Che BEST Chistras EVER



Advent: Hope

Bottom Line: When we set our hope for Christmas on seeing more of Jesus, we will not be disappointed or let down.

Think about something you waited a long time for, such as leaving home, getting married, having a baby, getting your dream job, retirement, financial stability, etc. What was your greatest expectation for that event? Did the event live up to your expectations?

Sometimes events in our lives will greatly exceed our expectations, and other times they fail to live up to the hype that we've created in our mind. Christmas, especially when you're a child, is a mixed bag. You wait all year in anticipation of what's to come: spending time with family, gifts, Hallmark Christmas movies, etc. Some years, Christmas day is everything you hoped it would be and more. But other years, Christmas is a let-down. Perhaps you didn't get that specific gift you wanted, or you didn't get to spend time with certain people. Anticipation can either ruin or improve whatever it is that we are looking forward to.

Read Luke 2:22-26. Simeon is described as a righteous and devout man who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." Understanding that "consolation" means "comfort", what exactly was Simeon waiting on?

The "consolation of Israel" referred to the hope that Israel had that God would deliver them. More specifically, it referred to the promised Messiah that had been foretold and prophesied about all throughout the Old Testament. Simeon was eagerly waiting for the coming of the "Holy One", the Redeemer that would save the people of Israel from their sins. As we know, on this side of the birth of Jesus, Simeon's hope was not in vain. His longing for the promise of God to be fulfilled was a right and good desire, and one that was assured to be met. But can the same be said for us? Are we longing for something that we KNOW will come to pass?

What are some things that we long for that God has not promised us? What promises of God can we trust and place our longings in?

Read Luke 2:25-32. What is the relationship between Simeon being "righteous and devout" and his ability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah?

The combination of words used to describe Simeon, righteous and devout, tell us a lot about him. The pairing of these words stresses that Simeon thoughtfully lived out his relationship with God. He was "righteous" in that he kept the laws of God, and he was "devout" in that he served God in all areas of his life. He took the promises of God seriously. It is no coincidence that this was the man who happened to recognize Jesus. Simeon had an intimate, personal relationship with God and that enabled him to be receptive to God's activity in the world. God was able to reveal Jesus to Simeon because Simeon was anticipating His arrival.



When you go to church or small group, or when you study your Bible, or when you pray, do you do these things with the anticipation that God will reveal Himself to you? (See John 14:21)

Are both "righteousness" and "devotion" necessary in order for us to "see" God? Why or why not? What does it look like to be righteous but not devoted? What does it look like to be devoted but not righteous?

Read Luke 2:36-38. Is there anything that amazes you about this account?

Anna was eighty-four years old. It says that she had spent almost her entire life in faithful service to God, and like Simeon, had been anxiously anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Can you imagine waiting so long for something to come? At this point in time, God had not spoken through any prophets for over 400 years. Imagine yourself waiting for God to fulfill His promise, fasting and praying day and night in the temple for 84 years, waiting for God to break the silence. This was Anna's life. But then finally, she laid her eyes on Jesus, and realized that everything she had been longing for was finally here.

But don't miss the importance of Anna's reaction. At this point in time, the Jewish understanding of the Messiah was that He was going to be a political king, a member of Jewish royalty who would rise up, overthrow Rome, and rule the Earth from Jerusalem; He wasn't going to be a baby, born to poor, immigrant parents. But Anna, like Simeon, had rejected the popular cultural expectation of who the Messiah would be, and had embraced the true, humble nature of Jesus as the Promised One. Yes, even a poor, weak, powerless baby could be God's Chosen One.

What are some cultural expectations that we allow to overshadow the true meaning of Christmas?

Are there any expectations you have for this Christmas that will spoil the season for you if they don't come true? How will you react this Christmas if you don't get the specific gift that you want or if a fight breaks out around the dinner table? Will the joy of Christmas be robbed from you if you don't get to sing the songs, eat the food, and enjoy the traditions that you normally do?

What can you do to anticipate and set your focus on Jesus throughout this Christmas season? How can you prepare yourself in devotion and righteousness to be able to see Jesus this Christmas?



Announcements:

Christmas Eve we will be having two morning services, one at 9:00am and another at 10:45am. We will also be having a special "candlelight" service that night at 6:30pm.

Volunteers Needed for our Christmas Eve services. We will have two services at 9:00 and 10:45 on Christmas Eve. Please consider serving in one and attending the other. Sign up across from Connections or contact Dawn Etter (937-901-3322) or Charity Betts (937-681-4442).

Worship Choir: On Sunday, December 17 our Sunday morning worship will feature a choir. We will be singing very familiar Christmas carols, so anybody from 7th grade and up is free to join! Please sign up across from Connections or contact Kris Sinclair (903-283-6967; krissinclair@fbcnl.com)



Advent: Joy

Bottom Line: Jesus Christ offers us joy that persists through our longing, waiting, and difficult seasons of life.

How would you define joy? How is it different than happiness?

We've discussed this many times before at FBCnl, but it's an important distinction to make: happiness is dependent upon our circumstances, whereas joy persists despite our circumstances. When we celebrate the joy that Christmas brings, we are referring to the indestructible delight that we have in Jesus. The grace that God showed us in sending Christ into the world is constant through every trial and season of life, so no matter what our situation, in the good and the bad, we may not always be happy, but we can always have joy.

Can you share about a time when you were joyful, even though you weren't happy?

We can see an example of the joy that the birth of Christ brings in the stories of Elizabeth and Mary in Luke chapter 1. Elizabeth and Mary both had angels come and declare to them that they would give birth to two very important people: Elizabeth would conceive John the Baptist, and Mary would conceive Jesus, the Messiah. Both were prophesied and foretold in the Old Testament. What is important to note is how serious an issue childbearing was for both of these women.

Elizabeth was a barren, elderly woman in a time when childlessness was considered a disgrace. She had lived her whole life in a state of shame and regret that she was unable to conceive. When she found out she was pregnant, she didn't complain about God's timing, and she didn't lament how difficult bearing and raising a child at such an old age would be. Instead, Elizabeth rejoiced that God had "taken away [her] reproach among people" (Luke 1:25). She had joy despite her circumstances because she realized that her situation was part of God's plan to show himself faithful to His promises. What she had longed for had finally come.

What are you longing for? What does it look like for someone longing for the same thing to maintain joy while they wait? How can our waiting increase our joy? Is your joy diminished by the possibility that you may not ever receive what you're longing for? If so, how does that show that your longings and joy may be misplaced?

We may be longing for loved ones to come to salvation, we may be longing for marriage or companionship, or we may be longing for a baby, like Elizabeth; these are all good things to desire, but when we realize that these are not ultimate things, and that our hope for *eternal* joy is not diminished by our lack of them, then we can maintain joy while we wait for them, and can be content even if we do not receive them.



For Mary, carrying a baby was just as serious of an issue, but for different reasons. Mary was a virgin who was betrothed, or engaged, to Joseph. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock would have ensured a divorce from Joseph, difficulty finding another husband, and a lifelong stigma as an adulterer. Yet Mary never voices any concern over the possibility of these troubles. Instead, she humbly submits herself to the Lord as His servant (Luke 1:38), trusting Him with her future. She allows for the joy of God's promise to override the potential problems of her situation.

What do we demonstrate about God when we maintain trust and joy in Him despite our circumstances? How does our status as servants of God help us to maintain joy? How much more knowing that we are no longer servants, but children of God?

Read Luke 1:39-50

What takes place in these verses is important in understanding how we can maximize our joy this Christmas season. C.S. Lewis said, "we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not only expresses but completes the joy." Our joy in something (or someone) is incomplete until it results in an expression of praise. That's what Elizabeth and Mary are showing us here. Elizabeth sees Mary and is keenly aware that she is carrying the promised Messiah. Overwhelmed by God's faithfulness, Elizabeth bursts into praise. Mary, likewise, responds to Elizabeth's praise with a song. Their joy in God overflowed into praise and worship.

Do Elizabeth and Mary's interactions with one another teach us anything about how joy and being in community are related?

Mary and Elizabeth had a lot in common; they shared similar situations, similar faith, and had received similar promises from the Lord. By celebrating together, they were able to encourage one another and feed off one another's joy, increasing their own. The same thing happens when we choose to gather with like-minded believers and share our lives with one another.

Do you agree with the quote from Lewis that praise completes our joy? Why or why not? How do your habits of praising God line up with how much joy you say you have in Him? If someone were to examine your conversations, your text messages, your social media posts, etc., what would they assume you delight in?

What are specific reasons that Christ is a source of joy in your life? What things in your life are distracting you from delighting in Him? How can you make the joy you have in Christ more evident to the people in your life?



Announcements:

Christmas Eve we will be having two morning services, one at 9:00am and another at 10:45am. We will also be having a special "candlelight" service that night at 6:30pm.

Volunteers Needed for our Christmas Eve services. We will have two services at 9:00 and 10:45 on Christmas Eve. Please consider serving in one and attending the other. Sign up across from Connections or contact Dawn Etter (937-901-3322) or Charity Betts (937-681-4442).

Worship Choir: On Sunday, December 17 our Sunday morning worship will feature a choir. We will be singing very familiar Christmas carols, so anybody from 7th grade and up is free to join! Please sign up across from Connections or contact Kris Sinclair (903-283-6967; krissinclair@fbcnl.com)

The Giving Tree: Once again we are helping those in our community with Christmas presents. This year we are connecting with the nursing home to help with any residents that do not have family, so there are some children tags as well as adult tags. Visit the Giving Tree today to select your tag(s). All gifts need to be returned next Sunday, December 17th. If you would prefer for someone to do your shopping please feel free to make a donation. Contact Dawn Etter (901-3322) for more information.

Community Christmas Choir: Several churches in New Lebanon will be performing a Christmas Cantata tonight, December 10, at 6pm at the Brethren Church on 32 S. Church Street. Join us for a wonderful night of celebrating our Savior's birth.



Advent: Peace

Bottom Line: Even when things are chaotic, Christ gives us a peace that persists through all seasons of life.

In its own way, Christmas can be a frustrating and stressful time for many. Why do you think that is? Do you sometimes feel that way about Christmas?

There are so many things to do at Christmas: gifts to buy, decorations to put up, plans to make, traveling, events to attend, etc. Christmas time can become a strain on our finances, our energy, and our time. But could it be that this frustration stems from the fact that we may not be celebrating Christmas correctly? As we all know, Christmas is about worshiping Jesus, but if we're honest, there are dozens of things other than Jesus that we devote our time to during Christmas. We become distracted by the craziness of the holidays and we can easily forget that part of what celebrating Christmas means is remembering the *peace* that Jesus has brought us.

Read Luke 2:8-15. (In verse 14, your translation may read either "peace and goodwill among men" or "on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased")

Shepherding was a difficult, fast-paced job. Sheep are notoriously mindless creatures and have to be constantly tended to in order to ensure their safety and well-being. Shepherds hardly ever worked alone and had to coordinate with each other to make sure that the entire flock was protected and fed, often working in shifts, only sleeping a few hours at a time, and living for extended periods in the very fields in which their sheep were kept. In Jesus' day, sheep were commonly used as temple sacrifices, which placed added pressure on shepherds to guarantee the cleanliness and health of the sheep. Furthermore, shepherds were very low on the social ladder and were not very respected or honored for their work. Shepherding was a hard, stressful job.

Understanding this about shepherds and shepherding, how symbolic and significant is it that God announced Jesus' birth to some of the lowliest members of society? What relevance does this fact have for us today? Also, how important was the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds that they saw reason enough to stop what they were doing to worship God? What does this tell you about the shepherd's priorities and commitments?

The shepherds were constantly wrapped up in the frenzy of their work, but at the news of the birth of Jesus, they were willing to actually stop what they were doing and make the trip "in haste" to see Him. The shepherds did not let the chaotic urgency of their work prevent them from seeing Jesus. The angel announced that Jesus would bring "peace on earth", and it seems that the shepherds believed this enough to drop everything—they truly found rest in Him.



For the shepherds, stopping what they were doing in tending the sheep to visit Jesus took an extraordinary amount of faith. How did they know that He would actually bring about salvation and peace?

How are you tempted to place a higher priority on your work/responsibilities during Christmas than serving and honoring Jesus? How can you act "in haste" to correct any misplaced priorities that prevent you from enjoying Christ this season?

But for us, on this side of history, we have the assurance that Christ was successful in accomplishing His mission and fulfilling God's promises. We don't have to *hope* that Christ will bring us peace, we can *know* that He will bring us peace.

What kind of peace has Jesus brought us to enable us to do this? Read and discuss the following passages for some examples.

Colossians 1:21-22 – We can begin to have peace by reminding ourselves that Christ has reconciled us to God; we are no longer His enemies, but His children. There is no longer a threat of wrath, but a promise of reward.

Ephesians 2:11-18 – We can seek peace and choose to be longsuffering with difficult friends/family members this season by understanding that Christ has "made us both one and broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility."

Philippians 4:19 – We are free from being overwhelmed by the desire to want more, buy more, work more. We don't have to get caught up in the holiday frenzy, knowing that God will "provide all of our needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:6-7 – For anything else we may be struggling with, for anything else that may be keeping us from God, we can offer these things to Him, and trust that the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" will guard our hearts and minds, keeping us focused on Christ.

Jesus Christ came to bring us peace (John 14:27). By looking at these verses, we see that Christ brings us peace with God, peace with others, peace with our finances/provision, and peace for all the rest of life. Christmas should be a time of rest and peace for those who know Jesus. But the whole point of Jesus coming was not to merely give us peace that lasts only a month or two, but a peace that persists throughout all of our lives. After visiting Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Bethlehem, the shepherds returned to their fields "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20). They were not hesitant to return to their responsibilities, rather, they re-entered the frenzy, taking the peace of Christ with them.

What does it look like to maintain peace even in the midst of chaos? How does our ability to maintain our peace affect our witness to others?



How has encountering Christ brought peace to your life? What situations, occasions, or events in your life rob you of this peace? How can you prevent yourself from slipping into despair if/when these situations arise again?

What would it look like for you to pursue peace this week with God? Others? Yourself? What Scripture verses/truths can you rely on to help motivate you?

Announcements:

Christmas Eve we will be having two morning services, one at 9:00am and another at 10:45am. We will also be having a special "candlelight" service that night at 6:30pm.

Volunteers Needed for our Christmas Eve services. We will have two services at 9:00 and 10:45 on Christmas Eve. Please consider serving in one and attending the other. Sign up across from Connections or contact Dawn Etter (937-901-3322) or Charity Betts (937-681-4442).