

Day 1

December 18



Pray | For Jesus to give hope to the lost

A thrill of hope; the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. – O Holy Night

It doesn't get much better than driving around on a quiet December evening, viewing Christmas lights on the houses around town. There's something about those small, flickering lights shining in the darkness that draws us in and brings us joy. We're attracted to light. Have you ever thought about how even the tiniest point of light is easily seen in the deepest darkness? And what hope and joy it brings to those who are lost? For believers, Jesus is that point of light. When we feel lost in this dark world, we can call on him to light our way. Let that truth soak in and fill you with hope and joy this Christmas season.



Read | Isaiah 9:1-3; John 8:12; Matthew 5:14-16



Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on the following questions.

Jesus called himself the light of the world, and in Matthew 5, he calls us to be a light for others. Take some time to think of ways you can be a light this Christmas season.

The holidays can be filled with stress – shopping, planning, cooking, family gatherings, loneliness, and more. If you're feeling weighed down this Christmas, what specific steps will you take to reduce the stress and experience joy? Sometimes all it takes is a change in attitude; for instance, play your favorite Christmas music while you're cooking (and sing along!), make a list of the things you love about your family members before you gather with them, give thanks for God's blessings while you're shopping – and consider buying some 'extras' for families in need.

Many of us relate more to the phrase 'the weary world' than 'a thrill of hope' during this time of year. Little kids know what it means to feel the thrill of hope; unfortunately, it's usually tied to the excitement of getting presents! Our hope should be focused on Jesus. Will you focus on him?

Day 2
December 19



Pray | Give thanks to Jesus for victory over sin

A time for celebration -

If you have never heard Tony Evans preach, look him up this week. A word of caution: you may want to listen when no one else is around, because by the end of his sermon he'll have you on your feet, hands in the air, and 'Hallelujahs' flying from your lips. And what a perfect time of year for some Holy celebration! Listen, beloved child of God: it can be easy to focus on what we've done wrong - to focus on our sin. Today, focus on what has been done for you. Through his birth, death, and resurrection, Jesus set you free from the yoke of sin; he has lifted Satan's rod of oppression from your shoulders. You are victorious! Get on your feet, throw your hands in the air, and celebrate the victory!



Read | Isaiah 9:4-5; Romans 6:14; and John 16:33



Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on the following questions.

Can you remember a time when God helped you overcome a deeply rooted sin? Take some time to thank and praise him for what he has done for you.

Notice the language that Isaiah uses; he says 'you will,' not 'you might.' He knows with absolute assurance that God will do as he says. And God did; he sent his son to die for us so that sin is no longer our master. Are you living like you believe it? What do you think it looks like to live with absolute assurance of victory over sin?

Verses 4 and 5 in Isaiah 9 not only foretell freedom from the burden and oppression of sin, they also speak of a time when there is no more battle; a time of peace. The kind of peace prophesied by Isaiah won't be fully experienced until God's final judgment. However, we can experience peace now by living in right relationship with God. Read John 16:33 again – what do you think Jesus means when he says, "...in me you may have peace"?

Day 3

December 20



Pray | *For God to pour out his abundant love on the world.*

An unusual love story -

Danielle Strickland and her husband, both officers of the Salvation Army, packed up their baby boy and moved to a section of the city where prostitutes gathered on street corners and drug addicts got high in alleyways. Danielle's mother was terrified for her grandson, and kept asking Danielle if this was really where God was calling her to minister.

Danielle noticed that when she walked around the neighborhood, her baby in a stroller, even hardened drug users would make way for her, calling out 'Baby coming!' One day, she pushed the stroller through a group of women lingering on the sidewalk. One of them stepped in front of the stroller and with a scornful look said, "He's too beautiful to be here." Danielle gazed at the woman, seeing the years of abuse, misery, and hardship etched into her face, and said, "So are you."

This story echoes another: of a beautiful, precious baby, born into a wretched world, with a message of great love.



Read | Isaiah 9:6a; John 3:16-17



Reflect | *Spend some time reflecting on the following questions.*

It's beyond human comprehension that the God who created the universe came to earth in the form of a tiny, vulnerable baby. Why do you think God chose to be born rather than coming to earth as a full-grown man? What do you think it brings to the story of God that Jesus was born of the line of David, by the Virgin Mary?

God is perfectly holy and righteous, yet he willingly enters into our messy lives on this sin-infested earth. He does it because we matter to him, although we may feel as if we don't matter – that we're worthless or insignificant. Have you ever felt this way? If so, read John 3:16 again, but make it personal and believe it: For God so loved **me**, that He gave his one and only Son, that **I** will not perish but have eternal life.

Around this time of year, you can flip to the Hallmark Channel at any time of day or night and find yourself immersed in a cheesy love story filled with Christmas 'magic.' Thankfully, we know that what makes Christmas special has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with God's love for us. Challenge yourself to tell someone today what his love means to you.

Day 4
December 21



Pray | For God's character to be revealed to you

What's in a name?

Did your parents pick your name for a special reason? Or did they choose it because they just liked the sound of it? For many of us, it's the latter. Names usually don't have meaning in our culture. Maybe that's why it's so easy to misuse God's name; we just don't think about his name being anything more than, well, a name. To the ancient Israelites, though, names had meaning; a person's name may have described something about them, or something about their birth. Sometimes, God changed a person's name to better describe who he or she had become or would become, like Abram to Abraham in Genesis 17:5, Jacob to Israel in Genesis 32:28, and Simon to Peter in John 1:42. Names carried weight in Biblical times; they revealed a part of the person's identity. Keep that in mind as you read today's verses.



Read | Isaiah 9:6b; Exodus 3:13-15; John 8:58



Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on the following questions

The names listed in verse 6b were not 'made up' by Isaiah – they were spoken to him by God. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace are ways that God describes himself. Which of these names resonates most with you? Why?

What other names for God can you think of that appear in the Bible; and what do these names say about the character of God?

In Exodus 3, God calls himself 'I AM.' Jesus repeats this name in John 8. Two short words – only three letters – reveal the eternity of God. What does this mean to you?

Day 5
December 22



Pray | For his kingdom to come, on earth as it is in heaven

Living in the in-between -

We live in the tension of the in-between; the not-yet. Unto us, a child was born and a great light shone. He was crucified as atonement for our sin – past, present, and future – and set us free. He is our counselor and father; abiding in him brings us peace.

But the world doesn't have peace. We are still surrounded by darkness, crying out to God for strength, safety, healing, and purpose. We can't see Jesus sitting on the throne and too often, evil seems to overcome goodness.

Isaiah's prophecy was both fulfilled and not yet fulfilled. Fulfilled with the birth of Jesus more than 2,000 years ago; but not yet fulfilled until he comes again to reign over the new heavens and new earth.



Read | Isaiah 9:1-7



Reflect | Spend some time reflecting on the following questions.

How does it change your perspective of these verses to read them as both fulfilled and not yet fulfilled?

No one knows when God will return, but the Bible warns us that it will be soon. In the meantime, God doesn't want us to lean back in the couch, put our feet up, and wait – he wants us to go and make disciples. This time of year is bursting with opportunities to start conversations about the meaning of Christmas. Take advantage of it today!

Isaiah's prophecy of a light that has dawned was only partially fulfilled by Jesus' birth. This world is still filled with darkness, and will be until Jesus comes again. Are you ready for his return? If you're not sure, talk to a pastor or Christian friend about what it means to be ready.

Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved. ESV® Text Edition: 2016.