ClearView
BAPTIST CHURCH

An Advent Devotional Through the Gospel of Luke

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The Thinking Behind this Advent Devotional...

A dear, unbelieving friend of mine recently shared something with me that I haven't been able to shake. This person knows what I do for a living. I have known them for close to a decade. Spiritual conversations have been had - but few and far between. Let's just say my friend is not from the South and has had minuscule interaction with the church. And, to be sure, my friend doesn't desire it either.

Somehow, we stumbled upon the subject of the afterlife. Before I could work up a solid, theological and biblical statement - this friend said, "I don't know where you're going when you die, but in hell I will be having the time of my life. It will be one big party where I'm going!" Yes. Though stated a bit tongue-in-cheek fashion, my friend truly believes the afterlife for unbelievers (hell) will be one big, music-blaring, beer flowing fun fest.

Another dear believing friend recently shared something else that I haven't been able to shake. Okay, okay. I've never met this 'friend'. And what he said was several years ago on a podcast (though I just listened to it last week). But I have come to trust this person and value his thoughts/opinions on things. Preston Sprinkle, after researching what the Bible says about hell, said he leans toward the annihilation view of the afterlife for unbelievers. The simple understanding of this view basically says that after an unbeliever dies, they simply cease to exist. Death. Perish. All over. Nothing else. Nada.

When it comes to the doctrine of hell, I was taught to believe that it will be an eternal, conscious torment. Continuous suffering. No escape from the consuming pain and agony. So, when I hear my unbelieving friend declare their belief in it being an eternal party - my insides cringe a bit. And when I hear that a theologian I admire and respect suggest that the unbeliever 'merely' perishes, my eyebrows raise. My inner Gary Coleman asks, "Watchu talkin' bout Willis?" I mean, is not a significant motivation for evangelism is to call people to miss hell and make heaven? It's what I've heard all my life. Heck, it's what I've said to people for most of my life.

Here's what I cannot shake: what if one of them, or both, are correct? Stay with me. Obviously, I don't think that hell will be one big party where everyone is going crazy, doing everything and anything they want to do forever. But what if my friend truly believes this? Does the evangelist have anything to say, or is that it? Is there an angle, an approach, I can take with my friend if, in fact, that is true about hell? And what if Sprinkle is correct? What if the overwhelming biblical evidence about the afterlife for the unbeliever is ceasing to exist? I'm not saying I believe this either (to be honest, I haven't studied the doctrine of hell thoroughly). But if he's correct - that the unbeliever is annihilated at death - is there anything a Christian can say to evangelize the unbeliever?

Considering these two convictions about hell, here is what it comes down to for me: Is the chief motivation for pleading with people to follow Jesus so they will not go to hell when they die? Is this it? Is this why anyone becomes a Christian? Or is there more to it? Again - hear me - I am not saying I believe my unbelieving or believing friend and their view of hell. I do not embrace either position. But let's imagine for a moment that one or both of them are correct? Is a relationship with Jesus worth it if hell is one big party? Is walking with Jesus now a good choice if we simply perish post-death? To put it yet another way, how might we share the Good News with others if hell is a party, or we simply go away at death? Is Christianity merely about missing hell, or is it something else? Something more? Something that speaks to the core/essence of who we are?

That's what this Advent devotional attempts to consider. Advent means "longing" and "hoping" and "to wait for an arrival." "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" as one hymn writer described it. My hope over the next four weeks is to explore with you the fact that, even if there were no hell, following Jesus is worth it. That feels heretical, in a sense, to write.

I do believe in hell. Let me make that clear. But when people I know don't, or have a faulty view of it, do I have anything to say to compel them to follow our Lord?

I think I do. I think you do too. In fact, I think the Bible reveals to us that a relationship with Jesus in this life is the realist of life there is. To put it in Advent terms, a faith in and experience with; a relationship with; an obedience to and worship of Jesus is what we are all most longing for. To be sure, I believe there will be much more to enjoy in the life to come. But let's consider life with Jesus, right now. Let's process what message we might share with those who disregard hell. Regardless of one's view of hell, I believe life with Jesus is so much more than simply being rescued from it.

The plan here is simple. I have confined myself to the Gospel of Luke. I have taken various passages from this third book of the New Testament, offered a devotional thought or two, and concluded with a few evaluation questions for you to ruminate on. If you start the first Sunday of Advent (November 29th, 2026) and work your way through it each day, you should wrap it up on the day of Incarnation (otherwise known as Christmas).

There is no greater thing than life with Jesus. I encourage you to allow the Scriptures to once again shape your mind and heart, your eyes and ears, your feet and mouth. Jesus is coming again – yes and amen. In that we Advent. But He has already come a first time, inaugurating a kingdom. Let's consider what is ours now because of His arrival.

O Come Let Us Adore Him,



DAY 1 - November 29th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 1:26-56

"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end…

…he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:32-33, 51-53)

There was a time in my life when I made ignorant statements such as, "I don't really care about politics." Or, "politics aren't really that big of a deal to me." Or, "I don't preach about politics or talk about it much from the pulpit."

Boy, that was dumb.

A very brief internet search defines politics (in its purest form) as, "the process of making collective decisions, resolving conflicts, and distributing power and resources within a society or organization. . . it encompasses everything from formal government legislation to everyday negotiations over competing interests."

Is there more to it than that? Sure.

Has the basic meaning been hijacked? Yes.

Is that what comes to your mind when you hear the word? Probably not.

But at its core, politics is how people work together to figure out how the rules are set, share power, and divide up limited resources.

If this is true – then all I have ever preached about is political! If this is true, all I have ever cared about as a Christian is politics! If this is true, every follower of Jesus is tattooed with political markings.

The Christmas story is ONE BIG MASSIVE POLITICAL STATEMENT! Consider Luke 1:32-33. The announcement of the angel to the virgin Mary includes words such as "throne"

and “reign” and “kingdom.” If those aren’t political words, then there are no such words. From the jump, Jesus was said to be the Son of the Most High, sit on David’s throne, reign over Jacob’s descendants, and have a kingdom that will go on for all eternity.

Translation: this Jesus will ‘politic’ everything in His way and His time and with and for His people – forever.

And let’s not miss how this One will rule. It will not be like every other earthly political leader. No. This One will “scatter those who are proud” and “bring down pompous rulers” and “lift up the nobodies” and “fill the hungry” and “send the rich away with nothing” (see Luke 1:51-53). In other words, this Ruler (Jesus) will take everything that is wrong with the worldly systems of power and greed and turn them all on their head. His politics, in other words, will be oozing with peace and justice and righteousness and love and mercy and kindness and grace.

Here’s the thing, Christian. Once He came on the scene and lived His life, and taught His message, and died on a cross, and rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven – when all that was set in motion – His kingdom rule began. It is happening now. It is working now. It is operating with Him on His throne at this very moment. We get to live under it. We get to join Him in the restoration. We get to reign with Him by doing for others what He set out to do. We get to, if you will, be all political as members of the kingdom of God.

> When you hear the word “politics” what comes to mind?
>
> Have you ever considered the Christmas story to be a political statement? Why or why not?
>
> How do you envision Jesus reigning at this very moment? What might He be calling you to that reveals His rule in the world?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 2 - November 30th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." (Luke 2:20)

This Advent devotional is attempting to make the case that following Jesus is beyond worth it, even if there were no hell. To be clear: I believe there is a literal hell. But I want to consider – even if there were no hell – are there compelling reasons anyone would want follow Jesus in this life?

Enter Stage Right: The Shepherds.

I am guessing you've heard the story. Some of you have heard, read, taught, and/or preached this story hundreds of times. Some of you have probably portrayed sheep or shepherds in your church's annual Christmas program.

Jesus had just been born in Bethlehem. Rather than taking the message to the rich and famous, God's birth announcement is made to the poor and unknown. Shepherds. Nobodies. Riffraff. In the eyes of the world, they were unreliable, undependable, sorry excuses for human beings. Yet it is to these fellas God announced the arrival of His baby Boy first.

The entire account is magnificent. Shepherds minding their business. Probably a few empty beer cans scattered around a fire. An empty pack of cigarettes lying on the ground with butts scattered around. More than likely some salty language and complaints about their marriages and low pay from the sheep owner. You wouldn't want your child hanging around these guys. Out of nowhere the dark night sky is lit up like the 4th of July – filled with angels announcing the birth of the Messiah. After the shepherds gather themselves, they take a final puff on their cigarette, and make their way to see what all the fuss was about. According to Luke, they found this young family just as they had been told by the angels. Yes. The entire account is magnificent.

But that's not my favorite part.

My favorite part is the very last verse in this famous account. Luke makes sure we know that the shepherds returned to their post "praising God for all the things they had heard and seen." Now. Read that again. You don't want to miss it. Luke says they returned to their shepherding job excited. Joyful. Praising God.

One might call it “giddy.”

This is what gets me:
• They still held the same job as before.
• They still were in the same marriages as before.
• They still had the same bank account as before.
• They still had the same reputation in their town as before.
• They still had all the same circumstances as before.

But they were different. They were changed. They had been seen by God. They had been visited by God. They had been shown the love of God for them.

There was no mention of hell. There was no “scare tactic” to get them trust Jesus. There was an announcement, a sighting, and a glorious shock that God had seen them, knew them, and loved them. And that was all that mattered. Knowing and walking with this God, in this life, is indeed what matters.

What is your favorite part of the shepherd story in Luke 2?

What do you think the shepherds did when they saw and heard angels in the night sky? What do you think Joseph and Mary did when the shepherds shared the message from the angels?

How does it sit with you that you are seen, known, and fully loved by God?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 4 - December 1st, 2026
Scripture: Luke 5.1-11

"Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.' So they pulled their boats up on the shore, left everything and followed him." (Luke 5:10b-11)

I can't say with absolute certainty, but I have a hunch I know why people like my friend say things like, "I can't wait to go to hell when I die. I am going to have a much greater time than you are!" I am guessing they think hell is going to be a big party because the alternative (heaven) is for judgmental, boring, self-righteous, arrogant, religious prudes. My assumption here is that, at root, he or she doesn't really think that about hell. Rather, what they have seen, observed, or presume about Christianity is the farthest thing from what they desire to associate with. Again, this is only a hunch. But I can't help but think they have only been around "God-people" who give off an air of arrogant haters of anyone not like them.

And unfortunately, to be sure, there more than a few of this flavor of religious folk – especially here in the Southeast. But what if their understanding of true, biblical Christianity is dead wrong? What if the nature of the kingdom of God is radically and categorically different from what they perceive? What if the vibe they have been given from false portrayers of Christianity is precisely what all of us should reject?

To say it another way, what if what they really and truly long for is the nature and function of the actual and true kingdom of God? What if Christ's kingdom embodied the thing they are aching for? What if it vehemently opposed and rejected what they too are vehemently opposing and rejecting?

Jesus told His first disciples that they would no longer be fishing for fish; rather, they would now fish for people. If you understand how they fished in the 1st century, you will get a glimpse of what He intended and how it reveals the nature of His kingdom. Unlike today, fishermen then used a dragnet. They would drop it to the bottom of the lake and scoop up everything. EVERYTHING. And they wouldn't sort it all out until they arrived on shore. In other words, they didn't hand pick the good or bad fish while fishing. They didn't discriminate who or what got in the net. They didn't try to sort out things while the net was in the water. Fishing in the first century involved throwing out a net and letting anything and everything possible hop in it. The sorting out would happen later, usually by another.

One commentator had this to say: "Jesus' call to fish for people is a call to be the 'worst kind of fisherman' – willing to drag in the absolute chaos of the world and live with the mess inside the net. . .It is a wild, passive, and incredibly generous dragnet operation of grace, where the disciples only job is to hold the net wide open and let God worry about the rest."

If this is true – and it feels true to me – I wonder what those who think "hell is a party" would think if they got a true taste of the true kingdom? I wonder if what Jesus is rejecting here (religious people preferring only respectable, clean, cooperative, and well-behaved people) is the same thing my unbelieving friend is ultimately rejecting? And, I wonder if we church people have made evangelism a lot more difficult and bigoted than it was ever intended to be?

I don't know about you, but I sure am glad the people who shared the Gospel with me allowed the net to hit the bottom of the lake. If not, I would have never been scooped up to hear, understand, and respond to the glorious good news.

What perception do you think unbelievers have towards those claiming to be Christians? Why do you think they perceive what they do?

Do you think that, deep down, perhaps they are rejecting a version of Christianity that Jesus Himself would reject? Why or why not?

What do you think about the statement, "...where the disciples only job is to hold the net wide open and let God worry about the rest"?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 5 - November 30th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 7:18-20 – Part I

"John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Luke 7:20)

July 30th, 2026. It was the last day of summer vacation for the Pearson family. The plan was to explore the Grand Tetons, hopeful to begin the day with a spectacular sunrise at Schwabacher Landing.

The clock had yet to reach 5 am when we piled into our rented vehicle. The 90-minute journey ahead of us demanded an early start – especially if we wanted to beat the crowds. The moon and the stars were bright and easily seen. We were confident of a crisp, clear view at our first destination. About halfway into the trip, however, a bit of doubt crept in. Thick, dense fog enveloped our car and what felt like hundreds of miles around us. We proceeded onward, sure the fog would lift before we arrived.

It was not to be. Turning onto the road that would take us to Schwabacher Landing was difficult. Cars were everywhere. The difficulty lies in the fact that they were driving away from the scenic spot, not towards it. The sun was mere minutes away from peaking over the mountains, yet hundreds of people were leaving. Not us. No sir. Our alarm clocks had gone off way too early for that nonsense. We drove as far as we could, parked, got out and started walking. The fog was still incredibly dense. No mountains could be seen. The Grand Tetons were there; they were just hidden behind a weighty, thick, soupy mist.

People continued to walk and drive the opposite direction. I was certain, however, that once the sun woke up the fog would dissipate quickly. So the Pearson's, along with around two dozen others, waited to capture the view of a lifetime. And we waited. And waited. And then we waited some more. The fog would not lift. Finally, well over an hour past sunrise, we decided it best to move on to the next destination on our list. What we had hoped was not to be. What we had planned got derailed. What began as a crisp, clear morning, quickly turned into an enveloping and blinding fog that lasted way longer than anyone wanted.

Sometimes a fog descends that was unplanned, unexpected, and unwanted. One moment everything is clear and hopeful. The next, everything is confusing and depressing. You know that beauty and life sit on the other side, but it is impossible to see. You wait and wait and wait for it to lift. But it seems to only get thicker and heavier. John the Baptist was immersed in a fog. Sitting in a jail cell

because of his commitment to God, thick doubt snuck in. Had he missed it? Had he hitched his wagon to the wrong horse? Had he been wrong about his cousin this whole time? Did his parents lie to him? Had Jesus lied to him? Had the whole thing been a cruel, cosmic joke? Everything started so well. It was crisp. Clear. Fun. Exciting. Then prison happened. He just knew he would get out soon. Surely, if his cousin was the Messiah, he would make the magic happen and pull some of his "God strings". So he waited. And waited. And waited some more.

The fog continued to linger. It was so thick, he sent some of his disciples to find out whether Jesus really was who He said he was. His debilitating depression overwhelmed him. He didn't know if he could believe anymore. Since he couldn't ask Jesus himself, he sent gofers for confirmation. It had become too much. He needed to know. He had to know.

Though crazy to consider, it is a great relief to know that even John the Baptist wrestled with doubt. With depression. With mental illness. The very one who was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb – that one – he was overwhelmed with mental anguish. If you are there now, be encouraged: you have company with one of the all-time greats.

> Have you ever experienced a mental illness? Was it like a fog, preventing you from seeing and thinking clearly?
>
> Why do you think John the Baptist had to send delegates to find out from Jesus if He truly was the Messiah? Of all people, he should have been confident, right?
>
> Does it encourage you at all to know that even John the Baptist battled depression? Why or why not?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 6 - December 4th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 7:18-20 – Part 2

"John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Luke 7:20)

July 30th, 2026. It was the last day of summer vacation for the Pearson family. The plan was to explore the Grand Tetons, hopeful to begin the day with a spectacular sunrise at Schwabacher Landing. If you read yesterday's entry, you'll know it wasn't to be. No matter how bad we wanted it to, the fog simply wouldn't lift.

That was our one and only chance to view the famous and, from what I am told, breathtaking sight at Schwabacher Landing. There is a good chance I might never get to see it. The fog prevented me from seeing what I had hoped and planned to see. Sometimes, the fog is so thick and so debilitating it blocks us from our hopes, plans, and dreams.

I am almost certain, when John the Baptist heard from an early age that he was the forerunner to the Messiah, his mind flooded with big notions of himself. And, I am fairly confident that when he found himself baptizing the Messiah, he considered how his fame would rise. Sure, he wanted to decrease so Jesus could increase. But I cannot help but think he saw his name in the "Most Spiritual Man Alive" lights. Big crowds. Major influence. Vast number of followers. By the religious world standard – hitting the big time. Life as a Jesus forerunner and follower was good. Hopes, dreams, and plans were limitless. No doubt he would see Schwabacher Landing, er, I mean preach to thousands one day.

But it was not to be. His "up and to the right" career pretty much ended at the baptism. His dreams and hopes and plans were dashed. He ended up in prison. The fog descended. It would not lift. He would never get to see what his imagination pictured.

Sometimes I wonder if much of the fog that descends on our lives is a result of our own plans and hopes and dreams being dashed? We imagine our lives and careers and families and circumstances as always moving "up and to the right." Yet what we so often hope for and dream about never comes to be as planned or predicted. We think life with Jesus means – perhaps a bit of pain here and there – but primarily thrill, excitement, and success. Before we know it, we end up in prison wondering where in the world our Savior is. The Jesus we were so confident in is now hidden behind the fog. We planned our lives to see Schwabacher Landing. Now we assume we will never get the chance.

What did John the Baptist do when he couldn't take it anymore?

When the doubt had crept in with such intensity that he wondered if it were all a lie? He did what all of us should do: he got his friends to ask Jesus for help.

Yep. Read that again. When the fog refused to lift, John the Baptist got his friends to ask Jesus for help. Yes, I know that you and I can talk to Jesus wherever and whenever. And, yes, I know John was in a literal prison and could not get to Jesus physically. But still. I know there are times when we do not have the words to pray. Or, we think our prayers are empty and not going anywhere. Or, we are done praying and at our wit's end. What do we do then? We ask others to pray on our behalf. We hope that perhaps one of them has a gift of prayer that God hears and answers. We send them to Jesus on our behalf in hopes that our doubt and depression will somehow dissipate.

How has your life turned out different from what you planned? Did a fog creep in? Why or why not?

What do you think John the Baptist dreamed about as a child, knowing he was the forerunner of the Messiah?

Who do you know who has a gift of prayer, whom you can ask to go to Jesus on your behalf?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 7 - December 5th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 7:18-28 – Part 3

> "So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me…I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John." (Luke 7:22-23, 28)

July 30th, 2026. It was the last day of summer vacation for the Pearson family. The plan was to explore the Grand Tetons, hopeful to begin the day with a spectacular sunrise at Schwabacher Landing. If you've been tracking along, you'll know it wasn't to be. No matter how bad we wanted it to, the fog simply wouldn't lift. We were forced to journey along to our next destination.

On the way to our next stop, however, we were interrupted by an incredible sight. A half dozen or so majestic Elk were migrating slowly across a field to our left. We pulled over, stopped the car, and climbed out to get a glimpse of something we had never seen before. They were breathtaking to observe. They were calm. At peace. Slow movers. Significantly larger than deer. Antlers resembling a crown on a king's head. The light brown creatures would look up and out, look down and eat, look up and out again, and back down to eat. The mere sight of them invoked wonder and moved my blood pressure to slowly decrease.

Here's the thing: had we not been forced to change course due to the fog, we never would have encountered the Elk. The fog kept us from what we were hoping and planning for. But the fog moved us to experience something ese. Something unplanned, but wonderful.

So too with John the Baptist. Due to his debilitating mental state, what he had planned for himself didn't pan out. But because of his own personal fog, he was led to receive one of the greatest affirmations in all the Bible. Not only did his disciples come back with a confirming report of Jesus's miracle-working power, they came back with a word from Jesus that John was the greatest humans to walk the earth up until that point. Had the fog lifted early, this soul fulfilling word might have never made it to John's ears.

No one ever asks for the fog to descend and remain. It's not something anyone hopes for. If you've experienced it, you

wouldn't even wish it on your worst enemy. However. Looking back over the season of anguish, if we're honest, we wouldn't change a thing. It is in the most difficult of times that God tends to reveal more of Himself. In other words, had the fog lifted when we wanted it to, we might have missed depths of God's reality and beauty. Our plans may have shifted, but what we shifted into is something we never would have encountered otherwise.

The Father's sovereignty and love are so intertwined, that He works even the most excruciating of circumstances out for our ultimate good and His majestic glory. The Pearson family had planned to see Schwabacher Landing. The dense fog prevented that. Our rerouted plans directed us straight to behold animals we had never seen before. John the Baptist planned to preach and minister to the masses. Prison and doubt and his own fog prevented that. His mental state led him to a confirmation from the Messiah that is unmatched in Scripture. And, dear reader, He does the same with you. The fog may lift soon. It may not. But the reroute will be worth it. It is there where God tends to do His best work.

Read Romans 8:28. How have you seen God work difficult circumstances out for good?

How have you encountered God's depth during a season of pain and difficulty?

How do you think John the Baptist felt when his disciples came back with their report?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 8 - December 6th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

"But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." (Luke 7:47b)

It's kind of crazy if you think about it. The one with the most sins is the one who loves Jesus the most. The more sin, the more love for Jesus. Now. I can feel you getting a bit nervous when you read that. I get it. It makes me nervous too. If you're like me, you want to add about a dozen caveats to it. We do that so we don't write one another a blank check to go sin as much as we jolly well please. We want to be, well, careful.

And, yes, there is a time to be careful.

However. . .

Jesus is not careful here. If we are going to be careful with this passage, let's be careful not to add to what Jesus does, or doesn't, do. In fact, what prompted the entire ordeal was the response (or lack thereof) from the "careful" crowd.

You know the story. Jesus accepted an invitation to eat at a Pharisees home. During dinner, a woman of questionable repute made her way into the home, wept over Jesus's feet and poured perfume on them as an act of honor and adoration. The religious leaders were outraged that Jesus would allow such a spectacle by a sinful woman. He proceeds to share a parable to the shocked hosts, revealing that those who have only had a few sins forgiven don't have much for Jesus. Those who are consumed with sin, however, well they can't get enough of Him.

The woman acts the way she does because she recognizes the depth of her sin and the overwhelming love and forgiveness from God in His Son. The Pharisees want very little to do with Jesus because they (a) don't think their sins are very many or bad; and (b) don't believe Jesus is God's expression of love. So they carefully diagnose and theologize the ludicrous nature of the whole thing while the sinful woman goes home totally and completely forgiven.

Jesus doesn't ask her to do any religious deed. Jesus doesn't demand a promise that she would never sin again. Jesus doesn't send her away telling her to stop sinning, or else. None of that. He sees her faith in the reality of who He is and what He came to do – and that was it. Forgiven forever.

She loved more because she had sinned more.

Don't Be Careful Where Jesus Isn't Careful

We want to make it tidy. We want to clean it up. We don't want our kids to hear something like this thinking they can go and sin all they want. We want to be careful.

Again, yes. There is a time to be careful. But let's not be careful where Jesus isn't careful. In fact, let's be wild where Jesus goes wild. Here He is wild with His forgiveness and grace and love and mercy. It's done. It's accomplished. His coming to earth, and yes His subsequent death and resurrection, guarantees forgiveness for anyone, at any time, in any place. Period. No questions asked. No commitment cards. No promises to never do it again.

The woman understood this undeserved, overwhelming reality and she couldn't contain herself (Read: she wasn't careful). The religious hosts? They couldn't fathom the depth of their sinfulness, much less that only by Someone else could they be made right with God. So they maintained a careful and calculated life.

Once again we are reminded of the truth that we all long to know that we can be fully seen, fully known, and fully loved. And once again we see that it is possible – only and through the Person of Jesus Christ. Hallelujah. Now why don't you go wild in your response to His amazing grace?

> Why do you think it makes us nervous to say or read things like "the one with the most sins loves Jesus the most"? Is it true? Why or why not?
>
> Why do you think we are so quick to add caveats or put parameters around it?
>
> How might you live a "love-full" relationship with Jesus if you allowed yourself to go there?
>
> Do you believe it's true that – because of Jesus – you are forgiven and free from all and every sin now and forever? Why or why not?
>
> **How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?**

DAY 9 - December 7th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 8.1-3

"and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdelene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means." (Luke 8:2-3)

At the time of my writing, my denomination (Southern Baptist) has been debating (again) the role of women in the church – in particular as to whether or not they can serve as ministers and pastors in local congregations. It became a big stink at the annual convention, and the ripple effects continue to linger. Sigh.

Also, at the time of my writing, research reveals that men are coming to church at a significantly higher rate than years past. Yay! Part of the data, however, is skewed because the research points to large numbers of women who are now leaving the church. Again, sigh. Is there a correlation between what Southern Baptist's are arguing over and women leaving the church? I have no idea. Probably, but

I can't prove it.

Now. I'm not here to argue whether or not women should be ministers/pastors. That's not the purpose
of this Advent devotional. (Though I must confess that when I get to heaven, I don't envision God saying to me, "Matt, I really wish you had spent more time getting women to stop talking about Jesus.") No. The purpose of this devotional is to examine whether or not it would be worth following Jesus if there were no hell. And, of course, it is worth following Jesus – period. Worth it for all people. Women and men.

I ache for the world – in particular women in the world – to know about women in the Bible. I fear many women get their understanding of God and church and how each view women from people who argue fruitlessly over such things. The Bible presents a view of women that, unfortunately, seems to contradict what many falsely assume. It's not just that Jesus loved women. It's much deeper than that. He valued them as humans. He allowed them to minister to Him. He allowed them to minister to others. Luke, inspired of the Spirit, fumbles over himself inserting verses about the importance of women to Jesus and His earthly ministry. Luke didn't have to write verses 1-3 of chapter 8. It could have easily been left out. Unless the Spirit told him to write it – which I believe He did.

It's a shame to me that so many women are leaving the church because those that knew Jesus, that saw Him, that interacted with the real and true One, were drawn to Him. They didn't spend

time with Jesus and leave because they felt small or unimportant or under-valued. No. Quite the opposite. Their connection to Him seemed to have led them to becoming fully alive.

I believe this is what happens when any human, of any gender, situates him/herself under the realm and reign of Jesus. He doesn't just heal diseases and cast out demons. He restores and brings dignity and value and calling and purpose and life. Regardless of what people are arguing over, let me encourage you to hitch your wagon to the Jesus of the Bible. You WILL become the person – man or woman – God made you be.

> Why do you think it makes us nervous to say or read things like "the one with the most sins loves Jesus the most"? Is it true? Why or why not?
>
> Why do you think we are so quick to add caveats or put parameters around it?
>
> How might you live a "love-full" relationship with Jesus if you allowed yourself to go there?
>
> Do you believe it's true that – because of Jesus – you are forgiven and free from all and every sin now and forever? Why or why not?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

"This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God." (Luke 8:11)

A commentator I read on this passage had a perspective I had never considered. In short, he taught his belief that the Sower was God the Father, not the Son; and the Word of God sown was actually Jesus (the Word). That being the case, he surmised:

> *"(this) means that on the plain terms of the parable, Jesus has already, and literally, been sown everywhere in the world – and quite without a single bit of earthly cooperation or even consent. But can you tell me that Christians in general have ever for long acted as if that were the case? Have we not acted instead as if the Word wasn't anywhere until we got there with him? Haven't we conducted far too many missions on the assumption that we were 'bringing Jesus' to the heathen, when in fact all we had to bring was the Good News of what the Word – who was already there – had done for them?"*

Now. Let me be clear. I don't know if I completely buy it. And, in a sense, a missionary who goes to the ends of the earth, "taking Jesus" to them is essentially the same thing as sharing the Good News of what Jesus had done for them. Potato, Pot-ah-to.

But doesn't this perspective free the evangelizer up a bit? Is it just me, or does it feel a bit less demanding and heavy to go out in the world, knowing the Word has already been sown? That my job is to open my mouth and declare what has already been accomplished? That my role in the thing is call others to see and believe?

And it's not just for those who go "to the ends of the earth" to the "heathen." If it's true there, it is true here. In other words, the Word (Jesus) has been sown with your neighbor, your co-worker, your family member, your best friend, your child, your parent, the person who does your hair, the one who makes your sandwich, the parent you sit with at your child's baseball practice, the person you meet at the gym. It's true for the person who believes hell is going to be one big party.

All of them. All people. Humans around the world are forgiven because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is done. Our role isn't to make anything happen. It's – all of it – has already happened. We get to declare it to be true and invite them to believe in the reality.

Dear reader – because of Jesus, your sins are forgiven. Do you believe it?

What do you think about the commentator's interpretation of the Parable of the Sower?

How does it set with your mind and heart as it comes to sharing the Good News of Jesus?

Who might the Father put in your path today who's heart is ready to hear and believe?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

"A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.'" (Luke 9:35)

Of all the things God the Father could have said at that moment. To our knowledge, no moment like this one had ever occurred. Heaven only knows what they are doing now, but up until this point – Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John, and Jesus had never been in the same location. Israel's history and the future of Christ's church all in one spot. The Law and the Prophets (Moses and Elijah) and the New Testament church (Peter, James and John) having a picnic on top of a mountain.

Several of Luke's comments are funny. For one, Luke tells us that while this was going on, Peter and his companions were sleepy. Really? Come on, guys! Your leader is transfigured in your presence, and dead patriarchs are talking with Him – and you're asleep?!?!? Two, Luke tells us that Peter, James and John didn't tell the others what had happened. Read that last sentence again. When have you ever known Peter to keep quiet? Correct. Never. It's as if Luke is wondering which is the greater miracle: the Transfiguration of Jesus or that Peter kept a secret.

We are told that when the three disciples were fully awake, and the six men were sizing one another up – a voice sounded from a cloud. It was God's voice. Yahweh spoke. At a moment unlike any other in human history – Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John, Jesus – the Father's voice is heard. Though I don't have to say it, I'm gonna: what God would say would be of utmost importance. This was, to put it mildly, an historic moment.

What did God say?

To listen to what His Son says. More specifically, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." Of all the things God the Father could have said at that moment – and He uses His heavenly voice to tell us to listen to Another's voice. He uses His words to ensure we listen to the Word.

And if your curiosity has got you wondering if there is something specific Jesus said that the Father is referring to – your curiosity can be quenched. We have three clues that highlight what, exactly, God wants us to pay close attention to.

> Clue #1: Right before the Transfiguration account we read Jesus saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Luke 9:22).
>
> Clue #2: Right after the events of the Transfiguration, we

read something similar: “Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men” (Luke 9:44).

Clue #3: Luke tells us what Moses, Elijah, and the Transfigured Jesus were talking about when they got together on the mountain: “Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about His departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30-31). The word for “departure” here literally means “exodus.” They were talking about Jesus’s death.

If you and I jumble these clues together, we can get a pretty good idea what God wants us to listen to when He tells us to listen to His beloved Son. God wants us to pay very close attention to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Think about that. Let that reality settle into your bones.

Of all the things God the Father could have said in that moment, He chose to tell us to listen – with every fiber of our being – to Jesus talking about His departure. We can be sure that this is the single most important thing in all the universe.

God didn’t tell us to get our act together.

God didn’t tell us to shape up.

God didn’t tell us He is angry or mad at us.

God didn’t tell us to be more like Moses and Elijah.

God didn’t tell us to jump through religious hoops.

God didn’t tell us to be consumed or motivated by guilt and shame.

God didn’t tell us that we needed to figure it all out.

No. God said to listen to Jesus. In particular, to listen to Jesus when He makes known that He will do everything for us.

You can stop working so hard to get God to like you, sir.

You can stop striving, ma’am.

His love for you is present, active, and available. Listen to and believe the Word.

DAY 11 - December 9th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 9:29-36

Before reading this story, if someone were to ask you what you think God would say at one of the most crucial moments in human history – what would you have said?

Do you think Christians are guilty of making lesser important things more important than they are intended to be? If so, what are some of those things?

Why is it so important for us to keep the most important thing – most important?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

A Unique Listening Moment in History



DAY 12 - December 10th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 11:37-54

> **"Then the Lord said to him, 'Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But now as for what is inside you - be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you." (Luke 11:39-41)**

I recently learned of a family in my neighborhood in the process of being torn apart. The husband and wife are getting a divorce. Their young children are being argued over. I have my suspicions as to what happened, but I don't know for sure. My sinful, greedy self wants to make it my business. But it isn't. From what I know (which isn't much), it is a very sad situation.

Though I don't believe any couple is ever fully exempt from this happening, to learn of it happening to this particular family startled me. I was surprised. I didn't think it would happen to that family.

Why?

Because I pass their home every day. And do you know what they have on their front porch and in their yard? Scripture verses. Yard signs and porch décor with good, beautiful, and hopeful Bible truths. From the outside looking in, it seemed as if this family had it together. They are sweet. Nice. Kind. Good looking. Well off. Churchgoing. Christian. Christian with biblical truths and promises displayed in front of their home.

I want to be careful here. On the one hand, I don't want to be guilty of shaming this family. Like I said, it can happen to any and all of us at just about any time. On the other hand, I don't want to give the impression that displaying Bible truths and such is a bad thing. It isn't.

I want to be careful to make the point that these verses from Jesus and this neighborhood incident is a reminder that looking like a Christian doesn't make one a Christian. Appearing godly doesn't guarantee godliness. You can put lipstick on a pig if you like. But it's still a pig. You can decorate your home with biblical truths, but it doesn't mean your heart is being transformed. Would it be nice to guarantee a happy family and marriage if I displayed some promises of God on my front porch?

Sure. But it just doesn't work that way.

Then again, no. It would not be nice. That would make it all transactional, not supernatural. It would make it dry and boring and lifeless, not full of life, energy, and miraculous power. Jesus was upset with the Pharisees because they were walking around

with unchanged heart. They had plastered all the godly signs up. They looked the part. But their souls were cold.

Christianity, thank God, is so much more than trying to decorate a pig. Walking with Jesus is so much more than going through a checklist or routine. It is so much more than signs and décor on a porch. It is life-giving. Life-changing. Joy-infusing. Love-consuming. Relationally dynamic. Abundant and full.

I'm not saying the family in my neighborhood weren't walking joyfully with Jesus. They may have been. Divorce and splits happen in a Genesis 3 world. But the outside of their house is a reminder that it's more than painted words on a piece of wood. It's about being radically transformed by the bloody stains from the wood of a cross.

Jesus, by the power given you due to your death, burial, and resurrection – give us new hearts that beat steadily with and for You and Your ways.

When you read the Scripture passage for today, what are some of the things that went through your mind? Why do you think Jesus was being so harsh?

In what ways might you be guilty of focusing on the appearance of Christianity, rather than the heart?

Why is it a good thing that a relationship with Jesus is more than a checklist or routine?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 13 - December 11th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 14:15-27

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters - yes, even their own life - such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26-27)

Let's be honest. These verses don't feel good. Jesus's words feel harsh and hard and strict and heavy. First of all, hating those closest to us is just, well, mean. And second, being required to carry an instrument of execution as entrance into the club is the opposite of appealing. If Jesus is wanting more followers, someone needs to help Him with His marketing strategy. Yes. By themselves, I can do without these words from Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't say these words without context. They aren't on an island by themselves. In fact, He had just shared a parable that makes the hard verses much easier to swallow.

Consider. . .

In what is known as "The Parable of the Great Banquet," Jesus hints at what hating your family might actually look like. The people who end up joining the master at the fun and food filled feast were who? The poor. The crippled. The blind. The lame (see verse 21). Think about this for a moment. If your life consisted of gross poverty, or being unable to walk, or unable to see, or unable to hear (lame), or a combination of each – and someone approached and shared with you that you have been invited to have a seat at the king's table – what would you do? Seriously. Think about it. If your life was nothing but pain and oppression and heartache and being ignored and devalued with no hope for future opportunity, and suddenly you are told you have access to a life-transforming party at the request of the king, what would you do?

You'd probably gladly leave the life you've known behind and do whatever it takes to get yourself to the banquet. You'd more than likely eagerly forsake all you've ever known so you can joyfully enjoy a new life with the gracious king. To put it another way, what you would do to get yourself to the banquet might just look like hate. It might look like you used an instrument of execution to get rid of your former life.

Do you see? When Jesus says we cannot be His disciple unless we hate family, He is saying that once we understand the invitation to be a part of His great kingdom banquet – we will gladly leave everything behind. Of course He doesn't want us to actually hate our family. But accepting His invitation to a new and invigorating life will look like a crippled person sitting at a great feast. After all, spiritually-speaking, aren't we

helpless? Could it be that the Christian life Jesus offers those who believe is like a fun-filled feast with the joy-filled and loving King? Perhaps if you and I really believe such things, then other things in life will pale in comparison (i.e., look like hate).

When you read Jesus's words to hate family and carry a cross, what feelings are invoked in you?

How might you need to reread Jesus's words in the context of Luke 14?

Do you see the Christian life as one of freedom and joy and fun life with God? Why or why not?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 14 - December 12th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 14:28-35

"In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." (Luke 14:33)

Two short parables about counting the cost. The first deals with a construction project. A guy wants to build a tower. Jesus claims it is wise consider how much money it will cost, survey whether there is enough money in the bank, and – if so – proceed with construction. It would be foolish, according to Jesus, to realize after the project has started that he can't afford its completion. A third of a tower would be a constant embarrassment.

The second has to do with a king considering a takedown of another nation. He has 10,000 soldiers. The nation he wants to take over has 20,000. In the mind of Jesus, it would be best for the king with 10,000 men to see if they can work out a peace deal, rather than fight. It's common sense that an army twice the size of another will easily defeat and conquer the smaller one.

Logical. Rational. Practical Prudent.

Consider the cost. If you don't have enough money to build a tower, don't build a tower. If you have half the number of soldiers as the nation you want to conquer, try to work out a peace deal.

It seems as if Jesus is calling His would-be followers to consider carefully and logically as to whether or not one should follow Him. It feels as if He is saying to be thoughtful and wise before jumping "all in" on the Jesus-train. It looks as if Jesus is attempting to talk them out of it, to keep them from future embarrassment.

But is that the way of Jesus?

Notice. In both of the brief parables, the two individuals (the one wanting to build a tower and the king with 10,000 soldiers) realize they don't have enough. The guy wanting to construct a tower only has enough to lay a foundation. The king wanting to defeat a particular nation has half as many soldiers necessary to compete. Both of them are well beyond the necessary means to accomplish their task. Both of them, in other words, have aspirations that are impossible.

So what's going on? Could it be that their impossible desires is the point? Could it be that the whole point of it all is that to be a part of the kingdom of God means recognizing you simply cannot make it happen on your own? Could it be that when Jesus says you cannot be His disciple unless one gives up everything he has He is saying that being under His rule only comes by gift and a full-on receiving of it by faith?

I think so.

Considering the context of Luke 14, Jesus is continuing on with the theme of poor, crippled, blind, and lame. Getting in on His party and joining in on the festivities only comes by believing you have been invited, trusting that it's happening, and enjoying the fun. You don't get in by working up enough money to build a foundation. You don't get in by offering 10,000 soldiers. You get in by recognizing you can't by yourself and accepting the free offer as nothing but a wonderful gift to be received.

So go ahead. Consider the cost. Explore your options. You don't have enough to make it happen. You cannot join in unless you believe it is all by Him, all from Him, and always available in Him. So let it all go, believe it to be true, and live.

When you think about "counting the cost" before following Jesus, what comes to your mind? Does it square with the point of these parables? Why or why not?

Why is it good news that we can't afford or work our way into the kingdom of Jesus?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 15 - December 13th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 15:1-32 – Part 1

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (vs. 1-2)

Stop me if you've heard this before, but the Parable of the Prodigal Son was not originally shared with prodigals. Oh no. This famous parable originally landed on religious ears. To be sure, society's riffraff heard it. But Jesus's words were intended for church-goin-folk.

It was the Pharisees and teachers of the law who were muttering. They were the ones in a wad with Jesus and His ways. If you recall, the parable trilogy of Luke 15 ends with an angry older brother, muttering complaints at the father. Yes. This parable was intended to, once again, cause shock and awe. The God the religious leaders believed in, and the One Jesus claimed to know could not be the same God.

Indeed, they were not the same God.

The God of the religious leaders owed them something for their piety.

The God of the religious leaders would love them more for all the good things they did.

The God of the religious leaders looked down on "tax collectors and sinners."

The God of the religious leaders punished gross sinners.

The God of the religious leaders was always on their side.

The God of the religious leaders acted on a transactional basis.

The God of the religious leaders was mean, uncaring, and waiting to punish the most miniscule wrong.

The purpose of religion for these leaders to was continue improving oneself morally.
Maybe I should have typed "god" of the religious leaders. Because, fortunately, their god doesn't exist.

They couldn't stomach the God Jesus purported. They could never even begin to imagine the God they had grown up studying and worshiping was anything like the God Jesus believed in. No way. Their god would never be that careless. Or should I say, their god would never be that prodigal?

The (False) god of the Religious Leaders

More on this tomorrow, but for now let me encourage you to consider something. Could it be that one of the reasons we church people have used hell as a means to convince people to believe in Jesus is because maybe we believe in a god similar to the one the religious leaders upheld? Could it be that hell has been used as one of our convincing rods to beat people with because we too have a hard time believing in such a crazy God?

This Advent devotional is seeking to answer the question of what's the point of following Jesus if there was no hell. What if hell is, indeed, one big party? Again, I don't believe it is, and I do believe in hell. But if not, would being a Christian still be worth it? What if we started helping people follow Jesus, not by warning them of hell, but by inviting them into a relationship with a crazy good God?

> How might your current understanding of God be similar to that of the religious leaders?
>
> Does it make you nervous to read of God being "prodigal"? Why or why not?
>
> Why do you think the "sinners" of society in Jesus's day wanted to be around Him so much?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

"Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" (v. 4)

Stop me if you've heard this before, but the Parable of the Prodigal Son is not really about a son who went prodigal. As mentioned yesterday, it also was not originally intended for prodigals' ears. These three parables were intended then, as now, to shock the religious people with the reality of God.

That's right. These parables aren't about a prodigal son. They are about a prodigal God.

Prodigal means careless. Wasteful. Reckless. Absurd.

Think about it. What shepherd leaves ninety-nine to go chase down one? That's not very smart. What if, in the process of chasing one down, the others decide to escape? It would seem that wisdom would tell the shepherd to count his losses so as not to risk losing another. Only a reckless shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep unattended.

And what about the woman who loses ten percent of her coin collection? Sure. What she does falls more in line with what a normal person would do. It's not necessarily prodigal to go searching for a significant sum of money. But notice what she does: she turns her house upside down until she finds it. She doesn't rest until it is back in her possession. She frantically searches until her coin collection is complete again. Translation: she goes all prodigal looking for the coin.

And then there's the father. The true prodigal in the story. Sure, the younger son went prodigal with his dad's inheritance. He was, indeed, careless and wasteful and reckless and absurd with his newfound wealth. But that's somewhat expected, is it not? How many prodigals have you known in your lifetime? Young people with loads of money don't usually make the best decisions. The shock of the story is not what the younger son does with the money.

The shock in the story is in how the father treats the son. In other words, the shock factor belongs to the father's actions. We expect the father to stay on the porch with a belt in his hand. We expect the father to let his boy have it. We expect the father to demand the boy prove that he really is sorry for his actions. We expect the father to look on with disappointment as the son gives his apology speech. We expect the father make sure the son knows how much he disapproves of his behavior. We expect the father to hold his older brother up as the ideal example to strive for.
But the father does none of that. In fact, he does just the opposite.

The Real Prodigal in the Story

Go back and read Luke 15:20-24. The father…

- Doesn't wait for his son but runs to him. The father had not been sitting on his porch waiting to scold him. The father had been longing to be back in relationship with his boy.
- Hugs and kisses him. He doesn't punish and beat the boy. He showers him with affection.
- Shows compassion. Not anger. Not judgment. Not disapproval. Not disappointment.
- Refuses to hear his son's apology. There was no time. It was time to celebrate and party.
- Doesn't demand a time to prove himself. This is risky, of course. But there are no stipulations or strict markers he has to hit to be able to stay at his house.

Everything in our lives (including in church!) tells us this is crazy. Absurd. Reckless. "What if the son takes advantage of him again?" "Aren't you enabling?" "I'm all for grace, but this is too much! There has to be some accountability somewhere!"

This is the God Jesus gave us. This is the God that is. Like it or not, our God is prodigal. All who believe get to share in the party. Those who refuse are left on the outside looking in.

How do you envision God responding when you mess up?

Where did you get that understanding of God?

Does it make you uneasy that the father in the story seems to go overboard? Why or why not?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'" (v. 31)

Stop me if you've heard this before, but the Parable of the Prodigal Son should really be called the Parable of Two Sons. Everyone knows about the one who squandered his inheritance with wild living. Every parent lives in fear that their son/daughter might do something similar with their life. In fact, if parents were honest, they would probably tell you that they secretly hope their children turn out like the older brother.

Which is a problem.

We tend to equate Christianity with being a good, upstanding, moral person. We tend to parent our children, situate ourselves, work our friends into being well-behaved, church-goin', respectable humans without a sketchy past. If we (or our children, or our friends, or our colleagues, etc.) don't go to jail, don't do drugs, don't have pre or extra-marital sex, stay away from alcohol, and only watch clean entertainment – then SUCCESS. In other words, if we aren't careful, we will make having an upstanding reputation in society the main thing for a good Christian person.

I'm all for good, clean living. However. . .

In the Parable of the Two Sons – the respectable one was the one left outside the party with the Father. The moral one was the one who never (to our knowledge) went inside. In other words, in Jesus's parable – the good kid ended up outside the celebration. He was too good to acknowledge or recognize the goodness of the father, so he never got to enjoy it.

Read verse 31 again. The father made it plain: "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." This is the father's way of letting the older son know that he has had access to the fatted calf and parties the whole time! The father was always present and ready to celebrate the older brother. The celebration was always going on. The older brother had been too busy keeping score, too occupied judging his younger brother, too angry at the perceived unfair treatment, too focused on bookkeeping to even notice the goodness of his father.

In other words, the older brother simply didn't believe it to be true. In his mind, this kind of father didn't exist. He didn't want a father who would be this excessive, this crazy, this abundant, this exorbitant. He never believed, therefore never got to go inside.

The way the parable ends brings us back to the beginning of the chapter. I believe it is it point of the entire chapter.

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1-2)

The religious leaders couldn't stomach a God who would associate and party with such gross members of society. The older brother didn't want a father could be so careless and reckless with his possessions. The good, moral, responsible ones were the ones left out. They refused to believe in this kind of God.

Christianity, at the end of the day, is not about who does the most good and the least bad. It's also not about who does the least good and the most bad. It's – finally and forever – about belief in a God who could be this abundant and kind and loving and joy-filled. A 'good' Christian person is one who is enjoying the eternal kingdom party that is happening and available because of the finished work of Christ Jesus. God isn't looking at you wondering why you did this, or why you didn't do that. He's wondering if you are enjoying the free, full, loving, and exhilarating party He's put on for you.

How would you define a "good" Christian?

Why do you think it makes us nervous to consider the fact that God isn't obsessed with our "good" or "bad" behavior?

Who are you more like in the parable – the younger or the older brother? Why?

What about God's excessive goodness is hard for you to believe? Why?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 18 - December 16th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

Sometimes I wonder if unbelievers are turned off by Christianity because of our arrogance? I wonder if we are our own worst enemies when it comes to the Gospel being understood and gladly embraced? I wonder if we who call ourselves Christians truly understand the radical nature of God's grace?

Consider the first guy in Jesus's parable. The Pharisee. One of the religious elites. Jesus starts the parable with this very revealing critique: "*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else…*" *(Luke 18:9)*. The smug Pharisee, in other words, walked with a judgmental air about him.

Jesus said the Pharisee stood off by himself and rattled off all his "goodness." He expressed gratitude for not being like wicked sinners (robbers, evil doers, adulterers, tax collectors). He proceeded by ensuring God knew that he fasted – not once, but twice a week; and that he had faithfully tithed for decades. You can smell the pomp.

This guy was probably the chairman of the deacons. More than likely, he always gave a quarterly report at the church business meeting. He had probably served on every committee the church offered, and had been a part of calling the church's last half dozen pastors. In his mind, and the eyes of the congregation, he had never stolen anything, never did any evil, was faithful to his wife, paid what he owed, and did all the right religious things.

And he knew it. And he loved it. When he turned off the news at night, he was grateful to God that he wasn't like "those" people who do all the crazy stuff. In his pious mind, God was lucky to have him on His team. If only the world had more people like him – then the world would be a better place!

Or would it?

It's sad/interesting/intriguing/frightening/freeing what Jesus does with the religious guy. He sends him home unjustified before God. That's right. In a crazy and unexpected twist – Jesus sends another guy home right with God. The Mr.DoGooder guy leaves the prayer time still working on his standing with God. The other guy? He goes home unburdened.

Free.

What's nuts about the parable is that the other guy is a tax collector. Evil. Selfish. Greedy. Deceitful. Cheater. The man spent most of his life draining people's life savings and ruining their futures. Everyone – EVERYONE – hated the wicked tax collectors. In the minds of first century citizens, you cannot get much worse than one of these. Grade 'A' Scum of the Earth.

Yet the tax collector goes home right with God.

Jesus could not have presented two more opposite individuals. In one corner, you have the most religious and pious and moral guy in town. In the other, the worst excuse for a human. And the bad guy goes home free.

How is that? It's the nature of genuine Christianity. It's called radical grace.

Consider:
"*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.'" (Luke 18:13)*

That did it. He knew he wasn't worthy. He knew he had nothing to offer. He knew his life has been a waste. He knew he deserved emptiness, pain, punishment, and isolation. He knew the only chip he could put on the table was a desperate plea for God to do it all for him. And it was this guy, not the Pharisee, who went home completely and totally right with God.

How can this be?

It's the only way to be a Christian. It's the only way to live as a Christian. Life with God is a life that is completely reliant on God. His mercy. His grace. His love. His power. The second we put the onus on us and our works – we back away from His power and begin to arrogantly assume "we" are better than "them."

I wonder if we unintentionally suck the life out of Christianity by making it all about what we have to do for God? I wonder if those around us would gladly come to Jesus if they had any idea how it truly worked? That, to be right with God is to humbly admit that we can never be right with God on our own? That God loves everyone to such an extent that He did all the work for salvation that was and is necessary? That God will never evaluate us based on our avoidance of bad things or pursuit of good things? Rather, that He looks on us through the lens of our desperate plea for His work on our behalf? I wonder if you – yes you – know that if you say to Jesus, right now, "be merciful to me, a sinner" that you will be immediately and forever justified with God?

I hope so. It's the only way.

Do you think unbelievers see Christians as arrogant? Why or why not?

How might arrogant and pious Christians do damage to the faith they claim to profess?

What about this parable makes you nervous? What do you like about it? How does this parable explain the essence of Christianity?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

Leaving Prayer Time Still Working



DAY 19 - December 17th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 20:1-8

"One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple courts and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, together with the elders, came up to him. 'Tell us by what authority you are doing these things,' they said. 'Who gave you this authority?'" (vs. 1-2, emphasis mine)

Everybody loves the Good News until the wrong people start believing it.

If you breezed through the highlighted Scriptures above (Luke 20:1-2), go back and read them again. It's okay. I'll wait. Read them slowly. According to the Gospel writer, what got the religious leaders in a wad was the fact that Jesus was proclaiming good news. In this instance, He wasn't rebuking anyone. He wasn't talking in some bizarre code. He wasn't sharing bad news. He was proclaiming good news. Who in the world gets upset at that? Why on earth would anyone get all knotted up over hearing that God loves them and forgives them and has – on continuous offer - abundant life for anyone who believes?

His words must have been radical. Crazy. Non-sensible. Ludicrous. The religious elite wanted to know where He think He got His authority from. Just who did this guy think He was? How could He possibly get away with saying such incredulous things?

You see, it wasn't just that Jesus was sharing random good news that only applied to a couple of good people. That kind of news doesn't get anyone in trouble. This good news was so insane that the religion professors were convinced this guy (Jesus) could not be from God. The God they knew, believed in, and worshipped was nothing like the God Jesus was talking about. The news Jesus proclaimed was so good it sounded too good to be true. And if what He said were true, then any sinner at any time in any shape – for all time – could be forgiven and free.

Everybody loves the Good News until the wrong people start believing it.
What would you think if you heard a preacher proclaim the forgiveness of God over Hitler? You would wonder where that preacher got his authority.

What would you think if you heard a preacher proclaim to a homosexual couple that their sins are forgiven in Christ Jesus? You would wonder who gave him that authority.

What would you think if you heard someone declare forgiveness and freedom over your ex-spouse? The Democrat you despise? The Republican you are repulsed by?

You get the idea. Everyone loves the Good News until the wrong person believes it.

But if the Good News of the Gospel is that we are saved by grace through faith – not of any kind of works (Ephesians 2:8-9) – if that applies to you, why wouldn't it apply to those mentioned above? If you heard forgiveness proclaimed over these people, the preacher would have received his authority from God.

This means, dear reader, that you – YOU – right now are forgiven by God in Christ Jesus. Always have been and always will be. Do you believe it?

It also means every sinful human that has walked the planet has the exact same offer. We get to tell them and ask them if they believe.

But watch out for the religious types. They think God is transactional. That He rewards good works and punishes bad works. Religious types don't like the Good News. But you go ahead and believe it. The news is for them, too.

> Have you ever seen or heard of the "wrong" person believing the Gospel? Did it upset you or make you uneasy? Why or why not?
>
> Do you believe the offer of forgiveness and freedom and life with God (the Good News available in the Gospel) is, right now, available for all humans? Why or why not?
>
> Why do you think we want to put behaviors for people to do before we can declare them "Christian"?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 20 - December 18th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 21:1-11

"Watch out that you are not deceived." (Luke 21:8)

Three years before I was born, an R & B group called Blue Magic had a number one hit in 1974. The song is called "Sideshow." Perhaps you've heard it. Here's a portion of the lyrics:

> *"Step right up, hurry, hurry, before the show begins, my friends.*
> *Stand in line, get your tickets, I hope you will attend.*
> *It will only cost you 50 cents to see*
> *What life has done to those like you and me.*
> *See the man with the broken heart, you'll see that he is sad*
> *He hurts so bad (so bad, so bad)*
> *See the girl who has lost the only love she ever had*
> *There's got to be no sadder show to see*
> *No doubt about it, satisfaction's guaranteed*
> *So let the sideshow begin*
> *Hurry, hurry, step right on in*
> *Can't afford to pass it by*
> *Guaranteed to make you cry"*

It is such an intriguing song. Their point is that oftentimes the "sideshows" we come across (a man with a broken heart, a girl who lost her only love) on our way to a "main show" are actually the most important things in life. The shows on the side, so to speak, the ones we tend to bypass, ignore, be ignorant of, etc. are the real and true shows. All of us, it seems, have a tendency to miss what's truly important because we are blinded by the lights we are told to behold.

Once again, I wonder if this is a reason why some dismiss Christianity? Why even some Christians believe it to be a boring or empty or dry sham? Why believers are often accused of being just like the world – because we are enamored with the same things as everyone else?

Jesus spent so much of His time pointing out the sideshows. The circumstances, people, interactions on the side that, to Him, were the main attraction. The disciples were enthralled with the wealthy putting their gifts in the temple treasury. Their minds were whirring with curiosity as to how much money some of them had. Their hearts were drawn to the display of immense giving, wondering how spiritual one has to be in order to give that much money to the temple! Everyone there was locked in to what the wealthy were doing with their gifts.

Everyone but Jesus.

The wealthy's offering did nothing for Him. What got Him out of His seat, what cranked His holy tractor, what stirred up His divine emotions was an impoverished widow dropping in only two copper coins. The sideshow was, to Jesus, the main event.

Similarly, the disciples went on and on and on about the majestic structure that was the temple in Jerusalem. They were awestruck at its size, its beauty, its stones, its arrangement. Jaws agape. Eyes wide. Sheer amazement. Everyone who came within its vicinity were blown away by what their eyes were telling them.

Everyone but Jesus.

He yawned. At the risk of being known as the ultimate negative Nelly, the extreme party pooper – He was quick to inform the disciples that everything was coming down. Everything would soon be destroyed. Translation: "Don't be fooled. It's not the ultimate thing."

There was a sideshow (Him) that didn't – to the world – look like much. A nearly invisible kingdom at work that would be fully manifest in due time. The main event, in other words, didn't look all big and ornate and fancy. It was off to the side – but was indeed the actual, ultimate, authentic, and fulfilling reality.

Let me challenge you not to miss it. I have a hunch you and I will pass numerous sideshows this Advent season. People in pain. People in need. People without. People that don't grab our immediate attention. We will pass them as we go to our "main show." Let's not miss the life that is right under our noses. The ultimate meaning of life right before our eyes. They may not look like that big of a deal. But if Jesus and Blue Magic can teach us anything – these sideshows are where the main action takes place.

What comes to mind when you think of sideshows?

Have you ever had your attention interrupted by something that seemed insignificant but turned into something important? What was it?

What are some potential sideshows you might encounter this week?

DAY 20 - December 18th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 21:1-11

Is it possible that Christianity has become boring to you because you have bypassed the places/people where Jesus is actually working?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?



DAY 21 - December 19th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 21:12-19

"But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom..." (Luke 21:14-15a)

Perhaps you are old enough to remember the animated movie An American Tail. It hit theaters in 1986 (I was 9 years old). The Pearson family apparently got our hands on a VCR tape of the movie. It was one my sisters and I watched on repeat. The movie included a hit song that was eventually picked up by Linda Ronstadt and James Ingram. The song was called "Somewhere Out There."

In the movie, the song is sung by a lonely mouse wondering if the person he loves is out there, somewhere. If you know the song, it is now in your head for the rest of the day, and perhaps the entire Christmas season. You're welcome (grin).

I wonder how many Christians unconsciously sing this song in their hearts about God? I wonder if we who believe in God, spend the majority of our time imagining Him to be somewhere out there? I have a hunch many of us go about our lives in sort of a slog state assuming God is there, yes; but somewhere out there. Perhaps, we think, we will get to have real conversations with Him when we all get to heaven.

That's why these words from Jesus are so important. Critical, actually. In the context of Jesus predicting persecution for the disciples, He promises: "I will give you words and wisdom." As in real time words and wisdom. As in the actual moment of needing a word from God. In other words, Jesus is making it clear that He's not somewhere out there. Oh no. He is intimately close. Like, closer to us than our own breath.

When you and I trust in the reality of Jesus, His Gospel, and His right-now-existing kingdom – we are in continual and constant contact with the Lord of the universe. And this Lord is not out there, somewhere, aloof to our circumstances and needs. No. He is present and active – whispering in our ears, giving us wisdom, leading us with His love and words and ways and purposes.

At the end of the day, the question is not whether or not Jesus is near. No. The question is, "Do we believe He is and, thus, have ears to hear what He is saying and how He is leading us?" The whole point of Christmas, by the way, is Immanuel – "God with us." He/She who has ears to hear, let them hear. There was a sideshow (Him) that didn't – to the world – look

like much. A nearly invisible kingdom at work that would be fully manifest in due time. The main event, in other words, didn't look all big and ornate and fancy. It was off to the side – but was indeed the actual, ultimate, authentic, and fulfilling reality.

> What about your relationship with Jesus? Do you perceive Him as somewhere, out there? Or do you go about your life as if He is with you in real time, speaking actual words?
>
> Do you imagine a Jesus who is nearby, ready to judge you for always messing up? Or do you think of Jesus as near, in order to help, rescue, support, and provide wisdom?
>
> Where do you tend to get your understanding of Jesus?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 22 - December 20th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 22:31-34; John 21:15-19

"But I have prayed for you, Simon that your faith may not fail." (Luke 22:32)

Of all the things for Jesus to pray for! Seems a bit odd, does it not. Think about it. . .

- Jesus is about to be arrested, beaten, put on trial, and unjustly crucified. In other words, He is about to endure the most gruesome 24-36 hours any human has ever experienced.

- His 12 disciples are all on the verge of abandoning Him . . . and He already knows it.

- Peter (Simon), the supposed leader will be chief denier.

- Peter (Simon) argues with Jesus about the predicted denial (in other words, Peter is in denial about his denials).

- Jesus is about to turn over the whole of Christianity to these guys and their leader who is on the verge of pretending to anyone who asks that he had never been associated with Jesus.

Let me spell it out like this: Simon Peter is about to do some really dumb things. He is about to behave in ways that are not in line with being a good Jesus follower. The pressure is about to hit him, and he is going to fail - and fail drastically.

And what does Jesus pray for? That his faith would not fail.

This is bizarre to me. Why didn't Jesus pray for Peter not to deny Him in the first place? Why didn't Jesus pray for Peter to obey and/or stand strong and/or be courageous and/or for God to help him not be stupid? If we knew what Peter was about to possibly experience, aren't these the things we would have prayed for him? If you are a parent, don't you pray these things for your children? For them to be obedient; for them to stand strong; for them to be courageous; for them not to do anything stupid? Is it not interesting that Jesus prays for Peter's faith not to fail?

Could it be that the best prayer we can pray for one another is that our faith not stop? Is it possible that what we most need, is not strength to be good or avoid bad, but rather faith to always believe the Good News of the Gospel? Isn't our biggest need and our greatest threat lack of faith in what we have and who we are because of Jesus's finished work for us?
To be sure, it is not wrong to pray for obedience and strength and courage. It is not wrong to ask God to help us (and others) not do

dumb things. But if you think about it – until Jesus returns – we are all going to continue to stumble and fall. And perhaps one of the reasons we do so is because we are always focused on trying not to stumble and fall. I wonder if Jesus prayed that Peter's faith not fail because He knew that what Peter most needed was not to pass a morality test. What Peter most needed was to be confident and secure – deep in his soul – that He was loved, forgiven, free, and able to enjoy life with God. Jesus prayed for his faith not to stop because he wanted Peter to focus on who he was because of Jesus's work on the cross, not because he was a "good boy." I think Jesus prayed this for Peter because Jesus knew Peter most needed to believe (trust, have faith) that he was always free to live a love-filled, joyful life with God.

Yes. Perhaps the greatest prayer you can pray for yourself and others is that their faith may not fail. Go ahead, ask Jesus to pray that to the Father on your behalf. I have a hunch it is a prayer the Trinity is eager to answer.

> What and how do you normally pray for yourself and your loved ones?
>
> Does it feel a bit shallow, or not enough, merely to pray for their faith not to fail?
>
> What does Jesus's prayer for Peter reveal about what Jesus is most focused on? Does he care more about our actions, or about our belief in the already available Good News?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 23 - December 21st, 2026
Scripture: Luke 22:39-65

"But this is your hour – when darkness reigns." (Luke 22:53b)

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

Jesus never waits for us to get our lives together. His love is not conditioned to be given only when we prove ourselves. He doesn't wait to see if we are going to finally "turn over a new leaf."
In fact, it's even better than that.

Jesus loves us at our worst. He never loves us less when we are grossly rebelling, nor does He love us more when we are "being good." He loves us radically on our best days and our worst days.

This is demonstrated clearly and wonderfully in the hours leading up to His death on the cross. When darkness reigned. When humanity was behaving in the most despicable manner (you cannot get any worse than beating, mocking, and killing God), Jesus continued on toward the cross. When it would have been easy for Him to give up on us and forget us and to demand that we have some good, moral skin in the game – He quietly, gently,and lovingly journeyed on toward the cross. While we were violently sinning against Him, Christ died for us.

- While Jesus was praying in anguish, the disciples could not stay awake to pray with Him. He continued on toward the cross (Luke 22:45-46).
- While one of His own betrayed Him with a kiss, He continued on toward the cross (Luke 22:47-48).
- When one of the disciples misunderstood the assignment and attacked with a sword, Jesus – continuing on toward the cross – healed the ear of one of his oppressors (Luke 22:49-51).
- When the leader of His group denied knowing Him on three separate occasions, He continued on toward the cross (Luke 22:61).
- When guards were doing unspeakable things to Him, Jesus continued on toward the cross (Luke 22:63-65).

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

If someone were to ask you why you are a Christian, there are many things you could say. One of the reasons could be that you don't want to go to hell when you die. And this is a good and true reason.

But there is so much more to it than that.

Mainly – LOVE.

Love at Humanity's Worst

We believe in and associate ourselves with Christ Jesus because of love. We all ache for, long for, deeply desire to know if there is anyone or anything that can love us at our worst. When it lands on us that it's God who does that? Oh my. Jesus's journey to the cross, and all the horror going on around Him, is overwhelming proof that we always have been and always will be loved. No matter what. Were it based on our actions, behaviors, words, and motives – Jesus would have stopped the whole enterprise long before the nails were thrust into his hands. But it never has been or will be about that. God loves. Period. Do you believe it?

How does it hit you that Jesus continued toward the cross amidst sleepy and confused disciples, a betrayal kiss, denials, and cruel bullying by guards?

Is it difficult to believe that God loves you, even at your worst? Why or why not?

Are you waiting for God to demonstrate His love in some other way? If so, what else could He do to prove it?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 24 - December 22nd, 2026
Scripture: Luke 23:13-25

> **"(Pilate) released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will." (Luke 23:25)**

The gospel in a verse. The gospel in a sentence. The one who is guilty goes free. The one who is guiltless gets punished.

Barabbas woke up in prison for leading riots and killing humans. He went to bed a free man. No questions asked. Jesus woke up in freedom – loving and teaching and healing and offering mercy.

He went to bed behind bars, accused of things He never did.

The guilty goes free. The guilt-less gets punished.

The Gospel.

I wonder what Barrabas did after being released? I wonder how he used his newfound freedom? He was given an unexpected, unwarranted, out-of-the-blue new life. I wonder what he did with it? He was released with no questions asked. He was released with no strict demands. He got to go free because Another took his place. Period. What did he do next?

Did he go back to leading rebellions?

Did he go find the family of the one he murdered and apologize?

Did he go find his family and spend extra time soaking in conversations with them?

Did he go and ask the woman he loved to marry him?

Did he go and eat a delicious meal with his favorite people?

Did he wonder why the guy who took his place did what he did?

We don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us. All we are told is that the guy who was a known insurrectionist and murderer was released; and the guy who had done nothing wrong took his place in jail. We don't know what Barabbas did with his newfound and unfair freedom. It's fun to speculate, but we simply do not know.

But we can know this: what you do with your freedom.

In a sense, we are Barabbas. We, the guilty ones, are free because the guilt-less One took our place. It's true. We actually are free. Released. Unbound. Unchained. Free to enjoy an unexpected, unwarranted, unfair life given to us by a gracious and loving God. What are you doing with your freedom?

Barabbas and Being Free – Really Free

Your release came with no conditions.

Your release came with no questions asked.

Your release came because you have always been and always will be loved.

Your release is present, ready, and available – regardless of your future behavior.

This being the case, how are you enjoying your freedom in Christ? Seriously. What does the fact that you are forgiven and loved and free to live under the reign of an unconditional, loving, and joy-filled King do to your posture toward life?

> How does the exchange between Barabbas and Jesus picture the Gospel?
>
> In what ways are you still living bound, though – in all actuality – you are free?
>
> What is keeping you from walking in complete and total freedom?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 25 - December 23rd, 2026
Scripture: Luke 23:26-49

"But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:40-43)

January 15, 2026. President Donald Trump receives a Nobel Peace Prize for something he didn't do. That's right. Maria Corina Machado, a Venezuelan leader who fought tirelessly for democracy in her country, received the coveted award for her efforts in October 2025. In a meeting at the White House at the first of the year, however, she handed the prize to President Trump as an expression of gratitude for his help with her beloved country.

I don't have to tell you the backlash that ensued. To many, this was scandalous – from both sides of the political aisle. The opinions shot like missiles claiming the President did nothing to deserve the Nobel Prize. Trump can be a lightning rod for many people. His receiving a gift that belonged to another was no exception.

As a matter of fact, emotions were so strong that an appeal was made to the Nobel Committee for their opinion. Their statement? "Once a Nobel Prize is announced, it cannot be revoked, shared, or transferred to others. The decision is final and stands for all time." The Prize (a gold medal) itself remains with the President of the United States. The work, however, is – and always will be – attributed to Maria Corina Machado. Thus, Donald Trump possesses a Prize that officially belongs to another.

Have you ever considered that the criminal in Paradise with Jesus may have bumped into someone he wronged? Quiet possibly, someone(s) he intentionally hurt could have crossed paths with him in Paradise. It is even more possible, mind you, that folks he wronged were present to witness his execution. Can you imagine what they thought when they heard Jesus declare that he would be with Him in Paradise? Talk about scandalous! How could that guy be gifted Paradise for something he didn't do? Even worse, how could he be gifted Paradise considering all the evil that he did do?

The Gospel is scandalous.

Grace is scandalous.

Usually, we are okay when we are on the receiving end. But when the "wrong" person gets it, watch out.

The Nobel Prize and the Gospel

"What do you mean the criminal on the cross with Jesus is promised Paradise moments before his death? He did nothing but hurt people his entire life!""

What do you mean President Trump owns the Nobel Peace Prize? He didn't earn it!"

The Gospel is the Good News (to put it mildly) that Another did the work that we receive and enjoy. The Gospel says that we cannot earn or work to get it (Paradise, the Nobel Prize), but rather we accept the labors of another. In our illustration with the President, he owns the gold medal. But the work is attributed to a Venezuelan leader. Regarding the criminal on the cross, he enjoys Paradise because the work accomplished by Jesus.

So too with us. We believe, receive, and live out the reality that Jesus did everything necessary for us to enjoy life with God. We enjoy peaceful, whole, intimate life with Him. Jesus gets the credit for doing all the work. The astounding reality about the criminal is that all he did was believe in the reality of Jesus as Messiah. He did zero work. He simply believed.
You and I aren't hanging on a tree next to Jesus at the moment. But the promise of Paradise is available. Being forgiven for everything is an actual, present reality. Walking in perfect peace with God is yours to enjoy. Being free to live out the life God called and created you to live is ready for you to work out. You being declared righteous and perfect and holy and loved is an actual thing. The work has already been done. The work is attributed to Jesus. But the work He did so you could enjoy these gifts.

The criminal believed and it all became true.

Do you?

> How does President Trump accepting another's Nobel Peace Prize illustrate the Gospel?
>
> How would it make you feel if you had been hurt by the criminal who was promised Paradise during his execution?
>
> What does the fact that Jesus promises the criminal Paradise communicate about how the Gospel works?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 26 - December 24th, 2026
Scripture: Luke 24:1-11

"On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb . . . When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdelene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles." (Luke 24:9-10)

Luke's Gospel started off with women (Elizabeth, Mary) playing a significant role in the life of Jesus. In the middle, we read of women who support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3) and another who teaches us to be still and present with Him (Luke 10:38-42). Now it ends with women being the first to hear and tell of the resurrection. Though we don't know for sure, it feels like Luke is communicating something important. If we want to learn how to live vibrantly, we would do ourselves a favor by paying attention to the women connected to Jesus. They seem to be (a) some of His favorites; and (b) the women appear to "get it."

Late last summer, I came across an article about Catholic Nuns. Yes. You read that right. I honestly cannot remember how it ended up in my feed, but it did. And I'm glad it did. It is from the National Catholic Register called "Surprised by Joy: How a Podcast Hosted by Nuns Took Over the Internet." Look it up. It's a thing. Even Cosmopolitan magazine found out about it, labeling summer of 2026 as "Nun Girl Summer." Weird, but intriguing.

Apparently two nuns, Sister John Dominic Rasmussen and Sister Miriam Holzman started a podcast "to show the joy of living the religious life, a life dedicated to Jesus Christ." Before they knew it, they were becoming internet famous. The thing that caught the most attention? Their joy. According to the article,

> *"This increase in viewership came with an onslaught of positive comments. People across the internet were struck by the joy and peace that the sisters exude.*
>
> *'The vibes here are amazing,' one Instagram user commented. . .*
>
> *'This lowered my cortisol exponentially,' wrote another."*

The entire article is worth your time. Podcast listeners are drawn to a way of being in the world. They are attracted to a way of life that is separate from what they are being sold by every other outlet. In other words, it points to the joy that emerges from life with God.

Now, to be sure, I am not Catholic. This may be the first piece on Catholic nuns I have ever read. The most exposure I have had to such things is when I watched Sister Act 1 and 2. In other words, I am not converting or attempting to convert anyone to Catholicism. That's not my aim here.

What I love about this and want to highlight is the fact that life with God brings about immense joy and vibrancy – not just in the life to come, but now. The ladies in Luke's Gospel and the nuns recording a podcast point to a thrilling and energetic response to being with and responding to the living Christ. Getting our cues from them, we don't have to wonder whether or not following Jesus is worth it. In Him, we find our truest selves and who were/are always meant to be.

Why do you think Jesus chose women to reveal His resurrected self to first?

Why do you think two Catholic nuns talking about life with God appeal to so many people?

If someone were to ask you why they should follow Jesus, without mentioning the afterlife, what would you tell them?

How might the Spirit be prompting you to pray right now?

DAY 26
December 25th, 2026

Merry Christmas!

This Advent Devotional has aimed to reflect on the incentive of following Jesus if hell were either (a) a party; or (b) didn't exist. If someone truly believes that hell is going to be a gigantic party, how would the Gospel be good news? If someone believes that an unbeliever simply ceases to exist after death, then what's the point? What's the motivation for becoming a Christian? To once again be clear: I believe in a real, eternal hell. And I believe it will be – to put it mildly – eternally excruciating. That said, I have attempted to explore if there is any incentive at all to being a Christian if there were no hell. Or, how might one engage in a Gospel conversation with someone who genuinely believes false things about it?

I think Luke's Gospel gives us good, solid, helpful, and exciting answers. Heaven and hell are real and can be helpful motivators when evangelizing. But following Jesus now by surrendering one's life over to Him truly is the greatest life there is. Life with God through Jesus Christ is the advent we all long for. And today we celebrate His arrival. We soak in the love of God for us as evidenced by the first Christmas.

Consider this exchange between a pastor (**Robert**) and one of his congregants (**Frank**):

> **Frank**: "If you say that the acceptance is already given freely to everybody in the world by the Mystery of the Incarnation – and that all anyone has to do is believe it – what's the incentive for living a good life as opposed to a rotten one? What, for that matter, is the incentive for believing as opposed to not believing?"
>
> **Robert**: "Here's my answer: the incentive is that the Gospel is fun…it's the only really good news in the world will ever hear. It may be mysterious, or absurd, or outrageous; but it will make you gladder than anything the world will ever tell you. As a matter of fact, all the world will ever give you is a lifetime's supply of threatening incentives to get your act together, or else.
>
> People always assume that the church's primary business is to teach morality. But it isn't; it's to proclaim grace, forgiveness, and the free party for all."
>
> [From The Mystery of Christ and Why We Don't Get it by Robert Capon.]

Yes. The Gospel truly is the only really good news the world will ever hear.

Now. Before you close this and meander off to stuff your face with delicious Christmas food, it must be said that this life is not all there is. Following Jesus is worth everything, yes. But we don't live as though we have no hope after the grave. It's impossible to live the abundant Christian life without the hope of the resurrection. Paul even said if this life is all there is – gross (see 1 Corinthians 15:19). A primary reason we celebrate today is because we know He is coming again, just like God promised He would the first time. Our joy never subsides because we are never without hope.

I leave you with this thought: If following Jesus is this good now – can you imagine what awaits us in the life to come?

Merry Christmas.

