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Compassion // Ted Logan
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Edited by Anna Emily and Christopher Wright



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Introduction // by Christopher Wright

Dueling Christmases

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." **Ephesians 2:8-9**

The Christmas season has always had a bizarre bipolarness to it for me. It wasn't until several years ago that I really started to notice that I celebrate two very distinct and very different Christmases depending on where I was and who I was with and it started to bother me.

I thought about it so much that I even named my two Christmases. There was "Secular" Christmas and then there was "Sacred" Christmas. The reason for the holiday's bipolarness is that they aren't really compatible with each other. I went so far as to create a graphic organizer (that's what we call it in elementary education land) so that I could better see the differences between the two. It went something like this:

Element	Secular	Sacred
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Santa Claus• Reindeer• The Grinch• Elves• Scrooge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Baby Jesus• Mary and Joseph• The Wise Men• The Shepherds• King Herod
Songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Let it Snow!"• "Jingle Bells"• Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer"• "The Twelve Days of Christmas"• "White Christmas"• "Frosty the Snowman"• "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "Joy to the World!"• "Silent Night"• "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful"• "What Child Is This?"• "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!"• "Away in a Manger"• "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen"

Element	Secular	Sacred
Stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Grinch stealing the Who's Christmas • Scrooge's turn from greed to the Christmas Spirit • Rudolph's journey from zero to hero • Being left behind at home and having to protect the home from thieves • Unexpected arrival of some "undesirable" relatives turns Christmas upside down • Ralphie's quest for a Red Rider BB Gun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The birth and protection of the son of God. Born to give his life for our transgressions
Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White, snowy • Evergreen trees • Sleighs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, sandy • Occasional palm trees • Camels
Traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christmas Trees • Give gifts to other people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Manger • The gift of Christ

Upon study of my graphic organizer, I could clearly see how divergent these two Christmases were. There was a friction between my two Christmases. One was about self, and stuff, and people who give me stuff, while the other was the humble beginnings of God's perfect son, Jesus Christ. One of them was basically focused on me and what I get and the other was focused on Jesus.

One secular Christmas song even makes fun of the me-centric secular Christmas in a song called *The Christmas Can-Can*:

*Christmas, Christmas time is here, and Christmas songs you love to hear
Thoughts of joy and hope and cheer, but mostly shopping, shopping, shopping!
Christmas. Christmas time is here, the sleigh bells and red nosed deer
Songs and songs we love to hear all played a thousand times each year*

Heard this same song 20 times and it's only Halloween

It's not even cold outside

Christmas, Christmas time is here, and Christmas songs you love to hear

Thoughts of joy and hope and cheer, but mostly shopping, shopping, shopping!

This brought me to a point of decision. Were these dueling versions of Christmas healthy to have? Did one distract from the other? Even worse, was one destructive to what I know the Christmas season is all about? Tough questions because I love both Christmases! I love the snow, the lights, the trees, the songs and I love the story of the baby in the manger, the carols. I didn't want to give either Christmas up.

I did however, notice that there was one similar item on my list. Gifts. Sure the giving of gifts came from two totally different perspectives but that was one element both Christmases shared. So this Christmas season we are going to focus, not on gifts, but the Gift. Not the giving of gifts to our friends and family (and the debt that typically accompanies those gifts), but on the gift of Jesus, what that gift is and develop a better understanding of how the gift affects each one of us. As you are reading and studying this week, our topics won't bring images of sugar plums dancing in your head. It won't make you think of a wintery scene painted by Thomas Kinkade. These topics are designed to bring a better understanding of how the gift of Christ works in your life and the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters.

So may you, this Christmas season, grow in knowledge of the purpose of the baby's arrival on that Christmas morning and like me, I pray that you wrestle with the appropriate balance in the dichotomy of our modern day Christmases.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Does a more secular Christmas celebration mask the true meaning of Christmas?
- ▶ A secular Christmas isn't all bad, it encourages some good things. In such a situation, is it important to consider the difference between what is good and what is best?

Week 1: Compassion // by Ted Logan

Day One // Compassion

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,” **Titus 3:4**

The sun is shining and traffic is light on this October morning. Bob is very excited as he makes his way to work in the city. In a couple of hours he will be meeting with a new client to finalize a deal that could mean huge profits for his company. Directly ahead, a small car swerves slightly and Bob sees what appears to be a young woman turn and reach into the back seat. Thinking that she probably has a small child in the back seat, he backs off a bit to give her some more room. Suddenly she turns and reaches into the back again and this time the car swerves even more. The car spins out of control, crosses the ditch, and slides across the grass where it ends up down a steep bank.

Without hesitating, Bob pulls to the shoulder of the highway, turns on the flashers, and leaps from his car. He races to the edge of the bank to find that the small car has stopped inches from the muddy stream below. The only thing that stopped the car from plunging into the water was the small trees that grow on the bank. As he searches for a way down to the car, he can hear the screams of a baby and the sense of urgency increases. As he reaches the driver's door he sees the young mother slumped over the steering wheel, apparently unconscious. Bob jerks at the door handle only to find it locked. Grabbing a spout for support, he kicks at the window until it buckles and he is able to reach in and unlock the door. As he does, he hears a cracking sound and the car slides closer to the water. As he fumbles with the seat belt he hears voices behind him and realizes that other motorists are forming a human chain down

the steep bank to assist in getting the victims out. Finally the seat belt is off and Bob starts the difficult task of lifting the woman from the car in light of his awkward position. He passes her to the man behind him and the human chain begins to pass her up the bank to level ground.

Another loud crack and the car continues to slide toward the muddy water. Inside Bob tries not to panic as he fights to free the car seat with the screaming two year old strapped in it. With the water up to his waist, Bob manages to free the child and passes him to the man at the door. Then, as the car slowly disappears into the muddy water, the rescuers help each other up the bank and fall down in the grass to get their breath. Bob is dirty, his suit is ruined, and he will miss his important meeting. Right now none of this matters because the mother has regained consciousness and Bob can hear her calming her child. Bob has never heard a sweeter sound.

A call comes to the secretary of a large church. The caller asks if the secretary knows of someone who can keep a teenage girl overnight during the week while her father works. The girl is a stranger, but the secretary and her husband decide that they will be the ones to care for this girl. They fix up a room for her, stock the refrigerator with snacks, and help her with her homework. They treat her exactly like they treat their granddaughters.

A young preacher walks from town to town because he has no other means of transportation. As he travels, he ministers to the sick, talks to people about God, and brings them new hope. The authorities of the region find him to be a threat and have him put to death. Even though the young man has the ability to avoid the horrible death that is planned for him, he does not resist. He goes like a lamb to the slaughter. Of course, that young man was God's son, Jesus.

What do all these people have in common? Compassion. Compassion for someone who needs to be saved from the brink of death. Compassion for a girl that needs someone to care for her. Finally, compassion for a world of people who are lost without hope.

Compassion is not just feeling sorry for someone. It is a word that implies action. It is feeling sorry and then moving to do something about it. God showed compassion for his people when he sent Jesus to be sacrificed for our sins. Because of that compassion we now have hope of eternal life. During this week we will take a close look at compassion as well as kindness, love, and mercy.

You may think that looking at Titus 3:4-7 is a strange way to begin the celebration of our Savior's birth. Hopefully, when you have completed all five weeks of the devotionals, you will

agree that it is totally relevant and a great way to remember exactly why we celebrate and what our response should be.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Think of a time recently that you had the option to show compassion to someone else. How did you respond? In hindsight, would you change your response and how?
- ▶ Do you put yourself in situations that give you the chance to show compassion to others?

Day Two // Kindness

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." **Ephesians 4:32**

If you are reading this on Tuesday, then talking about kindness may be the last thing you want to do. If that is the case, then I hate to tell you, but kindness is exactly what you need and what you need to talk about. Jesus was about kindness and if he is to be our example, we need to model the same type of kindness.

Last year, just before Christmas, I helped a lady lift her dog food into the car at Walmart. She was having trouble and I thought that it might be the thing to do. You know, since I was filled with the Christmas spirit and all. Just the other day, I drove a man down to Brown's store to get some gas. Seems he ran out at my driveway and was going to have to walk back home to get a can and then all the way to Brown's. We

used my car and my pickup to go the mile to the store for gas and, in a short time, had him on his way. Pretty cool of me don't you think, since Christmas is several weeks away. I am telling you this, not because I am proud of these small acts of kindness, but because I am ashamed that I have so few of these to share with you. Yes, I probably could come up with some more, but the point is, you shouldn't be able to count on one hand the acts of kindness that you did in the last year.

Galatians 5:22 list kindness as being a fruit of the spirit. Paul must have thought kindness and being kind was very important, as he mentioned it several times in his writings. Proverbs mentions being kind at least five times. If the Bible has so much to say about kindness I tend to believe that it must be important.

You may argue that you do not have the spiritual gift of helps so therefore you are excused from performing kind deeds. You may also use this excuse to keep from showing kindness in small things like letting someone go in front of you at McDonald's when it was obviously your turn. If you use the new two lane drive-up here in Sullivan you will have many chances to work on that!

Sometimes we may be acting in an unkind way and not even realize it. For instance, do you talk on your cell phone while going through the checkout line at a store? Have you ever considered how rude it is to ignore the person who is waiting on you while you chit-chat on the phone? I don't know about you, but I am annoyed when the service person ignores me and talks to someone else. Is it possible that a kind word from you might help that person have a better day?¹ We as Christians should be examples for the world when it comes to kindness and consideration. Say something nice to the people who wait on us or serve us in some way. Watch them light up, and when they do, your day will get a little better also.

¹ When I mentioned that talking on the phone while ignoring the checkout person was rude, I was assuming that the checkout person did not appreciate it. Well, I am not assuming anymore! As I stepped up to the counter at Lowes, I saw Mark Falloon strolling toward me. Always eager to hear one of Mark's witty comments, I turned a shoulder to the young lady at the register and began to chat with Mark. After a few seconds, I turned back to find the young lady patiently holding my change and my ticket. Realizing that I had ignored her, I apologized and shared with her that one of my pet peeves was people talking on their phones at the checkout counter while totally ignoring the person who was waiting on them. She smiled and said, "That is a big one (pet peeve) of ours too." I rest my case!

In today's world, rude and crude seem to be the rule and not the exception. It is never more evident than at children's sporting events. Some parents scream at the referees, curse the parents of the opposing team, and generally set a bad example. While these parents are usually the minority, they make the biggest impression. It makes me shudder to see these parents set that kind of example for their children.

On the other hand, at my granddaughter's basketball games, I have seen my daughter leave the stands to console players from the opposing team that were crying because they lost. I have also seen her congratulate girls from the team that just beat her daughter's team. She insists that her daughters do the same. This might not seem like a big deal, but this is a way of showing kindness. This is a way of showing the world that Jesus has made a difference in our lives. We tend to look for the big acts of kindness while passing up opportunity after opportunity to let people get a glimpse of Jesus through us!

It is not my intent to browbeat you into going out and performing some great act of kindness. It is my intention to start you thinking about your kindness rating. I cannot rate that for you. You will have to do that yourself. Let me remind you however, I am not the person by which to measure your kindness level. Your fellow church member or the guy down the street are not good examples. I think you already know where this is going. Jesus is our example and he was pretty good at being kind and showing kindness. There was a reason for that. He loved the people he came in contact with. We won't go there right now because that is the subject for another day.

Let us say for now that Jesus in us should give us the desire to be kind to others, kind even to those who are not kind to us. Yes, you read that right. I know that this concept is not popular. However, rewarding bad behavior with bad behavior does not seem to be a good way to win people for Christ. Jesus had the power to turn the men to stone that spit on him and beat him. He could have, but then he would have been just like them and the Son of God could not be just like them and still die for their sins.

I know, it is Christmas and you want to be happy and cheerful. Well, let me share a little secret with you. Show some kindness to the people you meet and do it more than once every day between now and Christmas. I wouldn't be surprised if your celebration of Christ's coming takes on a whole new meaning this year.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ On a scale of one (Scrooge) to ten (Jesus), how would you rate yourself on kindness? Would those around you give you same rating?
- ▶ When was the last time you intentionally performed a random act of kindness for someone else?

Day Three // Mercy

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--” **Ephesians 2:4-5**

On day two I got on your case a little. You might have thought I was picking at you or getting in your business. Call it what you want, I like to think of it as tough love! Today we are going to change the focus from others to us. As we prepare to celebrate the most famous birth in history, I would like us to focus on an element of that birth. That element is mercy.

During the Civil War, deserters from the Union Army were court marshaled and shot. Some of these soldiers were simply scared youngsters who ran away to go back home to help out on the farm. Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War, was a firm believer that these boys should be shot as an example to prevent further desertion. At that time in history, the public had easy access to the president, and President Lincoln rarely turned anyone away. Therefore, the mothers of these condemned boys would gain an audience with the president and beg Lincoln for mercy. Much to Stanton's disliking,

Lincoln would grant pardons in most of these cases, saving these young men from certain death. In more ways than one, President Lincoln was a merciful man.

How would it feel to be condemned to death with no way out? How would it feel to be pardoned and set free after death had seemed so imminent? If you are a born again follower of Christ you should know. If you have confessed your sins and asked Jesus into your heart then you have been pardoned. You have received eternal life, you will live forever as one of God's children. You have been on the receiving end of mercy.

Mercy is more than a feeling; like compassion, mercy is nothing without action. Mercy is showing kindness or giving forgiveness to someone who does not deserve it. God's mercy and God's grace go hand in hand.

Lincoln showed mercy to those men that had been condemned to death. God showed mercy to us when he sent Jesus to die for us. However, there was a big difference. The soldiers that Lincoln pardoned had never wronged him personally. The mercy that he showed them did not cost him anything personally. He did not have to give up anything or invest any time or effort into that pardon. He simply signed a document and had it sent to Stanton.

When we sin, we sin against God. We break his law and disrupt our personal relationship with him. Remember, this is the God that had mercy on the world and sacrificed his only Son, Jesus, so that we could have atonement for our sins. The mercy that God showed us was personal. We broke God's rules, we did not follow his laws and, we turned our back on him when he wanted a relationship with us. However, instead of sending us to hell without hope, he offered us a chance. By simply calling upon Jesus, confessing our sins, and asking forgiveness, we became the beneficiaries of God's wonderful mercy. Even though we have been forgiven, we continue to have problems with sin. Even so, God continues to show us mercy by forgiving us when we repent. I don't know about you but I cannot comprehend that kind of love, that kind of mercy. Only God can love that much.

What a wonderful thing God's mercy is. How fortunate we are to have such a merciful God? As you hurry through the Christmas season don't forget to stop and thank our Savior for showing us mercy.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ How have you disrupted your personal relationship with God recently?
- ▶ What can you do to repair that?
- ▶ When you mess up, do you try to fix it or do you turn to Christ's mercy?

Day Four // Love

"Greater love has no one that this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."
John 15:13

Turn on the TV, pick up a book at random, or watch a movie and there is a really good chance that before the story is over you will hear something about love. You will hear about falling in love, falling out of love, making love, looking for love, needing love, giving love, learning to love, parental love, and some things about love that I will not mention here.

Love has to be the most overused word in the English language. Think about it. We love our job, our truck or car, our purse, our house, a vacation spot, and our dog. We love football, baseball, TV, movie stars, certain food, and sometimes even going to church. Now and then you may hear someone say that they love the preacher or his sermon. Of course, this would be a rarity and hardly worth mentioning along with the others I have listed. No wonder our spouses barely blink when we tell them we love them as they leave for work or before they go to sleep. We use the word but we rarely think about what it means. We know that there are different kinds of love but we don't even try to stop and sort them out. On this day, this day leading up to our celebration of Christmas, let's stop for a moment and consider what it means to love and be loved.

The Greeks have different words for love depending on the type of love and who is doing the loving. However, for this short devotional, we will be looking at God's love for us, which is agape love.

As humans, we sometimes think we know about love and we may even try to compare the love we know about to God's love. We may think that his love for us is comparable to our love for a spouse. Sorry, no comparison. The love we have for our spouse, no matter how deep or strong, is based mainly on the fact that that spouse loves us. No, no, you say, I would love my spouse no matter what. You might think that, but in reality once your spouse stopped loving you and taking care of your emotional needs you would, in a matter of time, stop loving them.

We might compare God's love for us to that of a parent for a child. If we said that parent was the mother and the mother was exceptional, we might be close. Like that mother, God will love us unconditionally, forgive us time and time again, comfort us when we are hurt, and punish us when we sin. This love a mother has for a child is the closest I can come to explaining God's love to someone who does not know God. However, I have to take the analogy one step further and ask, will that mother allow her only son to be tortured and killed to save her step-children? God did!

God's love for us is unconditional, unlimited, unmatched, undeserved, unfathomable, and unwarranted. We have done nothing to deserve it, nor can we ever hope to match it or repay it. All we can do is accept it and love him in return. Of course, if we truly love God, then we will want to live a life that is pleasing to him and treat others by the example that Jesus set for us.

Christmas is about God's love and his gift to us. God has given us so much to be thankful for, but none of the things that he has blessed us with can compare to what he did for us on the cross. The gift of eternal life and fellowship with him was paid by the blood of Jesus. As we decorate, rush to buy gifts, and try to figure out how we can

attend all the parties we are invited to, may we be constantly aware of why we celebrate. God loves us!

Questions to Consider

- ▶ How can you make your Christmas more Christ focused this year?
- ▶ How can you reflect God's unconditional love to others around you?

Day Five // Be Still

“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” **Psalms 46:10**

Not long ago I was asked to visit an elementary school to read the last chapter of my book for a class of third graders. The students had already read all but the last chapter and I was to read to them, talk about the book, and answer questions. Some of the students were allowed to sit in the floor and one little girl sat directly in front of me barely five feet away. As I read the story, I could see the student began to fidget. She turned her back on me and begin to try to distract those who were sitting around her. I knew that the teacher could not see her and I did not want to interrupt the flow of the story. So, I continued to read. When I finished I asked her a question about the short chapter that I had just read. Of course, she did not have a clue since she was not paying attention.

How many times have we been caught not listening when God was speaking to us?

During a Sunday School class, a man was heard to say “If God would only post his instructions for my life on the bulletin board at work, or on a billboard by the highway, then I would know for sure what he wanted me to do and I would do it.” I am sure that we all have thought that same thing at times. However, it does not work that way and fortunately, it does not have to.

Today's verse opens with the words "Be still." Sounds simple, but in reality, not as easy as it sounds. Since this is your first week of devotions, you may not be feeling the crunch of the Christmas rush. While this may be true, I am thinking that for the people that are reading this, life is plenty hectic without throwing in the stress that Christmas seems to bring. I am retired but, due to the fact that I have trouble looking people in the eye and saying "no," I never seem to have a minute to spare. Consequently, I have trouble with the being still part. God is speaking to us. His voice is everywhere. It is in the nature that surrounds us, the blessings he gives us, and especially in the people that we meet every day. God is proving his love and mercy everyday but we turn our backs and do not pay attention.

Every Christmas you hear it from the pulpit, you hear it in your Sunday School class, and now you are hearing it from me. Slow down, be still, and let God's love penetrate into the

deepest part of your soul. You will be glad you did and everyone who comes in contact with you will be glad you did.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What are some ways that you can structure your life to help ensure that you can find time to "be still?"
- ▶ The message at Christmas is basically the same thing year after year. Can being still make the Christmas message new and different for you this year?

Day Six // Adored

"Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." **1 John 4:11**

My father and mother were not big on hugging and kissing us as children. Part of that may have been my fault, since I forbid my mother to hug me when she dropped me off at the school for the very first time. I can still see the hurt in her eyes when that happened. I don't ever remember my dad hugging me or telling me he loved me. I know without a shadow of doubt that he loved me but there was not a lot of verbalizing

about it. As a child, I was an avid reader and I especially liked to read adventure stories about the American Indian. From these stories I gathered that an Indian rarely, if ever, showed emotion, flinched from pain, and would never be caught crying. Surely, I thought, this is the image of a real man and I made up my mind to be like an Indian. For the most part I did a fairly good job of acting in a manner that I imagined would suit an Indian brave.

While you may think all of this is just silliness, let me tell you it had a very profound effect on my life. Those ideas that I formed at such an early age coupled with the example set for me by the ex-Marine that was my dad, has stayed with me for a lifetime. It has only been in recent years that I have been at ease with hugging my children and my grandchildren. Yes, it is in my nature to be friendly and outgoing, it is not in my nature to be loving and compassionate. Those attributes come from God in me. Those attributes are learned from and instilled in me by God. God overpowered and overcame the things that I learned and thought as a child.

We are slaves to our imagination. We image that someone has insulted us, therefore we are insulted. We image that we are going to have a bad day at work and lo and behold we have a bad day. If we image ourselves to be unattractive, we act in such a manner as to become unattractive to those around us. Imagine for a minute what it would be like to be adored: not just adored but loved and cherished. Imagine how it would feel to know, no matter what, that the love would never cease. Imagine that this never ceasing love would be willing to prove itself everyday for a lifetime and that you would be special for an eternity. On second thought, why imagine it at all. If you have Christ as your personal savior, then you have all this and more.

As you go about your daily task in the few weeks before Christmas, please pause to consider the compassion, love, and mercy that God had for us when we were sinners and even now when we sin. As you consider this, I am sure you will want to say a prayer of thanksgiving. When you say that prayer, think about including a request for help in showing more compassion, mercy, and love to those people you meet every day.

You just might be surprised how good you will feel about Christmas this year!

I love you and wish you the best Christmas ever!

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Carefully consider what it means to be adored by our Heavenly Father. How should that inform us on how we should live our daily lives?
- ▶ Jesus was born so that he would die on the cross for our sins. Have you ever acknowledged his Lordship over your life? If you haven't and are interested in learning more about that commitment, please contact a church member who you would feel comfortable talking with about these issues.

Week 2: Redemption // by Kevin Crowder

Day One // Redemption... Who Needs It?

“he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” **Titus 3:5**

Most of us who have grown up in a protestant church need little coaching when it comes to understanding that salvation is a work of God alone. We are taught that mankind cannot “earn” our way to heaven nor do anything to remove the burden of sin ourselves. A study of redemption changes none of those ideas, and, in fact will clarify many of the misconceptions we often hear. So if God does all of the saving and transforming, what then is the human response? Are we to sit by idly as puppets on a string waiting for the divine play to begin? Or, are we to “work out our salvation,” fully engaged in the process, eager to share with others that gift which has been so freely given to us? The baby in the manger is no longer there. He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen! His flesh has become immortal, and He sits at the right hand of the Father, pleading on our behalf—pleading for His people, those whom He has redeemed.



So, just what is the meaning of the word redemption? Well, the definition we will use this week is as follows: The process whereby the God of the universe gathers a people unto Himself for His glory, for His people, and for the world. Redemption is the grand, central thread that connects all of God’s Word to all of God’s people. It is the story of a nation, gathered from the corners of creation, gathered and marked for a purpose, an eternal purpose. It is the “crux” event in the eternal purposes of God:

Creation, Rebellion, Redemption, and Restoration. Oh, the joy we have in knowing that the voice on the throne is saying, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Rev 21:5) That same voice will dwell with us for eternity. He will be our God, and we shall be His people, for He is the one who has paid the price, He “gave Himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Tim 2:6)

Our Bible text for today comes from the book of Romans. In fact, we will be reading through a significant portion of Romans this week, meditating on a few important questions. Please take a moment to Read Romans 10:1-21. While you are reading, ask yourself the following questions of the text.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Who needs to be redeemed?
- ▶ While the nation (ethnic people) of Israel is clearly God’s ‘chosen people,’ what eternal implications does this have on us? We are, of course, part of the Gentiles, or ‘other nations.’ (Chapter 11 gives additional insight.)
- ▶ God has been in the business of redeeming people since the Garden of Eden. He covered the sins of Adam and Eve symbolically through the shedding of blood to provide for them a covering. (Gen. 3:21) Christ’s Advent (coming was for the purpose of putting on flesh and blood that could be shed to cover the sins of, and “to give eternal life to all whom [the Father] has given [the Son].) (John 17:2) Why is the shedding of blood so important? Does it tell us something about the seriousness of sin?

God is still redeeming people today. His purposes have been set in motion since before we were born. Two thousand years ago a baby was born, not to bring peace on earth today, but to redeem all kinds of people from all kinds of places, with all kinds of problems, and all kinds of sins. Salvation is open to all peoples of the earth. “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (Romans 10:13)
Cry out to Jesus this Holiday Season, He can be your eternal peace!

Day Two // Redemption... From What Do We Need Redeemed?

“But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ And he said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.’ He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’” **Genesis 3:9-13**

Quite simply put, the answer is sin, rebellion, and revolt of a people against their creator. Genesis Chapter 3 will be our reading for today. It seems quite appropriate when dealing with the topic of sin, that we go back and refresh our minds as to the



origin of sin in humanity. While reading this text I would like you to ponder why you think that mankind has such an inherent need for autonomy. My own definition of “sin” is: “Seeking Independence Naturally.” Read through Genesis 3 today, not with anger or malice toward Adam and Eve, but rather look for the redemption given to them and all of humanity through God’s correction and discipline. After you have read, consider the following passage from Michael Williams’ book Far As the Curse is Found:

“An entire demonic panoply of consequences stems from Adam and Eve’s disobedience. It perverts humans’ relationship to God. The creature meant to be God’s image bearer, his covenant mediator within creation, has declared war against God. Alienation takes the place of Covenant intimacy. Hostility, rather than obedient servant-hood now characterizes man’s relationship to God. The

Bible speaks of the corruption that blinds man to righteousness and disposes him toward selfishness, making him a slave to sin.”²

Dr. Williams powerfully suggests in his book that to know the full story of redemption, we must know the beginning of the story, or we get the story wrong. I often hear of eternal separation from God as some future event that takes place when one dies without knowing and believing in the love of Christ and the power of His resurrection. But that understanding is wrong. We are NOW and always have been eternally separated from God if we do not know His love—if we have not been redeemed by His precious blood. Being separated from the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things places one under the full power of the curse—the curse that has affected all of creation.

*“There is only cursing, lying and murder,
stealing and adultery;
they break all bounds,
and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
Because of this the land dries up,
and all who live in it waste away;
the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
and the fish in the sea are swept away.” (Hos. 4:2-3 NIV)*

The prophet Hosea has observed the effects of sin on the whole of creation. Obedience to God brings blessings, disobedience brings curses. Seeking a life of independence in our work, school, and play is not part of the story of redemption, that natural desire for autonomy and pleasure has its roots all the way back to the rebellion, the revolt, and the sin of Genesis 3.

This Holiday Season...

- ▶ Reflect on Christ’s supreme role in the Story of Redemption.
- ▶ Take your place on bended knee before the throne of He who has promised to “make ALL things new.”
- ▶ Consider ways you seek a life of independence. How has this affected your walk with God?

² Williams, 2005
The Gift // Devotional

Day Three // When Does Redemption Come?

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” **Romans 8:18-25**

To be redeemed is to live in the glory of our God at the place and time of His choosing—for His purpose and for His glory. Nothing ought to give a redeemed people greater hope and joy than to rest in the sovereignty of Almighty God. Today I would like for us to read all of **Romans chapter 8**. There is no greater passage in all of God’s Word that sets forth the hope of the glory that is to come. Being redeemed, having our sins forgiven, washed away, being cleansed and made whole, is a lifelong process. Salvation is only complete with death and glorification. Our life on earth has purpose and meaning in God’s redemptive story. We are part of the story, adding to it day by day. With the hope of His glory in mind, and having read our passage for the day, consider the following questions:



Questions to Consider

- ▶ Do you feel inadequate to receive the Love of God? Are your sins seemingly so bad that shame and guilt keep you from a right relationship with God? This is the negative shame that Satan uses to keep us separated from God. This is the guilt that keeps us oppressed under a yoke of sin. Christ is our freedom—freedom from the bondage of the curse of sin. God sent His only son into the world, in “the likeness of sinful flesh,” so that our redemption might be possible; the baby in the manger, human in every way except the corrupt, fallen, sinful nature. A life lived as was intended for all life. “He became sin who knew no sin, so that He might become our righteousness.” What the law requires, Christ fulfilled. What the Father demanded through the Covenant of Works with Adam, Christ fulfilled. He took our death and our sin because He loved us that much. Nothing indeed can separate us from that love.
- ▶ Consider Romans 8:1. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Then consider verses 38-39. Does the love of God seem to be so infused with grace as if to make it seem almost incomprehensible? These verses are unique capstones to this wonderful passage. The weight and power of the magnitude of God’s Spirit is heavy upon me as I consider my own sins which lay in the balance. May this draw us all to confessional prayer.
- ▶ Why is it that we seemingly live such lives of hopelessness and despair before the redeeming hand of God plucks us out of darkness? Why must we suffer so, even now? May the Lord strengthen us all as we walk together for Him. May we always be able to say with Job, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and on the earth again will stand.”(Job 19:25)

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains...
E’er since, by faith, I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.

-William Cowper

Our redemption was sealed from the foundations of the world. It began at the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it will be complete when He calls us home to His side...a new creation...a new body...a new resurrection!

Day Four // Redemption... Where Does it Take Place?

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” **1 John 1:1-4**

While I submit that redemption is the grand, central theme of the Bible, other supporting themes exist which must be addressed. Two of those themes are “Covenant Relationships” in the Old Testament, and “The Kingdom of God” in the New Testament. Both are intrinsically related to, and support the concept of redemption. God is a covenant making God and he never breaks His part of the deal. We see in Genesis covenants in the creation account— God’s promises which set order to all things. Adam broke that covenant, and so the need for redemption, understood by God before the creation of the world, began. But, the God of the covenant was not finished making covenants. He made covenants with Moses and Abraham and his descendants. He made a covenant with King David, and all of these covenants will remain or be fulfilled in the incarnation of the King of the Covenant--the man Christ Jesus, Lord of all things. He has come to fulfill all covenants, even giving us a new and greater covenant, one which will guide His Kingdom both now and forever.



The first passage of Scripture I would like us to read today is **1 John 1:1-4**. Here we are introduced to the concept of fellowship. Fellowship is a key component of a covenant. Where there is no fellowship, the terms of a covenant resemble little more

than a list of duties for a slave. Fellowship is also a key component to being a part of the Body of Christ—the Church. Now at this point we are not speaking of Temple Baptist Church (or your local church). We are speaking of a universal fellowship of believers from Adam through today, and all those who will come to faith in Christ till He returns. These are the redeemed people of God (Paul uses the phrase “The Israel of God” in Gal 4:16). Now, if I may aid and abet some of our non-Baptist friends in suggesting that their Confessions of Faith are absolutely correct where they state that there is “no salvation outside the church.” (I know I just made a few Baptist elders and deacons adjust in their recliners, but hear me out). I, of course, do not espouse the Romanist perspective that salvation is granted by a local body, or ecclesiastical order. I do, however, suggest that salvation is NOT a “thing” between you and God alone. The Beloved Apostle writes with the plural subject “we.” Here he is speaking for “the 12” to say that the very nature of fellowship with Christ is fellowship with them. That is to say that salvation is a corporate affair. God has been pleased over time to use His Church—His Redeemed People to share His Gospel with the nations. Certainly God has the power to transform an isolated soul, but He gives us NO examples of that in Scripture, and sketchy accounts of this at best, today. Why do I say sketchy? Because I have observed many who claim to love Christ yet hate His church. We cannot love Christ and hate the things that He loves. Temple Baptist Church (or your church) is far from a perfect church, but such a beast does not exist. The local expression of the Body of Christ is full of a spiritually redeemed people. They no longer have reigning sin in their lives, yet sin remains. We are a fleshly people while we remain in unredeemed bodies. The very thought makes me think of the uniqueness of God’s plan and the Hope of His Glory.

The second phase of our journey today is to read together **Hebrews Chapter 10**. I know this seems like a lot of reading today, but if you promise to keep up, I promise to make Friday a light reading day. After you read this chapter, consider the following questions:

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Think about the phrase in verse 10: “once for all.” Compare this with verses 14-16. There is clearly a difference in quantity when simply referring to “all” (rightly meaning “all of a group”) and “those who are being sanctified.” God places us in relationships for a purpose. Do you have people in your life that simply cannot see the truth of the Gospel? How can we help them to see the power of the resurrection and the promises of verses 17 and 18?
- ▶ Verse 24 has been used by the church as a stick to beat folks into regular Sunday and Wednesday church attendance. How would you apply this verse if we removed the perceived legal requirement of Sunday and Wednesday gatherings? (Hint: We lose the real meaning of the verse when we apply it so narrowly).

So where does redemption take place? First we must say it already took place at the Cross. But we must also consider that it takes place in coffee shops, restaurants, places of employment, schools, on the street corners, and anywhere the world sees the church in action. Be a witness for

Christ as He continues to redeem His people from the bondage of sin.

Want to dig deeper?

- ▶ Try visiting <http://going.imb.org> to learn about ways people are being a witness for Christ in different parts of the world.

Day Five // Redemption... Why the Cross?

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” **Romans 5:1-5**

The opposite of wasting your life is living life by a single God-exalting, soul-satisfying passion. The well-lived life must be God-exalting and soul-satisfying

because that is why God created us (Isaiah 43:7; Psalms 90:14). And, “passion” is the right word (or, if you prefer, zeal, fervor, ardor, blood-earnestness) because God commands us to love Him with all our heart (Matt 22:37), and Jesus reminds us that He spits lukewarm people out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16). The opposite of wasting your life is to live by a single, soul-satisfying passion for the supremacy of God in all things. ³

Today, as promised, is a short reading day. Turn to

Romans chapter 5, and let us read together verses

1-11. Yesterday, we read in Hebrews 10 that Christ’s sacrifice replaced the Old Covenant system of sacrificing lambs and goats and other animals by a daily and yearly shedding of blood. This “once for all” sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary had little to do with the wooden cross itself, but rather what happened as Jesus hung there, preparing to die. Jesus took on the sins of those who would be redeemed throughout the ages, bearing the wrath of the Father in Heaven so that we might go free. This step in the process of redemption is called justification. Through Christ’s taking the wrath of our sins, the Father may look upon us with great joy and love, seeing His Son’s righteousness where we had none before. When God walked with Adam in the cool of the day in the garden there was perfect fellowship in that paradise. But, sin created separation. Christ, the sinless man, born in the manger that first Christmas Day, leading a sinless life, offering Himself up as the perfect sacrifice, while maintaining His position as the High Priest, and by His nature of being God, was the one to whom the sacrifice was given, filled a role that no other being or non-being could possibly have filled. He did it with grand perfection. The cross itself was a man-made symbol reserved for the worst of criminals, designed to place them on display—“high and lifted up,” our God was placed upon Calvary’s mount to draw “all men to himself.” Would we dare waste our life by not exalting Him daily, recognizing the awesome sacrifice He made for us? “More



³ John Piper. Don't Waste Your Life. 2003. P. 43
The Gift // Devotional

than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Day Six // How is it That I Sin, Though I Am Redeemed?

“Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.” **Romans 7:4**

Today’s reading: **Romans 7:7-25**

In John Bunyan’s classic Christian tale, The Pilgrim’s Progress, the main character, “Christian,” is the personification of sinful mankind on a journey to that Celestial City. This journey takes him through many of the trials of life, all the while carrying a “burden” that he alone cannot remove. His journey takes him to the cross:



“That is that which I seek for, even to be rid of this heavy burden; but get it off myself I cannot: nor is there a man in our Country that can take it off my shoulders; therefore am I going this way, as I told you, that I may be rid of my burden.”

Bunyan narrates part of Christian’s journey to salvation. Once at the cross, this burden of original sin, or his “sin nature” is removed by God and God alone.

“So I saw in my Dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosed from off his Shoulders, and fell from off his back.”⁴

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Until we are fully redeemed—body, soul and spirit—there exists a conflict between our new nature in

⁴ Bunyan, John. *The pilgrim's progress: from this world to that which is to come, delivered under the similitude of a dream*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004

Christ and our old sinful nature, no longer a burden where death and condemnation can destroy, but an ever present struggle, a thorn which God may be pleased to leave in various degrees. What then is different about the redeemed? We are a people called out of darkness for an eternal purpose. We have been chosen to be worshippers of the King of the Universe. We have been given the righteousness of Christ, and Paul tells us in Romans 1:16-17 that “the righteous shall live by faith.” It is our faith in Christ our Redeemer that gives us confidence and hope, and joy. Will we continue to sin? Yes. Even the most pious among us struggle with temptations and sins which vex the mind. But we all have an advocate with the Father in heaven...Christ Jesus our Lord. After reading our passage for today, consider the following questions:

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What is the purpose of the law today if not to be a list of do's and don'ts for believers?
- ▶ How can recognition of sin actually draw us closer to Christ?
- ▶ How can we as a body of believers assist each other in our struggles with sin?
- ▶ Paul says in verse 18, “I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out.” Christ provides that ability through faith in Him. How has He provided that ability in you? Think of specific examples throughout your life. Could He use your experiences to help others who struggle with similar sins?
- ▶ Confession? It is a scary word for many, yet a lack of it, both to God and to man, hinders the work of God in our lives. May the world see the redeemed people of God in an open and honest light this Christmas Season. May His birth be proclaimed once more to a new generation. Let them know that Jesus is alive, and still redeeming His people from their sin.

“The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift His countenance upon you and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:22-26)

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Week 3: Regeneration // by Craig Tanner

Day One // Regeneration: A New Birth

*"Every generation needs regeneration."
--Charles H. Spurgeon*

"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." **Titus 3:4-7**

Once there was a religious man who was intrigued by a certain teacher who was becoming very popular. This new guy in town was teaching some things that started to scare many of his religious contemporaries. The religious man was deeply unsettled about all of this and so he decided to speak to this new teacher. He waited until it was dark and then under the cover of night he approached the man. "Rabbi." He said, "We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." The Rabbi answered, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Slightly shocked the religious man thinks for a moment. Taking the Rabbi's words quite literally he wonders, "how is it even possible for someone to be born a second time?" But the Rabbi explains, "While humans can only reproduce human life, the Spirit gives birth to new spiritual life. So don't be shocked when I tell you that you must be born again."

You may recognize this story about the Pharisee named Nicodemus and his encounter with the Messiah.⁵ Jesus unequivocally explains what it takes to enter the Kingdom of God. One must be born again. This has a fancy theological name;

⁵ John 3:1-15
The Gift // Devotional

regeneration. This is an instantaneous act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us.⁶ Jesus makes it quite clear; there is no salvation without regeneration.

Out of the goodness and loving kindness of our God we receive a new birth that gives us a new origin, no longer born of flesh but born of the Spirit.⁷ By his grace we have hope in an eternal inheritance that is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading”.⁸ In other words, nothing can take away the joy that’s coming to those who have new life in Christ. This means our lives; both present and future, will never be the same.

You come to expect this when it comes to new life. When we were expecting our first child, the first things I noticed were the signs of new life. It all started with the gentle movements and kicks that occurred before he was born. Then the day finally came when he entered the world and I can still vividly remember his cry as the doctor held the little baby boy up for Momma to see. They cleaned him up, wrapped him in a blanket and allowed Daddy to carry him to the nursery. When I walked out into the hallway, he was greeted for the first time by his grandparents and friends from church. After I dropped him off at the nursery we all stood at the window and watched as they bathed him, checked his vital signs, weighed him, and made little prints of his hands and feet. There was no denying that this new child that had come into the world was very much alive and his life meant that our lives had changed forever.

During the Christmas season the world celebrates the miraculous birth of Jesus. We adorn our homes, inside and out, with different nativity scenes that express the humble beginnings of this child who would one day be revealed to the world as the Son of God. We talk about how his mother was a virgin, fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah concerning the coming of the messiah. The little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger will one day give his life as a sacrifice on the cross to redeem us from our bondage to sin. By his mercy he will wash us with regeneration, giving us a new

⁶ Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine. Inter-Varsity Press. 1994. Pg. 699.

⁷ Romans 8:9

⁸ 1 Peter 1:3-4
The Gift // Devotional

life, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new heart. In essence we become a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come! ⁹

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Have you been born again? Is there evidence of a new birth in your life?
- ▶ What is the difference between being born of the flesh and born of the Spirit?
- ▶ Are there areas where the results of regeneration are not clearly seen in your own life?

Day Two // Regeneration: A New Creation

“The change which our Lord here declares needful to salvation is evidently no slight or superficial one. It is not merely reformation, or amendment, or moral change, or outward alteration of life. It is a thorough change of heart, will, and character. It is a resurrection. It is a new creation. It is a passing from death to life. It is the implanting in our dead hearts of a new principle from above. It is the calling into existence of a new creature, with a new nature, new habits of life, new tastes, new desires, new appetites, new judgments, new opinions, new hopes, and new fears. All this, and nothing less than this is implied, when our Lord declares that we all need a “new birth.”

--J.C. Ryle

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;” **2 Corinthians 5:17-18**

Have you ever paused to consider what it means to be a new creation? Genesis says, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” ¹⁰ God’s creation was perfect. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were made in God’s image and had perfect fellowship with him. That was until an encounter with Satan left them rebelling against God, ultimately shattering their relationship with him. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or they would surely die. They ate. They died. Spiritually that is. Humans from this point on have been spiritually dead and are broken, shattered images of their creator. Ephesians 2:1 says,

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

¹⁰ Genesis 1
The Gift // Devotional

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” In a very real sense we are in a state of spiritual death, which is why Jesus says, “unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ, an event in history that was set in motion long ago as God initiated his plan of redemption. He begins by making a covenant with a man named Abraham through whom he creates a nation called Israel and forms a people known as the Jews. He establishes the royal throne of a man named David and promises that David’s descendants will rule on the throne for eternity. From among this people there came a man named Joseph betrothed to a virgin girl by the name of Mary. Mary gets a visit by an angel who bears good news: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”¹¹ Mary does give birth to a Son conceived of the Holy Spirit and gives him the name Jesus. This child will grow up to live a sinless life of obedience and he will suffer and die on a cross as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of his people restoring their broken relationship with God. Three days later he will rise from the dead, affirming his victory over sin and death. Jesus ascends to heaven, taking his rightful position on the throne at the right hand of God where he will rule for eternity. He promises to send a helper in the form of the Holy Spirit. Through the proclamation of the Gospel, the Spirit begins to work in the hearts of sinful men, bringing them to repentance and giving them new life in Christ. They are regenerate, born again, made new. They trust in Christ for salvation, are freed from the penalty and power of sin, gifted with the righteousness of Christ, and given new life. In Christ our relationship with God is reconciled, our image of God is restored, and we become a new creation, or literally a new creature. The purpose of all this was not to make bad men good or even make good men better, but to bring dead men back to life.

¹¹ Luke 1:30-33
The Gift // Devotional

The change is quite radical. According to Spurgeon, the Spirit “gives us new natures, makes us love what we hated, hate what we loved, sets us in a new road; makes our habits different, our thoughts different, makes us different in private, and different in public.. The old things have passed away and the new have come. ¹² In other words, this regeneration is something that affects the whole person. It’s not just a matter of making our spirits alive, but every part of us is affected. This is what Paul means when he says, “If anyone is in Christ, *he is a new creation*”.

Christmas is viewed in a different light for those who are in Christ Jesus. It’s not just a sentimental holiday for families to get together and give gifts to one another. It is a reminder that through

Jesus we are new creatures, with a new beginning, and a whole new perspective on life.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Have you considered yourself to be a new creation? What does that look like in a person’s life?
- ▶ How does a Christian’s perspective on life change once you have been born again?
- ▶ Thinking about the purpose for the birth of Christ and what he came to accomplish, does this change how you think about and celebrate Christmas?

Day Three // Regeneration: A New Spirit

“Just as in the beginning 'God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' so, at the moment He appointed for our new birth, he said, 'Let there be life' and there was life.”

--J.A. Motyer

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. **John 3:5-6**

¹² Spurgeon, Charles. The New Park Street Pulpit: Regeneration. Sermon No. 130. Delivered on May 3, 1857 at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

When I was a child Christmas meant only one thing to me: toys. It seems my own children have carried on this tradition. The boys somehow acquire catalogs filled with toys and they look through them page-by-page pointing out the things they would like to have. While I take the opportunity to teach my children about the evils of materialism, letting them only pick out one toy, I also realize that the one factor working against me in all of this is grandparents. Santa seems to skip over our house and visit the grandparents' house instead. You know what that means. Toys! In addition, the toy industry has made life particularly difficult for parents with their new packaging. Each toy is secured with 37 pieces of wire, tied in three knots around a piece of plastic, and covered in tape. It takes twenty minutes to finally get the toy out of the packaging and with a sudden sense of accomplishment you hand the child his toy only to discover it doesn't work. Why? What is the one thing we always forget and never have? Batteries. So you scramble to pull batteries out of remotes and various things around the house in order to make this piece of plastic come alive. A toy without batteries is missing the one thing it needs to become what it was meant to be.

There are people in our world who walk around everyday with the appearance of life, but in reality they are dead inside. There is a big hole inside of them because they are missing the one thing they need to bring them to life, the Spirit of God. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us new life in regeneration. It is the Spirit, indwelling in our mortal bodies,¹³ that transforms us and makes us a "new creation." This is not something that can be gained by our own exertions. A man can reform his ways, get rid of his habits, give up things he indulged in, overcome evil desires, and give his life to the work of the church. Even though he struggles greatly to accomplish these things, he can never accomplish what is beyond his own power.¹⁴ Jesus says, "unless a man is born of the Spirit, he can not see the kingdom of God." New life can only happen by the work of the Spirit.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Timothy 1:14

¹⁴ Spurgeon, Charles. The New Park Street Pulpit: Regeneration. Sermon No. 130. Delivered on May 3, 1857 at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

Jesus' birth occurred by the work of the Spirit. When Mary questioned Gabriel about how it was possible to be a pregnant virgin he says, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.*"¹⁵ So Jesus enters into humanity having been given life through the work of the Spirit. John the Baptist baptized Jesus after which "*the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him*".¹⁶ Jesus' birth and life are the perfect examples of what it might look like when flesh and Spirit merge. This is why so much of what we experience in life as Christians finds depth and meaning in the life of Christ, because having been born again we have received the Spirit of God. In other words, our earthly flesh and the Holy Spirit have come together to create something in us that we never could have created on our own. New life.

The Book of Romans says, "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."¹⁷

When I put the batteries in my children's toys, the toys come alive! These things are designed that way. The toys need an external source to be placed inside them, giving them a power they can't otherwise create on their own. God has designed

¹⁵ Luke 1:35

¹⁶ Matthew 3:16

¹⁷ Romans 8:7-11
The Gift // Devotional

people in such a way that we are in desperate need of his Spirit. When the Spirit of God dwells within us our mortal bodies come alive!

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Why must a man have the Spirit to experience new life? How is the Spirit important to the life of the believer?
- ▶ What happens when “our earthly flesh and the Holy Spirit” come together?
- ▶ What does it mean to no longer live in the flesh but in the Spirit? What does that look like in your life?

Day Four // Regeneration: A New Mind

“Living in a sensuous culture and an increasingly emotional democracy, American evangelicals in the last generation have simultaneously toned up their bodies and dumbed down their minds. The result? Many suffer from a modern form of what the ancient stoics called “mental hedonism”-having fit bodies but fat minds.”

--Os Guinness

“For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Romans 8:6-8

When I entered the bookstore at Missouri Baptist College in the Fall of 2000 I was a little bit naive. I had accepted a call into ministry and decided to ignore the fact that I just received my degree in electronics and was starting school over again to earn my degree in religion. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect. I began to pick up the books that I needed for classes and suddenly noticed a theme. Each class required at least four or five books. By the time I made it to the checkout counter I had so many books in my arms that the pile nearly went over my head. I set the massive stack of books on the counter and the clerk said, “You must be a religion major.” This set the precedent for what I experienced for the next six years of my life as I finished my BA in Religion and went on to receive my MDiv. It's one thing to read the Christmas story in the Gospels. It's a whole other ball game when you get into the intellectual intricacies involved in the theological implications of the miraculous conception. Huh? I very quickly

began to realize that studying the Bible and the things of God was similar to drinking the ocean; it takes time and continuous effort. To this day I still believe the pursuit of knowledge is an important part of the Christian's life. As we study and meditate on the truth of God's word we begin to think in new and right ways.

You have heard it said that a mind is a terrible thing to waste. If this is true for the natural man, how much more true is it for the regenerate man? Paul says the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God because he is not able to understand them without the Spirit. However, for those who are spiritual he says, "...we have the mind of Christ."¹⁸ Regeneration involves a 'renewal' or 'transformation' of the mind. The Spirit has given us the capacity to understand and comprehend spiritual truth. This is something the natural man cannot possess. Romans 8:6-8 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

While the natural man can understand the basic facts of the gospel and perhaps even affirm beliefs in the things of God, the mere knowledge and expression does not mean that he or she understand the immense value of such things. Sin blinds us to the truth, but new life in the Spirit enlightens our minds to the mysteries of God. One who is alive in Christ has the ability to discern God's revealed will and so possesses a spiritual wisdom no amount of natural knowledge can provide.¹⁹

Regeneration involves a transformation of the mind, and naturally, our emotions and actions will begin to reflect this new way of thinking. As God grants us the capability of gaining spiritual knowledge, it should lead believers to the diligent study of God's word. Romans 8:5 says, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." As we disrupt "worldly" thinking and begin to set our minds on the

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:14-16

¹⁹ Akin, Daniel: Editor. *A Theology for the Church*. B&H Academic, Nashville, TN. 2007. Pg. 744.

things of the Spirit we are developing the mind of Christ.²⁰ In other words, we begin to think like he thought, love like he loved, and act as he acted.

For those who are in Christ Jesus, we live in a bizarre dichotomy where we have filled our lives and thoughts with worldly things for so long that it is difficult to force them out. Worldly things become formidable opponents to having the mind of Christ. However, to set our minds on the things of this world is to focus our time, energy, and passions on the things that are hostile to God. To claim Jesus as Lord and yet conform our lives and minds to the world is quite strange indeed. It's like finding out you are allergic to peanuts and then deciding to work in a peanut factory. It doesn't make sense. The Apostle Paul tells believers not to be conformed to the world but to be "transformed by the renewal of your mind."²¹ As regenerate believers we should be fighting the daily battle for the mind.

It is an irrefutable tragedy that in our churches today many good people who proclaim faith in Jesus remain Biblically illiterate. Is it not foolishness to be given the Word of God and the capacity to know and apply it and yet refuse to read or study it? Are we not raising the white flag of surrender to the enemy when we do not seek the mind of Christ? Paul told the Colossians, "You have to put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator"²² A qualitative change of identity has already

occurred in the believer through regeneration.²³ What remains is bringing the mind into line with this new identity.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Why can't the natural man accept things of God?
- ▶ Why is it important for believers to be diligent in the study of scripture?
- ▶ What does it mean to be transformed by the renewal of your mind?

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:16

²¹ Romans 12:2

²² Colossians 3:10

²³ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), Study notes, copyright 2008 Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Day Five // Regeneration: A New Heart

“Truth is so obscured nowadays and lies so well established that unless we love the truth we shall never recognize it.”
--Blaise Pascal

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” **Matthew 6:21**

One of my all-time favorite Christmas songs is “O Holy Night.” There is just something about listening to someone with a big, powerful voice sing “Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices! O night divine, the night when Christ was born!” And when you get to the end of the song and they hit the big high note, it is nearly enough to bring a tear to your eye. Music has a way of igniting some of the deepest emotions in us, and let’s face it, feelings are a big part of our lives. Most guys don’t really want to admit it, with the fear that they may endanger their manhood. But truthfully one of the manliest qualities we can possess is love. To love with such a passion that we would willingly give our lives for another, that’s manly. Love summons a man to give all. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”²⁴ That’s how Jesus loved us. Even while we were still his enemies, he died for us.

Throughout Scripture the heart generally refers to the core of one’s being, involving emotions, reason, and will. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”²⁵ He is reminding us that the things we love, desire, and treasure are the things that have our hearts. To love, desire, and treasure the things of God, our heart has to change. Regeneration is a cleansing of the heart.²⁶ It gives us an entirely new outlook on life and a disposition to love what we once hated and hate what we once loved. It’s a transformation of the heart drawing us to love God and hate sin.

²⁴ John 15:13

²⁵ Matthew 6:21

²⁶ Acts 15:9
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Those born of God will love God ²⁷, the Word of God ²⁸, and the people of God ²⁹ at the expense of the love for this world and for ourselves.

When we begin to realize that love for God demands love for the things God loves, our passions and desires begin to change. When we are gifted with a new heart our materialistic, selfish man-centered love is slowly replaced with a heavenly, selfless love, a love that looks out for the well being of others no matter the cost. John Piper says, "Love is doing whatever you have to do, at whatever cost to yourself, to help people, have an all satisfying passion for Jesus, forever."

We still face a spiritual battle to overcome the fleshly, earthly desires that we have sought after and treasured for so long. We are giving up these things in order to have a passionate, wholehearted love for God and the things of God. Paul says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." ³⁰ Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourself treasure on earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." ³¹ A new heart will give us a new perspective on life where the things that are Godly will become our priorities. This is a difficult position to be in when you live in a culture that worships freedom, independence, personal rights, and the pursuit of pleasure. In America we respect the people who sacrifice to get what they want, but we question the sanity of people who sacrifice what they want to give others what they need.

In the sinful, natural state of man the Bible refers to the heart as being deceitfully wicked and desperately sick. ³² Yet God in his great mercy through the washing of regeneration has given the believer a new heart, ³³ a heart that is no longer wicked or

²⁷ 1John 4:19; 5:2

²⁸ 1 Peter 2:2

²⁹ 1 John 5:1

³⁰ Colossians 3:1

³¹ Matthew 6:19-20

³² Jeremiah 17:9

³³ Ezekiel 36:32
The Gift // Devotional

sick. A heart that is capable of love, desire, and self-control beyond what the natural man can fathom. This is why Christians giving all for the cause of Christ seem radical to the unbeliever. They cannot understand the kind of love that compels two 80-year-old women to go to Cameroon, West Africa to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick³⁴ or the love that causes a couple from America to pack up and move to Burma twelve days after they were married to spend their lives reaching people with the gospel. They can't understand a family downsizing everything they have to be able to give more for the cause of Christ. They can't fathom the heart of someone willing to give up everything for Jesus. "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."³⁵

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Who has your heart? What things do you love, desire and treasure? Is Christ at the top of the list or are there things you cherish more than Him?
- ▶ What does it mean to "love what you once hated and hate what you once loved"?
- ▶ What daily battles do you face to keep heart and mind focused on Christ?

Day Six // Regeneration: A New Life

"A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world - and might even be more difficult to save."

--C.S. Lewis

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." **Galatians 2:20**

When I walked into the department store on the first day of November, I was surprised to see the discounted Halloween items sitting next to the brand new

³⁴ Piper, John. Don't Waste Your Life. Crossway Books. Wheaton, Illinois. 2003. Pg. 45

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14
The Gift // Devotional

Christmas display. Of course I wasn't nearly as excited as my children who began making a scene when they saw the outdoor Santa display with jolly ol' St. Nick poppin' out of a camper to say hello. I remember thinking about how odd it was to be standing next to a discounted life size mechanical witch while my kids were going crazy over the Christmas trees and Santa displays. It seems like it wasn't that long ago when you really didn't see as much Christmas stuff until it was closer to Thanksgiving. Now we're rolling it out early. Even some of the radio stations got the jump on Christmas and started playing all Christmas songs, 24 hours a day, two weeks before Thanksgiving. One thing is for certain; you cannot deny that Christmas is coming. The closer we get the more evidence we will see. Houses will be covered with Christmas lights and decorations, stores will be jam packed with shoppers, more radio stations will join in the Christmas song playing madness, and you'll be singing to yourself "it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go."

Just as we can observe the environment around us and determine what time of the year it is, we can also look within our own lives to see whether there are any signs of new life. The Bible says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves, or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed you fail to pass the test!"³⁶ New life in Christ should produce certain results and characteristics. Regeneration is being born again, becoming a new creation, receiving a new spirit, a new mind, a new heart, and in essence a new life. Paul says the old is gone and the new has come, in other words you can't stay the same. To wrap up our discussion on regeneration this week we'll take time to "examine" ourselves.

Do the following things characterize your life: Belief that Jesus is the Christ,³⁷ sorrow for sin and an honest commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience³⁸, sincere

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 13:5

³⁷ 1 John 5:1

³⁸ 1 John 3:9, 1 John 2:29, 2 Corinthians 7:9-10

love for Jesus and for others ³⁹, genuine faith and trust in Christ ⁴⁰, and evidence of growth in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? ⁴¹ Genuine regeneration will result in these things becoming more and more apparent in the life of a believer. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” ⁴² He is saying, “my former self, the person I (Paul) was before I trusted Christ, with all of my sinful goals and proud, self-exalting desires, came to an end. I’ve died. I have been crucified. It’s no longer I (Paul) who live, rather it is Jesus Christ who lives in me.” Paul’s own goals and personal interests were no longer directing his life; Christ now directs and empowers all that he does. ⁴³ Does your life echo Paul’s words, “It’s no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”?

I’ve heard it said that you could know the true character of someone if you could see what he or she does when no one is watching. How is your private life? Do you live without prayer, without searching the Scriptures? Do you live without thoughts of God? Can you live as a stranger to God, having no love for him or fear of him? Does your private life show genuine signs of regeneration?

There was a captain of a ship who had the sudden feeling that he was lost. To those sailing with him he gives fair warning. “You must sail very carefully, and watch closely, because to tell you the truth, I do not know where I am and there may be rocks close ahead.” The captain goes down into the cabin and begins to search his chart. He diligently inspects everything carefully and then comes up again to say, “Hoist every sail, and sail as you please, I have discovered where we are; the water is deep, and the

³⁹ 1 John 4:7

⁴⁰ Acts 26: 27-28, John 3:2

⁴¹ Galatians 5:22

⁴² Galatians 2:20

⁴³ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), Study notes, copyright 2008 Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

sea is wide; there is no need to be alarmed, my searching has satisfied me.”⁴⁴ And so it goes with our own lives. There may be times when we begin to have doubts and we seemingly lose our way, but in those moments we should take time to examine ourselves. How happy and joyful will you be, if, after having searched yourself you can say, “I know in whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” On the other hand, you may be afraid to “examine yourself.” What if you should have a bad result? What if you test yourself and fail to pass the test? The truth is, it’s better that you should find it out now than find it out too late.

Spurgeon says “it’s better to think harshly of our condition before God than to think too securely and so be ruined by presumption.”⁴⁵

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Do you ever have doubts? Are you willing to “examine yourself, to see if you are in the faith?”
- ▶ When you examine yourself what do you find? Is there evidence of genuine regeneration?
- ▶ What does it mean to be crucified with Christ?

⁴⁴ Spurgeon, Charles. Self-Examination. Sermon No. 218 delivered on October 10, 1858 at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

⁴⁵ Spurgeon, Charles. Self-Examination.
The Gift // Devotional

Week 4: Justification // by Scott Perry

Day One // Getting What You Want and Wanting What You Need

“we are justified by his grace.” **Titus 3:7a**

I have only fond memories of Christmas as a child, beginning with trips to the downtown Dallas Niemen Marcus store where we made annual visits to the magical Toyland to see Santa Claus and get a small gift from a large chest of toys monitored closely by vigilant elves. It was not the toy or the decorations, but the concept that Christmas was a time that brought joy and happiness, something we all want.

My mother perpetuated my understanding with her philosophy of gift giving. She believed that Christmas gifts should be what you want, rather than what you necessarily need. She never wanted appliances and duty oriented gifts that spoke of work instead of desire. As a result, she tried to give what she thought you wanted, whether you really needed it or not.

As time progressed I learned from my parents that it is possible to get what you want and to want what you need. I think this is simply the natural process of maturity that maintains the joy of gift giving with the added bonus of practical application.

It seems a poignant reminder of the true meaning of the season in light of God’s gift of Jesus. The birth of Christ set in motion the fulfillment of God’s promise to provide by His grace what we need – we need a Savior. Someone who could deliver us from the pain and penalty of our sin by giving us what we need most. As we grow in our understanding, we learn that what we need (salvation) and right standing before God is also what we want. We want to be in a relationship with God that not only ensures our eternal destiny, but also gives purpose to our daily existence.

Titus 3:7a tells us “we are justified by his grace.” The doctrine of justification is at the very core of the Gospel. All of Christianity revolves around a correct understanding

of this pivotal principle. Wayne Grudem defines justification as “*an instantaneous legal act of God in which he thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and declares us to be righteous in his sight.*”

Justification means that our sins are now seen as forgiven. The penalty and punishment that is due to sin is reprieved. More than that, God has taken the righteousness of Jesus Christ and applied it to our lives. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. And finally, God declares us to be righteous, and who can question the word and judgment of God?

In my sinful state I needed someone to save me from my sins being powerless to do so myself. Jesus came to this earth to give his life as a ransom for my sins and to call me to himself that by faith in his sacrifice I am forgiven. This is what I needed. As the power and presence of the Holy Spirit fill my life, I discover that salvation is more than an escape from hell; it is God himself looking directly at me and declaring me to be righteous by faith in the righteousness of Christ. What an amazing gift! What a tremendous relief! What an incredible act of love and grace!

The weight and realization of my sin teaches me that I need to be rescued. The justification that God gives through faith in Jesus Christ not only sets me free from the tyranny of sin, but also delivers me into the family of God for which I have always longed. Justification magnifies the love of God beyond the realm of mere escape; it also fills my life with the

righteousness of the one who saved me. Through Jesus Christ, God has given me what I need, and now I see that He is what I really want.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Can you remember the last time you felt the weight of your rebellion or sin against God?
- ▶ What does it mean to be righteous?
- ▶ “God himself looking directly at me and declaring me to be righteous by faith in the righteousness of Christ.” The impact of that statement is huge! The God of the universe sees you in right standing because of Jesus. How can we show our thankfulness for this act?

Day Two // All His Ways Are Justice

“The Rock, his work is perfect,
for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
just and upright is he. **Deuteronomy 32:4**

The familiar Christmas story reminds us that before Jesus was born, God announced His purpose. An angel told Mary in a vision that she would give birth to the son of God and that “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”⁴⁶

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and instructed him to take Mary as his wife because the child she was carrying had been conceived by the Holy Spirit and was the fulfillment of the promise given through the prophets. The angel also told Joseph “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”⁴⁷

From the beginning Jesus was ushered into the world as a King and a Savior, but Mary and Joseph could not have possibly understood the implications of this angelic announcement. True, he was a King, but not like Herod or other earthly kings. And certainly he was a Savior, but not for deliverance from Roman rule. Jesus came to this earth with the authority of heaven to be given as a sacrifice for redemption to meet the requirement of a just and Holy God.

The justice of God is the standard by which all things in the universe are governed. Moses said, “for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without

⁴⁶ Luke 1:32–33

⁴⁷ Matt. 1:21
The Gift // Devotional

iniquity, just and upright is he.”⁴⁸ Because God is just and righteous, he must hold people accountable for their deeds and he must punish sin, unless there can be some other means of punishing sin. This is what Paul referred to when he said, “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”⁴⁹

Paul referred to the fact that God imputed our sins to Jesus when he died on the cross. The word imputed means to ascribe the deeds of one to another. In this case God ascribed our sin to Jesus so that the punishment for our sin was carried out on him. The prophet Isaiah said it this way, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”⁵⁰

The justice and righteousness of God was satisfied by the sacrifice of Jesus. Sin is atoned and the debt of sin is paid. When we respond to God’s call on our lives with faith, we are trusting in his death as the payment for our sin. Sin does not go away, it was transferred to the cross where its power to condemn died with Jesus and the requirement of a just and holy God was met.

When we speak of such heavy matters surrounding the Christmas season, some would eschew the subject believing it to be misplaced or inappropriate for the occasion. I would strongly disagree. To celebrate the birth of Jesus without the acknowledgement of the true purpose of that birth seems an affront to the gift we have been given. To look upon the baby in the manger without seeing the man on the cross is to deny the highest

⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 32:4

⁴⁹ Romans 3:25–26

⁵⁰ Isaiah 53:4–6
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moment of God's grace and ultimately His glory. It may be gory and gritty, but true justice is rarely otherwise.

Jesus taught us that when we gather at the Lord's Table we are to remember his shed blood and his broken body. The symbols of the Lord's Supper are designed as reminders of God's grace and justice. God does not desire our surrender out of a sense of guilt-obligation, but

rather he has welcomed us into presence on the basis of eternal justice and righteousness.

Truly, "all his ways are justice."

Questions to Consider

- ▶ In the day to day grind, our daily surrender can very easily become an item on our daily spiritual to-do list. Soon surrender begins to happen out of a feeling of duty or a sense of obligation. How can we avoid such attitudes?
- ▶ Thinking of baby Jesus at Christmas time can give us warm-fuzzy feelings. When we stop there, however, what do we miss out on at Christmas?
- ▶ In thinking about the characteristics of God, Justice is one that typically gets down played. Why is that?

Day Three // Justification and Life for All Men

"For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." **Romans 5:17-18**

The birth of Jesus occurred at the "fullness of time"⁵¹, making the celebration of Christmas a celebration of the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption. Justification reveals how all of that works and why this was just the right time for God to implement his plan of salvation. It is important that we know what we believe, and it is essential that we know why we believe it. Romans 5:17-18 helps us to understand the how and why of justification.

⁵¹ Gal. 4:4, Eph. 1:10
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Because of man's sin in the Garden of Eden, sin was imputed to all men. Genesis 3 tells the story of how Adam and Eve rebelled against God and disobeyed his word. Further – it also tells us of the consequences of that sin specifically applied to all of creation. The devastating effects of sin were not limited to Adam and Eve but were also imputed to all of humanity that would come after them – “because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man,” “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men,”⁵². God imputed Adam's sin to all mankind so that Paul would say, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”⁵³.

We were created to give glory to God, but our sin causes us to “fall short” of that glory – meaning we no longer have the ability to fulfill the purpose for which we were made. Since God is a just God who is very jealous of his glory, he must judge sin with the appropriate punishment - “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”⁵⁴.

In order to maintain his character, and guard his glory, God set in motion a plan that would bring redemption. That plan found its fulfillment when Jesus was born as the “Lamb of God” or blood sacrifice to atone for man's sin. So just as God imputed Adam's sin to all people, he has now imputed our sin to Christ when he died on the cross. Through the blood of Jesus the penalty of sin is paid for and made available through faith to those who believe, “much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ,” “so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men”⁵⁵.

The last element of justification involves how we access God's grace. Romans 5:17 tells us, “receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness”. When we commit our lives to Jesus by faith in response to the call of the Holy Spirit, God imputes or declares us righteous. Romans 5:16 says, “But the free gift following many

⁵² Rom. 5:17a, 18a

⁵³ Rom. 3:23

⁵⁴ Hebrews 9:22

⁵⁵ Rom. 5:17b, 18b
The Gift // Devotional

trespasses brought justification.” Our sin nature came from Adam, our sacrifice came from God through Jesus, and our salvation is offered as a free gift to be received in faith.

When Jesus died on the cross, God imputed our sin. That means our sins are forgiven – past, present, and future. But if God had only imputed our sin, that would have brought us back to the same standing that Adam and Eve had before the Fall. We would still be lacking the righteousness necessary to have a standing before God. What makes God’s gift so abundant is that it is more than just forgiveness of sins to make us morally neutral; it is also imputed righteousness making us holy. When God looks at the person who has received by faith the gift of salvation, he sees the sacrifice of Jesus for sin and he sees the righteousness of Jesus making us heirs with him.

Knowing what you believe and why you believe it gives strength to our conviction and longevity to our discipleship. But more than anything, it should bring renewal to our worship. Everyone who approached the baby Jesus; Shepherds, Magi, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna praised God and thanked him for the salvation represented in this child. Their knowledge was limited and their experience incomplete. Our knowledge is comprehensive through the Word of God and our experience is empowered by the Holy

Spirit. Thus, our response seems obvious – Let all that is within me praise the Lord. May the praise of his people declare the glory of his majesty.

Things to Consider..

- ▶ Why did God create us?
- ▶ In the song The Little Drummer Boy, the boy finds himself in the presence of Jesus, he knew he wanted to give the baby king something but he had nothing. So the boy worshipped Jesus by playing his drum. Pray that you find yourself this week in a similar situation and that you respond like the little boy did, by worshipping with all of your heart.

Day Four // Christmas is About Christ!

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus," **Romans 3:23-24**

Every year as Christmas rolls around, we speak of the way the holiday has lost some of its impact because of commercialization, materialism, secularism, and neglect. While these things are deplorable, the Christian community is not so different from the rest of society. Christians are just as likely to overspend, underworship, and give passing assent to the true meaning of the season as everyone else. The bottom line in all of it can be summed up with the statement: Christmas is about me rather than Christ.

Christian Smith is a professor at the University of North Carolina and he has done extensive study on the religious views of American teenagers. From that study he coined the phrase "Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism." He offers these five tenants of this newfound religion passing itself off as Christianity:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Clearly such views show a complete reversal of Biblical Faith from one that is focused on God to one that is focused on man. How convenient! Sadly, our teenagers did not develop this philosophy on their own, but are simply giving voice to what they have learned from previous generations. We are essentially dealing with idolatry whereby man is god and God exists to serve man.

As with all sin, the solution is the Gospel. Only the truth of the Gospel empowered by the Holy Spirit, explained by the Word of God, embodied through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and embraced by people of sincere faith can transform self-absorbed sinners into transformed disciples. At the very core of the Gospel is the truth that “we are justified by his grace.”

The emphasis of justification by grace alone removes the focus from man and returns it rightly to God. The fact of the matter is that regeneration is the work that God does in you and justification is a judgment of God with respect to you – both are entirely the work of God by His grace.

God is not required by external forces or by legal obligation derived from his own character to offer anyone grace. Rather, he has done so at his own expense (the sacrifice of his son Jesus), and as a gift unmerited by any human deed. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” ⁵⁶.

Understanding justification as act of God’s grace reorders all things. I am fully dependent on God as the source of my justification, and I live my life guided by his truth and Spirit to the glory of his name.

A renewed appreciation for grace gives integrity to faith. A faith that is genuine and true has eternal value that brings temporal transformation. In the process of sanctification, I become more like Christ with a hunger and thirst for the things of God and a burden to share the good news of the Gospel that has so changed my life.

May the gift of
God, given by the grace
of God, transform us this
Christmas to the glory of
God. Amen.

Things to Consider..

►Wouldn’t it be easier if there was a Check-list to Become a Christian? Pray the prayer, check. Go forward, check... etc. However, in such a situation, we have wrestled control back from God and we are trying to pilot our lives. How can you acknowledge God’s gift of grace this week?

⁵⁶ Ephesians 2:8–9
The Gift // Devotional

Day Five // Santa Theology

"yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." **Galatians 2:16**

Everyone knows some version of the story of Santa Claus. While not everyone encourages the practice in their homes, most are still familiar with the custom. The custom says that on Christmas Eve Santa guides his sleigh filled with toys to the homes of all the good boys and girls where he deposits their Christmas loot as a reward for good behavior. The version I learned as a child made for a lot more work for Santa because he also had to visit the homes of children who failed the performance review to deliver a lump of coal to their stocking as a punishment for past failure and an encouragement for future improvement. The other requisite element to the story required that each child had to believe in Santa Claus in the first place. I'm not sure what the unbelievers got in their stockings on Christmas morning – maybe the lump of coal was burning white hot.

Regardless, it seems the custom incorporates a certain amount of faith combined with good behavior. Now before you get all bent out of shape, you need to know I am a fan of childhood fantasy and I don't think you are lying to your kids if you tell them about Santa. However, I do find the correlation between Santa and faith to be interesting. It seems to have spilled over into Christianity or maybe a faulty view of Christian faith has played a role in crafting the Santa Claus custom.

Faith is the means by which we are justified and yet justification is not enhanced by the addition of our faith. It is clear from scripture that God has chosen the sincere faith of believers as the only means by which we can respond to his offer of grace. However, the Bible makes no distinction between the qualities of the faith of one over the other. You either believe by faith and are thus justified, or you believe by faith plus

your own good deeds or love or whatever and soon you cannot tell where your faith ends and trust in your own abilities begins.

God has chosen faith as the means by which we are justified because true faith is the opposite of depending on self. Like too many cooks standing around the same pot we want to offer our own recipe variations to God thinking the end product will somehow improve. The reality of true faith is that it's already perfect because it has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Jesus as the object of our faith.

The benefits of true faith are manifest. Convinced of our own inability to merit God's favor with a righteousness of our own, we respond in faith trusting in the righteousness of Jesus. Through faith our hope is secure because it does not depend on us, but on the accomplished work of the Savior that is unfading. Rather than living with the insecurity

brought on by our continued struggle with sin, we live in confidence by faith in the one who has defeated sin.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ True faith only comes from God, through no work of our own. How can we know that our faith comes from God?
- ▶ How can we measure our dependence on ourselves versus our dependence on God?

Day Six // Peace on Earth

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” **Romans 5:1-2**

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all

the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:8–14 ESV)

If Christmas is about experiencing peace, then we are missing it altogether. There isn't much peace in the stores on Black Friday. We certainly do not exude peace when we look at our crowded calendars for the holiday season. There is no sense of peace as we try to work out acceptable schedules to accommodate all of the necessary family gatherings. And who can be at peace knowing the size of the credit card bill that is coming in January?

The problem is not the lack of peace, but the perception of peace. We tend to understand peace as the absence of anxiety or stress. Anxiety and stress come from fear of failure, uncertainty about the future, or overwhelming obligations and expectations. Most of the above, as well as a host of unnamed issues, are born out of an effort to balance our abilities with our responsibilities. In other words, “can I do it and what will it cost me?”

Many people carry the same behavior into their spiritual lives. We learn about discipleship, holiness, and righteousness then immediately set about trying to live up to the standard we see in the Bible only to be frustrated with our limitations. As a result, our spiritual lives become another source of stress rather than bringing us the peace we know is promised.

When the angel announced “peace on earth”, he was not referring to the absence of anxiety, but the restoration of a personal relationship with God through the Savior who had just been born. Instead of us looking at the requirement and wondering can I do it and what will it cost me, God said, “let me do it and I will pay the price”. When

he calls us to himself, it is not for more self-effort, but it is for greater self-surrender.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" ⁵⁷.

The peace in the heart of the believer that comes from being justified by faith is peace with God. No longer strangers or enemies we are made members of the family of God. The tumult of sin is replaced with the healing power of forgiveness, while the frustration with failure yields to the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Imagine what it would be like to get off of your spiritual treadmill and start making real progress that leads to greater glory for God, deeper commitment in faith, and genuine confidence founded on the righteousness of Christ. Resting in the finished work of Jesus and the righteousness of Jesus brings the peace of spirit and mind that exceeds human understanding.

The doctrine of justification is more than a precept to be learned, it is the expression of practical truth regarding what God has judged and the identity of the follower of Christ. When he thinks of me, my sins are forgiven; and when he looks at me he sees the righteousness of Jesus.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" ⁵⁸.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What is the antidote to an over-stuffed Christmas schedule? How can you find peace in the holiday season?

⁵⁷ Matthew 11:28

⁵⁸ Romans 8:1
The Gift // Devotional

Week 5: Adoption // by JD Huitt

Introduction // Our Journey

A few years ago, my wife and I were in North Carolina with our church youth group on their summer mission trip. While there, we heard a sermon preached by a pastor named Tony Merida concerning orphan care and the adoption journey that he and his wife have recently embarked upon. As he preached from a passage in the book of Galatians, I was struck by an overwhelming sense that God was leading Hannah and me to pursue adoption ourselves. Unbeknownst to me, Hannah was experiencing the same thing at the same time. So, through a series of events that God put into motion over 12 years ago (well before Hannah and I had ever met), we are now in the midst of adopting from Ukraine.

In preparing to write this portion of the Advent series study, I wrestled a great deal with how I could communicate what the Bible says about God's plan for adoption without it seeming like I have a personal bias or agenda. Often times, people are guilty of taking a passion or pursuit in their lives and shaping Scripture around it rather than starting with the Gospel and having their passions and pursuits built around Scripture. I had even entertained the idea of just writing anonymously until I found out that that wasn't going to be an option. Plus, with the personal experiences that God is using to teach us about His plan for adoption, it would be difficult to write anonymously anyway.

So my hope is that as we take a small look at the gift of adoption that draws in part from the sermon that we heard that day in North Carolina, the truths of God's word would speak for themselves and that my own personal experiences would in no way take away or distract from what Scripture has to say so that we all might see yet another side of how great our God is.

Day One // Adoption is Planned

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." **Ephesians 1:3-6**

As we've progressed through the process of adopting a child into our family, we've been taught a lot about God's adoption of us into his family. One parallel is just in the planning that is required for an adoption. As with couples who choose to have children biologically, those who opt to add to their family by way of adoption put forth a great deal of forethought and preparation.

Couples who pursue adoption have to answer many questions in their planning. Will we adopt domestically or internationally? If internationally, what country? What adoption agency will we use? How old of a child do we want to have? Do we want a baby or do we want to skip the whole potty training phase and adopt a toddler ⁵⁹ ? Or do we want to adopt an older child whose chances of being adopted decrease exponentially with each passing birthday?

For us, the decision to adopt also means that we have some home remodeling that we have to do in order to prepare. With the way Ukrainian adoptions work, you aren't presented with options until you arrive in the country. This means that you could come home with one child or, if a sibling group is available and in need of a family, you could come home with a lot more. You just don't know. In an effort to be ready for anything, we're adding on to our rather small, box-like home in case we step off of the plane with a whole pack of Ukrainian kids.

This is just a small sampling of the amount of planning that is required in order to plan for an adoption. Just the same way that humans adopting humans into their Earthly

⁵⁹ I personally feel that this is a compelling argument for adopting a toddler or older child.
The Gift // Devotional

family is planned, God's choice to adopt humans into His heavenly family is planned. In Ephesians chapter 1 verses 3-5, Paul is laying out the foundations of our faith to the church and says,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ...”

What we see here is that adoption is not a man-made thing. Adoption was God's idea. Before He even spoke a molecule into existence, God set up the universe in such a way as to make adoption possible. Why? First, as we see in latter part of verse 6, God's plan to adopt us was done “in love.” In an outpouring of the love that flows from God's heart, He planned to take us from an infinitely bad situation and adopt us into an infinitely great Heavenly family.

In the latter part of verse 5 and reading through verse 6, we see another reason why God set up the universe with the expressed purpose of moving towards our adoption through Christ. It reads,

“In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

In verse 6, it says that we're adopted “to the praise of his glorious grace.” Adoption is not only from God, but it is also to God in that it prompts us to praise Him for how glorious He is and how infinite His grace is. John Piper put it this way:

“When God was thinking about how to create a universe, what was centrally driving Him was, ‘How can I create a universe in which my grace will be put on display most beautifully?’ and His answer was, ‘I will predestine people for adoption.’”

This plan for adoption that God had put into motion before time began found its center in humble beginnings of a small child born to a scared teenage girl in the dumpy, backwater town of Bethlehem. And it's a plan that would eventually cost this child his life.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Why do you think it is that God chose adoption as a means of bringing people into His eternal family?
- ▶ Many see salvation as an event in our life that occurs at a time of our choosing. How does knowing that God planned for you to be adopted before time began change your view of your own salvation?
- ▶ How is justification different from adoption?

Day Two // Adoption is Costly

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." **Ephesians 1:7-10**

The adoption process comes at a great cost. The costs associated with both domestic and international adoptions usually average between \$25,000-\$35,000. It's this very thing that deters most couples from even considering adoption.

But the cost of adoption goes beyond the financial burden. It also costs a great deal of time. Most of the time that we've spent thus far has been in filling out paperwork, going through multiple forms of background checks, wrestling with the state, filling out more paperwork and having people talk and visit with us to see if we're qualified to be parents. None of this includes the time that we'll have to spend once we notified by the Ukrainian government that they're ready for us to come over. Most likely, we'll have to stay in the country for 4-6 weeks while the adoption is processed and finalized in Ukraine.

In addition to the time and financial costs, there is also a significant emotional cost. Nothing is ever easy. I've read about cases where couples who have looked forward to the birth of their soon-to-be adopted child are crushed when they find out that the birth mother has decided to not put her child up for adoption. Fickle governments can change the rules in the middle of an adoption process or shut down international adoptions altogether. The list goes on and on.

Adoption is costly. But it isn't nearly as costly as what our adoption in Christ was. To adopt a child means that you will have to go through a lot of red tape, but for us to be adopted, it cost Christ his red blood. Continuing his line of thought from God's predestining us for adoption, Paul continues writing to the church in Ephesus in Ephesians 1:7-10 by saying,

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Paul is obviously so excited to tell the Ephesian church about this that he forgets to put in a period thus creating one of the longest run-on sentences ever. And for good reason too. It is through the blood of Christ that was spilled on our behalf that we are redeemed in the sight of God and are forgiven of our sins. But it was not free. Someone had to pay the penalty for our sin and it was only Christ who had what it took to pay what our sin cost. That's something to get excited about.

We're often asked how much our adoption is costing us. After recovering from the initial shock of learning the financial costs of an international adoption, the next question is most often, "Why don't you just have some kids of your own?"⁶⁰ Here's the answer: Christ spared no expense in his adoption of us. In fact, he did more. To adopt us, he gave everything. In light of that, we're counting the expenses of adopting an orphaned

⁶⁰ I've often found this to be an odd question, as if the kids that we'll be adopting won't be "our own."
The Gift // Devotional

child into our family as nothing. As a matter of fact, the cost could be two or three times greater and we would still do it. Although we're still in the process, we have faith that God has put this in our hearts and will provide the means to see us through to the end. But I can't bring myself to think of the child (or children) that God has picked out for us who are spending this Christmas in an orphanage somewhere in eastern Europe and say, "Adopting them is too much. I won't do it." Even though we haven't met them yet, they are supremely valuable to us and we love them enough to do what it takes to bring them home regardless of the cost. That's what God did for us. But the greater reality is the one that we who are saved are currently living in. The one where God sent Christ to Earth as an orphan so that in Him, we may all be sons and daughters.

Thanks be to our God, who is a good Father, who looked at us in our spiritual depravity and said, "I will adopt them. They will be mine and I will give everything to make it happen."

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What is it in your life that made your adoption such a high cost?
- ▶ In what ways does our adoption through Christ bring glory to God?
- ▶ If God was willing to pay such a high cost to bring rebellious sinners into his family, how should that change our view of how we are to live in a world where so many do not know Christ?

Day Three // Adoption Requires Someone Who is Qualified

"I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." **Galatians 4:1-5**

The process of adopting a child really is something to behold. The amount of

paperwork and interviews that we've gone through in order to make sure that we're qualified to be the parents of a child has been nothing short of amazing.

We've been asked nearly every question under the sun regarding each detail of our personal lives. How much money do you make? What is the total of all your assets? Have you ever been convicted of a crime? What was your parents' relationship like? How could their marriage have been better? Speaking of marriage, tell us everything about yours. What are the things that you argue about the most? Where do you see yourselves 10 years from now? Are you satisfied with the more intimate side of your relationship?

The one that got me was "Have you ever had a speeding ticket?" Fortunately, the success of our adoption did not hinge on my less than perfect driving record, but I assured the adoption agency that I had been reformed of my ways long ago and that any child that was entrusted to me would be safe with me behind the wheel. This just scratches the surface of the questions, the background checks, the biometric hand scans and the home studies that go into an adoption to make sure that the parents are qualified to be entrusted with a child or children.

When people ask us about the process and what all we are required to go through, most are of the opinion that the whole thing is ridiculous. With 150 million orphans in the world, why wouldn't they make it easier for people to adopt? I can see where it would be easy to have that view, but really, we haven't minded any of it because we know that the adoption agency and the social workers involved have the best interests of the children at heart. Let's face it. There are some straight up weird people out there who don't need to be raising any kids. The adoption process serves to filter out those who aren't qualified to care for a hamster, much less a child.

Our adoption into God's family is no different. We can't do it on our own no more than the orphan child in Thailand or Uganda or Romania can place themselves into a family by the force of their own will. It takes someone who is perfectly qualified to oversee our adoption. And that person is Christ.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:4-5)

It is only Christ who is qualified to redeem us, to bring us into right standing with God, so that we might receive our adoption. What is it that makes him qualified? He is the only one who was both fully God and fully man. He is the only one who was sinless. He is the only one who was able to fulfill the Law. He is the only one who could be the perfect, unblemished sacrifice. Were it not for Christ, there would be no redemption, no regeneration, no justification, and there would certainly be no adoption.

All of this occurred at just the right time. Paul says that Christ came “when the fullness of time had come.” That is what we celebrate at Christmas. That Jesus, perfect in every way, humbled himself and came at just the right time so that we could be free and experience eternal

joy with him. And one day, when the time is right, He will return to finalize our adoption and make all things new.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Many people (Christians included) look to all kinds of different things as their source of salvation and security, but none of them are qualified. What are the things that people tend to turn to most in your workplace? In your family?
- ▶ What are the things in your own life that you tend to turn to as your functional savior?

Day Four // Adoption Changes Our Circumstances

”And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” **Ephesians 2:1-9**

There are over 150 million orphans in the world today. That’s about half the size of the United States. Try to wrap your mind around that. A country half the size of the United States filled with nothing but orphans. That nation of orphans would be the 8th largest country in the world. It could even be argued that the fatherless in our world is largest unreached people group out there.

It is well known that the continent of Africa is being ripped apart by the AIDS virus. Although Africa only holds around 15% of the world’s population, it is estimated that 92% of AIDS related deaths occurred in Africa in 2007. The side effect of this continental epidemic is an orphan crisis in Africa from children who have lost their biological parents to AIDS. The most recent studies estimate that over 2.1 million children are orphaned in Africa every year. That’s one every 15 seconds. Many of these children are left completely vulnerable and are subject to being trafficked into the sex trade, forced into modern slavery, or recruited into private armies as child soldiers. In Ukraine, it is estimated that over 60% of the orphan girls who are not adopted leave the orphanage and are either sold into the sex trade or forced into a life of prostitution. Over 70% of the boys are lured into a life of crime.

These statistics and facts could go on and on in representation of children throughout the world who have no one that they can call “mom” or “dad”. What is

heartbreaking is this: while 250,000 children are adopted annually, each year, 14,050,000 children grow up as orphans and “age out”⁶¹ with no family or home to call their own. Over 14 million young boys and girls walk out of the doors of an orphanage every year on their own.

All of this is to illustrate one thing: to be an orphan is to be in a situation without much hope but to be adopted into a family is to be brought into a situation where there is much hope. That is what happened when we were adopted into God’s family. We were brought out of a hopeless situation and into a hopeful way of living. Paul illustrates this in Ephesians 2 when he reminds the church that we weren’t always children of God, but were in fact children of a different kind. Take some time to re-read Ephesians 2:1-7 above.

I hope that you caught that. We were not always called “children of God.” We were once children of wrath. Our very nature was hostile to God. But God, being rich in mercy being a good Father, saves us, justifies us, and loves us into His family through adopting us.

I love listening to and reading stories about parents who have gone to great lengths to adopt their kids. One that I heard recently was about a little 9 year old boy who had been orphaned when, to the best of everyone’s knowledge, his biological mother had been killed by his father. As time passed and he lived his life out in the orphanage that he’d been placed in, he began to think that he’d never have a family. One of his teachers at school was teaching the class a song about mamas, which he refused to sing thinking that he would never have a mother again. He has essentially lost hope of ever being apart of a family. But God had other plans and shortly thereafter sent a wonderful Christian couple that adopted him and his siblings into their family and brought him home to be their son, forever.

It’s a great thing for a child to have their circumstances changed from one of hopelessness to one of hope, but how much greater is it see our God adopt rebellious

⁶¹ “Age out” is a term that is used to describe children who reach an age where they are too old to live in the orphanage and are required to leave and live on their own.

children into His family
and change their
eternally hopeless
situation into one that is
eternally hopeful.

Questions to Consider

- ▶ Were it not for the grace that was given to you by God, where do you think your life would be today? Or, if you are not yet a Christian, how do you think that being adopted could change your life (both right now and for eternity)?
- ▶ What can you do to be the hands and feet of Christ and help alleviate some of the suffering that is occurring in the world today?

Day Five // Adoption Changes Our Identity

"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." **Galatians 4:6-7**

If anyone in Bible could be called an authority on slavery, it would probably be Moses. Having been born into slavery under Egyptian rule, Moses' mother drops him in a basket and floats him down the river in an effort to save him from Pharaoh's decree that all Hebrew infants are to be executed. Ironically, it is Pharaoh's own daughter who finds Moses and decides to adopt him.

As Moses grows and matures, he proves himself to be a man who cares deeply for matters of injustice, which gets him into a bit of trouble when he goes a little overboard and kills an Egyptian that is beating a Jewish slave. It is this incident that forces him to flee into the wilderness where he takes a wife and begins living out what he thinks will be a peaceful life as a shepherd. But God had other plans.

Anyone who has grown up in Sunday School or has watched Charlton Heston in The Ten Commandments knows what happens next. God calls Moses to go back to Pharaoh and lead the Jewish people out of slavery. In order to loosen Pharaoh's grip on the people, God initiates a series of bizarre plagues where, amongst other things, water turns to blood, everybody's cattle fall over dead, and the land is infested with gnats. Personally, I would have been done after the gnats if I were Pharaoh. Frogs? Yeah,

that's kind of nasty. Darkness? I wouldn't like it, but I could maybe tough it out. But when a billion gnats start buzzing up my nose and in my ears, that's when I tap out. But it isn't until after the tenth plague where the firstborn of every house dies that Pharaoh finally relents and sets the people of Israel free.

The exodus of the slaves under the leadership of Moses is one of the hallmark accounts of the Bible. But there is another liberation story in the Bible that trumps the Exodus. It is the liberation of spiritual slaves by someone who is the greater Moses, Jesus Christ. In Galatians 4:6-7, Paul puts it this way:

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

When the adoption of our child (or children) is complete, they will have a new identity. Whatever their birth certificate says now will change. On their new birth certificate, my wife and I will be listed as their parents. Their name will change also. They will go from having whatever last name they have at this moment to being a "Huitt". In many cases, it's remarkable to see how the children who have been adopted into a family end up identifying with their parents in every way. I recently overheard a woman make a comment about a boy that her sister had adopted by saying, "Unless you knew it, you'd never know that he was adopted. He and my sister even walk the same."

The change in identity that occurs when a child is adopted is great, but the change in identity that occurs when we are adopted into the family of God is even greater. We go from being slaves to being sons.

There are many different forms of spiritual slavery that we are bound to. For some of us, money is our master. The desire for a better "this" or a newer "that" is cruel master that never satisfies. For others, sensuality is what shackles us and lust is what rules in our life. Like money, lust is cruel master that promises much but delivers nothing that is lasting or ultimately satisfying. It could be argued that the most subtle and dangerous form of slavery is that of religion, which sets us up as our own master. In it,

we become slaves to the law and to “cleaning up our act” and making sure that everyone else cleans theirs up too.

But as sons, our identity has changed. We are no longer slaves. We are liberated from turning our affections to lesser things and freed to love our Father, in whom we will find ultimate satisfaction and peace.

Things to Consider...

- ▶ When the Israelites left Egypt in freedom, many of them found themselves wishing that they were back in the former enslaved state. What forms of slavery do you find yourself looking back towards most often?
- ▶ How does our new identity as sons or daughters change how we live?
- ▶ Read through the rest of chapter 4 and chapter 5 to see what Paul had to say to the church in Galatia about living in slavery and living free.

Day Six // Adoption Makes Us Heirs

”So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” **Romans 8:12-17**

One thing that Hannah and I found out soon into the adoption process is that people are inquisitive and have many questions, which is fine. I’m not sure how other adoptive couples feel, but we’ve haven’t minded a bit. In fact, we enjoy talking about it because it gives us an opportunity to talk about the Gospel and how great our God is. However, there have been some questions and comments that are...well...interesting. The following is a small sample of things that said directly to us and in some cases, indirectly:

- ▶ “Why would you want to adopt a kid when you can just have one of your own?”
- ▶ “I think that what you guys are doing is great, but you really should try to have your own kid at some point. There’s really nothing like it.”

- ▶ “So are you guys wanting to adopt so you can try it out first and see if you like it before you have your own baby?”
- ▶ “So which one of you has the problem?” When this person clarified that they were asking which one of us was infertile, I replied that to our knowledge, we were capable of having kids biologically but wanted to adopt to which they replied, “Huh. Well that’s weird.”⁶²
- ▶ “I don’t know why they would want to adopt instead of having their own child. They’ll never love that kid as much as they would if they’d have a baby of their own flesh and blood.”
- ▶ “The Bible says to ‘be fruitful and multiply’. I don’t see how it’s Biblical to adopt somebody else’s kid and not have your own.”
- ▶ “You know, you all could probably avoid a lot of headaches and save a bunch of money if you’d just have your own kid.”
- ▶ “You guys are going to adopt a white baby, right?”

These are all direct quotes. I do need to say that for every negative comment, there are 3 or 4 that are overwhelmingly supportive. I also need to say that I’ve never been offended by any of them. On the contrary; I’ve actually had pity on those who spoke them because what it demonstrates is a lack of understanding of the Gospel. Those who think that we are insane for wanting to adopt have no realization that they themselves were once orphans.

This question of the legitimacy of adoption was a problem in the early church too. There seemed to be a general issue regarding whether the new Gentile converts were really a part of God’s family. Paul addresses this in Romans 8:14-17 by detailing how all of us who are adopted through Christ are heirs with Him.

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears

⁶² I was also sure to clarify that people who struggle with infertility don’t have a “problem” either.
The Gift // Devotional

witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,..."

When the adoption of our child/children is complete, they will legitimately be ours. If we choose to have a biological child later on, they will be the full brother or sister of the child/children that we adopted. They will all be "our own". Will they be brothers and sisters by blood? Of course not.

But love trumps blood.

We who are in the family of God are all brothers and sisters, but not by birth. None of us were born into the original race of God's chosen people. As a matter of fact, all of us came into God's family by way of trans-racial adoption.⁶³ We have different skin tones, personalities, and backgrounds, but that doesn't make us any less connected. We have all been adopted by our Heavenly Father, which makes us all family and all heirs with Christ, our older brother.

Things to Consider...

- ▶ What does it mean to be an heir? What does it mean to be "an heir with Christ?"
- ▶ How might Satan use our status as adopted children to undermine the work of Christ in our lives?
- ▶ How do trans-racial adoptions mirror our adoption in Christ?

Conclusion // What Next?

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" **James 1:27**

My hope for our church is this: that we will become a community of believers that cares for orphans. This Christmas, there are 150 million children around the world who have no mom or dad to celebrate with. At the very least, they are spending it in an

⁶³ The person who was concerned as to whether or not we were adopting a "white baby" missed this point. Families comprised of individuals of different skin tones and ethnicities are a beautiful example that we have been adopted trans-racially.

orphanage with a host of other children who are not receiving the attention and care that is found in the loving care of a family. At the very worst, they are spending it under the oppression of an evil man or woman who is exploiting them for their own wicked gain.

We can't do something for all of them, but we can do something for some. I've prayed that God would raise up Godly couples in our church who feel the burden to care for the orphan and take it upon themselves to expand their family by way of adoption. For some, that may mean adopting domestically or fostering a child. For others, it may mean adopting a child who has been orphaned because of AIDS in Africa or traveling to Nepal or India or Ukraine to take a child (or children) and love them into their family. For those whose kids are grown or are nearly grown, it would be my hope that God would raise up some who feel the burden to adopt an older child, who is amongst a group of children that is considered nearly unadoptable because of their age.

For those whom God has not called to adoption, my prayer is that God would burden them to care for the orphan in other ways. That may mean supporting other families as they pursue adoption. Or it may mean going to a place like Guatemala where international adoptions have been closed so that they can help establish and sustain an orphanage where children can be cared for and can learn about Christ.

Whatever the case, it is clear throughout Scripture that God cares for the orphan. And we should too, because we too were once orphans. I think that it would be amazing to look around in our church 10 years from now and see it full of ex-orphans from all over the world as a living testament to the fact that our God saves both here and for eternity.

At the time that I'm wrapping this up, it's about time for me to go to bed. That means that on the other side of the world, in some orphanage in Eastern Europe, my child is likely getting ready to wake up and start her day. I have no idea how old she is, what her name is, what she looks like or how she became an orphan, but Hannah and I are already thinking about and praying for her.

In Romans 8, Paul talks about how sin has subjected the whole world to futility. It's led to wars, famine, disease, injustice, and orphans. He also says that we "groan

inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons.” I can feel that. I’m sure that our child feels it too and that she’s groaning inwardly as she wait for her adoption.

I’m praying that God instills in her a sense of hope. Hope that a family and a better life full of church friends and aunts and uncles and grandparents and fishing trips and Happy Meals and Christmas presents are ahead of her. But most of all, I’m praying that once we adopt her into our family, that God will adopt her into His.