

THE
GIFTS
OF
Christmas

A DEVOTIONAL JOURNEY THROUGH
THE SEASON OF ADVENT

The Gifts of Christmas

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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
THE GIFT OF HOPE	
1. The Gift of Hope	13
2. Past Hope	15
3. Present Hope	17
4. Future Hope	19
5. Confident Hope	22
6. Patient Hope	24
7. Sharing Hope	27
THE GIFT OF LOVE	
8. The Gift of Love	33
9. God's Love in Us	35
10. Amazing Love	37
11. Practicing Great Love	39
12. The Necessary Ingredient	42
13. No Greater Power	44
14. Love to Share	47

THE GIFT OF JOY

15. The Gift of Joy	53
16. Joy Stronger Than Fear	55
17. Watch for Joy	57
18. Season of Joy	60
19. Joy in All Things	62
20. Complete Joy	64
21. Joy to the World	67

THE GIFT OF PEACE

22. The Gift of Peace	73
23. The Prince of Peace	75
24. Peace with God	78
25. Peace with Others	80
26. Peace Beyond Understanding	83
27. Peace in Trouble	85
28. Passing the Peace	87

THE GIFT OF JESUS

29. Christmas Eve: Unexpected Gifts	93
30. Christmas Day: The Perfect Gift	95

INTRODUCTION

This Christmas, share in the magic as we unwrap four of the most important gifts we could ever receive. During the season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we will dive into the meaning of hope, love, joy, and peace. And we will prepare our hearts to celebrate the coming of the ultimate gift, Jesus Christ.

Advent is a season that is officially observed in many churches. The four weeks before Christmas are set aside as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Jesus's birth. The term *advent* is a version of the Latin word that means "coming."

But Advent is not just an extension of Christmas; it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

There are some differences in the way people celebrate Advent. While the core is the same, some of the traditions and practices vary. This book is based on common practices, and we invite you to adapt it

to match the traditions of your own church. One of the main traditions of Advent is the lighting of the candles on an Advent wreath. A circular evergreen wreath represents God's unending love for us. And the lighting of five candles throughout the season represents Jesus's coming to a world lost in darkness. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isaiah 9:2). As we light an additional candle each week, we get closer to the arrival of the true Light of the world.

This book contains devotions for each of the thirty days leading up to Christmas. Based around the weekly Advent themes of hope, love, joy, and peace, there are seven devotions for each theme. There is also a devotion for Christmas Eve and one for Christmas Day. In addition, each of the sections contains an introduction page with verses to memorize, a song to sing, and a verse to focus on throughout the week. We encourage you to use these sections as a guide for a weekly lighting of your own Advent wreath. Whether you do this alone, as a family, with friends, or as a small group, taking the time

to practice the tradition of the lighting of the candles will add to the richness of your Advent experience. And singing the songs can make the experience especially fun and meaningful if you have kids.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts. The tradition and the devotions in this book are designed to help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God’s redeeming love for our world.

No matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder for you as you discover the gifts Jesus brings at Christmas: hope, love, joy, and peace.

THE GIFT OF hope

The first Sunday of Advent signifies the hope people felt in their hearts for a Savior to lead them out of dark and hard times. As we begin this season of Advent, we will spend the next seven days unwrapping the gift of hope. In addition to the daily devotions, take time this week to light the first candle in your Advent wreath. Remember the prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus's coming, express your desires for this season, and place your hope in the Light of the world who was born a baby in Bethlehem and who is coming again.

LEARN

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” —Isaiah 9:6

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” —Hebrews 6:19

SING

“Away in a Manger”

FOCUS

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

—Romans 15:13

1

THE GIFT OF HOPE

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

—1 Peter 1:13

Do you remember the one Christmas gift you hoped for most as a kid? Maybe it was a bike, a doll, a game, or a pet. Whatever it was, can you remember how it felt to be consumed by that one desire? When we hope for something, we think about it, dream about it, and watch for it with longing and expectation. Everything we see reminds us of the focus of our longing. That's what this season of Advent is about—expectant waiting. Not waiting for stuff, but waiting for a person. And this kind of hopeful waiting is not passive but active as we prepare our hearts for the celebration of Jesus's coming into the world.

Your longings have probably changed drastically

since you hoped for that something special under the Christmas tree. But that familiar feeling of longing returns each year as we look to the gift of hope in Jesus—past, present, and future. Our “hope-so” has become a “know-so.” We know the story of Jesus’s coming to earth, and as Peter said, we set our hope on the grace to be brought to us when Jesus comes again.

Hope is central to our survival as people. When we lose all hope, our life loses meaning and purpose. And hope is central to our faith. Advent is not just about waiting for Christmas. It is also about waiting for the rest of the story—Jesus’s second coming to earth. This hope is based on the promises of God and fulfilled in Jesus’s birth, death, and resurrection. So we celebrate Jesus’s birth, but we also look forward to and trust in the completion of our hope at His second coming.

What do you hope for this season? How can looking at hope as the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus past, present, and future give you new hope? How will that change the way you live this Advent season?

2

PAST HOPE

And again, Isaiah says, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope.”

—Romans 15:12

We live in a society of instant gratification. We get impatient waiting for microwaves, airplanes, and high-speed Internet connections. So just think of waiting thousands of years for something! The people of Israel lived an entire history of waiting. In the darkest days of hardship and exile, the Israelites held fast to the bright hope of the promise of a Messiah. Isaiah prophesied, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD” (Isaiah 11:1–2). The prophecies gave people

hope, and the words of the psalmist David encouraged them (and us) to hold on to hope: “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD” (Psalm 31:24).

Can you imagine the expectation that built over such a long time? Hope must have naturally faded for many, and others must have lost hope altogether that the prophecies of a Messiah would come to pass. In the hard moments of life, it was almost too much to hope for. But Jesus did come, and His coming fulfilled the prophecies of the past, not just for the Jews but for the whole world. In the book of Romans, Paul quoted a prophecy from Isaiah: “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope” (Romans 15:12). Jesus was a Savior for the whole world—for all who recognized Him as Messiah and worshipped Him as the Son of God, sent to redeem the world.

How does seeing the longtime hope of Israel fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah impact your concept of hope? How can you use this Advent season of waiting to help you worship more fully?

3

PRESENT HOPE

*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul,
firm and secure.*

—*Hebrews 6:19*

Imagine the worst storm you've ever been in. Lightning flashes, thunder rolls, the wind howls. A storm at sea is even more overwhelming as the waves toss and churn anything in their waters. When a storm hits a ship at sea, the anchor becomes its only hope. Nothing can be done about the wind and waves and rain. There is nothing solid to tether to. But the sea anchor serves to stabilize the boat in bad weather. By increasing the boat's drag through the water, the anchor can keep the boat from turning broadside to the waves and being overwhelmed by them. The anchor allows the boat to weather the storm.

Hebrews 6:19 compares our hope in Jesus to a sea anchor. Hope doesn't change the storms we are

facing—the waves are still as big, the rain pelts us just as hard, and the wind still howls just as strong. But hope can hold us firm and secure so that we are not overwhelmed. This is God’s promise as we wait for Jesus’s coming at Christmas and His second coming on earth. Hope is what we cling to when the storms of life come, knowing that our eternal hope is in the One who controls the wind and waves and that His love for us is greater than anything life can bring.

What storms are you facing in your life? Do you feel secure in hope or overwhelmed by the waves? How can you cling to hope as an anchor amidst the storm?

4

FUTURE HOPE

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

—Romans 5:1–5

Cliff-hangers—we love them, and we hate them. They drive us crazy and keep us coming back for more. A cliff-hanger is the end of a story that's not really the end. It leaves us in suspense, waiting in

eager anticipation for the rest of the story. The makers of the *Star Wars* movies are cliff-hanger geniuses, creating suspense that lasts for years until the next movie releases. People are so caught up in the story that they put on costumes and camp out in lines just to be the first to find out the resolution to the cliff-hanger.

We often think of the arrival of Jesus as the end of the story—and it was the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. But did you know there are many more that have yet to be fulfilled? Yes, Jesus's life was action packed. He was born, lived, died, rose again, and went to be with the Father. But that wasn't the end of the story either. Jesus's story in our world is not yet complete. And the same is true of our hope in Him—the completion of hope, when all things are made right, is yet to come.

We live in the time between. And that is why we still feel suffering, pain, and doubt. But in Romans, Paul told us to glory in our sufferings because they produce perseverance that produces character that produces hope. The focus is on the future. Our hope is rooted in what God has done through Jesus but looks

forward to the resolution of the cliff-hanger. And we hold tight because we know that we won't be disappointed by hope given to us by the God of love.

How can focusing on Jesus's coming this Advent season help you hold on to the future hope of the glory of God? How can hope for the future help you face with perseverance the challenges of today?

5

CONFIDENT HOPE

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

—*Hebrews 11:1*

Do you ever wish you could know the future? Maybe not the whole future, but just a glimpse—enough to be confident that everything will be okay. What would you do with that information if you had it? Would it really take less faith to believe and hope if you had a glimpse of things to come? For Mary, the mother of Jesus, she did get a glimpse of her future through the words of the angel Gabriel. And yet, it seems that knowing what would happen required greater faith than not knowing.

Luke 1 tells us that Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would become pregnant and give birth to the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Really? Can you imagine receiving that

message? Unbelievable, right? And certainly not a message that would naturally make one confident, hopeful, or assured. Like so many things in our lives, there was still a great deal of unknowns that required faith. Mary didn't know how it would all work out. She didn't get the details or a promise that it would all have a happy ending. But she chose to respond in faith, replying, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38).

Mary was not given confidence and assurance so that she could have faith. We often want assurance before faith, but it usually happens the other way around. The book of Hebrews says faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. That means we must choose faith, even when we cannot see the result, trusting that God is there working all things for good. The gift of confident hope comes when we place our trust by faith in Jesus Christ.

Where do you feel a lack of confidence and assurance about the unknowns in your life? How can you choose to step out in faith, placing your trust and hope in God for all that you cannot see?

6

PATIENT HOPE

For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

—Romans 8:24–25

Were you ever the kid lying in bed on Christmas Eve, listening for reindeer hooves on the roof? Parents everywhere assure their kids that if they are quiet and listen patiently, they'll hear them. The parents are banking on the fact that if their kids lie quietly in a dark room for long enough, they will eventually fall asleep. But the problem is that excited kids are not patient—pajama-clad kids are famous for popping out of bed every two minutes on Christmas Eve yelling, “I hear them! I hear them!” convinced that the reindeer have landed on the roof above.

The whole Christmas season is built on excitement and anticipation, making it a hard time to be patient. Everywhere we look, the lights and music and advertisements remind us that Christmas is coming. Even as adults, patient hope is never easy. The things we wait and hope for this season and throughout the year are bigger—a child to hold in our arms, a friend to be healed, a job to come through. Like kids on Christmas Eve, we are restless and impatient with the things we hope for in life.

But the Bible tells us that true hope looks different. It is not hope *for something* but hope *in someone*. The assurance that in the bigger picture of eternity God is at work helps us to place patient hope in Jesus Christ no matter the season or the circumstances. Sometimes patience is hard because of excitement. Sometimes it is hard because of discouragement. But either way, Paul encouraged us in Romans 8 to wait for the unseen with patience. And Psalm 42:5 encourages the hurting with these words: “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”

Feeling impatient? Remember these three things as you prepare your heart for Jesus's coming this Advent season: Praise cures hopelessness. Gratitude helps impatience. Worship brings hope.

What are you waiting and hoping for in your life? Are you feeling impatient with God? Why? What are three things you can do today to focus on praise, gratitude, and worship as you wait patiently on Him?

7

SHARING HOPE

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

Picture a homeless man lying huddled in a sleeping bag, propped up against the brick wall in a busy downtown area. It's a heartbreaking image. But now picture that the window of the store he leans against is painted with bright colors, depicting a warm fire in a cozy home. The words "Home for the Holidays" are scripted across the window. Suddenly the heartbreaking scene becomes even more stark as we see with clarity how truly far this man is from home.

A similar contrast exists for many of us this season. The displays of happiness and cheer that are meant to warm our hearts can serve to make us feel

more alone and hopeless as we compare our reality to the idealism of the season. The reality is that there is a stark contrast between what the season represents and what many people around us are living. For some it is a season of loneliness, grief, and pain. But just as Jesus entered a dark and hurting world, offering hope in a bigger story, we can do the same. Be the difference for someone this season. Share hope with the world around you—not in an artificial way but by showing genuine care and service to others. This sharing of hope can make our waiting during this season an active waiting. And it can help prepare our hearts to welcome the reason for our hope.

Not feeling like you have hope to share? Rest in the promise of Romans 15:13 that it's not up to you—peace, joy, and hope all come from God, who fills us to overflowing by the power of the Holy Spirit. Look for ways to share hope with others this season—not to create an illusion that everything is picture perfect but simply because God has sent His Son and the world is being transformed because of the work He has done.

Think of someone you know who could use hope this season. What is one practical way you can share hope with that person this week?

End of Excerpt. The full
book is 96 pages