

SEEKING DAILY  
THE HEART OF GOD

*Christmas*

*5-DAY READING PLAN FROM BOYD BAILEY*

## Make Room For Joy

*She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. Luke 2:7*

Busyness can build walls around our hearts—where joy is uninvited into a crowded life. Before we realize what has happened, we are sucked into a crazy cycle of fatigue, frustration and faithless living. Culture can keep us on a carousel of dizzying activities, for what seems in the beginning harmless, even exhilarating—but over time becomes distracting to the Lord's best. Unmet expectations nurture anger in ungrateful hearts, condensing room for joyful praise to Jesus.

The circumstances surrounding the first Christmas were strikingly similar to our modern-day celebration of Christ's birthday. A bustling season of census taking turned Bethlehem into temporary mayhem, like rabid fans descending into a city for a championship game. Traffic snarls, tempers flare, restaurants with two-hour waits and no vacancy lights flash orange with hopeless repetition to all looking for a place to stay the night. Experiencing real-time rejection, Joseph finds a way to care for his young wife and new baby. The room he found was not suitable for human royalty, but the humble manger became a joyful birthday party for baby King Jesus. (John 1:14)

As faithful followers of Jesus we can expect joy filled hearts, because the heart of our Savior has radical happiness. Expectation of God's grace excites our emotions over what we can expect in the acquisition of His good gifts. The Lord's blessings prompt pleasurable feelings with worship and thanks, which cause us to shout out joyful praise and gratitude to our great Jehovah Jireh! Our heavenly Father provided the birth of His Son, who with joyful obedience, gave His all for us.

You make room for the joy of Jesus when you invite Jesus into your heart for healing and peace. By faith and through God's grace, invite Jesus Christ to come into your life so you will experience the new birth of salvation, and begin to grow into a life of joyful obedience. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what needs to change in your schedule, so you can make room for what matters most to Christ. A life with margin is able to experience life to the fullest—framed by joy. (Hebrews 12:2)

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, help me make room for Jesus and the joy He gives, in His name, amen.

**Application:** What in my schedule needs to change so I have margin to make the best decisions?

## Peace On Earth

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!* **Luke 2:14 NKJV**

Peace on earth begins with peace in the hearts of people. Outward peace is the product of inward peace. Once a soul has experienced peace with God there is a serenity that seeps into human relationships and calms the rough waters of conflict. (Romans 5:1-2)

It is a grace-based belief system that allows citizens and countries to get together and accept one another's differences. Without conversations of grace, there is no context for peace. Indeed, nations that believe "might is right", with whom forgiveness is a foreign language, will remain restless with no peace in sight. However men, women, children and governments who embrace reconciliation will experience an incomprehensible peace. (Philippians 4:7)

Jesus came to earth first and foremost as a peace envoy on behalf of Almighty God. Do you have peace in your heart this Christmas season? Or is there restlessness in your soul that needs the comfort of Christ's peace? The peace of God is your best prescription for insomnia. Peace brings deep abiding sleep.

Does this mean that we can experience 100% peace on earth? No, because the truth is divisive and not everyone believes the truth. So while Jesus is the "Prince of Peace", listen to His challenging words, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three" (Luke 12:51-52).

So what is the role of Christians in promoting peace on earth and good will toward men? Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Followers of the Lord know grace best governs relationships, families, cities and countries. It is God's grace that allows you to influence the process of peace.

So, stand for the truth in a spirit of grace and humility this Christmas season, and trust God for His peace to reign in your heart and in the hearts of those around you. Take the high road of heaven and proclaim in celebration of Christ's birth, "Peace on earth and goodwill toward men." Christmas is God's gift of peace in the person of His son Jesus.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I praise You for the peace on earth You offer through Your son and our Savior Jesus Christ, in His name I pray, amen.

**Application:** Am I submitted to God, and am I allowing His peace to reign in my heart and mind? How can I, in humility and love, bring peace to a hard family issue this holiday season?

## Overflowing Hope From The Holy Spirit

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13*

Trust in the God of hope fills the hearts of Jesus followers with joy and peace, overflowing with hope, all powered by the Holy Spirit. Our Christian hope is secure in Christ—the originator and giver of hope—no other foundation is as unshakable and secure as His. Like the El Capitan Mountain in Yosemite National Park, our heavenly hope is massive and unmovable. Fear is unable to scale to the top, only faith is victorious because of the well-worn path marked by God's promises. Led by the Holy Spirit, joy and peace accompany those who persevere in their journey of hope.

Though Paul experienced much, much more than his share of suffering, he never lost hope but instead, anticipated hopeful outcomes and a hopeful destination. Painful circumstances were his opportunity to lift his eyes off his own needs to look to the needs of others while looking to the Lord who richly provides. This wise follower of Jesus knew he could not be the ultimate solution for those who found themselves in what seemed to be hopeless situations. Instead Paul wisely pointed them to a "lively hope", a hope built on "nothing less than Jesus' blood and His righteousness." (1 Timothy 1:1)

Is your hope vibrant and alive or struggling on the verge of extinction? Begin to process your hope in God with this acronym: H- heaven's resources at your disposal for soul strength and anticipation of the Lord's loving presence. O- opportunity to trust Jesus with conditions or critics out of your control, knowing He has your best interest in mind. P- persevere through trials as a testimony to a faith filled life. E- encouraged by the Spirit's wise leadership and empowerment.

Others look to you for encouragement, so keep Christ your solid rock of hope and stand strong as a hopeful example to the hurting and the hopeless. Meditate on the truth of Scripture to fuel your faith and hope in the Lord, and others will learn to draw their hope from God's written word. Hope in man many times leads to disappointment, but hope in the Lord's unfailing love gives peace, security and rest to the soul. When downcast, cast your cares on the One who cares most. Out of the praises from your lips will the God of hope fill your life with joy and trust in Him. (Psalm 42:11)

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, give me the faith to hope in You and not in hollow hopes on earth, in Jesus' name, amen.

**Application:** Who needs from me an encouraging word from God's word?

## Love Radically Gives

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16*

Love is a radical giver—intentionally and indiscriminately. Love gives. It gives individually and internationally. Love gives. It gives bountifully and without bias. Love gives because generosity is its nature. A soldier who gives for love of country, or a mother who gives for love of her child reveals their character. A husband who loves his wife gives her emotional attention. A wife who loves her husband gives him physical affection. Love gives as a matter of course. It's natural.

God's love is the gold standard. His banner of love is raised high above the most hideous criminal to the most innocent child. God gave the ultimate gift of His son Jesus, because He loved all of us—each one of us. Just as rays of sunlight warm all of us and each of us, so the love of the Lord is for the world, and each one. We are individually loved by Jesus. Since God is love, His love is effortless. His loving offer of forgiveness comes to us by belief in Jesus. (Galatians 2:20)

How can we intentionally love the Lord, people, and ourselves? Love begins by being loved by the One who is love. Once we receive Christ into our life by faith, His very nature of love resides within us. The deeper we fall in love with the Lover of our souls, the greater our capacity to love. His love gives us peace, so we are able to offer calm in the middle of conflict. His love gives us patience, so we are able to extend a compassionate ear to a fearful foe. His love gives us forgiveness, so we are able to offer total forgiveness to a friend or family member. Love gives.

How can we love ourselves by giving to ourselves? We love when we give ourselves the gift of margin. Margin is time for prayer, exercise, thinking, reading, hobbies and being creative. We can love ourselves by having more or less time with people. Nonetheless, we love ourselves, so we are better prepared to love God and others. An unloved self is a loveless self. Not narcissism of course, but a healthy love of self, like Jesus loves us. Our soul care, emotional fitness, mental refreshment, spiritual nurture and physical rest all contribute to a loving life. Love gives. So, receive God's love in Christ and from an overflowing heart of love—love generously. (Matthew 22:37-39)

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, by faith I receive Your love into my life in Christ, so I am able to love like Jesus loves.

**Application:** What is one way I can grow my love for others in a radical way?

## The First Christmas

*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Luke 2:11-12*

The focus of the first Christmas was Jesus. It was His day. There was no competition from commercialism seeking economic gain. The gifts were given to Him. God was the recipient of gratitude and generosity. He was glorified on this day of salvation for all who would come to believe in Jesus as God's only Son. There was an appreciation for the Almighty's descent into the decadence of humanity. There was no feuding from other faiths jockeying with each other for time in the Savior's spotlight. On the contrary, there was a religious respect and humble worship from those who traveled great distances from their diverse origins of belief. On this day, Jesus unified sincere seekers of truth.

The first Christmas, however, was not without controversy. Politically, Jesus was a lightning rod (some things never change). Government leaders felt threatened, as if a traitor had infiltrated their influence over the masses. Involuntary spies were sent to validate His presence. Once His birth had been verified, the powers-that-be went to work. Insecurity and fear drive people to commit irrational acts, and it was no different back then.

So what started as a celestial coronation for the Prince of Peace ended with jealous leaders taking severe and deadly action. The Christ-child was driven from their pitiful, but powerful presence. They destroyed other God-fearing people in the process. The community was cast into chaos when Christ was removed from their culture.

From the first Christmas we can learn to keep Christ central in worship and society. He is the wonder of our worship. He is the reason for our giving gifts. It is because we celebrate His birthday that we pause to pray, reflect, and plan to follow His will in a more robust and intentional manner. Our Master came to earth and made Himself like man. He took on the form of a servant, though He could have crowned Himself as King. He pointed us to the love and forgiveness of His heavenly Father. The Christ-child was born of a virgin. He was God who dwelt among us, but sometimes we forget Him, even on His birthday.

One reason we have failed to keep Christ in Christmas is that we have failed to keep Him in some of our churches. Why should the culture embrace the Christ of Christmas, when some of our churches have marginalized their Master? Let's start by inviting the Almighty back into our churches with fresh and revitalized reverence in worship, evangelism, and discipleship. Let's prayerfully and responsibly "lay hands" on leaders who fear God, hate sin, love people, and teach the Bible. Christmas is losing its luster for the Lord because Christians have forgotten to fear God.

His birth is only significant if His death and resurrection are significant. The Christ of Christmas becomes compelling when we, as followers, flock to Him in faithfulness and obedience. Let all who name the name of Jesus revisit Him in the awe and worship of that first Christmas. Let's exclaim with enthusiasm to a hurting world, that He has come to heal broken hearts and revive sick souls. We unapologetically celebrate His birthday with passion because God is with us.

He is transforming us into the likeness of His Son. Let's make this Christmas like the first Christmas. Let's invite the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with forgiveness, joy, hope, peace, and love while we worship our Lord together. The first Christmas fuels our faith and recalibrates us to Christ.

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, I praise You for sending Your perfect son into our imperfect world so we might know You and be known by You, in Jesus' precious name I pray, amen.

**Application:** Read the Christmas story to your family and ask each person which character they most relate to in this season of their life.