



Advent

— 2024 —



If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

1 Corinthians 13:1-8



Introduction

Humans are fascinated with stories. We watch them, read them, tell them to one another around campfires. We frame our entire lives within the concept of stories. Our hearts thrill along with stories of triumph; we can't help but cheer when good wins the day.

The greatest Story, the one that we live in, is one of true Love. A Love that overcame all obstacles, humbled himself, and took on the form of the Beloved so that the Lover could give up his life as a ransom.

The name of this Love is Jesus.

In this devotional, we'll be exploring the Christmas story in the light of 1 Corinthians 13:1-8, a famous passage of Scripture about the very nature of love (see the previous page). This devotional contains ten sections, each consisting of Scripture readings, reflections, and responses.

We invite you to walk through these readings at your own pace; whether read over the course of ten days, or more slowly over the entire month of December, our hope is that this devotional helps direct your heart to Jesus in this season of Advent.

Day 1

Read

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Reflect

These verses begin what many consider the *greatest* chapter in Scripture. Its words cause the world to stop and savor God's language of love. Bob Dylan wrote part of this text into one of his songs. Prince Charles read it at Princess Diana's funeral. President Obama quoted from its lines at his inauguration.

Embedded deeper within this eloquent descriptor of love is not the message that loves cares, or even conquers all, but that love *came*. It is not just about what love is, but *who* love is. And on this side of heaven, love was embodied in a baby.

God had lavishly spoken His love across the Scriptures and spans of time: "*I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness*" (Jeremiah 31:3). Now His love would be expressed by tongues of men and of angels heralding Christ's birth. Angels would break the barrier between a holy heaven and fallen flesh, announcing this good news to Zechariah, Mary and Bethlehem's shepherds. Stars would align with a message for royal seekers. Dreams would deliver directions to Joseph and the wise men. Prophetic words would be poured forth to and then through Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna.

The opening crescendo of 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that our speaking is for love's sake, as is our service and even the sacrifice of our very lives.

But only One would personify this perfect love, fulfilling love's demands.

Christ spoke words of love: *"As the Father has loved Me, so I have loved you"* (John 15:9). He served by walking in love: *"Having loved His own, He showed the full extent of His love"* by washing their feet (John 13:1-5). And finally, Jesus sacrificed His own life in an outpouring of eternal love: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"* (John 3:16).

Tongues of angels would proclaim the coming of Love, and those receiving the message then became the messengers. Simeon and Anna spoke words of love and life over Jesus. Zechariah and Elizabeth served Mary with shelter and encouragement, while Joseph lovingly led his new wife and son, protecting and providing step by step. Shepherds left their jobs to bring a sacrifice of praise to God's little Lamb, Savior of all. Wise men sacrificed time and treasure to hail the newborn King, acting as a beacon of God's redeeming love.

This Christmas, each of us has the privilege of doing the same. Like them, we are the message hearers, but will we be the message bearers? Through our speech, our service, our sacrifices of time and treasure steeped in love, we can herald this good news to others longing to know that Love came down at Christmas.

Respond

Will you watch your words throughout this season, making love the goal of all you say? Ask the Lord to use you as His messenger of good news!

How can you serve those closest to you this Christmas, personally demonstrating Christ's love?

Day 2

Read

Matthew 1:18-25

Reflect

“Love is patient, love is kind...”

You may have heard these words, which begin the passage in 1 Corinthians 13 that is the framework of this devotional, read aloud at a wedding. What could be more appropriate at a wedding ceremony than a beautiful excerpt from the Bible about love?

Over two thousand years ago, there was a wedding on the horizon for Mary and Joseph. They were betrothed, which in their day was a legally binding arrangement that couldn't be called off on a whim. Divorce, death, or marriage were the only exit ramps for a betrothed couple.

Almost certainly, “love” (in the modern-day, Hollywood sense of romance) was not the basis of this betrothal. It was arranged by the families, as marriages in that day were. So, when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant with a child that is certainly not his own, he stops to consider his options.

Consider this: Mary had some advanced warning of this miraculous pregnancy (see Luke 2:26-33). But we don't know if Mary told Joseph about what the angel had prophesied over her. All that Scripture tells us is that Joseph didn't receive an angelic visit until *after* learning about the pregnancy and making an honorable and *kind* decision: *I will divorce her quietly.*

Joseph doesn't rush to this conclusion either; note the next phrase (this is still before the angel's visit): "*As he considered these things...*" The act of consideration takes time, a willingness to not rush to conclusions. In other words, it took patience!

Patience is often defined as a willingness to "wait and see." But it can be defined in a different way. The word often used in the Bible can also be translated "long-suffering," meaning a willingness to tolerate a situation or behavior.

We speak of patience like a thing that exists in finite amounts. We say that our own patience is "wearing thin," or that someone's patience is being "tested." As if patience exists in a bucket that must eventually run dry and, when empty, sets frustration and irritability free. God's patience is not like this. His patience cannot wear thin. He is long-suffering of our sins, mistakes, and unfaithfulness.

Maybe Joseph didn't have the passionate feelings toward Mary that we often associate with love today - although we do not know for sure - but he was certainly kind to her, and patient with the bewildering circumstances. In his attitudes and actions, he modeled the love of God. How can you do the same this Christmas season?

Respond

When has someone's kindness toward you made a big impact? Look for ways to express kindness and patience toward others today.

Day 3

Read

Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-7

Reflect

“Love does not envy or boast...”

The “wise men” of the Christmas story were so called, not because of their SAT scores, nor even their status as teachers. In that day, the term “wise men” would refer to men of great wealth and renown. They were scientists, astronomers, philosophers. We know very little about these particular wise men, except that they saw the star in the sky and came to worship the One who sent it.

Have you ever been surpassed in some skill or knowledge by someone younger than you? Our humanity rankles at the idea that someone with less experience could overtake us. Joseph, the youngest in his family, was sold into slavery for intimating he would someday rule over his brothers (see Genesis 37). King Herod is deeply threatened by Jesus’ birth – imagine a king being afraid of a newborn baby!

Yet these wise men, in a show of utter humility, came to bow down at the feet of a child. Though considered kings and priests in their culture, rather than exalting themselves, these men made an arduous journey to exalt God’s king. They recognize that the birth of Jesus is not a threat – it is their very salvation.

Humility is recognizing the greatness of another, and, instead of trying to hurry to prove your own worth, exalting and

celebrating with the other. Love does not envy others for their accomplishments or capability. Rather than stirring up jealousy, love swells with pride at the success of the beloved. This is easy in theory, but difficult in practice.

It's tempting to attempt to direct attention and adulation back to ourselves when the spotlight has shifted. But we can be secure in our worth because our Father has called us worthy.

The wise men modeled the love of God in their humility and willingness to step away from the spotlight. Their names are not recorded in Scripture. When we speak of them, we speak only of the gifts and praises they bring to the newly born Christ.

May we be so willing to be forgotten if it means our Savior is remembered. May we be willing to be made less, so that He may be made more! May we say and truly mean, like Jesus' cousin John, "*He must become greater; I must become less*" (John 3:30).

Respond

"Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me, and when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord, where I can go in and shut the door, and kneel to my Father in secret, and am at peace as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and above is trouble."

— Andrew Murray

Day 4

Read

1 Corinthians 13:4-5, Luke 2:1-12

Reflect

“Love is not proud, it does not dishonor others...”

By the time of Christ’s birth, the religious leaders of God’s people were pursuing status and vying for control. There were fractures and factions among the priesthood, and the high priestly position was offered to the highest bidder. In King Herod’s court, that position had been awarded to his brother-in-law, hardly a Levite or lover of God.

Herod had pleased Rome by exacting heavy taxes on the Jews and getting hard labor from them. The Jews were kept content by Herod rebuilding their Temple, thus allowing them to practice their religion. And in between the two were the religious leaders, who were beholden to both.

Caught off guard by the surprise visit of the Magi, their only appearance in the Christmas story is hurrying to give Herod bearings about the location of Messiah’s birth. Odd, that all Jerusalem was “troubled” along with their Roman ruler at the news that their redeeming Ruler had been born!

Even though prophecy was being fulfilled before their eyes, not one of these self-absorbed “spiritual” shepherds made the five mile walk south of Jerusalem to see a miracle in the making – their Messiah’s arrival. They simply did not care. There was nothing in it for them.

The religious leaders had lost sight of the language of love throughout God’s Law, calling them to love Him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love others well. They failed to pass on love’s legacy. Worse yet, their pride puffed

them up, dishonoring their Lord and those they were sent to serve. It would be wiser men from a far-away land that would become the worshippers bowing to the King and Lord of all.

How easy it is to misplace the meaning of Christmas, to dethrone God and dismiss others. We scurry to spend, and sprawl our symbols of celebration. We play music merry and bright that never mentions our merciful God. We fill our calendars with parties that fail to focus on the Person who brought us peace. So much to do that has little to do with the Little One who lowered Himself to give us life.

Another religious leader, once himself proud and dishonoring of God and others, would encounter the Christ of Christmas on a dusty road to Damascus. He would be forever changed by the compelling love of the One slain for his own sin, and this religious leader, Paul, would later say, *“The Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20).

This Christmas, as the glitter of a godless culture shimmers before our eyes, may our gaze continually turn toward the glorious arrival of Immanuel, God with us. May we not miss the short journey to the meek One in a manger and once there, may we humbly bow in pure devotion to our Lord of Love, then go forth to love as He loved all season long.

Respond

*May the mind of Christ my Savior
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

*May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.*

*May the love of Jesus fill me
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing—
This is victory.*

*May His beauty rest upon me
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.*

Kate B. Wilkinson (1859-1928)

Day 5

Read

Matthew 2:1-8, 12-16

Reflect

“Love is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs...”

In this devotional thus far, we’ve been looking to different people in the Christmas story to examine how love was displayed through their various attitudes and actions. In today’s passage, we look to King Herod not as an example of love, but of its opposite.

Herod was the Roman-appointed king of Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth; if you were to ask any citizen on the street who “the king of the Jews” was, they’d be quick to point to Herod. So, when the magi enter the scene and start asking about a *different* king, Herod tries to gather information. His reign and his power are being threatened, and he intends to do something about it – something terrible.

When Herod realizes that the magi have thwarted him and left without reporting on Jesus’ location, he takes drastic action and orders the death of all the baby boys in the area. Reacting out of anger and selfishness, he commits abominable sin against innocent victims. Herod is the antithesis of loving.

Anyone in a healthy relationship can tell you that it does no good to keep score. Pile up all the wrongs around you like stones in a heap, and eventually you will be crushed by your

own bitterness. Refusal to forgive often has terrible consequences.

If God were to count up all your sins and render a verdict, you would not be able to stand. We have all fallen short. But there is good news! If you have decided to follow Jesus as your Savior and your Lord, you have received the full forgiveness of God. The slate hasn't just been wiped clean, it's been thrown away altogether! Love keeps no record of wrongs.

Because of God's forgiveness, we are free to forgive those who have wronged us. Because God is slow to anger, we can let his peace dwell in our hearts. Because God is seeking our good, we are free to seek the good of others.

This Christmas season, remember that that Jesus' birth signifies God's ultimate love for you. The birth of Jesus means that you can be born again!

Respond

Can you think of any other stories (biblical, or even fictional) where a ruler is threatened by a child? What are the outcomes of those stories?

Where do you need to practice forgiveness *for* someone you love? Where do you need to seek forgiveness *from* someone you love?

Day 6

Read

Matthew 4:15-16; Luke 1:76-79; John 1:9-14

Reflect

“Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth...”

The story of the Bible is steeped in illustration of opposites. Good and evil, light and darkness, wisdom and folly. These dichotomies help us to understand God’s nature and desire for our lives.

Scripture often speaks of truth as something to be revealed by *light*. Truth can be defined as an adherence to reality, to fact. Light reveals the true state of reality; darkness cloaks that reality in lies and deception. This metaphor makes sense to us; it is easy to be fooled by simple tricks when the room is dimly lit, but turn on the floodlights and we can see things how they really are.

John 1 paints a picture of Jesus (“the Word,” and “the true light”) as the light coming into the world. The world had been living in darkness, receiving only glimpses of God’s goodness and glory. But here, born as a baby, is God in human form – what was before only given in flashes and glimmers, we now get to see as in broad daylight: the full truth of the gospel!

So, if we are to be a people who *rejoice* with the truth, we must not abide hidden sin. Sin loves to hide in darkness, convincing you that if anyone knew your secrets, they would be horrified.

The enemy wants to keep you isolated and terrified to confess your sins. Concealment of sins in darkness only benefits the enemy. It is easy to remain cloaked and hidden. What is difficult is bringing our own sin, ugly and raw, out into the open.

Confession leads to forgiveness, and forgiveness leads to healing. By bringing our sins to the light in confession to God and other believers, we are proclaiming that whatever sin has kept us captive, is no longer the reality we live by. We have staked our claim on God's truth and can live without shame.

Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we no longer have to walk in darkness. We can live in the light of Jesus, rejoicing with the truth. Will you continue to live cloaked in darkness, or will you turn on the lights?

Respond

Is there anything you need to confess to God or to another person? Confession can be frightening, but forgiveness waits on the other side.

Day 7

Read

Luke 2:8-20; Mark 9:23-24

Reflect

“Love believes all things...”

On an otherwise ordinary night, the local shepherds become the first to hear the world’s most important Good News: the Savior has been born!

Now, it’s probably pretty difficult to ignore a multitude of angels all singing the same thing. But can you imagine if the shepherds had decided that the angelic host was some kind of trick of the light, or something they collectively imagined? They would have stayed in their fields, had a good laugh, and missed out on the most transformative moment in history.

Dallas Willard, a remarkable theologian, once said, “We don’t believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.” In other words, real trust – real belief – *always* leads to action.

We exhibit belief every day. Some things we believe with a careful hesitancy (you probably trust, for instance, that other drivers on the road will obey traffic laws – but it’s still wise to look both ways before proceeding through a green light).

Other things we believe with full measure. It’s easy for us to believe in things that have proven themselves over and over.

Some things in life are sure, so we can act with full confidence in their dependability – like the sun rising in the morning. God’s goodness is one of these faithful, dependable, never-let-you-down, certain things.

The shepherds take the angelic announcement seriously. They *believe*, and because they act upon their belief, they become the first witnesses to the incarnation.

About thirty years after the shepherds receive an angelic visit on that first Christmas, the little baby - now grown and teaching - declares, “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11). The sheep know - and trust - in the voice of the Shepherd. When we spend enough time around Jesus, when we become intimately familiar with his voice, it becomes easier to believe that what he says is true and good. And when we follow the lead of those lowly shepherds and believe in the truth, God will show us marvelous, wonderful things.

Respond

Despite all the times that God has proven his faithfulness, we tend to be forgetful, prone to despair and relying on our own efforts. It helps to set up reminders so that our eyes are continually fixed on God. We can do this in community, reminding one another of all that God has done. We can set up tangible reminders as Ebenezer stones (see 1 Samuel 7:12), writing out Bible verses and placing them where we can see them.

What’s a way you can remind yourself of God’s past faithfulness? Whether it’s a sticky note on your bathroom mirror, a Bible verse written on your hand, or something else entirely, put a reminder where you can see it.

Day 8

Read

Isaiah 9:1-7

Reflect

“Love hopes all things...”

Everyone understands the anticipation of Christmas Day. Especially as a child, there’s a kind of magic about the “thrill of hope” of waking up on Christmas morning!

When the nation of Israel was still in captivity, Isaiah prophesied over them: a Savior is coming. Parents told this promise to their children, who passed it down to their children’s children. It’s hard for us to understand this sort of multi-generational hope, because our world is one of instant gratification.

Israel waited in this kind of anticipation for centuries, watching and waiting for the signs to be fulfilled. I imagine they went through seasons of hopelessness. *It’s been so long – has God forgotten us?* Yet still they hoped.

Love hopes all things. Another translation says, “Love always hopes.” As a people of love, Christians are also a people of hope. We do not despair along with the world when circumstances turn bleak. Our moods do not rise and fall according to the success or failure of our politicians. We have a hope in something greater, something sure: the love of Jesus.

Isaiah's prophesy to the Israelites was finally fulfilled when their Savior was born in Bethlehem. Ironically, many of them refused to believe that the time had arrived, and tragically missed out on the joy of hope fulfilled. They were distracted by their own ideas of what the Savior might look like.

When we give in to despair or distraction, we risk missing out on all that God has in store for us. When we cling to hope, we can know that God's faithfulness will see us through.

We can hope in the love of Jesus, which covers all our sins. We can hope in His resurrection, delivering us from death. And we can hope in His return, when the new heaven and the new earth will be revealed!

Respond

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn,
O Night Divine.*

Placide Cappeau, 1843

Day 9

Read

Luke 2:15-19, 28-35, 46-51

Reflect

“Love bears all things, endures all things...”

1 Corinthians 13:7 describes love as bearing all things and enduring all things. These two qualities best describe the steadfast love of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Greek word for bear (*stego*) means “to cover (like a roof), to pass over in silence or keep confidential.” At his birth, Mary covered her newborn Son, swaddling him, nestling him close to her heart. She hovered over him in life, covering cuts and scrapes and soothing hurtful words as others taunted his questionable conception.

Mary also held silent vigil, keeping confidential mysterious moments as she “pondered these things in her heart,” (*Luke 2:19*), storing them as timeless treasures. Moments when shepherds came to see the tiny Lamb of God or her twelve year-old Son sought to be in his Father’s House.

Then one day, as Jesus bore our brokenness, covering us in love, his mother stood near, bearing a broken heart seeping with unending love for her beloved Son. Then she watched as her Son’s wounded body was covered for burial. *Love bears all things.*

Love also endures all things. The Greek word for *endure* in 1 Corinthians 13:7 means “to remain underneath,” and pictures staying under a heavy weight, unbearable burden, or unrelenting pressure.

Mary would feel the first sting of enduring love while dedicating her newborn baby in the Temple. While Simeon assured her that her baby would change the world, he also shared with Mary that a sword would pierce her heart in the process. Can you imagine as a mom pondering that message for over *thirty* years before it happened? Yet Mary's heart must have been pierced in multiple ways and degrees before then. It is part of carrying a mother's heart. Swords pierce deeply into mother's souls.

Newly betrothed to a carpenter who was building her a home, Mary's following an angelic announcement, that love was eclipsed by another Carpenter who would one day use wood, nails, and stone to build for her an eternal Home. None of us can possibly imagine the soul-piercing realities Mary alone would endure because of love.

Her tender mother's heart, filled with unfailing, faithful love, was the closest thing to heaven Jesus knew. Never was our loving Lord loved in return on earth as He was by His mother – her service to Him, her sacrifices for Him, her suffering because of Him. When He was finally and fully pierced by a spear upon the cross, she felt a sword pierce her very soul as well, enduring to the end for love.

The blessed bearer of God's Son would herself bear and endure many things for love. Because of God's faithful promise to her and through her, we can know the greatest Love which came down at Christmas in order to sacrifice his life to save us.

Respond

What are you having to bear in your life right now? How does Mary's example encourage you? How does the fact that Christ bore all for you comfort you? Ask the Lord to help you bear all things in love.

Day 10

Read

1 John 4:13-21

Reflect

“Love never fails.”

This phrase is a perfectionist’s siren call – a challenge to overcome, not a truth to submit to. We all have some misconceptions of what “love” really means. We all carry wounds from someone who professed to love us but failed to act like it, and we’ve all repeatedly failed to act in love toward those around us. You simply can’t find a friend, husband, wife, child, or parent who is getting a perfect score in loving others.

Here is a tough truth for the perfectionists: you *will* fail in your efforts to love others. Others will fail in their efforts to love you. You will fail in your efforts to love God. You cannot muster up enough patience, kindness, humility, selflessness, forgiveness, or goodness to do so – this is one of the great consequences of our own humanity.

This last phrase in the 1 Corinthians 13 passage, though, is not meant to set an impossible standard. This is the phrase on which the whole passage rests, the climactic note of the song. For it’s in this phrase that it becomes clear: *Paul isn’t talking about us.*

All of our attempts to love, to measure up, to get it right, only highlight how short we fall. There is, however, good news! There is a person, alive and well, who is the image of Love perfected. God’s grand rescue plan did not fail. Love came down as a baby,

perfect and innocent. Love lived a sinless life, proclaiming the kingdom of God and healing the brokenhearted. Love died on a cross, taking on a punishment for our sin. Love rose triumphant from the grave, defeating sin and death on our behalf. And Love will come again on the clouds, making all things new!

In all of our shortcomings, our failure is meant to point to the One who has never failed, who loves with a perfect love. All that love is can be found in the person of Jesus Christ, our God in the flesh. May you be reminded of His unfailing love this Christmas season.

Respond

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

1 John 4:7-12

CONNECT WITH US

Chris Stull

Lead Pastor

chris@wellspringchurch.com

Brian Dodridge

Associate Pastor

brian@wellspringchurch.com

Dick Stafford

Associate Pastor

dick.stafford@outlook.com

Caleb Whitten

Student + Young Adult Minister

caleb@wellspringchurch.com

Jill Rhodes

Women's Minister

jill@wellspringchurch.com

Brenna Stull

Women's Ministry Coordinator

brenna@wellspringchurch.com

Sarah Oster

Children's Minister

sarah@wellspringchurch.com

Emily Whitten

Connections Minister

emily@wellspringchurch.com

Leslie Anderson

Administrative + Financial Coordinator

leslie@wellspringchurch.com



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