wrong way to use this resource. We recommend reading the devotionals in order, but they are flexible enough to meet the needs of you and your family or small group. Below is a description of each devotional to help you decide in advance how you will plan out your Advent material:

1. ADVENT: THE NEED

This devotional, from Genesis 6, focuses on the sin of humanity and how it grieved the heart of the Lord to the point where he was sorry that he made man on the earth. The birth of Christ is ultimately rooted in grief in the heart of God. We recommend reading this devotional first.

2. ADVENT: THE PROMISE

This devotional, from Isaiah 59, focuses on the promise of a Redeemer. Isaiah 59 exposes our sin and leaves us hopeless on our own, but then points us to the source of hope, Jesus Christ. We recommend reading this devotional second.

3. ADVENT: THE ANNOUNCEMENT

This devotional, from Luke 2, focuses on the announcement of the birth of Christ. This announcement is a joyful hymn of celebration but also a definition of our biggest need and Christ's mission on earth. We recommend reading this devotional on Christmas Eve.

4. ADVENT: THE PLAN

This devotional, from Isaiah 53, focuses on the crucifixion of Jesus. Isaiah 53 prophesies the Cross and reveals the love that God has for his children by the crushing of his Son. We recommend reading this devotional after Christmas Day.

BONUS. 10,000 LITTLE MOMENTS

This bonus devotional focuses on the New Year and our desire to make big changes to our lifestyle habits. We suggest reading this devotional on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day.

DEVOTIONAL 1

ADVENT: THE NEED

“5 The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6 And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7 So the Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” 8 But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.”

GENESIS 6:5-8

Could you get any more graphic, more specific, more all-inclusive words than these?

“The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

Immediately after, you have what may be the saddest passage in all of Scripture.

“And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”

What makes this passage so graphic and so sad? I’m deeply persuaded we will only understand the significance of this passage if we understand the original intent of God’s creation and how far this description has strayed from that original intent. Let’s take a look:

You and I were created to love God. We were hardwired to live in an intimate relationship with the Creator that would shape every motive, every desire, every choice, every word, and every action. If at any moment you asked me what I was doing, I could say to you, “Because I love my God.”

Why do you speak to your spouse the way you do? Because I love my God.

Why do you treat your children the way you do? Because I love my God.

Why do you spend your money the way you do? Because I love my God.

Why do you schedule your life the way you do? Because I love my God.

Love of God was the plan. We were created to recognize his existence and his grandeur and his authority. In acts of deeply personal love, we would choose to serve him with all our time and energy, and it wouldn’t be a hassle. We would obey because of our personal love for God. Because we loved God the lawgiver, we would find joy in following his laws. We would find joy in serving him and staying inside his boundaries. That was the plan.

It’s very clear that something went terribly wrong. Love of God no longer ruled the heart of man. But this is important to understand - Genesis 6:5-8 didn’t signal the end of love in the heart of man. Human beings never stop loving. Every human being is hardwired to be a lover. The question is: what love rules your heart?

At the deepest, most profound level of your existence, you love, and you will either love God or you will love yourself. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says, *“And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”*

The thing that always replaces love of God is love of self. The thing that leads to an endless catalog of evil is always love of self. You and I will find a way to insert ourselves into the center of our world. We’re obsessed with our will; we want to be sovereign over our own lives; we want to set the rules; we’re addicted to our own pleasure and happiness.

What makes marriage so hard? You have two individuals that love themselves. Very quickly, that self-love will escalate to conflict. What makes parenting so hard? You have given birth to children that love themselves. As soon as you start to give them rules that rub against their desires, that self-love will escalate to conflict.

Every act of murder and violence is rooted in self-love. Every moment of greed is rooted in self-love. Every word of gossip and slander is rooted in self-love. Every act of adulterous desire is rooted in self-love. By Genesis 6, the world had exploded into chaos because this self-love ruled the heart of every man, woman, and child. The same self-love still rules today; all you need to do is watch the news.

This is why the heart of the Lord was grieved. His beautiful creation, designed to live in an eternally loving relationship with their Creator, had betrayed him. When you read this passage, you should see the tears in the eyes of God. You should hear the weeping in his voice. This adulterous betrayal is deeply personal for God.

How did God respond to this ultimate betrayal? The story doesn't hesitate to tell us. *"So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.'"*

God has seen enough. He lovingly and personally designed every element in creation to provide humanity with every good thing they ever would want and could never design for themselves, and they betrayed his love. So in an act of holy justice - not ugly vengeance - God sent the waters of the flood to wipe the earth clean. God had every right to blot out mankind.

It seems like a tragic end to the story, doesn't it? Thankfully, the story doesn't end there. Genesis 6 has a verse eight: *"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord."* In an act of sovereign grace, God placed his saving favor on Noah and his family. Noah wasn't deserving; God was zealously loving.

If you read past the covenant God makes with Noah (Genesis 9:1-17) to the genealogies of Noah's sons, you will find a familiar name - Abram (11:26). God changes Abram's name and makes a covenant with him, promising to bless all the nations of the earth (22:18). In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul alerts us to the fact that the seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).

This is what Advent is all about. God was personally grieved by the betrayal of his creation, but motivated by an even greater personal love. Instead of sending a flood to blot out the earth, he sent his Son to be exposed to all the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. Despite daily pain and temptation, Jesus lived perfectly to provide the ultimate sacrifice that we could never provide. In so doing, he paid the penalty for sin in full, quenching the wrath of God and restoring hope to the entire universe.

This redemptive work of the Messiah is both an event and a process. By his work on the cross, the power of sin has been forever broken. He made a public spectacle of the enemy, triumphing over him; we don't need to live under the slavery of sin any longer. But a battle still rages, because the presence of sin still remains. It's being eradicated by sanctifying grace, but it's an ongoing process.

So when you reflect on Genesis 6, you need to be honest. There are times when your thoughts are shaped by love of God...but not always. There are times when things we desire flow from a heart that loves the Lord...but not always. There are times when act from a pure heart that loves God...but not always. You and I gave empirical evidence this week that the war of love still goes on in our hearts.

This Advent season, you need to embrace the sad reality that your heart is still prone to betraying the Lord. You love yourself everyday. But Advent is also a glorious celebration of the hope that is ours, represented by that baby in a manger who has come on a mission of rescue and deliverance. There will be a day when every microbe of sin is destroyed and every cell in your soul will be controlled by the love of God. Look forward to that day, because when it comes, it will never expire. You will live inside God's boundaries and live for his glory forever and ever and ever.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are some things that grieve your heart?
Do the same things that grieve the heart of the Lord bring your heart sadness?

Do you ever struggle to make your relationship with God personal?
Would a more intimate relationship with God change the way you live?

In what ways this week did you allow love of self to replace love for God?
What was the outcome?

In what ways this week did you die to self and act out of love for God?
What was the outcome?

DEVOTIONAL 2

ADVENT: THE PROMISE

*1 Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;
2 but your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.
3 For your hands are defiled with blood
and your fingers with iniquity;
your lips have spoken lies;
your tongue mutters wickedness.
4 No one enters suit justly;
no one goes to law honestly;
they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies,
they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity.
5 They hatch adders' eggs;
they weave the spider's web;
he who eats their eggs dies,
and from one that is crushed a viper is hatched.
6 Their webs will not serve as clothing;
men will not cover themselves with what they make.
Their works are works of iniquity,
and deeds of violence are in their hands.
7 Their feet run to evil,
and they are swift to shed innocent blood;
their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity;
desolation and destruction are in their highways.
8 The way of peace they do not know,
and there is no justice in their paths;
they have made their roads crooked;
no one who treads on them knows peace.
9 Therefore justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not overtake us;
we hope for light, and behold, darkness,
and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.*

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE...)

*10 We grope for the wall like the blind;
we grope like those who have no eyes;
we stumble at noon as in the twilight,
among those in full vigor we are like dead men.*

*11 We all growl like bears;
we moan and moan like doves;
we hope for justice, but there is none;
for salvation, but it is far from us.*

*12 For our transgressions are multiplied before you,
and our sins testify against us;
for our transgressions are with us,
and we know our iniquities:*

*13 transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning back from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words.*

*14 Justice is turned back,
and righteousness stands far away;
for truth has stumbled in the public squares,
and uprightness cannot enter.*

*15 Truth is lacking,
and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.
The Lord saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.*

*16 He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.*

*17 He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.*

*18 According to their deeds, so will he repay,
wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render repayment.*

*19 So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west,
and his glory from the rising of the sun;
for he will come like a rushing stream,
which the wind of the Lord drives.*

*20 "And a Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord.*

21 "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the Lord: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the Lord, "from this time forth and forevermore."

ISAIAH 59: 1-21

I don't know if you have thought about this or not, but you're hardwired for hope. You don't live by instinct. Every decision you make is fueled by and motivated by hope. Your happiest moments are about hope fulfilled and your saddest moments are about hope dashed. You're always hoping.

Isaiah 59 is a brilliant hope passage because it's written in a dark moment. The children of Israel had been in captivity in Babylon, only to return to a Jerusalem in shambles. There were no city walls, the temple had been destroyed, and the government infrastructure was shattered. It was a fundamental breakdown of society, but into that darkness comes this discussion of hope found in Isaiah 59.

If this passage is all about hope, we need to define it. There are four important elements. First: **hope is an object and an expectation.** You're hoping in something and asking that something to deliver. Second: **the doorway to hope is hopelessness.** The only way you will ever find true hope is to give up on all your false hopes. Third: **hope, to be reliable, must fix what is broken.** Hope must successfully address the biggest dilemmas of our existence, otherwise it isn't worth hoping in. And fourth: **hope is a Person, and his name is Jesus.** Hope is not a situation; hope is not a location; hope is not an experience. Hope is a Person.

Return to the passage. Isaiah 59 divides up into four sections. The first section (verse 1) begins with a false charge against God by Israel. The second section (2-8) is a return accusation by God against his people. The third section (9-15) contains a very important confession by God's children. The fourth and final section (16-20) describes how God will respond to the confession.

Verse 1 - *"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear."* God, through the prophet, is answering a charge that Israel is making against him. They were a suffering people, and in the middle of the difficulty, they began to question God. They questioned his power (is his hand too short) and they questioned his goodness (does he not hear our cries).

We are much like the Israelites. When life disappoints us in some way, and the comfort and ease that we seek is removed, it's very tempting for us to bring God into the court of our judgement and question his faithfulness. But often, the grace of God comes to us in uncomfortable forms. God allows difficulty to enter our door, not because he's too weak to help or because he doesn't hear our cries, but because we need personal heart transformation. Just like the Israelites, we want the grace of relief and the grace of release, but what we need is the grace of refinement.

God responds to the misplaced charge with a divine accusation beginning in verse 2. *"Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear..."* The accusation continues through verse 8, and it reveals the real problem.

You and I like to think that our deepest problems in life are outside us, not inside us. We like to blame circumstances, locations, or relationships. We like to think that we're one of the good guys, and sure, while we might make a few mistakes along the way, other people and other things are ultimately to blame. Isn't that why people love to protest? You'll never find someone in a protest carrying a sign that says, "I'm the problem" with an arrow pointing down. We love to protest because we can point the finger and accuse someone else for our problems. This is what Israel did; they tried to blame God and their circumstances, but God was quick to describe what the real problem was - their heart.

Think with me for a moment. There's no such thing as a bad marriage. The institution of marriage is completely fine. Marriages turn sour because you have two people involved. The same goes for a bad neighborhood. That neighborhood would have nothing bad in it if you removed all the bad people. There's no such thing as a corrupt government. Governments are corrupted by corrupt politicians.

You and I can't just blame other people. We can't just blame our circumstances. Of course, we will be sinned against and we will live under harsh circumstances, but our biggest problem is our heart. That's the accusation God made, and when God accuses, we better listen.

This divine accusation is followed by a confession beginning in verse 9. *"Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom."* The confession continues through verse 15, with Israel admitting to their sin. Verse 12 is the apex - *"For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities."*

Israel couldn't blame God; they couldn't blame the Babylonians or any other group; they couldn't blame their harsh circumstances. They were their biggest problem. They also couldn't find hope in anyone else, because all of humanity suffered from the same condition. Every location and situation was populated by these people. Israel was hopeless.

But this hopelessness was the best thing for them to experience. Remember the second elements of hope: **the doorway to hope is hopelessness**. Just like Israel, you and I need to abandon all our false hopes - it won't be found there. Biblically, it makes no sense to find hope in the people in places of this world, but we do it all the time. We say, "If only I had _____, I would be happy" or "If only _____ didn't happen, I would be content." Whatever fills in that blank is where you're searching for hope. Once Israel realized that they were their biggest problem, and that all horizontal hopes would fail them, they humbly confessed and ran to the only source of hope that could save.

Finally, after the accusation and confession, the Lord reveals his plan of salvation. Beginning with second half of verse 15: *"The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation."* In light of the disaster and rebellion, God didn't turn his back on his children. Instead, he revealed his plan of salvation and redemption.

These final verses are a prediction of Christ, sent from heaven to earth and armed with **Justice** and **Grace**. Verses 17-19 describe the his **Justice**. God was going to deal with evil. This passage makes it very clear that this is a God who is perfectly committed to justice. This should terrify us, but it should also comfort us. You wouldn't want to live in a world where injustice was permitted to reign. There's comfort in knowing that the King of the universe is fully committed to repaying every evil act.

But Christ isn't just armed with justice; he comes armed with **Grace**. The final two verses of Isaiah 59 reveal the redeeming grace of God: *"And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord.* To redeem to means to buy something back. By his life, by his death, and by his resurrection, the righteousness of Christ has been given to your account. You can stand before a holy God as if you never sinned, unafraid of his wrath, and have him wrap his arms of acceptance around you and invite you into a personal relationship with him. Because of Christ, your sin longer separates you from your Lord.

That's the Christmas story. Christmas is about hope coming. That's why the angels sang those glorious songs. That's why the shepherds were blown away. That's why the wise men came to worship. Hope had come, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This Advent season, don't search for hope in your situations or circumstances or relationships. Hope will never be found horizontally. Hope has already come, and his name is Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Have you ever questioned the faithfulness of God?
What circumstances caused you to doubt his character?

Are you quick to blame your circumstances or relationships for your sin?
Why do you point the finger and argue for your own righteousness?

Name some things that your culture defines as hope?
Why are these sources of hope flawed?

What difficult circumstances or relationships are you facing right now?
How is Jesus your source of hope in the midst of this difficulty?

DEVOTIONAL 3

ADVENT: THE ANNOUNCEMENT

*“14 Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

LUKE 2:14

I live at the edge of Chinatown in Philadelphia, and in the winter to avoid the cold, I cut through Macy's to get to where I need to go. During the Christmas season, every day, six times a day, from Black Friday until New Year's Eve, Macy's displays a holiday light show with over 100,000 LED lights. It's a Philadelphia tradition that dates back half a century and continually draws a huge crowd, but as a local resident, I've seen the light show 722 times already this year (that's an exaggeration for you mathematicians trying to calculate).

As I walk through Macy's, holiday sounds accompany the Christmas displays, so naturally, the refrain of Luke 2:14 is played over and over again. "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*" Considering the amount of times I walk through Macy's, it's quite easy for me to tune out this chorus. That got me thinking - I wonder if we understand what these words really mean. There's something about familiarity that puts our brains and hearts into a spiritual monotone. In doing so, I'm afraid that we might miss the deep and expansive content of the words of this little hymn. So slow down. Pretend with me that this is the first time you're reading this verse.

"*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*" **Glory** and **Peace** are the two principal words of this hymn. We'll look at **Glory** first.

I don't know if you have noticed this about yourself, but you're glory focused. Everything you do in your life - everything you say, every choice you make, every reaction you have - is done in pursuit of some kind of glory. Maybe you're a bit confused about glory, so take a short biblical tour with me.

You were created to live with the glory of God in view. The principal motivation of your heart was supposed to be that God would be praised in every moment of life. All of creation was designed to remind us of the glory of God. Whether it's the unique pattern of a snowflake or the brilliant sound of a trumpet or the warmth of a fire, all those things were meant to reflect the glory of God.

That's the way it was meant to be, but in a moment of disobedience and rebellion, Adam and Eve chose to live for the glory of the creation rather than the glory of God (Genesis 3:6). Ever since that horrible moment, there has been a glory war raging on our hearts. We don't always live for the glory of God; we want to fight for our own little glories.

Some of you were sitting in traffic this week, and I would wager that you probably didn't think first of the glory of God. Some of you struggled with lust this week, exchanging the glory of God for the glory of momentary sexual pleasure. Some of you struggled with materialism on Black Friday, or as you think about what you want for Christmas, replacing the glory of God with the possession of physical things that don't satisfy. Some of you struggled with pride, choosing to live for self-glory instead of the glory of God. We all are, in some way, glory confused.

"*Glory to God in the highest.*" Imagine what the world would be like if every person lived that way. Imagine what it would be like to live in a society where every heart was ruled by the glory of God. No war, no poverty, no divorce, no murder. But that's far from our reality. Our planet is populated with people who live for their own glory, and so is the church.

The second word is **Peace**. "*Peace among those with whom he is pleased!*" You and I were not only created to live for the glory of God; we were created to live at peace with God. We were created to have the high honor of being the worshipful and obedient friends of God. There's a horrible moment in the garden where God comes down in the cool of the day to commune with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8). It should be a beautiful picture, where God walks with his friends, but Adam and Eve are hiding in guilt and fear and shame. Peace with God has been shattered.

Peace with God would also allow us to have peace within, not because we're strong or wise or know what will happen next, but because we have an intimate relationship with the One who rules over everything for his glory and our good.

I love the Old Testament word "shalom" because it pictures something more fundamental than just the absence of conflict. It pictures that all things are in their proper order and are working the way they were designed to work. Peace with God results in personal peace of heart. But we don't always have that. We experience anxiety or anger or frustration or depression or hopelessness. Our hearts all struggle to find rest. Shalom has been shattered.

Peace with God finally means peace with others. When you and I don't have peace with God, and we don't have peace inside ourselves, it makes it very difficult to live at peace with others. Our lives become marked by conflict. I don't think anyone reading this has lived a conflict-free 2013. In fact, I would go as far as to say that you probably haven't lived a conflict-free December 2013. All you need to do is watch the news to know that peace with others has been shattered.

"And on earth peace..." Imagine what the world would be like if every person lived that way. Imagine what it would be like to live in a society where every heart was ruled by peace with God and others. No war, no poverty, no divorce, no murder. But that's far from our reality. Our planet is populated with people who live for their own glory, and so is the church.

Now, if you have a **Glory** problem (which you do), and if you have a **Peace** problem (which you do), then what you have is a **Heart** problem. Yes, traffic is frustrating and the sexual insanity of our society doesn't help, and yes, your child is often disobedient and your spouse is often difficult, but your biggest problem is still you. There's something broken in your heart. That's why David gets it right when he prays, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."* (Psalm 51:10). What we need is radical, personal, permanent heart-change.

This little hymn is a celebration of the baby's birth, but it's so much more than that. These words define our biggest need, and in defining our need, they define the mission of Christ. The prophecies of his coming are very clear that Jesus will address this issue: *"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."* (Ezekiel 36:26).

There's another thing these words do - they define the price of Christ's mission. It's captured in that final phrase, *"Peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* A different translation could be, *"Peace on whom his favor is placed,"* or *"Peace to those to whom his grace is given."* The only hope of peace is grace, and the vehicle of grace is a death. You won't fully understand the weight of the baby in the manger unless you know that the baby came to be a Lamb.

This little hymn from the heavenly host announces your redemption, but it also reminds you of your ongoing need for grace. While the power of sin has been broken, freeing you from bondage to all the little self-glories that used to rule your life, you still struggle to live for the glory of God everyday. And while the ultimate sacrifice has been paid so that you can experience eternal peace with God, but you still struggle to live at peace within and live at peace with others everyday.

This Advent season, remember that the birth of Christ frees you from living for little glories and invites you into a much more glorious kingdom. And remember that the birth of Christ not only gives you eternal peace with God, but enables you to live at peace within and at peace with others.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Are you struggling with familiarity? Is your brain and heart in a spiritual monotone?
How can you slow down this Advent season and personalize your walk with Christ?

Where do you see a **Glory** war raging in your heart and in your life?
Why are you tempted to live more for the glory of self than the glory of God?

Where are you struggling to find **Peace** with God, within yourself, and with others?
How can you let the peace of Christ rule in you heart? (Colossians 3:15)

Why is it difficult to admit that you have a **Heart** problem?
Who, or what, are you blaming for your **Glory** and **Peace** problems?

DEVOTIONAL 4

ADVENT: THE PLAN

*10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.*

ISAIAH 53:10

We love Top 10 lists. They populate our social media, sports highlights, celebrity magazines and blogs. As we round out this Advent devotional, I want you to come up with your own Top 10 list. Write down ten things that bring you pleasure. Some of the things on my Top 10 list, specifically regarding the Christmas season, would be the variety of cookies available, decorating my tree, cooking Christmas meals, and having all our children together for the holidays.

Save your list for later; there's a Reflection Question for it at the end. For now, here's what you need to understand about pleasure and Christmas: everything we have considered in this Advent devotional is connected to pleasure in the heart of God. Isaiah 53:10 - *"Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief."* I like using other translations for this verse, because they use a variation of the word **pleasure** - *"But the Lord was **pleased** to crush Him, putting Him to grief"* (NASB) or *"Yet it **pleased** the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief"* (NKJV).

You need to get your mind around this radical phrase. How could it be that God the Father would ever find pleasure in the crushing and the grief of his Son? If you're a parent, think of the protective heart you have for your children. You don't want any harm to come to them, and you try to protect them from danger and difficulty. You can't imagine them being crushed or grieved, nevertheless inflicting that pain on them personally. This radical verse is meant to make you stop short and ask questions.

What could be so powerfully motivating in the heart of the Father to make him crush his own Son, and find pleasure in his grief? The answer is found in John 3:16 - *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* God looked at relational separation between Creator and creation, and his grieved heart couldn't bear it any longer. Motivated by a deep and personal love, the only solution was to crush his Son.

Make sure you don't interpret the pleasure of God incorrectly. He's not a sadist or a masochist, one who enjoys giving or receiving physical pain. God didn't experience pleasure from the particular moments of physical and relational suffering. Rather, the pleasure of God was rooted in what resulted from the crushing and grief of Christ - a restored relationship between God and man.

For many of you, John 3:16 is a verse that can be found on your refrigerator, a coffee mug, or a picture frame somewhere in your house. You know that God *"so loved world;"* you probably learned this verse in Sunday school. But sometime next week or next month or next year, you will be tempted to doubt the love of God. In some circumstance, location, or relationship, you will have your questions.

Maybe it will be a moment of physical suffering, and you will question why God has permitted this pain to be your experience. Maybe it will be a very significant relational disappointment, and you will wonder why God led you to that relationship in the first place. Maybe in a moment of financial difficulty, even when you have sought to be a good steward of your money, you will have your doubts about why a loving God would choose to allow you to lose your job or your financial stability.

Maybe all it takes is for you to turn on the local news or read the international headlines. It looks like evil is prospering. Sex slaves and Internet pornography dominate your world. Young children are kidnapped. Unarmed citizens are executed by a tyrannical government. Cancer and disease ravage humanity. Hunger and poverty and homelessness are the reality for millions around the globe.

Where is God? Where is his love? How can a God who *"so loved the world"* actually allow this to be our reality? To answer these questions, we need to consider two words in Isaiah 53:10 - **Crush** and **Grief** - and then consider what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:32 - *"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"*

Crushing has to do with the physical suffering of Christ. Every moment of Christ's life was physical suffering. The Cross was an extremely painful culmination of a life of suffering, but it wasn't his only location. Every day he subjected himself to the harsh realities of life in a fallen world; the manger marked the beginning of his crushing.

There was emotional suffering for Christ as well - that's why Isaiah uses the word **Grief**. Jesus was "*despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief*" (Isaiah 53:3). He was continually mocked and rejected and scorned by people, and his life of emotional suffering reached a crescendo on the Cross when he cried out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachtani?*" (Mark 15:34) There was no greater moment of pain for Christ when the Father turned his back on the Son.

Now back to Romans 8:32. Here's the logic that the Apostle Paul is using - if God subjected Christ to the extreme physical and emotional suffering for our eternal salvation, it would make no sense for God to turn his back on us during our present time of need. In other words, the guarantee of our future (sealed by the Cross) also guarantees everything we need right here, right now.

We have other Scriptural evidence of this promise too: "*His divine power has given us **everything we need** for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness*" (2 Peter 1:3, NIV) and "*My God will supply **every need of yours** according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19).

Your Creator will meet all your needs; that's a biblical promise. That doesn't mean, however, that God is going to sign your wish list. You and I have a problem with the word **need**. We load all kinds of things that we **want** onto our list of needs. Perhaps these are not sinful requests in and of themselves, like some of the pleasures on my Top 10 list, but here's the danger with our need list: when we name things as needs that aren't actually defined by God as needs, we begin to judge his goodness and love by whether or not he delivers. If he delivers what I think I need, I love God and I praise him and I tell others about him, but if he fails to deliver what I think I need, I question his love and goodness and become bitter. All the while, I set myself up for this disaster because I wrongly named things as needs.

God knows what we actually need, and he will provide. This means we don't have to be afraid of what the future holds or lose sleep at night playing out all the "*what ifs*" of life. There will be moments in life when God will confuse you, but read what I'm about to write: peace of heart will never be found in understanding. Your ability to rest is found in the pleasure of the Father and in the willingness of his Son to be crushed. There is no more clear-pointed, rest-giving demonstration of the love of God for you than the gift of his Son.

This Advent Season, if your heart is not at peace, and if you don't have a stability and security in your soul about what you're facing, maybe you haven't understood the full implications of Christmas. Yes, your life will be confusing, and yes, your life will be difficult, but God never turns his back on you. Jesus Christ faced the ultimate rejection from the Father so that we would never have to see the back of God's head. The fulfilled prophecy of Isaiah 53:10 and the promise of Romans 8:32 guarantees that God will be with us in every moment, right here, right now, all the way until eternity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What physical or emotional pleasures populate your Top 10 list?
Are you at risk of turning any of these God-given pleasures into idols?

Where do you see brokenness in your life or in your world?
Are you ever tempted to look at this brokenness and question the love of God?

Fill in the blank: "If only I had _____, then my life would be _____."
What are you defining as a need? Does the Bible name this as a need?

Where is your heart struggling to find peace with God's plan for your life?
How can the Advent season serve as a reminder to help put your soul to rest?

DEVOTIONAL 5

10,000 LITTLE MOMENTS

Trading One Dramatic Resolution For Ten Thousand Little Ones

BONUS DEVOTIONAL

'Tis the season, but not the Christmas season anymore. 'Tis the season for New Year's resolutions.

This time of the calendar year comes along and provides plenty of fodder for blogs, newspaper articles, TV magazine shows, Tweets, and Facebook posts. 'Tis the season for the annual ritual of dramatic New Year's resolutions, fueled by the hope of immediate and significant personal life change.

Let's be honest. The reality is that few smokers actually quit because of a single moment of resolve. Few obese people become slim and healthy because of one dramatic moment of commitment. Few people deeply in debt change their financial lifestyle because they resolve to do so as the old year gives way to the new. Few marriages change by the means of one dramatic resolution.

Is change important? Yes, it is for all of us in some way. Is commitment essential? Of course! There's a way in which all our lives are shaped by the commitments we make. But biblical Christianity - which has the gospel of Jesus Christ at its heart - simply doesn't rest its hope in big, dramatic moments of change.

The fact of the matter is that the transforming work of grace is more of a mundane process than it is a series of a few dramatic events. Personal heart and life change is always a process. And where does that process take place? It takes place where you and I live everyday. And where do we live? We all have the same address. Our lives don't careen from big moment to big moment. No, we all live in the utterly mundane.

Most of us won't be written up in history books. Most of us only make three or four momentous decisions in our lives, and several decades after we die, the people we leave behind will struggle to remember the events of our lives. You and I live in little moments, and if God doesn't rule our little moments and doesn't work to recreate us in the middle of them, then there is no hope for us, because that's where you and I live.

The little moments of life are profoundly important precisely because they are the little moments that we live in and that form us. This is where I think "*Big Drama Christianity*" gets us into trouble. It can cause us to devalue the significance of the little moments of life and the "small change" grace that meets us there. Because we devalue the little moments where we live, we don't tend to notice the sin that gets exposed there. We fail to seek the grace that's offered to us.

You see, the character of a life is not set in two or three dramatic moments, but in 10,000 little moments. The character that was formed in those little moments is what shapes how you respond to the big moments of life.

So if a New Year's resolution doesn't lead to significant personal change, what does?

- 10,000 moments of personal insight and conviction.
- 10,000 moments of humble submission.
- 10,000 moments of foolishness exposed and wisdom gained.
- 10,000 moments of sin confessed and sin forsaken.
- 10,000 moments of courageous faith.
- 10,000 choice points of obedience.
- 10,000 times of forsaking the kingdom of self and running toward the kingdom of God.
- 10,000 moments where we abandon worship of the creation and give ourselves to worship of the Creator.

And what makes all of this possible? Relentless, transforming, little-moment grace. You see, Jesus is Emmanuel not just because he came to earth, but because he makes you the place where he dwells. This means he is present and active in all the mundane moments of your daily life.

In these small moments he is delivering every redemptive promise he has made to you. In these unremarkable moments, he is working to rescue you from you and transform you into his likeness. By sovereign grace he places you in daily little moments that are designed to take you beyond your character, wisdom and grace so that you will seek the help and hope that can only be found in him. In a lifelong process of change, he is undoing you and rebuilding you again - exactly what each one of us needs!

Yes, you and I need to be committed to change, but not in a way that hopes for a big event of transformation, but in a way that finds joy in and is faithful to a day-by-day, step-by-step process of insight, confession, repentance and faith.

As 2013 gives way to 2014, wake up each day committed to live in the small moments of your daily life with open eyes and humbly expectant hearts.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Do you have any resolutions you want to make or bad habits you want to kick?
What is motivating you to want to change these areas of your life?

Why might it be “easier” to make one big resolution than 10,000 little ones?
What are some elements that make the daily routine of life so difficult?

How does the grace of God help you with your 10,000 little decisions?
How can you take advantage of New Morning Mercies? (Lamentations 3:22-23)

What are some daily spiritual struggles that you are facing?
What daily commitments can you make to address these areas of weakness?

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