

Songs for a King



Advent Devotional



As we enter the Christmas season, my hope is that you and your family can take a step back from the busyness and urgency of this world's demands. This Advent Devotional is designed to help you consider the light of Jesus as revealed in the Psalms, and further ignite your passion to follow Jesus this holiday season.

Merry Christmas!

Mark Vroegop
Lead Pastor

DECEMBER 2

Paul Nystedt *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 2:1-6

¹Why do the nations rage

and the peoples plot in vain?

²The kings of the earth set themselves,

and the rulers take counsel together,

against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,

³“Let us burst their bonds apart

and cast away their cords from us.”

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs;

the Lord holds them in derision.

⁵Then he will speak to them in his wrath,

and terrify them in his fury, saying,

⁶“As for me, I have set my King

on Zion, my holy hill.”

LEARN TOGETHER | THE KING REIGNS

The Sinfulness of Man (v. 1-3).

No matter what you believe, truth is truth. In a post-truth society, that first statement is actually controversial. Regardless, the truth remains: God exists. In Psalm 19, David says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” God exists, and his existence can be clearly seen.

Despite this, the nations rage against God. An unbeliever doesn’t ask, “How can I praise the Almighty Creator of the universe?” The unbeliever asks, “What can I do to avoid his laws? What can I do to thwart his control in my life?” It is the earliest lie. It’s the lie the Devil himself bought and now sells—that we can be our own gods. The whisper in our ear says, “Be your own God, live for yourself, enjoy yourself. Don’t let some other being, even God, control your life. What good God would want to prevent you from living your life the way you wanted?” Sadly, many people believe this lie. Not only do they rage, but the psalmist says they also gather to plot against the Almighty.

The Holiness of God (v. 4-6).

Think about it: this is like a bunch of ants gathering together to discuss how they will stop an incoming atomic bomb. It’s absolutely laughable. In fact, that is exactly how David describes it. The powerful creator of the universe looks down and laughs at the unfathomable pride of humanity. King Jesus reigns from his holy hill, and he will speak wrath and justice over the ungodly. The hill isn’t holy because it is special, but because of who is ruling from it. This is a statement of the complete separateness and worth of Jesus. Notice he speaks wrath over his enemies. What is the wrath he speaks? God speaks reality to them. Isn’t that interesting? He speaks truth. All that is needed against this foolishness is the Almighty’s speech. What is this truth that God speaks? The King reigns (v. 6).

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. How have you listened to the lies of the world? What are some of the consequences of doing so?
2. What does it tell us about God, that he has the authority to speak truth to establish justice and pour out wrath? (Consider Gen. 1:3; Ps. 46:6; Joel 2:11; Amos 1:2; Heb. 1:3)
3. Thinking about the two questions above, how are you encouraged and comforted? How are you motivated to live?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Fill us with your Spirit to discern the things of God in every area of our lives. Strengthen us to stand strong against the flaming darts of the evil one. Give us the desire to take your counsel, will, and commandments for our lives over the counsel of the world. Remove all pride in our lives, and let us securely rest in Jesus, the Lord's anointed. Speak truth into our lives where we need it, encourage us, and strengthen us to do the same for others.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 3

Paul Nystedt *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 2:7-12

⁷I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.

⁸Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

¹⁰Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

¹²Kiss the Son,
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

LEARN TOGETHER | REFUGE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE

The writer of Hebrews links Psalm 2:7 with Psalm 45:6-7 and tells us these passages are about Jesus.

David writes prophetically in these psalms of what the coming anointed King, the promised one, would accomplish. In this psalm, we read that God has begotten the Son—in other words, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). God became a man. The only hope for the promise of God to Abraham, and to David, was through the promised one who would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, made a way for all the people of the world to become the heritage of God. Through Jesus, we can be adopted into God’s family as his children. As we read in Hosea, “And in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people;’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’” Jesus is the embodiment of God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:6-7).

The Son responds in two ways shown in verses eight and nine. Jesus displayed God’s love in the most loving, humble, and sacrificial act that will ever be made; but through God’s spirit, we must accept it. If we do not, Jesus will also uphold his justice and carry out his wrath on all ungodliness.

So, we have a choice. David warns us of two outcomes. We can either joyfully serve and worship Jesus who took the wrath we deserved, or we can accept his just wrath by living in the passions of our flesh. We can live in ungodliness. If we do, we will perish in our sins. The good news is that the passage doesn’t end there. Those who take refuge in Jesus are blessed. Jesus is making people from all nations his children; he is giving refuge to everyone who believes. Therefore, David encourages us to throw off our ungodliness and take refuge in the one who humbled himself, took the form of a servant, and paid it all, so that we might live.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Why should we “rejoice with trembling?” Why is this good news? How would that look practically in our daily lives?
2. David gives two options for us in response to the reality that Jesus is King: we can serve him, or we can follow the world. Do you feel like you are serving Jesus the way the King of the universe deserves? What might need to change?
3. David says, “I will tell of the decree.” It is good news that Jesus reigns. Who might God be calling you to disciple or share the gospel with? Pray that God would equip you to do so. Pray that God would open that individuals’ hearts and eyes.

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for giving us refuge. We do not deserve it, yet you have given us rest and shelter, and the promise an eternity of joy. Would you strengthen us now to endure trials? Give us the ability to rejoice always, and to serve you in the knowledge and fear of who you are. Keep us from sin and temptation. Give us opportunities to tell of your wonderful decrees. Help us give your refuge to others. We pray that many people would come to praise you for who you are, and that they would not be like “the nations” David mentions who pridefully go against your will. Help us serve you always, displaying your reign in our lives for all to see.

In Jesus’s name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 4

Joe Bartemus *Pastor for Theological Development*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 5:1-8

- ¹ Give ear to my words, O LORD;
consider my groaning.
- ² Give attention to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you do I pray.
- ³ O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;
in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.
- ⁴ For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil may not dwell with you.
- ⁵ The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
- ⁶ You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

- ⁷ But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,
will enter your house.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
in the fear of you.
- ⁸ Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness
because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.

LEARN TOGETHER | TAKEAWAY

Context.

This Psalm has been called a morning psalm because of the reference to “morning” in verse three. David wrote this psalm as a cry to God during hard times; he wanted the Lord to help him. David promised that he was going to bring a sacrifice and obey the Lord. He trusted that God would be there for him. The word “watch” gives the sense of eagerly waiting for God to show up. David trusted that God would deliver him.

Trouble in the world.

He told the Lord that the world was full of evil, and knew he needed the Lord. David clung to the truth that God would eventually rid the world of evil. The Lord is described in very great terms:

- The Lord is called the King (v. 2). He rules and is the sovereign king who will make all wrongs right.
- The Lord has steadfast love— evident throughout Psalms. It shows the faithfulness of God to keep his covenant with his people, and to accept worship from them in his temple.
- The Lord is righteous (v. 8). He will protect his people and act with justice on their behalf.

Advent.

This psalm could only be realized fully when the Messiah would come. There was a hope for the present king to bring hope and peace, but David realized that the true Messiah would come in the future. Advent anticipates the coming of the Messiah, who would be the true king of Israel, bringing righteousness and steadfast love to the world.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What New Testament passages help us see Jesus as the king who was anticipated in the Old Testament? (Genesis 3:15, Genesis 49:10, Psalm 89:3-4, Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, 11:10, 33:22, Jeremiah 23:5)
2. Read Romans three. What does it show us about the wickedness in this world? How does this passage show us God's provision of righteousness in Jesus? How does that affect us?
3. Look at Romans 5:1-8. How does this passage show God's love expressed in its fullest form?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Your name is set apart and holy. We thank you this advent season. We thank you that you sent Jesus who is our king and who reigns in righteousness. We thank you that he has given his righteousness to us so we can be his children. With grateful hearts, we love you because you first loved us. The clearest evidence of your love is seen in John. 3:16: you sent your Son. This advent season we say, "May your kingdom come and will be done."

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 5

Karesse Faull *Assistant Director of Community and Discipleship*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 16:1-6

- ¹ Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.
² I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you.”
³ As for the saints in the land, they are excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.
⁴ The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.
⁵ The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
⁶ The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

LEARN TOGETHER | DELIGHTING IN GOD, HIS PEOPLE & HIS PROMISES

Delight in God.

In the first two verses, we see a proclamation: “Preserve me, O God... You are my Lord.” David, knowing the state of his own soul, humbly proclaims an acknowledgement that God is his Lord, and surely there is no good inside or outside of him that does not come from the Lord. This quick declaration gives a foretaste of what we see our Savior doing within the New Testament. Jesus, the Son of God, humbly proclaimed this truth to all—God is father of all.

Delight in the Children of God.

In verses three and four, David expresses his love for God’s people: “The saints in the land, whom is all my delight.” David delights in those whom he knows belong to his God, and he delights in doing good to them, despite their failings. We see this as a reflection of how God delights in us. Knowing that our hearts are deceitful and that we have a tendency to worship other things instead of God, David transitions with a warning: If we fall into this sin, we will become restless, or as David boldly declares, those who seek anyone other than the living God will surely see their sorrows multiply.

Delight in the Promises of God.

In verses five and six, David quickly turns back to where he finds his comfort, which is the Lord who is his “chosen portion.” He rests in the promise that the God of the universe is in control of his life. David has full assurance that not only does God “hold his lot” while he walks on this earth, but that God will provide an inheritance that is beautiful and eternal. The progression of this passage shows David’s delight in God, his delight in the children of God, and his delight in the promises of God for his future.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. In this busy Christmas season, our hearts can be consumed with the things of this world, and we often forget to take the time to remind our hearts of the truth of who God is. When is the last time you reminded your soul of this truth?
2. Write down the names of a few people you want to be praying for. Then, take time to intentionally pray for them.
3. David proclaimed: “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” How can you hold onto that promise during this season of your life?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

We come to you humbly confessing that you are God and we are not. You are in control, and we are not. We acknowledge that we often proclaim you with our mouths, yet live as though we are the ruler of all. We ask that we would be quick to proclaim you not just with our lips but that we would worship you in our hearts.

Father, we come before you to confess our lack of loving those who you have placed in our lives. We know that in our flesh, we do not want to consider others better than ourselves. But Lord, we come asking that we would be reminded that we love, because you first loved us. Soften our hearts and out of the overflow of your love, empower us to love those you have so kindly put in our lives.

Father, we thank you that all your promises are, “Yes!” in Jesus. We thank you for the promise that you hold our lot, that the lines have fallen for us in pleasant places. We thank you that even in seasons of pain and suffering, we can come cling to the promise that our inheritance in you is beautiful.

In Jesus’s name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 6

Karesse Faull *Assistant Director of Community and Discipleship*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 16:7-11

- ⁷ I bless the Lord who gives me counsel;
in the night my heart instructs me.
- ⁸ I have set the Lord always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.
- ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.
- ¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.
- ¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forever.

LEARN TOGETHER | PLEASURE IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

In verses seven and eight, we see David lifting blessings to God, his wise and infinite counselor. David knows the world's lofty and empty wisdom could never lead him to righteousness and pure wisdom. This bleeds into David's statement in verse eight. Knowing God as the source of true wisdom, David puts God before him. Then, we see the blessing of living in this posture. With the God of the universe at your right hand, you shall not be shaken. We are reminded that as we submit ourselves to the Father, he promises more of himself in the midst of the sorrow and pain.

In verses nine and ten, David continues in his posture of gratitude. We see that a secure soul produces a joyful soul. David's entire countenance and being are rejoicing in the eternal security that comes from trusting in God's promise—that his soul will not be abandoned and his flesh dwells secure. As the early church father Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless, until they can find their rest in you." David claims that true rest comes from believing and clinging to God, who will continue to hold him fast.

The psalm ends with a foundational truth and promise (v. 11). In a few verses prior, David spoke of God as his counselor, a counselor who "makes known to him the path of life." David reveals the truth that as we submit ourselves to God, and follow his path, fullness of joy, and pleasures forever are truly at our disposal.

David lived in this broken world. He encountered the harshness of sin in his own life. Yet, David—knowing the heart of his God—was able to proclaim that joy and pleasures were offered here on earth. However, the greatest beauty that David knew and declared throughout the entire psalm was the promise of pure satisfaction that was to come for all of eternity.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. When is the last time you thought of God as your counselor? When is the last time you went to God as your counselor?
2. During life's trials, what truths and promises do you cling to? How can this psalm comfort you in both the joyful seasons of life and the difficult ones?
3. How can you intentionally take time to set your mind on things above during this holiday season?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Just as David did, we bless you. We thank you that you go before us, behind us, and beside us. We thank you that we can trust you as our counselor. We thank you that you said to us in your word that if anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask in faith, and it will be given to him. We pray that our hearts would continue to look to you as we walk this weary land. Thank you for being a personal God who delights in offering wisdom to his children.

Father, we thank you that we can find rest for our souls. We thank you for your extravagant grace in our lives. We praise you that even though we are prone to wander, you hold us fast. We ask that you continue to help us have hearts like David that rejoice in your promises and find rest in your Word.

During this advent season, may we remember why we celebrate, and continue to be in a posture of celebrating that you, our King, have come and that our hearts can rest in you.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 7

Zach Cochran *Assistant Pastor of Student Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 18:1-3

¹ I love you, O LORD, my strength.

² The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

³ I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.

LEARN TOGETHER | TAKEAWAY

This Davidic psalm is most likely written at the end of the king's life. As he writes this, David looks back on God's deliverance. In doing so, he gives imagery to who his rescuer is. He is describing God as his strength, fortress, deliver, rock, refuge, shield, horn of salvation, and stronghold. Through all of the trials, sin, and strife David encountered in his life, God remained his foundation. David clearly dwelled on the good characteristics of God. He did not just know God; he had a personal relationship with God. He knew God's character.

As God delivered David, he delivers us, through Christ. In our sin, God has rescued us from the worst of consequences, in this life and the next. God is with us every step of the way. When we encounter struggles, suffering, sickness, sin, or even sweet times, God is with us. That should cause us to praise God the way David does.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What has God rescued you from?
2. What has God rescued you to? What does that mean for how you live your life?
3. List out a description of God in your own words the way David did. How would you describe our Savior?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

I come to you in awe of all that you have rescued us from, most of which we are not even aware. You are our redeemer, and we ask that you keep redeeming us from the threats, temptations, and deceptions of the world. Go before us as our shield—and as our protector from ourselves and the devil's schemes, through Christ.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 8

Zach Cochran *Assistant Pastor of Student Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 18:25-30

- ²⁵ With the merciful you show yourself merciful;
with the blameless man you show yourself blameless;
- ²⁶ with the purified you show yourself pure;
and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous.
- ²⁷ For you save a humble people,
but the haughty eyes you bring down.
- ²⁸ For it is you who light my lamp;
the LORD my God lightens my darkness.
- ²⁹ For by you I can run against a troop,
and by my God I can leap over a wall.
- ³⁰ This God—his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD proves true;
he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

LEARN TOGETHER | GOD BLESSES THE MERCIFUL AND HUMBLE

As David is at the end of his life, basking in the favor God has shown him, he recalls how God showed him mercy when he was merciful and humble. He is not patting himself on the back. He's declaring the truth of God to himself. As he says, it is God who lights his lamp, runs against a troop, and leaps over a wall. He gives all glory to God. Everything good that David accomplished or experienced, was from God.

This is the reality: God honors the humble and the merciful. We see this most clearly in the life of Jesus. Jesus came to this earth as a merciful servant. He was born in a manger, lived as a lowly human, served those who were seen as worthless, and God raised him—displaying him as the King of the world. The baby that was born in a barn now sits at the right hand of the Father. That is the mercy and humility that David points us toward. Paul tells the Philippians to have the same mind that Jesus had in humbling himself to the point of death. We should serve and love God, and we should serve and love others—counting their needs as more significant than our own (Phil. 2).

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Sometimes it looks like the humble and merciful suffer more than the rest. How does this reconcile with Psalm 18?
2. If God honors the merciful, list some ways that we can practice mercy during this advent season.

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

This week, we have not been as merciful and humble as we ought to have been, but you have shown us grace. Give us more grace to be able to live with greater mercy and humility toward others, so that your mercy might pour out on us and those around us. Through Christ, make us into the people you desire us to be.

In Jesus's Name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 9

Zach Cochran *Assistant Pastor of Student Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 18:46-50

- ⁴⁶ The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock,
and exalted be the God of my salvation—
- ⁴⁷ the God who gave me vengeance
and subdued peoples under me,
- ⁴⁸ who rescued me from my enemies;
yes, you exalted me above those who rose against me;
you delivered me from the man of violence.
- ⁴⁹ For this I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations,
and sing to your name.
- ⁵⁰ Great salvation he brings to his king,
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David and his offspring forever.

LEARN TOGETHER | CHRIST, THE ROCK AND RESCUER

As David finishes recounting God’s work in his life, he declares to himself the worth of God. He declares him as “my rock,” again; then recounts the deliverance God has provided in his life. David has been through a lot, and he desires for the world to know the glory of God through his praise. David’s heart goes beyond his people and extends to the nations.

David points us to the true King who will come to rescue us, his offspring: Christ. David’s great grandson wouldn’t just be the king of Israel. He would be the King of the universe. He would be the King we are celebrating this advent. That is the great news of this psalm.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. How does this picture of Jesus in the psalms—hundreds of years before he was born—speak to God’s faithfulness?
2. As we look at our lives, how can we see God’s hand at work?
3. How can we recount God’s work as David did in this psalm? Spend time reflecting on God’s work in your lives.

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

You are our rock and rescuer. You have redeemed us, and you are our foundation. All ground outside of you is sinking sand. Keep us standing on that rock. Let us remember all you have redeemed us from and the joy of our salvation, so that we might not chase any idol for satisfaction.

In Jesus’s Name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 10

David Michael *Pastor for Next Generations*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 8:1-9

To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

- ¹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- ² Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.
- ³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
- ⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
- ⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
- ⁶ You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,

- ⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
- ⁹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

LEARN TOGETHER | THE MAJESTY OF GOD IN CREATION

David begins and ends this psalm by exalting the majesty of the Lord over all the earth. To say, “O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” is an attempt to express the inexpressible! Just a glimpse of the majesty of God is enough to take our breath away and render us speechless.

For the seven verses in between, David ponders two aspects of God’s glory and majesty.

At the end of verse one, he declares that God’s majesty is above the heavens. His glory and majesty are not only “in all the earth,” they are also above the earth and above the heavens—beyond the millions of stars that David could see and the billions of stars and galaxies that are light years beyond what he could see.

In verse three, he acknowledges that the heavens, and the placement of the moon and stars in them, is the work of his fingers. Just his fingers! Take a minute and let that sink in!

David then gives us two illustrations of how this glorious and majestic Lord condescends (stoops) to use the weak and insignificant to accomplish his purposes. First, he defeats his enemies and avengers with the mouths of infants and babies (v.2). Second, he takes man who is massively insignificant compared to the majesty of God, makes him a little lower than heavenly beings, crowns him with glory and honor, and gives him authority and dominion over the entire world (v. 3).

Consider that our infinitely glorious and majestic God was so mindful of us that he emptied himself of his majesty and stooped to make himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born an infant in the likeness of insignificant men, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:7-8), so that we in all of our insignificance and sin might be saved. It is enough to render us speechless. Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. The more we see ourselves as we really are in the light of God's glory and majesty, the more precious the gospel will be to us. One way to prepare our hearts to worship Christ and rejoice in his advent is to "look at the heavens" as David did and ponder God's greatness. Take some time to look at the heavens and explore the greatness of God this season.
2. Using Google, search: "how big is the universe?" or "Louie Giglio Mashup of Stars and Whales Singing God's Praise." After you consider the heavens, consider other works of his "fingers" and consider the wonders of his love!
3. How could you share the reality of God's greatness in creation with others?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Psalm eight is a prayer of praise that exalts the greatness and worth of the Lord our Lord! Praying through the Psalms can be a very encouraging and faith-building exercise, and Psalm 8 is a great psalm to use. If you are with others, have each person take a sentence from the psalm as the base for your prayers. You can continue beyond the nine verses with your own words of praise.

DECEMBER 11

Kristin Williamson *Director of Children's Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 116:1-4

- ¹ I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my pleas for mercy.
- ² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.
- ³ The snares of death encompassed me;
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;
I suffered distress and anguish.
- ⁴ Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!”

LEARN TOGETHER | EMPOWERED AND DELIVERED BY GOD

Psalms is a book of praises to God for who he is, what he has done, and what he will do. The opening of Psalm 116 begins with the statement: “I love the Lord.” David goes on to give two reasons why he loves the Lord, following them with specific situations where he recalls God’s faithfulness. The first reason is that the Lord hears him, and the second reason is that God not only hears him, but also “inclines his ear to him.” God is the God who hears, and acts on our behalf.

As we continue through Psalm 116, we see many reasons why David wrote and sang praises to the Lord. Through singing, David remembers what the Lord has done, and because of this, he will continue to call on him as long as he lives. David trusts God in the hard times by knowing who God is and what he has done for David (and others) in the past. Though David went through great hardship, he remembered the love of the Lord and called on the Lord to deliver his soul. The advent season may be a time of hardship for you. Remind yourself that you have a God who hears your cries and will act on your behalf. Remember what God has done for you and others in the past. Let this strengthen and embolden your faith.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What are some ways that you love the Lord?
2. What are you pleading the Lord to deliver you from? How have you seen him answer your cry?
3. How can trusting who God is and what he has done empower you to live for him even in the hard times?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Spend some time in prayer repeating the phrase “I love you Lord, because _____,” filling in reasons why you love the Lord. Reflect on what he has done for you.

Example:

I love you because you have brought me from death to life.

I love you because you gave me hope when I had none.

DECEMBER 12

Kristin Williamson *Director of Children's Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 116:5-9

- ⁵ Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.
- ⁶ The LORD preserves the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me.
- ⁷ Return, O my soul, to your rest;
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.
- ⁸ For you have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling;
- ⁹ I will walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

LEARN TOGETHER | THE LORD AND HIS GOODNESS

As we continue in Psalm 116, we see how David encourages himself by reminding himself of what the Lord has done. He remembers his distress and anguish but recalls how God delivered him. David wrote these next five verses to remind himself of the Lord's good character.

When we are going through hard times, it's easy for us to look inward. We look to what is happening in our world and how it is affecting us. We forget to focus our eyes upward. We are forgetful people just like the Israelites. The Israelites had the very Word of God. He gave them signs and dwelled with them, yet they continued to look away from him to the world.

As we go through our lives, we are prone to walk in our own way. One thing that can help us look outside of ourselves is to continually remember who the Lord is, and what he has done—that he is good. The psalmist says that the Lord preserves us, delivers us, and deals bountifully with us. In remembering these truths, we encourage our eyes to look upward. This is where we will find rest for our weary souls.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Highlight or underline some of the characteristics of the Lord that are in verses 5-9. Then, reflect on how you have seen these characteristics in your own life.
2. Who are some people you can ask to help you remember to keep your eyes focused on who God is and what he's done for you?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Spend some time meditating on and praying through how the Lord has delivered you. Use some of the characteristics you underlined in question one to help you pray and meditate on these things.

DECEMBER 13

Kristin Williamson *Director of Children's Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 116:10-19

¹⁰ I believed, even when I spoke:

“I am greatly afflicted”;

¹¹ I said in my alarm,

“All mankind are liars.”

¹² What shall I render to the LORD

for all his benefits to me?

¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call on the name of the LORD,

¹⁴ I will pay my vows to the LORD

in the presence of all his people.

¹⁵ Precious in the sight of the LORD

is the death of his saints.

¹⁶ O LORD, I am your servant;

I am your servant, the son of your maidservant.

You have loosed my bonds.

¹⁷ I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸ I will pay my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in your midst, O Jerusalem.

Praise the LORD!

LEARN TOGETHER | GOD'S REST LEADS TO WORSHIP

We see again in this psalm that David wrote to the Lord to encourage himself to persevere. He wrote “I believe even when ... I am greatly afflicted.” David continually speaks truth over himself. He is putting his faith in the Lord. Author and pastor James MacDonald said, “Faith is believing the Word of God and acting upon it, no matter how you feel, because God promises a good result.” Eternal reward outweighs temporal suffering and brokenness that we experience in this world.

Here, David has given us a practical example of the definition of faith. He acted upon what is true even though he was in anguish and distress. He continued to meditate on God's deliverance. Here, he asks, “What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits?” He is choosing to live his faith out by praising, by giving thanks, and by serving the Lord publicly.

We have watched the writer go from despair, to finding rest, to publicly praising the Lord for his goodness! As we walk through this advent season, let's remind ourselves to not look inward, but to look upward and outward, to publicly share the love of Christ by walking by faith in his good character.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Was there a time in your life when you believed in the Lord even though the world was telling you otherwise? Share.
2. During this advent season, how can you publicly praise, give thanks, and serve the Lord?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Help me remember your faithfulness every day. Guide me to be rooted in your truth in, so that when the hard seasons come, I can still find rest in you.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 14

Kelly Alexander *Assistant Director of Soul Care*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 20:1-3

¹ May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble!

May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!

² May he send you help from the sanctuary
and give you support from Zion!

³ May he remember all your offerings
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!

Selah

LEARN TOGETHER | PRAYERS FOR OUR KING

In this psalm, the people pray for King David to have victory in battle. It goes along with Psalm 21, which gives praise for the deliverance in that battle. The last line of Psalm 20 is a plea from the people to save the king and the first line of Psalm 21 is the thanks to God for saving the king.

This psalm is unique in that it was written to be used in public worship. First, you will notice it is not an individual psalm, but rather a corporate prayer of many worshipers. Second, you will notice that there seems to be two voices speaking.

- Stanzas 1-5 were perhaps spoken by the people on the king's behalf.
- Stanza 6-8 were perhaps spoken by the priest, assuring the people that their prayers are answered.
- Stanza 9 was perhaps spoken by the group of people as a summary and farewell petition, probably as the king marched off to the battle.

It seems less like a prayer to God and more a statement to the king about desires and hopes for the battle. Yet, we know, because of verse 9, that the people are actually praying for the king, and calling out to God with these requests.

In total, there are six desires that the people cry out for their king. In this first section they pray:

- May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble!
- May the name of the God of Jacob protect you!
- May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion!
- May he remember all your offerings and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices!

Again, these appear to be statements made to the king himself but as you read the entire context of the psalm you see that they are directing these petitions for the king to the Lord. In reading about King David in this advent season, we should think of King Jesus, who we must place our faith in—and who went to battle for us.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

How can we rally around the throne as the people of God? What desires might we bring before the Lord during this season? Some examples are listed below:

- May our nation turn to the Lord in the day of trouble.
- May the name of Jesus be called upon by the people.
- May he save our loved ones from sin and despair.
- May he remember us and continue to pour out his grace and mercy on his people.

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Let's read together this portion of a Puritan prayer from *The Valley of Vision*.

*O God of my Delight, the throne of grace is the pleasure ground of my soul,
Here I obtain mercy in time of need,
here, see the smile of thy reconciled face,
here joy pleads the name of Jesus, here I sharpen the sword of the Spirit,
anoint the shield of faith, put on the helmet of salvation, gather manna
from thy Word, am strengthened for each conflict, nerved for the upward
race, empowered to conquer every foe;
Help me to come to Christ
As the fountain head of descending blessings, as a wide-open flood-gate
of mercy.
I marvel at my insensate folly, that with such enriching favors within my
reach
I am slow to extend the hand to take them.
May I never forget that
Thy eye always sees,
Thy ear always hears,*

*Thy recording hand always writes.
May I never give thee rest until Christ is
The pulse of my heart;
The spokesman of my lips,
and the lamp of my feet*

DECEMBER 15

Kelly Alexander *Assistant Director of Soul Care*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 20:4-5

⁴ May he grant you your heart's desire
and fulfill all your plans!

⁵ May we shout for joy over your salvation,
and in the name of our God set up our banners!
May the LORD fulfill all your petitions!

LEARN TOGETHER | MORE PRAYERS FOR OUR KING

This section of Psalm 20 continues in the voices of the group that is praying for King David. Here, the people cry out:

- May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans!
- May we shout for joy over your salvation!
- May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!

David was called a man after God's own heart. What does that mean? How do our heart desires get granted by God? It does not happen when God changes his heart to mirror ours. It happens when we change our hearts to match the will of God. We can know the will of God through his revealed Word. David applied this in several ways, and we will look at a few below:

- David was devoted to the Word of God: "Lead me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long" (Ps. 25:4-5).
- David was reverent toward God: "I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies" (Ps. 18:3).

- David trusted in the Lord: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid" (Ps. 27:1)?
- David valued the presence of the Lord: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4).
- David repented to the Lord: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment" (Ps. 51:1-4).

Jesus is the only one who had perfect desires and perfectly obeyed God's will. We celebrate advent because Jesus is the only way that we can have confidently pray a prayer like David, stating, "Blot out my transgressions."

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What desires has God shown you in the past that need to change to line up with his will?
2. How do you determine if your current desires line up with the Word of God?
3. Do you have godly people that can speak into your desires?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Let's read this Puritan prayer together from *The Valley of Vision*.

*O God whose will conquers all,
there is no comfort in anything apart
from enjoying thee and being engaged in thy service;
Thou art All in all, and all enjoyments are what to me thou
makest them, and no more.
I am well pleased with thy will, whatever it is,
or should be in all respects,
And if thou bidst me decide for myself in any affair,
I would choose to refer all to thee,
For thou art infinitely wise and cannot do amiss,
as I am in danger of doing.
I rejoice to think that all things are at thy disposal,
and it delights me to leave them there.
When prayer turns wholly into praise,
and all I can do is to adore and bless thee.
What shall I give thee for all they benefits?
I am in a strait betwixt two,
knowing not what to do; I long to make some return,*

*but have nothing to offer, and can only rejoice that thou doest all,
that none in heaven or on earth shares thy honor;
I can of myself do nothing to glorify thy blessed name,
But I can through grace cheerfully surrender soul and body to thee,
I know that thou art the author and finisher of faith,
That the whole work of redemption is thine alone,
That every good work or thought found in me is the effect of thy power
and grace
That thy sole motive in working in me to will and to do is for thy good
pleasure.
O God, it is amazing that men can talk so much about man's creaturely
power and goodness,
When, if thou didst not hold us back every moment,
we should be devils incarnate. This, by bitter experience,
thou hast taught me concerning myself.*

DECEMBER 16

Kelly Alexander Assistant Director of Soul Care

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 20:6-9

- ⁶Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with the saving might of his right hand.
- ⁷Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.
- ⁸They collapse and fall,
but we rise and stand upright.
- ⁹O LORD, save the king!
May he answer us when we call.

LEARN TOGETHER | CONFIDENCE IN THE LORD

Stanzas six through eight were perhaps spoken by the leader of this group, who was likely a priest. Notice it changes to first person. The priest speaks of God's trustworthiness. He uses words like:

- I know that the Lord saves his anointed
- He will answer him from his holy heaven
- We trust in the name of the Lord our God

The people respond by affirming their trust in the Lord, that he will answer them when they call.

All the way back in Genesis, God promised a Savior. The advent season is a celebration of the time of expectant waiting of the coming of this promised one. God has been trustworthy in all his promises to us. He has solved our biggest problem: separation from him that was due to our sin. Therefore, we can trust him with everything including our marriages, our singleness, our children, our jobs, and our suffering. In this season of fulfillment, let us remember all that God has done and to grow in trusting him more.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What are some of the other promises of God in Scripture?
2. What is an area of your life that you have trusted God with?
3. What is an area that you have difficulty trusting God?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Let's read this Puritan prayer together from *The Valley of Vision*.

*O LORD God, who inhabitest eternity, the heavens declare thy glory,
The earth thy riches, the universe is thy temple;
Thy presence fills immensity, yet thou hast of thy pleasure created life,
and communicated happiness; Thou hast made me what I am, and given
me
what I have; in thee I live and move and have my being;
Thy providence has set the bounds of my habitation,
And wisely administers all my affairs. I thank thee for thy riches to me
in Jesus,
For the unclouded revelation of him in thy Word
Where I behold his Person, character, grace, glory,
humiliation, sufferings, death, and resurrection;
Give me to feel a need of his continual saviourhood,
And cry with Job, "I am vile,"
With Peter, "I perish,"
With the publican, "Be merciful to me, a sinner."
Subdue in me the love of sin,
Let me know the need of renovation as well as of forgiveness,*

*In order to serve and enjoy thee forever.
I come to thee in the all-prevailing name of Jesus,
With nothing of my own to plead,
No works, no worthiness, no promises.
I am often straying, often knowingly opposing thy authority,
Often abusing thy goodness;
Much of my guilt arises from my religious privileges,
My low estimation of them,
My failure to use them to my advantage,
But I am not careless of thy favor or regardless of thy glory;
Impress me deeply with a sense of thine
Omnipresence, that thou art about my path,
My ways, my lying down, my end.*

DECEMBER 17

Karen Pourcho *Director of Women's Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 22:1-8

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my
groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest.
- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴ In you our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- ⁵ To you they cried and were rescued;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
- ⁶ But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by mankind and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock me;
they make mouths at me; they wag their heads;
- ⁸ "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him;
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

LEARN TOGETHER | THE COST AND HOPE OF THE CROSS

As we look toward the coming of our Savior, this psalm reminds us of the great cost Jesus endured in order to be our Savior. We remember the opening words of this psalm as words spoken by Jesus when he was suffering on the cross. In the Hebrew tradition of quoting a line of a psalm, Jesus is referring to the whole psalm, and it gives us a window into his thoughts and anguish during the passion of the cross.

The word forsaken is never used in Psalms to mean God is somehow removing his presence or turning his back. How could an omniscient, omnipresent God ever be separated from his Son? Rather, it refers to the feeling of the psalmist as God seems to be allowing him to fall into the hands of his enemies. As Jesus bore the sin of the world, neither the presence of sin nor the amount of sin was a reason for our Holy God to remove himself (in the book of Job, we see the embodiment of sin, Satan, in the very presence of God). However, what God cannot do is look favorably on sin. It is in this moment that God is no longer looking on Jesus as his beloved Son. Innocent Jesus is bearing God's full wrath for our sin. Isn't this one of the hardest things to bear—the justifiable wrath of another directed at you while you are in their presence? In his divinity, Jesus could never be separated from the Godhead, but in

his humanity, bearing our sin and God's just wrath, Jesus was in unfathomable anguish.

By quoting this psalm, Jesus allowed us to know the depth of his feelings. It is in our deepest valleys that we can remember he too, has walked through the "valley of the shadow of death." We have a Savior who loved us enough to endure the cross, and he promises that although we may feel forsaken, he is always there. "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:5).

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Jesus knew the Scriptures by heart and called them to mind in times of trouble (Matt. 4, 27; John 19). What Scriptures come to your mind when you are in need of help?
2. Think of a time when you did something wrong to someone else. Remember how it felt to hear how your action hurt them. Remember, how awful it was to endure the consequences or punishment for your actions. Now think how that would have felt if you did nothing wrong, but instead took ownership and consequences of the wrong for someone else. How does this help you think through what Jesus did on the cross for you?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

How can we ever thank you for taking the punishment for our sin on the cross? You came to this earth to live as a man for this very purpose. We are forever grateful and praise your name. Hallelujah!
What a Savior!

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 18

Karen Pourcho Director of Women's Ministries

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 22:19-24

- ¹⁹ But you, O LORD, do not be far off!
O you my help, come quickly to my aid!
- ²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dog!
- ²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!
- ²² I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
- ²³ You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- ²⁴ For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him.

LEARN TOGETHER | REJOICE IN WHAT GOD HAS DONE

In these verses, we see a drastic turning point in the psalmist's lament. Yesterday, in verse two, the psalmist said that the Lord was not answering him, yet today he proclaims that God has heard when he cried to him. He confidently declares that he has been rescued and this immediately turns to praise. This praise is not intimate or private. The psalmist shares what God has done with his community and he urges all to join him.

How quick are we to share with others when God has answered our most desperate prayers? Sometimes we hold back because we may not want others to know how desperate our circumstances actually were. Yet, as the psalmist explained, others had despised the affliction of the afflicted, but God had not. He is not repulsed by our humiliating circumstances, but he hears and acts (Is. 64:4). How can we not praise him and share what he has done with others? Oh come, let us adore him!

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Share a time in your life when you began to think that God was not listening to you or was not going to answer. What was the result of his answer?
2. Why do you think we don't share answers to prayers with others as often as we share prayer requests?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

We praise you because you are a God who hears the cries of his people. We thank you for acting on our behalf and for the answers that you give. We pray that you will sustain us as we wait for you, granting us assurance that you do not hide your face from us. It is because of the gift of salvation that you granted us through the sacrifice of your Son that we gratefully and confidently praise you.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 19

Karen Pourcho *Director of Women's Ministries*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 22:27-31

- ²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
- ²⁸ For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
- ²⁹ All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
even the one who could not keep himself alive.
- ³⁰ Posterity shall serve him;
it shall be gold of the Lord to the coming generation;
- ³¹ they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people
yet unborn, that he has done it.

LEARN TOGETHER | THE REALITY CHRIST PURCHASED

We end our look at Psalm 22 today with the psalmist's triumphal declaration, "He has done it! Jesus finally cried, "It is finished" on the cross as he referred once again back to this psalm. God's ultimate work of salvation for earth-born sinners was complete. Our Savior had done what He came to do; his mission was accomplished!

As the psalm concludes, we see the ripples of praise begun in verse twenty-one have now spread. All the ends of the earth and the families of nations have joined in praise as news of what he has done has filled the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). In an "already, not yet" prophecy, the psalmist speaks of the universal spread of the good news of what he has done. Then he also proclaims that it will be spread to those not yet born. The hymn writer Isaac Watts shares that same tension in his much-loved carol, "Joy to World".

*Joy to the world; The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King:
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns;
Let men their songs employ;
While fields & floods, rocks, hills & plains
Repeat the sounding joy!*

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Reflect on the mood and tone of the beginning of this psalm compared to the end of it (see the December 17 and 18 devotionals). What do you think caused the change?
2. The praise of one spreads to the praise of many! Why do you think this is?
3. Verse thirty-one states, “They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn.” Who proclaimed his righteousness to you? How did you first respond? What is your response today?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

We praise you for your mighty plan of salvation. We praise you that through the Lord Jesus Christ, our salvation is complete. Guide us to opportunities where we may share your praise with others. We worship and love you, King Jesus!

In Jesus’s name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 20

Joe Bartemus *Pastor for Theological Development*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 41:4-10

- ⁴As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me;
heal me, for I have sinned against you!”
- ⁵My enemies say of me in malice,
“When will he die, and his name perish?”
- ⁶And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words,
while his heart gathers iniquity;
when he goes out, he tells it abroad.
- ⁷All who hate me whisper together about me;
they imagine the worst for me.
- ⁸They say, “A deadly thing is poured out on him;
he will not rise again from where he lies.”
- ⁹Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.
- ¹⁰But you, O LORD, be gracious to me,
and raise me up, that I may repay them!

LEARN TOGETHER | JESUS TRIUMPHS OVER EVIL

Context.

This psalm concludes the first book within Psalms. This book is made up mostly of Davidic psalms and each book ends with a high praise, as seen in verse thirteen. David is the highest of the kings of Israel. He knew that his descendent would finally rule supremely on the throne as Messiah as he was promised in 2 Samuel 7. In reading his psalms, the reader can see a desire for the full realization of the Davidic promise to come to pass.

Trouble in the world.

As in so many psalms, David is not shy to confess his sin (v. 4) and to call for judgment on his enemies and wickedness in the world (v. 5). Even one’s closest friends can turn on them and seek their pain. The call is for God to deliver forever (v. 12).

The Lord is described in very great terms:

- The Lord is gracious (vv. 4,10). He will give good to his people that they do not deserve.
- The Lord delights in his people (v. 11). He wants to help and save.
- His reign is forever and ever (vv. 12-13). That notion transcends time alone. He has a lot invested.

Advent.

Verse nine is the reason this verse is in this section of advent. This wild verse is quoted of Judas (John 13:18), the friend of Jesus later betrayed him. I do not know that David meant to quote Judas when he wrote this, 900 years before Jesus, but it is used by Jesus for Judas.

This shows that the Old Testament has references to Israel that the Messiah would finally fulfill. Jesus was the true fulfillment of Israel. He would bear the sin of Israel in its fullest so Israel (and all the people of God) could triumph over evil. Advent anticipates the Messiah who would represent us and bring us into the presence of God forever. That Messiah is Jesus and we worship him this advent season (Isa. 53).

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What suffering did Jesus experience so that we would not have to suffer?
2. This advent season, think of a few of the sins you have committed that Jesus needed to die for. List some of them and thank him for forgiveness.
3. How long is eternity? Is it fair that you can have eternal life in Jesus?
4. How should we treat our enemies—those who do not follow Jesus?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Your name is set apart and holy. This advent season, we thank you that you sent Jesus who is our king and who reigns in righteousness. We ask you to forgive us our debts as we sin against you. Thank you that you delight in us and will give us victory over evil. This advent season we pray: come quickly again and until then, uphold us in your love.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 21

Jeff Brown *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 72:1-7

- ¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!
³ Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!
⁵ May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers
that water the earth!
⁷ In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!

LEARN TOGETHER | GOD'S KINGDOM: RIGHTEOUSNESS, JUSTICE & LIFE

The Psalms are often the first book of the bible that we go to when we feel the urge to minister to our own souls. The unfiltered honesty of Psalms brings comfort to our souls because these songs seem to capture how we feel, yet often struggle to articulate. However, the Psalms aren't just meant for our self-medication. This book is also a guide to point us to the King and his kingdom. Psalm 72 gives us a picture of a kingdom that was only meant to be a foreshadow of what's to come. The full realization of this kingdom would come under the kingship of David's descendent, Jesus. Therefore, we'll look at the first seven verses of this psalm.

The kingdom of Jesus is here, and it is unlike any other kingdom. His kingdom is empowered by God and not man. Man's kingdoms may be decorated with gold and diamonds, but God's kingdom is decorated with justice and righteousness. This is key to understanding why Jesus came into the world. Why is there so much brokenness around us? Why do nations war against other nations? Why is a full stomach only wishful thinking for so many? Why does man kill his fellow man? Why do children hate their parents? Why are there systems and laws set up to oppress people created in the image of God?

The simple answer is: sin.

Sin has broken the world in more ways than we could ever imagine. Sin affects the physical and spiritual world. It affects the whole universe. It has brought death to all good things in God's created order. "But God..." God promises that his King will fix all that sin has broken. King Jesus came to bring order to chaos. He came to bring good where there is evil. Most importantly, Jesus came to bring life where there is death. This is why the advent of God's King matters.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What are some of the biggest ways you have seen sin affect our world?
2. Why is it important for Christians to address the physical brokenness in the world as well as spiritual?
3. Why is it good news that King Jesus came to our sin-cursed world?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Lord Jesus,

Thank you for humbling yourself and being the perfect sacrifice for sins. Thank you for bringing us to God. We grieve over the brokenness of the world but we praise you for the restoration you began at the cross. Bring many people to yourself. We long for your return. Come quickly and restore this broken world (Rev. 22:20)!

In your name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 22

Jeff Brown *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 72:8-14

- ⁸ May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!
- ⁹ May desert tribes bow down before him, and his enemies lick
the dust!
- ¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!
- ¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him!
- ¹² For he delivers the needy when he calls,
the poor and him who has no helper.
- ¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
- ¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life,
and precious is their blood in his sight.

LEARN TOGETHER | THE KINGDOM HAS COME

Jesus told his disciples that God's kingdom had arrived! After dying on the cross and resurrecting from the dead, he told them that all authority on heaven and earth had been given to him. The promise of a kingdom ruled with righteousness and justice is upon us. Some will ask, "Why is there still injustice and evil in the world?" Theologians have answered this question with the phrase: "already but not yet."

In other words, has this kingdom that destroys all evil and unrighteousness come with the advent of Christ? Yes, it has already arrived, but it is not complete. This means that we experience the righteousness and justice of Christ's kingdom already, but it won't be until the second advent of Christ that everything is fully restored from the effects of sin.

How can we know that the kingdom has already arrived? The gospel's work in the church is proof. The dead and evil hearts of people being changed is proof of the kingdom's arrival. What would make a sinner desire righteousness over the deceitful pleasures of sin? King Jesus has conquered their hearts. He has begun doing this to men and women all over the world. This is why people across the globe are bowing to King Jesus as both their Lord and Savior.

The sovereign King chose to redeem us from the enslavement of sin, and he will not stop until every knee bows and every tongue confesses that he is the Christ. Some will bow out of allegiance to this King, and others will bow because the almighty God will break them. Therefore, we preach his kingdom's arrival and urge others to bow to King Jesus before his second advent.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. All suffering will be dealt with when Christ comes again. As we await that day, what are some ways you can love people this advent season to show them a picture of what's to come?
2. Who are some people God has put in your life that need to hear the gospel? How can you pursue that?
3. How would you rate your involvement with global missions? How can you do better?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Pray that God would open up doors for you to do three things this advent season:

- Share the gospel with someone who needs to hear it.
- Become involved in some capacity with global missions.
- Engage with those who are marginalized and show them the love of Christ.

Heavenly Father,

Would you bring someone who needs the gospel in my path? Give me the boldness to share and the words to speak. Help me see how I can be a part of how your kingdom is spreading among the nations. Help me be part of your kingdom advancing to the marginalized. Show me strategic ways I can show them the love of Christ both spiritually and practically.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 23

Jeff Brown *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | PSALM 72:15-20

¹⁵ Long may he live;
 may gold of Sheba be given to him!
May prayer be made for him continually,
 and blessings invoked for him all the day!
¹⁶ May there be abundance of grain in the land;
 on the tops of the mountains may it wave;
 may its fruit be like Lebanon;
and may people blossom in the cities
 like the grass of the field!
¹⁷ May his name endure forever,
 his fame continue as long as the sun!
May people be blessed in him,
 all nations call him blessed!

¹⁸ Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
 who alone does wondrous things.
¹⁹ Blessed be his glorious name forever;
 may the whole earth be filled with his glory!
Amen and Amen!

²⁰ The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.

LEARN TOGETHER | GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATION

God did not need us, but he chose to use us! God created us in his image and likeness, so that we would glorify his name and enjoy him forever. Sin always seeks to attack the glory of God. Yet God is still undefeated. The kingdom of God is made up of people who glorify Jesus and invite others to share in this reality of justice and righteousness. The church was never meant to be isolated from the world. Those of us in Christ are called to be a city on a hill, and a light to the world. Therefore, if our relationship with Christ becomes something isolated, we've failed to obey the commands of Christ. He saved us not simply for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others to share in glorifying his name. The church is meant to be the tangible picture of the glory of God as it spreads across the whole earth. The question remains, "How are we to do this rightly?"

A wholistic gospel is the only way we can truly display the glory of God to the whole earth. In other words: Jesus didn't come to simply address our individual sin. As important as this is, we are not the center of God's plan. The driving purpose of God's plan is his own glory. When Adam and Even sinned against God, they brought death upon all creation. Humans, animals, the earth, the sea, the heavens, and everything else, was affected by the curse. King Jesus

came into the world to restore the glory of God in all creation. The person and work of Jesus was the perfect picture of God's glory. Therefore, the church of Jesus is meant to be the agent by which God's glory is spread throughout the whole earth.

This is why it is so critical that we be Christ-like. If Jesus was concerned about God's glory, we must be concerned about God's glory. If Jesus was concerned about sinners repenting, we must be concerned about sinners repenting. If Jesus was concerned about the poor and marginalized, we must be concerned about the poor and marginalized.

A wholistic gospel is one that brings change in the spiritual as well as the physical. It is not simply individual but also corporate in its work. The gospel is meant to restore all creation to its proper submission under God's rule. Revelation 21 and 22 describe what is to come at the second advent of Christ. Those two chapters can be summed up by saying, "The whole earth is filled with God's glory."

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What does “glory” mean? What do we sometimes give glory to instead of Christ?
2. How do you think about the gospel? Do you view it as something that affects you individually or something that affects the whole world?
3. Why is it important that we live Christ-like lives in front of nonbelievers?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

We ask you that you would give us a bigger picture of the gospel. Help us see how the hope and truth of the gospel affects all of our lives. Give us vision to see areas of our lives that we should give you glory where we currently are not and forgive us for our shortsightedness. Thank you for giving us true hope through Jesus.

In Jesus’s name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 24

Paul Nystedt *Pastoral Resident for Community*

READ TOGETHER | MATTHEW 1:18-25

¹⁸“Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us).

²⁴When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

LEARN TOGETHER | OUR KING COMES

Righteousness Revealed.

Maybe you are sitting down by your Christmas tree this Christmas Eve. As you read this, you might be content with the food you just ate; the air may be heavily scented with the aroma of cookies that you will be eating soon. Your cookbook didn't give you this enjoyment. Ultimately, God did. Without Jesus, we'd all be dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). We are all sinners by nature, but God “makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). God gives both the righteous and the unrighteous good gifts to enjoy. In his gospel, Matthew clarifies what justice and righteousness are, and how God—through Jesus—is the ultimate satisfaction for everyone. He is not temporal, but rather the eternal satisfaction to all who believe (Matt. 5:6; 10).

Matthew turns the concept of righteousness on its head. Those who were thought to be righteous are hypocrites (Matt. 23:28), and the sinners are the ones who will be healed (Matt. 9:12). This righteousness reversal begins in the first chapter right after the genealogy of Jesus Christ that establishes Jesus as King. Matthew could have described the birth of King Jesus in any way, and the first significant thing he mentions is Joseph's confusion. Joseph thought Mary was unfaithful to him. However, Joseph had compassion on

his betrothed, and sought to act mercifully to her by divorcing her quietly. The culture at the time would probably have thought it righteous to publicly shame her and put her on trial.

Why even mention this? It all worked out, right? Matthew intentionally points out that righteousness in God's eyes may not be exactly what the teachers of the law wanted others to believe—a theme that would permeate his book. God desires mercy and grace, not sacrifice as an end in itself (Matt. 9:13). Sacrifice pointed to the greater reality. It never had power to take away sins (Heb. 10:4). God desires that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He is compassionate. Like Joseph illustrates, righteousness includes having those characteristics.

The Savior Sent.

Joseph soon finds out that his righteous instinct, as always, was the right move. Mary wasn't unfaithful, but the hope of the world and the King of the universe was in her. Why did Christ come? Matthew tells us in 1:22: “to save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:22). In other words, King Jesus came to make righteous those who could not be otherwise (1 Pet. 3:18). At his baptism, Jesus testifies this purpose of his ministry stating, “this is fitting

to fulfill all righteousness.” Christ is our righteousness. Matthew continues explaining this reversal of “righteousness” by displaying Jesus having a right understanding of the law in comparison to the Pharisees (Matt. 12). Matthew reveals that Christ is the embodiment of the righteous God in human form. The righteous King Jesus conquers our unrighteousness. On a dark night in a dark world, God brought light and hope into the world, so that the unrighteous could become righteous through Christ our King.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. What does the righteousness of Joseph teach us? How can we better show true righteousness to those around us?
2. What would the world be like without Jesus? Why is it so important that God came to earth as a man?
3. If Jesus came to conquer our sickness, make us whole, and make us righteous, how should we live? What are some practical steps that we can take to live that way?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Consider praying through this prayer or use each section as a prompt as you pray more on that thought.

Heavenly Father,

We praise you for being the righteous God who sent your son Jesus to make the unrighteous righteous.

We pray that your kingdom would come, and that the truth would spread to the world, so that the righteous King would conquer all unrighteousness.

You are so good to us, and we trust your will in all things. Even when it's hard, we look to your plan in redemption; we know that if we can trust you in that, we can trust you in everything. Thank you for sending your Son and bringing us to life.

Lord, keep us righteous. Fill us with your spirit to conquer the remaining unrighteousness in our flesh and help us lead rightly and justly as citizens of King Jesus. Give us eternal joy in you and help us give it to others.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

DECEMBER 25

Taylor Frank *Student Ministries Resident*

READ TOGETHER | LUKE 2:1-21

¹In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly

there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

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

¹⁵When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

LEARN TOGETHER | TAKEAWAY

The Annoyance.

In the first three verses, Mary and Joseph have their lives interrupted by the government. They're forced to take a long trip back to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. Talk about inconvenient and expensive! But, could what seems like a waste actually lead to God's will? Could God use what seems like a problem to fulfill a prophecy and keep a promise? In that moment, we can only imagine that Mary and Joseph are incredibly inconvenienced by the circumstance they find themselves in. What do you think?

The Awkwardness.

In verses four through seven, we see an incredibly surprising situation as Joseph has returned to his hometown with his pregnant girlfriend – well, kind of. Mary and Joseph are betrothed (similar to how couples get engaged today), meaning they are not yet married, and Joseph's fiancé is nine months pregnant! In a conservative, first-century, small-town, Jewish community we can only imagine the sideways looks they get as they ride into town. To make things

worse, all the hotels are booked; Mary and Joseph have to sleep in a barn. Can you imagine? It might not be so bad as long as Mary doesn't go into labor, right? You already know what happens next: Mary delivers her first-born son, Jesus.

The Announcement.

In verses eight through fourteen, things get crazy. The shepherds—a group of rough, indecent, vulgar, hard-working, brutes—are just hanging out in a field minding their own business on another average evening of sheep-keeping when, suddenly, an angelic being appears, blazing brilliantly white in the night sky. Keep in mind, this was before sci-fi; these guys have never seen anything like this before. What do you think started going through their minds?

The set-up comes in the next two verses, when the angel says, “Don't be afraid! I have great news!” What news is so great it requires a levitating, fluorescent messenger from God? The Savior of the world has been born just down the road! Just like that, God

reveals the greatest news ever told, to a group of dirty, average, rough-around-the-edges, sheep-keepers. The sign they would see is just as shocking: they'll find this Savior of the world, wrapped in rags and lying in a feeding trough. He shouldn't be difficult to spot, that's for sure! What would you have been thinking? Would you have believed this messenger from God? And just then, all heaven breaks loose as a multitude of angels triumphantly declare in unison: glory to God and peace to mankind (The original Christmas concert)!

The Awe. In verses fifteen through eighteen, the shepherds waste no time in getting to the bottom of it. Once they regain their bearings on reality (we can only imagine these guys have been absolutely

stunned), they go straight to Bethlehem. There they find him: the way to God, the truth about God, and the life of God—lying humbly as an infant child, in an animal's feeding trough. Emmanuel. God with us. Staggering. Stunning. God's unexpected rescue plan for humanity has officially begun, and the shepherds can't contain themselves. They go on their way and tell everyone they can about what God had done – and was just beginning to do. And people stood in wonder and amazement at what they heard. Good news of great joy for all people. An announcement for the ages. God brought us hope by becoming a human.

THINK TOGETHER | REFLECT & APPLY

1. Is there a frustrating situation in your life right now that God could be using to lead you to his will and bring himself glory?
2. Has God ever put you in an awkward situation that resulted in something awesome?
3. Why do you think God told the best news ever to shepherds first? How should this make us feel?
4. What do we learn about God and Jesus through his humble birth (See Phil. 2:3-11)?
5. What are some appropriate responses we should have to Jesus and the story of his birth? Emotionally, mentally, physically, relationally?
6. Have you been sharing this great news with others? Why or why not? How do you need to grow in sharing Jesus?

PRAY TOGETHER | GO BEFORE THE LORD

Heavenly Father,

Please grow our faith in Jesus. Please help us to believe this story—to really believe your good news of great joy for all people. Help us grow in confidently giving our lives to follow the Prince of Peace, Emmanuel, your only Son. Help us with bold confidence to tell others of the truths of the good news, that we might never be ashamed of our Savior, the Savior of the world.

Father, please grow our hope in Jesus. Please help us to find Jesus as our confidence in every season of life; through every joy and every sorrow of this life may we look constantly to the next life where we will finally be made perfect like Jesus. Through every accomplishment and disappointment, may our greatest hope always be: “Jesus died for me.”

Father, please grow our love for Jesus. Please help us treasure him above all and everyone else. May every other love of our hearts come into full submission to our greatest love for Christ our Lord—the treasure worth losing everything for. May we delight in him more completely today, tomorrow, this year, than ever before. May we in turn love others just like Jesus has so magnificently loved us.

In Jesus's name,
Amen.

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