

# so loved

ADVENT 2021 — CALVARY CHURCH VALPARAISO

**Advent is a season of preparation. These four weeks before Christmas are an ideal time for our church to meditate on the love of God as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. This is a season for sharing too. Make space in your schedule and your life for an Advent guide like this one or another one you choose and invite a few friends, your family, your Life Group, or coworkers to join you. May God remind you of his love and bring you fresh ways to experience him.**

In many ways, Advent is a microcosm of what our whole life should be. For these four weeks, we prepare and anticipate the time when we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. It's like we're holding our breath, waiting for the day to come. Anticipation makes sweet things sweeter and, if we're honest, it also makes hardship harder and loss more poignant. But our whole Christian life is also a time of waiting and preparation. One day Jesus is coming again to make the world new and usher us into his forever kingdom. Until then, we live out God's love where we are.

## **GOD'S LOVE *recognized***

### **Week of November 28**

Readings: 1 John 4:7-8 & Lamentations 3:22-23

The first Christians had waited their whole lives for "the coming" – the advent of the Messiah. Their people, the Israelites, had been looking for his coming for generations. So if we're going to talk about Advent and the love of God, we should start in the long "before" that preceded the Christmas story because it's there – in the garden, in the desert, and in exile – that God began to show his love for his people.

The Old Testament reveals God with nuance: the holy lover, the grace-filled disciplinarian, the just warrior-king. Even then, he was often not what his people expected him to be and yet was exactly what they needed. He gave himself – "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Jeremiah 30:22) – and demanded everything in return, "Love the Lord your God with

all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5). People kept falling short of adequately loving this God who had chosen them as his own, but he just kept loving them anyway. It's...it's as if what they did didn't change how much he loved them.

The love story of the Old Testament begins to look one-sided until you consider that there were never two lovers in this story, or in the New Testament either. Only one. God's love doesn't flow out of him and onto you; it flows from him through you, coming back to him as that whole-self love in Deuteronomy 6:5 and also reflecting outward to others (Leviticus 19:18). "Making himself our end is a greater love than making us his end," John Piper once said. God's love controls, constrains, animates, moves, and impels us, he explained, because "that's what he was after in loving us – our living for his glory."

**TO CONSIDER:** How is God loving us for his glory a better kind of love than if he loved us for ourselves only? Why is it that having to wait makes us think we're unloved? How is asking us to wait sometimes a loving thing for God to do?

## **GOD'S LOVE *revealed***

### **Week of December 5**

Readings: 1 John 4:9-10 & John 13:1-5

A few days before Jesus' crucifixion, he did something extraordinarily ordinary. He washed some dirty feet. Chances are that you know this story from John 13, but try to put yourself in one of those seats around a table strewn with near-empty plates. Jesus ties a towel around his waist, picks up the bowl set aside for this one purpose, and kneels in front of you. The one you know is the son of God picks up your foot, dips a cloth into the water, and then begins to wipe your foot clean. It's uncomfortable, isn't it? It feels weird and awkward and like somehow things are out of order. This is servant's work!

When we want to explain the love of God, we point first to the cross, and rightly so. Yet, in Jesus' life were so many moments when he humbly served, and they all reveal something so profound about him, about the gospel, and about God's love. The foot washing is so obvious you can't miss the message, but what about the times when we see the miracle and nearly miss the compassion for hungry or hurting bodies. Or when we hear the rebuke and don't catch the gently firm way it

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## So Loved continued ►

became a teaching moment (looking at you, Sons of Thunder; Matthew 20:20-28).

Jesus left the heights of heaven and stooped low to serve us. He went all the way down to the degradation of dying like a criminal on a cross to pay the penalty for your sin. Along the way, in his earthly lifetime, he proved he cared not only about souls, but also about bodies, and hearts, and minds. He loves all of you.

**TO CONSIDER:** Why would it be uncomfortable to have Jesus wash your feet? Why would/should it not be uncomfortable for you? Why does it matter that Jesus cares about our soul but also more than our soul?

## GOD'S LOVE realized

### Week of December 12

Readings: 1 John 4:16-18 & Ephesians 3:14-21

The apostle Paul was a man of prayer. His letters open with prayer or he breaks into prayer mid-way through them or he asks for prayer of himself or someone else. In his letter to the Christians at Ephesus is this prayer:

I pray that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power in your inner being through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19, emphasis added)

Paul had had a miraculous encounter with God (Acts 9) that drove deep into him an understanding of the "length and width, height and depth of God's love." He never forgot it, and he never stopped praying that God would continue making his love more real, more precious, and more of a settled assurance in Paul's heart and mind. Paul prayed this for himself and for the people he ministered to. He expected that kind of knowing would be part of a Jesus-follower's experience (...be able to comprehend with all the saints...).

Jonathan Edwards described it this way: "There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet and having a sense of its sweetness." It's the difference between holding the opinion that God loves you and having tasted his goodness and grace.

Whether you've already had that experience of coming to know and believe his love or you're still wondering if his love is really real, this prayer is for you. Fill your mind with the things of Christ and pray that his Spirit opens the eyes of your heart.

**TO CONSIDER:** What's your story of coming to know that God loves you? How would you pray Paul's prayer in your own words? Who will you pray it for besides yourself?

## GOD'S LOVE reflected

### Week of December 19

Readings: 1 John 4:11, 19-21 & John 13:12-15, 31-35

Just after Jesus washed the disciples' feet in John 13, he sat down with them and explained a few things, most especially that his example of humble, loving service was to be their way of life. "I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another" (v. 34). That doesn't sound like a new command. That's Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself," the very same command that Jesus identifies as being the second greatest command from God after loving him with your whole self (Mark 12:30-31; Deuteronomy 6:5).

What's new is the comparison. It's no longer love your neighbor like you love you; now it's love your neighbor like Jesus loves you. That's so much bigger and deeper than before. If you know the love of Jesus, if his love is what motivates and inspires you, you will live differently than other people do. You will reflect the love of God in the way you love people.

Yes, people can be hard to love and hard to serve, and the closer we get to them, sometimes the greater the challenge is. And yet, it is not you but Christ in you who loves. There is so much joy to be had in sharing that kind of love.

**TO CONSIDER:** What's the difference between loving others like you love yourself and loving them like Jesus loves you? Why is there joy in loving and serving others?

## so loved

### Christmas Day

Readings: Luke 2:1-20 & John 3:16-17

Three of the gospel accounts each tell parts of the Christmas story. There's something beautiful about reading these accounts in tandem. Read these passages in order, or visit [calvaryweb.net/christmas-story](http://calvaryweb.net/christmas-story), where we've posted the narrative all together for you.

John 1:1-5  
Luke 1:68-75  
Matthew 1:18-23  
Luke 2:1-20  
John 1:10-14

**TO CONSIDER:** Have you considered that Jesus came and died and rose again for you personally? In light of all that you have heard and read this month, how will you respond to being so loved?

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Calvary Kids has an Advent guide available with even more resources for families. Check the Kids' welcome areas for it.