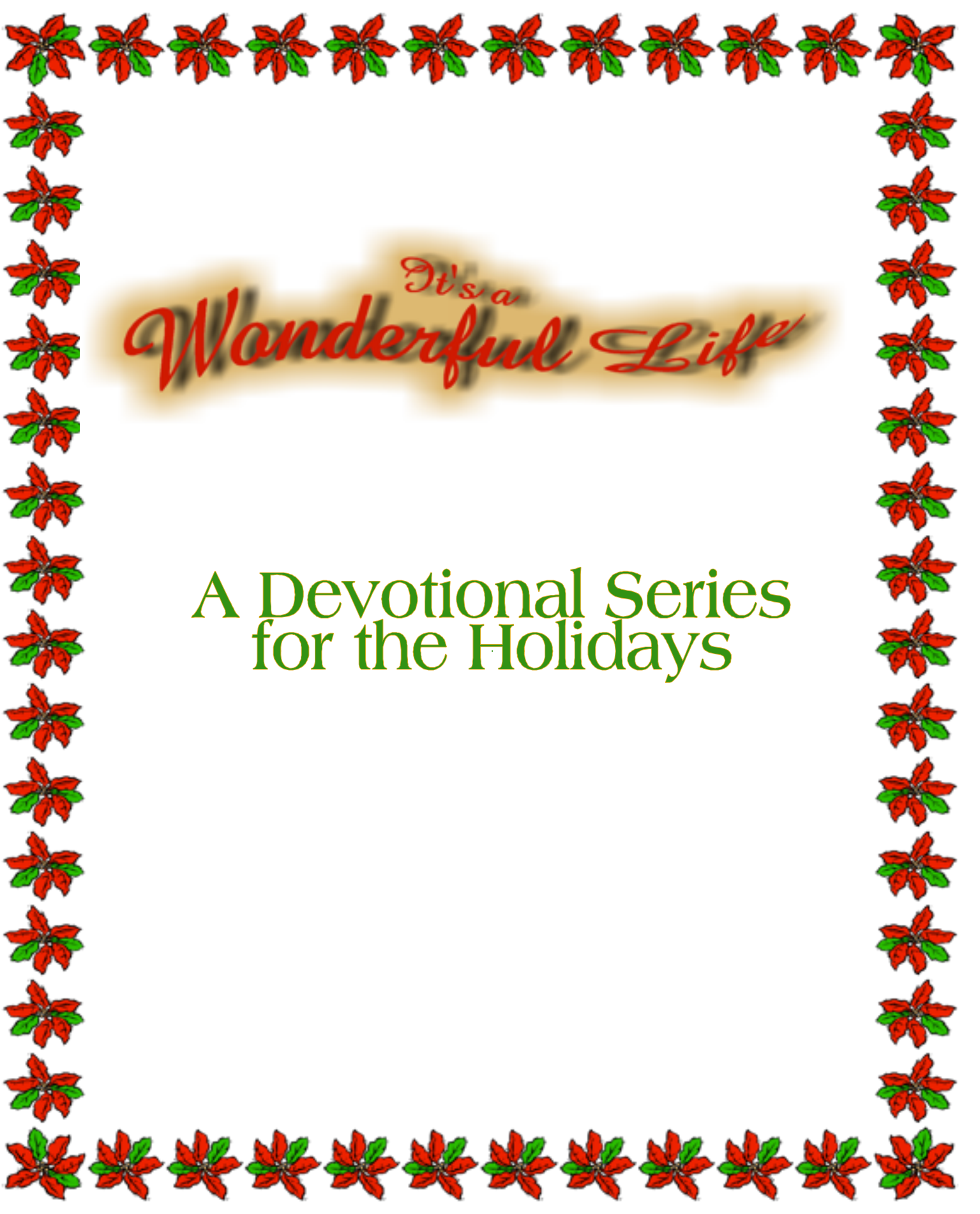
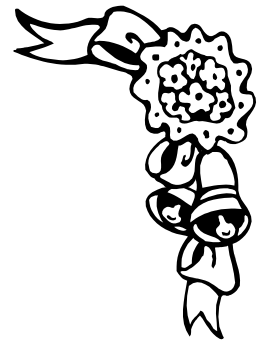
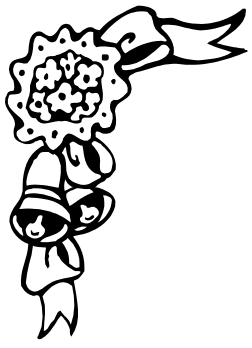




*It's a
Wonderful Life*

A Devotional Series
for the Holidays



It's a Wonderful Life!
A Devotional Series for the Holidays
"Series Introduction"

Dear Fayetteville Church Family:

Seasons Greeting! Christmas is a time of faith, family, and festivity. Reminders of Christ are all around us! We're reminded by countless special traditions to live by the golden rule, and it's a time where loving one another is given renewed emphasis. Ah, Christmas!

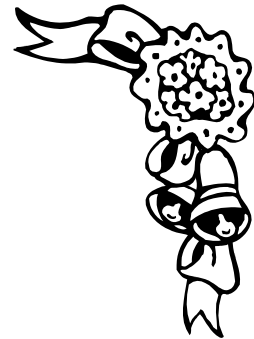
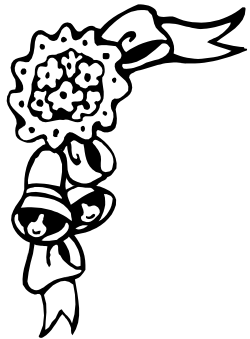
Unfortunately, that's not always the way it works out! The busyness of the season and the hiatus from healthy habits that we're tempted to indulge in can lead us to relegating God to a lesser priority. When we allow this to happen, the results are never good! At best, our failure to remain focused on our faith can leave us feeling guilty, dull, or just plain 'worn out'. At worst, our failure to remain focused on our faith can open the door to Satan's attacks, and we fall into sin. In either case, when we stop focusing on God we put ourselves in a precarious position. While nobody intends to start the New Year in a hole, often times that's exactly what happens.

Given the challenges and opportunities that come with the Christmas season, we thought it might be helpful if we tried something a little different. Attached you will find three weeks of quiet times are designed to provide some much needed structure to help us in our quest to stay close to God and one another.

- Week 1, entitled **Preparation and Anticipation**, begins on Monday, December 19th. It is designed to keep our faith strong by focusing our hearts and minds on the birth of Christ.
- Week 2, entitled **Remembrance and Reflection**, begins on Monday, December 26th. It is designed to help us develop a Godly perspective on the happenings of 2011.

- Week 3, entitled **Decision and Dedication**, begins on Sunday, January 1st, is designed to help us approach 2012 with a purposeful confidence that springs from a deep relationship with God.

It is our sincere desire that doing these quiet times together as a Church will help us all stay close to God and one another. It is our hope that each of us is reminded daily of the wonderful life that God has granted each of us who chooses to live in Christ!



It's A Wonderful Life!

Introduction to Week 1: Preparation and Anticipation

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:14–18)

As a very small child, I could hardly wait for Christmas. Beginning in November I began the painstaking process of picking out the right gift for each member of my family. I eagerly crossed off the days on the calendar as the big day approached. To me it was an important day – and since it only came once a year I wanted to make the best of it!

My understanding of Christmas as a child – a time to give and receive presents – was limited. Yet I still eagerly anticipated the importance of the day and did my best to be prepared to make the best of it.

As Christians our understanding of Christmas is much more than simply exchanging gifts. It's a time to reflect on perhaps God's greatest and most generous miracle: taking the form of man and living among us. Have you thought about this lately? What kind of a God would leave heaven to be born in a feeding trough, spend his first years fleeing for his life, spend the rest of his life living among sinners, and be executed as a scorned imposter? As the song says, “what a Savior!”

As magnificent as Christ's birth is, it's still easy to get distracted this time of year. The modern day Christmas season is fraught with things that test our faith. Fear and anxiety, the allure of materialism, discouraging thoughts and feelings, and the stress associated with the myriad of activities that have redefined the season are just a few examples of things that can take our focus off of God this time of year.

To help you have a spiritual focus, we've prepared seven quiet times for this week that are faithfully preparing for and anticipating the coming of Christ. We pray that these quiet times bring you close to God and give you an unquenchable desire to eagerly prepare to receive our King!

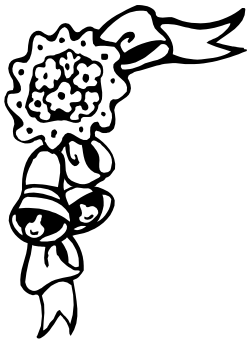
- ✝ **Monday, December 19th: Choosing Faith over Doubt**
- ✝ **Tuesday, December 20th: Choosing Faith over Fear**
- ✝ **Wednesday, December 21st: Choosing Faith over Fatigue**
- ✝ **Thursday, December 22nd: Choosing Faith over Fine Things**

✝ **Friday, December 23rd: Choosing Faith over Familiarity**

✝ **Saturday, December 24th: Choosing Faith over Frazzle**

✝ **Sunday, December 25th: Faithful Preparation and Anticipation**

In each of the devotionals, you will find many thought questions and activities. We hope that these will help you with your own creative process of thinking about things that will draw you closer to God. On the next page is a partial list of ideas and activities that we hope you will enjoy.



Ideas and Activities for the Christmas Season

***Christmas Movies:**

- The Nativity Story
- It's a Wonderful Life
- A Christmas Carol
- Elf
- Little Drummer Boy
- A Christmas Story

Movies for Young Children:

- Veggie Tales: A Meaningful Life
- Saint Nicholas, A Story of Joyful Giving
- The Crippled Lamb, by Max Lucado

Ideas for Devotionals and Family Activities:

Younger children:

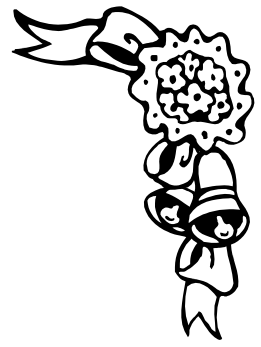
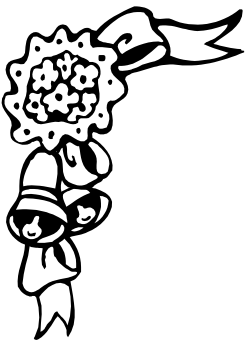
- Act out the story of Jesus' birth.
- Make a birthday cake for Jesus and talk about his birth.
- Teach them about the meaning and purpose of giving gifts (Acts 20:35 "It is more blessed to give than to receive.") Go with them to pick out gifts for family members or friends. If they are so moved, they may want to give some of their toys or things to needy children or families.
- Decorate and help fill bags for the church's Christmas project.

Older kids:

- Consider self in role of Joseph or Mary. How would you respond?
- Make gifts/write cards for teachers, friends, etc.

- Go Christmas caroling (Wednesday the 21st at the Campagna's house) or join the caroling at Haymount. (Monday the 19th!)
- Volunteer for one of the many available community Christmas projects, or start your own.

*Movies are a matter of individual convictions, tastes and opinions. Be sure to review any movie before showing to your family.



Monday, December 19th
“Choosing Faith over Doubt”

Believe God...sometimes it's easier said than done. We begin our journey through the Christmas season with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. What did you believe about God and his plan for your life when you were baptized? What do you believe now?

1. Read Luke 1:5–7

- Zechariah and Elizabeth were faithful and earnest in their obedience to God. Yet, they were childless, which was considered a disgrace during that time. Note that Zechariah and Elizabeth were still seen as righteous by God even though they were disappointed. Being disciples doesn't exempt us from difficult times, or having things happen (or not happen) to us that we don't fully understand.

Thought Questions:

- Have you wanted some things in life that you did not receive, or have not yet received? Have you ever prayed for something you deeply desired and the prayer wasn't answered, or not in the way you wanted? Does that mean God is not pleased with you, or he is not faithful to you?
- What does this couple's story teach you about maintaining your faith in the midst of this kind of a trial?

2. Read Luke 1:8–20

- Zechariah's prayer for a child is answered many years later. He probably wasn't even praying for a child anymore. When Gabriel gives him the good news, he doesn't believe him! Fortunately, Zechariah's doubts do not alter God's plan.

Thought Questions:

- Where is your belief today? Have the troubles of the world made you doubt how much God loves you? Are you dutifully trudging along as a disciple, but not truly believing God's promises and that he wants to work powerfully in your life? Isn't it time to believe again?

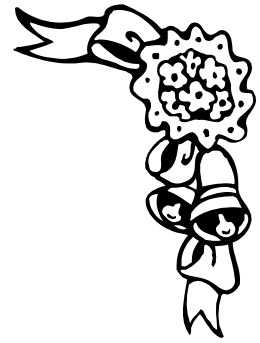
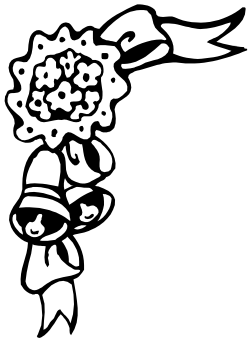
3. Read Luke 1:21–25

- Think about Elizabeth's words in vs. 25. It's easy to have faith when you know how the story will end, but it's harder when you're in the middle of it and you don't know God's final plan. God's ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8), and his view of time is not like ours (2 Pet. 3:8–9). The story of your life is still being

written. This day, let's renew our faith and hope in the middle of the story, knowing God will bless us in the end!

Thought Questions:

- Is there something you have deeply desired from God, but given up on? -- Character growth? Finding a life partner? A straying child? To be fruitful? Let's believe until the end of our life's story! Isn't that what Christmas is all about?



Tuesday, December 20th
“Choosing Faith over Fear”

The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Mary was greatly troubled at his words... (Luke 1:28–29)

Perhaps one of the most inspiring aspects of the nativity story is that Mary chose to faithfully obey God rather than give in to her fears. God surely knew what He was doing when he selected Mary to be the mother of Jesus! Let’s consider why she was chosen and what it means to find favor with God.

1. Read Luke 1:26–38

- Consider vs. 38. What a humble, submissive attitude Mary had!

Thought Questions:

- Do you think young Mary had any idea what she was committing to? Have you ever considered what it was like for Mary, an unwed pregnant teen in a Jewish family? What must her parents and Joseph have thought? Think about the suspicions and doubts she had to endure. (View the movie *The Nativity Story* for a different perspective).

2. Read Luke 1:39–56

Thought Questions:

- What character traits do you see in Mary that led God to choose her to be the mother of his son, the savior of the world?

3. Read Luke 2:1–7

For Mary to be favored by God meant great suffering as well as great honor. While the pregnancy and birth were not what you would expect for a king, it must have been amazing to witness the shepherds and Magi coming to visit her newborn baby. She was warned by Simeon that “a sword would pierce your own soul” (Luke 2:21–38), but she would be known for eternity as the mother of the Christ.

Thought Question:

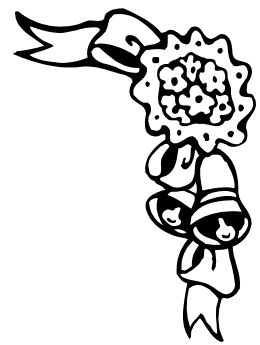
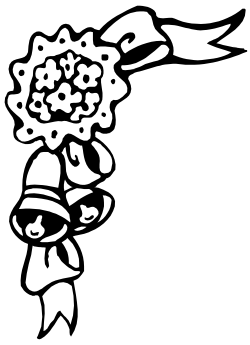
- How has being used by God brought both honor and challenge into your life? When you weigh it all out, does not the blessing outweigh the difficulty?

God saw the qualities in Mary’s heart and he chose her, despite her humble station in life and her circumstances. Sometimes we feel that God can’t use us. Believe that God

knows the qualities in your heart and he has chosen you for a special purpose (Eph. 1:11–12).

Thought Question:

- How has God shown you in your life that he has chosen you and favored you? How can you prevent your fears from casting a shadow over God's choice to use you?



Wednesday, December 21st
“Choosing Faith over Fatigue”

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. (Luke 2:1-4)

How many of us can get tired over the holiday season? Baking, buying gifts, late night functions, long distance travel, hosting guests, struggling with the Christmas lights -- the myriad of unique activities in the month of December can really take their toll! The busyness associated with preparing for Christmas often contributes to a deep sense of fatigue that can rob us of our joy and even make us vulnerable to illness.

Before we get too focused on how difficult our lives can be, in this season, let's consider the daunting task that Joseph and Mary faced. Caesar's simple decree that a census be taken had long-reaching repercussions.

1. Joseph and his very pregnant wife had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem., On their journey to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary covered a distance of over 80 miles.

Thought Questions:

- How many days do you think they traveled? How many hours of walking/riding do you think it took them? Physically and spiritually, how do you think they sustained themselves on this rigorous trip? Consider taking a nice long walk today or tomorrow. As you finish up your walk, take a moment and compare it to the walk that Joseph and Mary took. Express your gratitude to the Lord. Sometimes our journeys aren't as hard as we make them out to be!

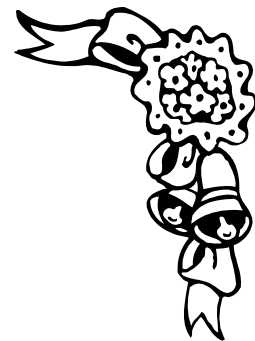
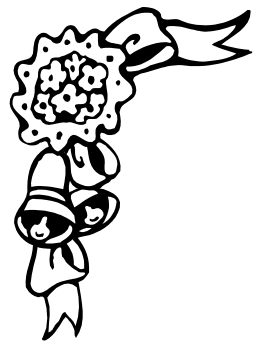
2. Joseph and Mary's journey wasn't optional – they were obeying Caesar's decree. In contrast, much of our stress and fatigue are self-induced.

Thought Question:

- Are there some things that you should consider eliminating from your schedule this week that will reduce your anxiety?

3. Make a schedule of what you have to do. Share it with your family, pray about it, and come up with a fun family plan to work together to get the necessary things done. As you go about your day, consider this Proverb and what it means: “Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.” (Proverbs 19:21)

4. This week, in the midst of the busyness let's seek to fix our eyes on the simple, beautiful story of the birth of our savior. As we do, may we remember that we are deeply loved by God, and that this is "The Reason for the Season."



Thursday, December 22nd
“Choosing Faith over Fine Things”

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

–Luke 2:12

Too often during the Christmas season, we wrap our self-esteem in the quantity and quality gifts we give and receive. Most parents have struggled with whether or not to buy the gift your child desperately wanted but you couldn't quite afford. Likewise, most of us have had a time or two when we desperately wanted a gift but knew our spouse or parents wouldn't be able to afford it.

In one sense, it is natural to want to give and receive nice things. But let us soberly recall that that focusing on our material things above our spiritual blessings is sinful. As you finish shopping, take some time to meditate on the importance of this fact: The best gift ever given in the history of mankind was born in a barn, wrapped in cloths and placed in an animal's feeding trough.

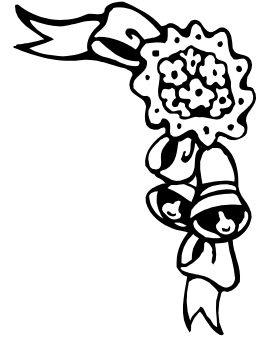
Thought Questions:

- Why do you suppose Jesus was born into such humble circumstances? What is God trying to teach us through this?
- What are some of the best non-material gifts that you have received?
- What are some of the best non-material gifts that you have given?
- What are some gifts that God has given you this year?
- What are some gifts you can give this Christmas that don't involve spending money?
- Are you overly reliant on material wealth for your joy, comfort, and happiness?

Some free activities that may help to set you free:

1. Write a card to someone telling them how much you love them and why.
2. Use your talents to create a gift for someone.
3. Provide a service for someone: Rake their leaves, do their laundry, make them a meal, wash their car, clean their house, etc.
4. Bake some cookies for a neighbor, your postman, the firemen at the local fire station, the folks at a local homeless shelter. Try giving a gift to perfect stranger.
5. Visit a nursing home. Many elderly residents have few or no visitors during this season.

6. Watch The Little Drummer Boy. Whose gift was most appreciated?



Friday, December 23rd
“Choosing Faith over Familiarity”

Faith makes things come alive. Familiarity can have the opposite affect. The Christmas Story is one that most of us have heard over and over for years. Let us today seek to have it come alive and be alive within us – in all of its glory and beauty.

Read Matt. 2:1–12

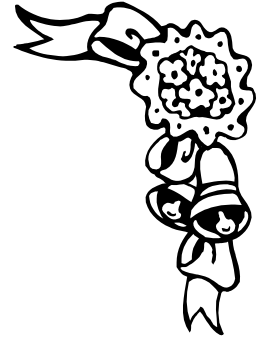
- Who were the Magi of the Christmas story? – They were typically men of science or higher learning. They were from the East (Perhaps Persia or Arabia) with an interest in studying the stars or ancient predictions.
- The Magi were probably familiar with Jewish Literature (i.e., Numbers 24:17, etc.)
- Their journey may be an indication the Magi became convinced the Jewish prophets, predictions of the birth of the “King of the Jews” was soon to occur.

1. Consider the hearts of the Magi:

- Pure hearted: Traveled hundreds, maybe thousands of miles
- Moved by scripture: Through study of the ancient words became convinced of the Messiah.
- Worshipful and reverent
- Brought expensive gifts
- Stepped outside the familiarity of their faith. The Magi were Gentiles. Bethlehem of Judah was in the heart of the Jewish world.
- Spiritually awakened and joyful.

2. Read John 1:10–13, Mark 6: 1–6

Thought Questions:



•How is it that some of those who were actually closer to the story, and who knew the Scriptures better, were not as receptive and appreciative of Jesus?

•How can that same thing happen to us as we go through the years of following Jesus and celebrating Christmas? What can we do this Christmas to keep our hearts alive with wonder, and not dulled by familiarity?

Some suggestions:

- Take a few minutes and write down three things that make your heart overflow with gratitude when you think of Jesus' birth.

Saturday, December 24th “Choosing Faith over Frazzle”

One more day! May you feel at peace this morning! Some of us may be done with all preparations and ready to relax and celebrate. Others may feel frazzled and that there is more to do today than we can possibly get done. Whatever our situation, let's use this time to connect with God. This will prove more valuable than “getting it all done.” What's your favorite Christmas carol? Meditate on the lyrics this morning. Here's my favorite carol, O Holy Night. The lyrics as well as some thoughts to ponder are provided.

O Holy Night

Verse 1

O Holy Night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of the 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.
Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices!
O night divine, the night when Christ was born;
O night, O Holy Night, O night divine!
O night, O Holy Night, O night divine!

Verse 2

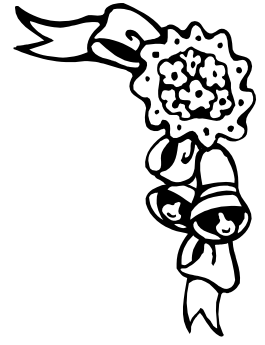
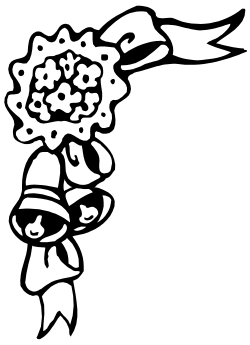
Led by the light of faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
O'er the world a star is sweetly gleaming,
Now come the wisemen from out of the Orient land.
The King of kings lay thus lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our friends.
He knows our need, our weakness is no stranger,
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!
Behold your King! Before him lowly bend!

Verse 3

Truly He taught us to love one another,
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains he shall break, for the slave is our brother.
And in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
With all our hearts we praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! Then ever, ever praise we,
His power and glory ever more proclaim!
His power and glory ever more proclaim!

Thought Questions:

- As you read the words carefully and they speak to your heart, what do they say to you?
- In verse three, we see that Jesus sets us free. What chains has Jesus broken for you? What chains do you still need him to break? (See Luke 4:14–21, John 8:31–36.)
- Christmas is a great time for evangelism since most are already thinking about Christ. Who are some people you can share the good news with this Christmas season?
- Holy Night is a powerful song of praise. Can you imagine the shepherds and magi offering praise to Jesus? Can you imagine yourself in heaven worshipping Jesus before his throne? Take time today to “fall on your knees” and worship our Lord and savior. And don’t forget to hear the angel voices!



Sunday, December 25th
“Faithful Preparation and Anticipation”

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 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.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

-- Luke 2:6-16

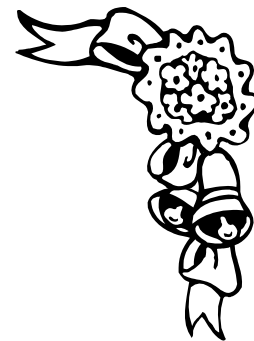
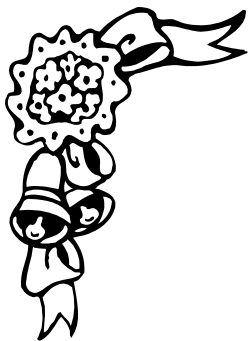
Christmas morning! Enjoy this magical day. Enjoy your family. Enjoy your friends. Enjoy your food. Most of all, enjoy your faith and the living presence of the King!

Thought Questions:

- Isn’t it great to faithfully follow God’s word? Where would we be without it?
- Isn’t it great to believe that there is a God who loves us and knows us? Consider how he came. Consider how he lived. Consider how we died. Consider how he rose again.
- Isn’t it great to know that God has prepared a place for us? (John 14:1-3). In Christ, there is no uncertainty, there is no anxiety, and there is no fear.
- Isn’t it great to know the way to the place where he has gone? (John 14:4)

Activity: Take time to pray to God today and thank God for his grace and mercy. Thank him for sending Jesus to show us the way home. Let each family member share their gratitude. As a family, joyfully anticipate and prepare for his return just as you have celebrated his birth on Christmas Day!

MERRY CHRISTMAS!



It's A Wonderful Life!

Introduction to Week 2: Remembrance and Reflection

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly, if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶ The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops. **Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.**" (2 Timothy 2:3–7)

Reflection is the act of fixing our thoughts on something and giving it careful consideration. Reflection brings depth, richness and faith into our lives. It is a sad fact of Western culture that we rarely take the time to reflect and give careful consideration to anything, especially the past. When we reflect on all God has done, we learn and grow. When we do not reflect, we continue our old ways, and we often fail to see the how the gracious hand of God has been work.

Let's use this time between Christmas and the New Year as an opportunity to remember and reflect on the many significant happenings of 2011 and on all the ways God has been at work in our lives. Here's our exciting plan for the week:

- ✝ **Monday, December 26th: Remember the Cross**
- ✝ **Tuesday, December 27th: Remember your Conversion**
- ✝ **Wednesday, December 28th: Remember the Good**
- ✝ **Thursday, December 29th: Remember the Blessings Born Out of Difficulty**
- ✝ **Friday, December 30th: Remember the Inspirational**
- ✝ **Saturday, December 31st: Reflect on 2011**

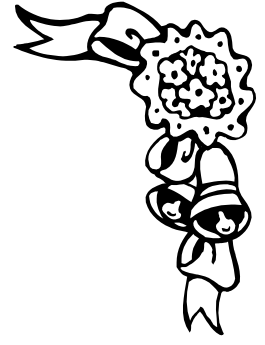
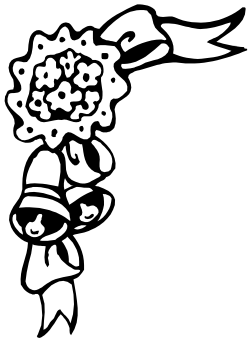
As we enter into this time of reflection consider these thoughts:

- 2 Tim 2:7 declares that as we reflect, the Lord will give us insight. Notice – it is **the Lord** who gives us insight! Throughout this week, prayer and meditation are essential. Listen for God's voice!
- The questions and activities are provided as a guide only. You probably won't be able to finish all of them. On the other hand, simply reading the questions

without writing out any of the answers will deprive you of the great benefits you could reap.

- No matter how you're feeling about taking a closer look at the year, be faithful. God created your inmost being. He knit you in your mother's womb. You are fearfully and wonderfully made; a wonderful work; God's masterpiece. Don't be afraid to reflect on your life with confidence!

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. –Hebrews 4: 15–16



Monday, December 26th
“Remember the Cross”

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:2–3)

Yesterday, we celebrated Jesus’ birth. We celebrated his humble and yet glorious arrival here on this earth, in the form of a little baby. He came to live with us as a man, and he also came to die for us. A little over thirty years later, he would be praying to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. He would be arrested, given an unfair trial, mocked, spat upon, forced to carry his own cross, and then crucified upon it.

It was physically excruciating– the worst death anyone could die. It was emotionally agonizing. Jesus was jeered and condemned by crowds. His disciples fled when he was arrested, and even his friend Peter, denied him three times. He deserved a crown of glory, but he received a crown of thorns. Most importantly, Jesus took on all of the sin of the world, and by doing so was separated from his loving Father, whom he had been with eternally. God had to turn his back on his beloved Son, who had committed no sin. Jesus was all alone.

This is the punishment we deserve. But because of Christ’s sacrifice, we receive life, not death! Jesus tore down the curtain of sin that separated us from God. We were God’s enemies, but now we are able to have a relationship with him and spend eternity with him. Because we were buried through baptism into Christ’s death, God no longer remembers our sin.

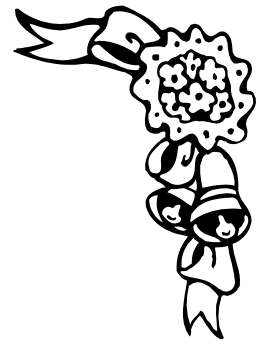
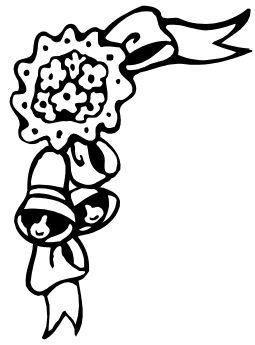
All of this is possible because of Jesus’ love for us. He endured the cross for the joy set before him– the joy of being with us forever! We are loved! Salvation and a relationship with God is truly the best gift we have received!

Some Suggested Activities

How can you keep your perspective on the cross fresh? What can you do to remember what Jesus did and its personal significance for you? Here are some suggestions:

- Read an account– or all of the accounts– of the cross. While reading, reflect on the significance of the things that Jesus went through, what he said, and what he did. Remember that everything was done for your sake; that Jesus was thinking of you. Imagine being there while all of it was happening. Imagine being in the place of different people, such as Peter, Jesus’ mother, or the thief on the cross.

- Watch The Passion. This film is reasonably true to the Bible, and does not add any “fluff” to what Jesus really went through. Spend some time in prayer afterwards.
- Write a letter to Jesus. Write about what he went through, what he saved you from, and your gratitude. Especially if you feel like your view of the cross has seemed cold and dull lately, ask him to help you gain a deeper and renewed understanding.



Tuesday, December 27th
“Remember Your Conversion”

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. “ – Titus 3:3–7

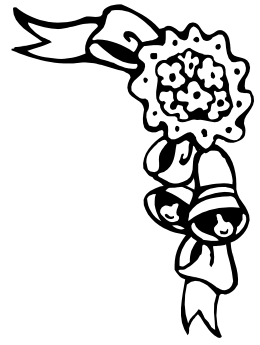
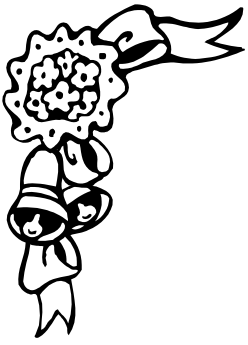
Then Moses said to the people, “Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand.” – Exodus 13:3

The most important day of your life was the day of your baptism. On that day, you made the good confession that Jesus Christ is your Lord, you were buried into his death through the waters of baptism, and you were resurrected into a new life with the gift of the Holy Spirit. That was the day you were washed clean. That was the day you began your eternity with the Father. You were once a slave to sin, but now you are set free.

Long before Jesus came, God saved the Israelites from a different kind of slavery. For four hundred years, they had been oppressed. Then, by great wonders, God saved them, and they began their journey to the Promised Land. However, in Numbers 13 and 14, we see that the Israelites became fearful and turned away from God. They forgot that Almighty God had delivered them from slavery, and would continue to deliver them. They had to wander in the desert for forty years. Imagine witnessing the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, being freed from slavery, and then later wanting to turn back to that old life!

We, too, can become calloused and forget what God has saved us from. Sometimes, when faced with a challenge, we doubt that God can get us through it, forgetting that he has already given us the victory in Christ! Or, when life is going smooth, we can become careless and prideful, believing that we have made changes through our own power. We might even long for the days before God saved us, just like the Israelites did.

To guard against this, we must continually remember our baptism, and maintain an attitude of gratitude. Our baptism should be a continual source of joy; not an old, faded memory.



Spend some time today reflecting on who you were before your conversion, on what that day was like, and on what your life has been since then. If you feel out-of-touch, or you have made mistakes, don't be discouraged; all of us fall short, but God is continually gracious to us, allowing for repentance and growth. The memory of all God has done will keep us full of joy, and keep our hearts renewed and refreshed.

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“Remember Your Conversion” (continued)

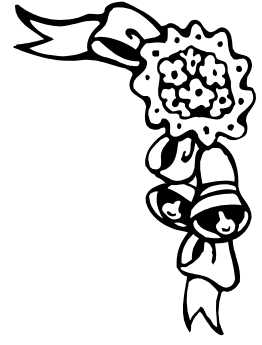
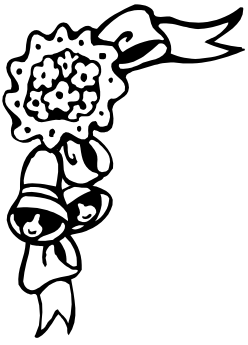
Thought Questions

- How did God reach out to you? Who did he use to reach out to you?
- What sins were in your life before your baptism? What was your character like?
- What was it like when you were baptized? How did you feel?
- What changed in your life when you were baptized?
- How have you matured in your walk with God since then?
- James 4:7 says that we must continually resist the devil, and he will flee from us. Are there areas of your life where you have stopped resisting the devil? If so, what changes do you need to make?
- How can you keep your gratitude new? How can you continue to be compelled by Christ's love?

Some Suggested Activities

- Imagine where you would be if God hadn't freed you from the bondage of sin, your "Egypt." Take some time to reflect on this, and then rejoice that God has delivered you!

- Write a memoir of your conversion. Reflect on how God demonstrated his power and love for you.
- Remember the people who reached out to you or studied the Bible with you. Consider giving them a call or sending them a note expressing your gratitude.



Wednesday, December 28th

“Remember the Good!”

“From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another”. (John 1:6)

After living in the Northeast for most of my life, I am amazed at the number of days that we have in North Carolina where the sky is blue, blue, blue! I must admit, sometimes it just doesn't seem possible to me that God graciously gives us so many of these days. Frankly, they often leave me breathless!

While I suppose that many native North Carolinians take these “Carolina Blue” days for granted, I do not. Nevertheless, it does make me wonder: How many wonderful blessings of God have I failed to notice or take time to acknowledge? How many gifts from God have I overlooked?

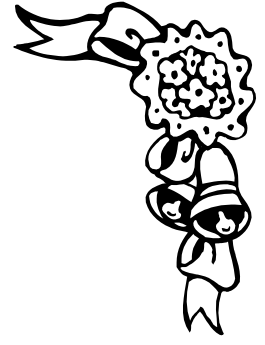
But here's another thought: Have you ever opened all of your gifts on Christmas morning, only to later realize that there is another gift that you did not see, hiding underneath the tree? What a joyous occasion it is when you realize there are even more gifts than you thought!

Take some time to reflect on 2011. I bet there's still a gift or two under the tree you didn't realize that were there for you!

Thought Questions and Activities:

- Who are some special people God used to have a positive impact on you in 2011? How did they help you?
- What are some areas that you grew in during the last year? (Perhaps it would be helpful to get some feedback from some people who are close to you.)
- Who are some people that you had the opportunity to help in 2011? How did it make you feel to be able to touch a life?
- Write down a list of things that God did for you in 2011. Don't forget those answered prayers!
- Reflect on David's prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18–27. While David had much to be thankful for, he also had undergone much tragedy and hardship in his life. David was definitely a 'glass is half full' kind of guy (i.e. he was a positive thinker). Reflect on this. What made him so?

- Consider writing God a thank you card for the many blessings he's bestowed upon you in 2011.



Thursday, December 29th

“Remember the Blessings Born Out of Difficulty”

“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.
You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your
decrees.

...It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” – Psalm
119:67, 71

Many years ago my daughter, who was in kindergarten, was being bullied while at school. When I was told what was happening, I was greatly troubled. How dare they bully my little girl! To say that I became upset is an understatement. Luckily for me, a very wise friend noticed my agitation and calmly said, “What kind of a man would you be today if every time you had a little difficulty your father came and rescued you?” I learned from him a valuable lesson: While there may be time to intervene, part of being a loving parent is allowing and helping our children to go through difficulties, knowing it is out those times that their character is built.

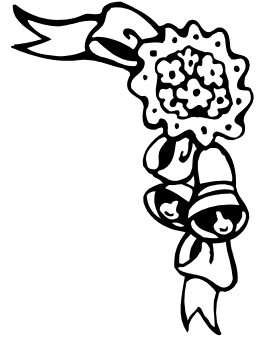
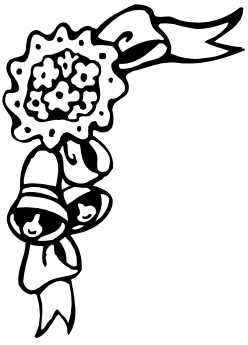
Thought Questions

- Did your trials in 2011 draw you closer to God? If they didn't, it's not too late!
- Read Hebrews 12:1–13. Can you think of some times in 2011 in which you underwent God's discipline? What did you learn? Did you to “fix your eyes on Jesus”? (Heb 12:2)
- If you're still in the midst of some trials, can you look to the future and see any good coming from them? (If not, consider talking with a faithful friend who'd be willing to help you be a little more farsighted.)
- Are you faithful that God desires to bring you to a place of abundance? Take some time today to pray for someone whose trials have been burdensome, especially if their faith may be wavering. If you are able, do something to encourage the person.

Consider these words from Psalm 66:10–12 and be encouraged:

For you, O God, tested us;
You refined us like silver.
You brought us into prison
and laid burdens on our backs.
You let people ride over our heads;

we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.



Friday, December 30th
“Remember the Inspirational”

I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:1–3)

According to dictionary.com the word “inspire” means “to fill with animating, quickening, or exalting influence.” Now tell me, who doesn’t want to be inspired? We pay money to go to movies for just that reason! Truth is, each one of us witnessed numerous inspiring events in 2011. And, besides that, we crossed paths with many inspiring people. The question is: Did we take the time to reflect on these events and people and allow ourselves to be inspired? Take heart, it’s not too late to be inspired from 2011!

Thought Questions

- What was the most inspiring conversation you had in 2011? Why was it memorable?
- What was the most inspiring sermon you heard or book you read in 2011? How did it influence you?
- What was the most inspiring life change you made in 2011? Why was it memorable?
- What was the most inspiring thing you saw happen in the church in 2011?
- What spiritual song inspires you most? Why?

Some inspiring activities to consider:

- Watch an inspiring movie. Here’s the top 10, according to one internet site:

#1: Rocky

#2: Stand and Deliver

#3: Life is Beautiful

#4: The Pursuit of Happyness

#5: It’s a Wonderful Life

#6: Good Will Hunting

#7: Chariots of Fire

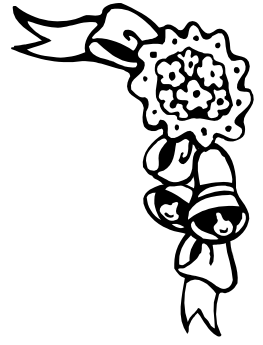
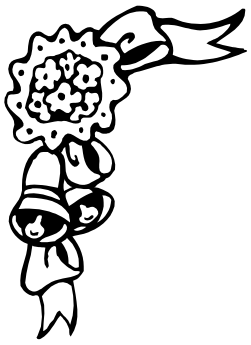
#8: Cinderella Man

#9: My Left Foot

#10: Star Wars IV: A New Hope

(Note: if you have questions on whether or not these movies are appropriate for you or your family to watch, visit imbd.com)

- For 2012, make a decision to fill yourself daily with inspirational thoughts, ideas, people, and activities. In the words of Zig Zigler, “People say that motivation doesn’t last. Neither does taking a bath. That’s why we recommend it daily!”
- Write down a list of the things that inspire you most about God and Jesus Christ.
- Come up with a list of the Top 10 most inspirational people in the Bible
- Develop a list of the Top 10 most inspirational people you know. Consider encouraging them by letting them know they made your list!



Saturday, December 31st

“Reflecting on 2011”

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” (Isaiah 30:21)

How was your hearing this year?

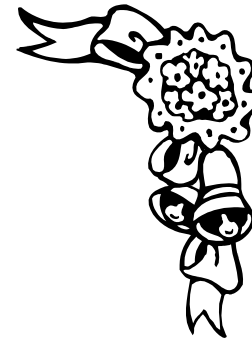
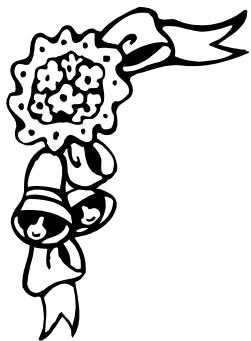
The LORD said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

Sometimes we try to win God’s favor through the intensity of our activity. It’s safe to say that if Elijah’s intense zeal for the Lord was not enough, then ours won’t be enough either. God’s voice often comes in a whisper, ensuring that only those who are making every effort to listen are capable of hearing.

God has been speaking to you all year long. Are you ready to listen?

Some Important Ways to Hear What God Has Been Trying to Say to Us:

- Reflect on the year. Write down what you think his message to you has been.
- If you had to come up for a title for your 2011, what would it be? 2011: The Year of _____
- Reflect on all the ways God loved you in 2011. Write down some of your best memories of your relationship with God in 2011.
- Reflect on all the ways God led you in 2011. Record some of your best memories of how he influenced you.
- How do you think God used 2011 to prepare you for 2012?
- Take some time to pray about what God has been trying to say to you. If you didn’t understand his message, it’s not too late to ask him for clarification!
- How can you use 2011 as a launching pad into 2012? Write some things down. Ask the Spirit to inspire you. It’s time to dream!!!



It's A Wonderful Life!

Introduction to Week 3: Decision and Dedication

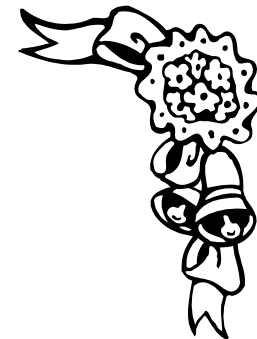
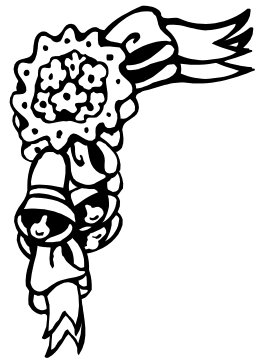
Together, we are all welcoming in the New Year this morning! The family of God in Fayetteville is collectively starting this New Year in the word, prayer and communion with God. I believe 2012 can be a time of the richest and greatest growth that we as individuals and a church have ever experienced. It will start with a simple decision to pursue a goal of finding out what pleases God and choosing the right path. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. (2 Corinthians 5:9) It will mean exciting Change for all of us, both individually and collectively.

As we journey through these next few days together, we will reflect upon God's wonderful plan for renewal in our lives. We will discover how he brings renewal about, and learn about the awesome process and power of personal and collective dedication and decision. Hold on for a time of transformation both internally and externally!

Let us make a decision to trust and surrender to God more deeply and in so doing have the most "Wonderful Life" ever in 2012!

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|---------------------|---|
| ✝ Sunday, Jan. 1 | All Things New |
| ✝ Monday, Jan. 2 | Hearing the Call...Again |
| ✝ Tuesday Jan. 3 | Decision Points |
| ✝ Wednesday, Jan. 4 | Making Changes That Stick (Part 1) |
| ✝ Thursday Jan. 5 | Making Changes That Stick (Part 2) |
| ✝ Friday, Jan. 6 | Strength for the Journey |
| ✝ Saturday, Jan. 7 | Finish Just Like You Started |
| ✝ Sunday, Jan. 8 | Shameless Persistence in Change – Never Quit! |

The New Year: A Time of Renewal, Revival and Restoration



Sunday, January 1 “All Things New”

Don't you love the idea of “new”? There is something special and exciting about anything that is new! Things (and people!) get old, wear out, and lose their luster. But God is all about renewal! He has the power to create, and also to **re-create**. He graciously gives us new days, new weeks, fresh new seasons, and now, a New Year to help us “reset” and look forward to a season that will be fresh, new and great.

LEAVING THE PAST IN THE PAST

Before we can move forward, however, we may need to drop off some baggage! For some of us, Satan will try to accuse us and keep us dwelling on our past shortcomings. While we need to learn from the past, God does not want us to stay in a place of guilt, fear, or hopelessness. Your car's front windshield is bigger than your rear view mirror for a good reason! If dwelling in the past is your struggle this morning, I encourage you to reflect upon these scriptures:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. (Isaiah 43:18)

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13,14)

RENEWAL:

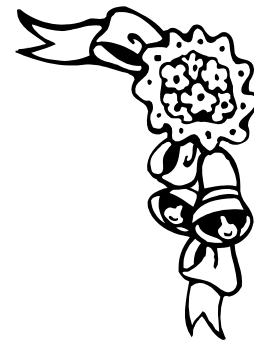
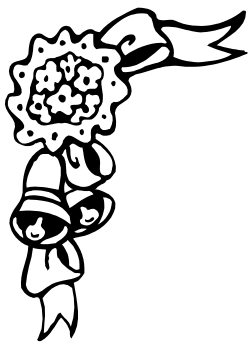
God loves to make things new, to re-new us. How does it happen? Certainly, God will faithfully do his part – He will work by the power of the Spirit, by his strength working within us. But Scripture tells us we have a role in our renewal. We need to do our part – to put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of the creator. (Col. 3:10) What could be better than starting the New Year reflecting on the concept of “New” in God's amazing Word?

- Lam. 3:21–24 – New mercies
- 2 Cor. 5:17, Col 3:10 – New self
- Acts 5:20 – New life
- Rev. 21:1–5 – Jesus: All things New

Thought Questions:

- What do you think “renewal” means in a spiritual sense?
- Why do we need renewal? How often?
- Can you name a few areas where God has renewed your life over the years?

- How have those times made a difference in your life? How did the time of renewal happen?
- Where do you think you need renewal the most right now? I.e. walk with God, marriage, family life, devotion to the Church, relationships, evangelism. (Note: Be careful not to take on everything at once! Pick one or two areas of focus, and everything will grow!)



Monday, January 2 “Hearing the Call...Again”

Read John 21:15–25

Here we have the story of Jesus encountering Peter in the 40-day period he spent on earth after his resurrection and before his ascension. He meets him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, fixes him and the other disciples breakfast, and takes Peter on a walk. What is Jesus going to say to Peter at this crucial moment?

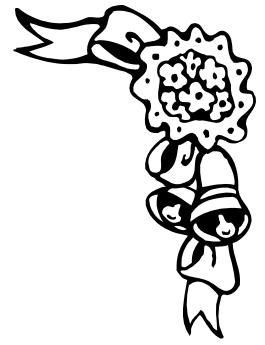
Study Questions:

- Jesus asks Peter four questions during this walk. What are the first three questions, and why does Jesus ask them?
- Each time Peter answers, Jesus gives him a charge. What is it?
- Considering Peter’s denial on the night of Jesus’ arrest, why is it significant that Jesus calls Peter back into his service? What does this mean to Peter? Would it be encouraging or discouraging?
- Jesus finishes the conversation with two challenges to Peter: “Follow me!” (vs. 19 and 22). Jesus had issued that same invitation years before (See Mark 16–18). Why does he extend it again now?

Thought Questions:

- What do you learn about the need to hear, and hear again and again, the call of Jesus to make him Lord, to follow him, to give up Self, to leave the world, and make him Lord?
- Have you ever come through a period of time when you felt you had let the Lord down and needed to hear His call again?
- If Jesus were walking and speaking with you today, what charge do you think he would give you?
- Is there a “call” that is resounding in your heart? Do you need a sense of being re-called, renewed, or restored right now? In what areas?
- Reflect upon the greatest decision you have ever made: Making Jesus your Savior and Lord. When and where did this glorious decision take place for you? How did you feel when you made this change?
- Recall the decision point when you finally surrendered yourself to the Lordship of Christ and went into the waters of baptism. What hesitations did you have to overcome?
- What event do you remember that moved your heart to finally make that glorious decision and step out to change? (I.e. the cross, a particular scripture, a question or challenge from a disciple, a kind word or deed from someone.)

Today, as we enter into this New Year, let us seek to hear what the Lord is saying to us. Let us feel his renewed call to us to be his disciples, to follow him, to serve him and to share his Word!



Tuesday, January 3

“Decision Points”

Renewal, revival and restoration are exciting! We learned yesterday it is never too late to change! As disciples, God wants us and enables us to be in a state of continual growth and change.

When was the last time you really changed anything in your life and could say, “I am really growing, I’m changing!”

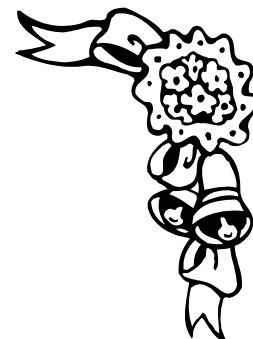
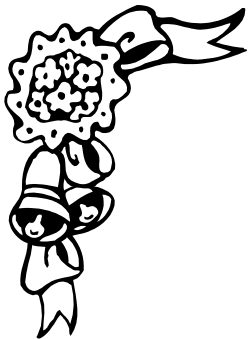
At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: “I tell you the truth, **unless you change** and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. – Matthew 18:1–4

Sometimes we just can’t get a handle on where to start or what to focus on. As you think about how God wants to renew, revive or restore you, ask Him for guidance and direction, and get excited about the prospect of a fresh time of growth in your life!

Thought Questions for Growth and Change:

- What would most please God?
- What would most relieve your conscience?
- What would most benefit others around you?
- What would bring you the most joy?

Write down some areas in which you need to change. Think about them over the next few days, and ask God to bring you to complete clarity and conviction. Tomorrow we will move forward with seeking God’s wisdom, inspiration, and power to change!



Wednesday, January 4

“Making Changes That Stick” (Part 1)

New Year’s Resolutions are great – but how many of us keep to our resolve? How can we make changes that last? We will tackle this for the next two days.

Here are some suggestions that will help you make lasting changes. You probably won’t be able to cover all of this material in just one day. Use this as a source to come back to as you continue to work on being renewed over the next few weeks.

1. Decide clearly what you want to change, and write it down

1. Limit it to one or two things at a time – focus your efforts
2. Be specific Matt. 20:32
3. Review it every day, “our daily bread”

2. Build your faith: Get inspired and stay Inspired

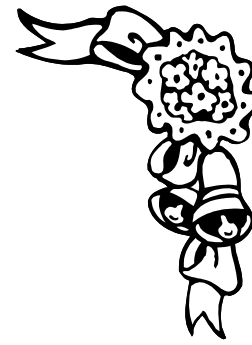
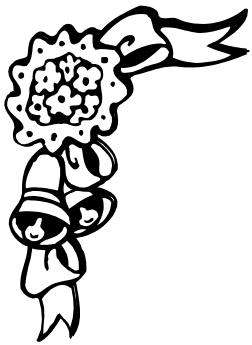
1. Develop an arsenal of Scriptures to help you Matt. 4:4,7, 10
2. Daily Prayer Luke 11:5–13
3. Read encouraging books
4. Listen to inspiring messages
5. Remember past victories 1 Sam. 17:34–38

3. Speak your faith

1. Change from negative self-talk to positive Phil. 4:13
2. Change from negative talk to positive Num. 13:30
3. Do not speak about your problem, speak to your problem. 1 Sam 17:45–48

4. Get Help from Others

1. An encouraging friend Heb. 3:21–13 1 Samuel 23:14–19 2 Tim. 1:16–18
2. Get advice – Ask: “Am I on track? Am I challenging myself enough? Have I bitten off more than I can chew?”
3. Go Public – talk about it with others – boast in your weaknesses (2 Cor. 12: 7–10), ask for prayer
4. Hang out with faithful, positive people (church!! Acts 2:46)



Thursday, January 5
“Making Changes That Stick” (Part 2)

Yesterday we set out four of the eight steps we need to take to make lasting change. Here are steps 5 through 8:

5. Work on your thought patterns /keep your eyes focused – 2 Cor. 3:17–18

- a. You must fill your mind with the good Eph. 4:20–24

6. Take Positive Action (Matt. 12:43ff)

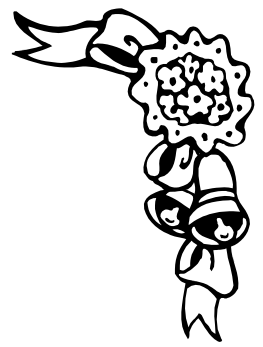
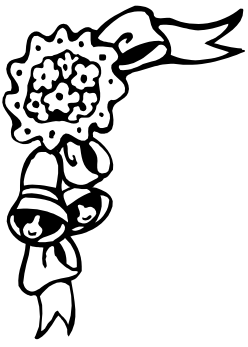
- a. We can get frozen in inaction and procrastination
- b. Even when you do not feel like it or feel inspired – ACT!! You will feel better later.
Remember: MOOD does not equal MOTIVE
- c. The point of being tempted is that you WANT to do the wrong thing at the moment.
- d. Remember: Temptation does not equal sin!
- e. Overcome emotional reasoning – I don't feel like I can change. I feel weak. I feel like a failure. This isn't going to work. Who am I kidding?
- f. Take small steps – get started on something you CAN do! – Clean out a desk drawer, straighten up a closet, rake the yard. Small victories can break us out of the rut of procrastination.

7. Deal with Failure and setbacks

- a. Remember: Progress upward is not a straight line
- b. Be patient with yourself – treat yourself as you would treat your best friend
- c. Get back up and go again (Prov. 24:16)
- d. **Stop listening to accusing voices!!** Voices like: You'll never change this. You're no good. This is too hard.

8. Claim and record your victories, Track your progress

- a. Celebrate your victories – even small ones
- b. Write down your victories, write down what you did right yesterday!
- c. Endorse Yourself



Friday, January 6
“Strength for the Journey”

As we mature in Christ, change can and should be just as exciting and freeing as when we first followed Jesus. Some changes will occur incrementally over a lifetime. Other changes occur only when we make a specific decision to change. Today, we want to get excited about the prospect and possibility of change in our life through REVIVAL, RENEWAL, and RESTORATION in the coming New Year of 2012.

Reflect upon the following scriptures as resources to help you with this next stage of change in your life:

Day by day we are renewed:

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." Lamentations 3: 21-24

God gives us mercy and grace in our hour of need:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 3:16

God comforts us:

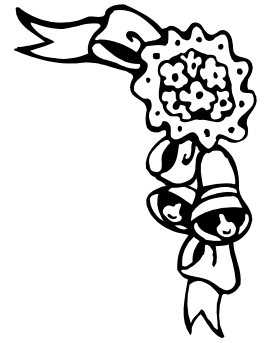
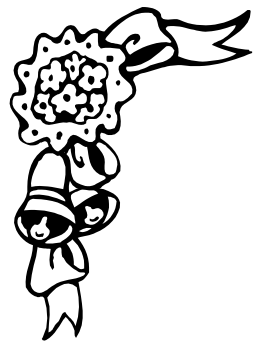
Sometimes discouragement can set in as we face changes we know we need to make, or as change seems slow in coming. We have thoughts like "I cannot change" and we can feel all alone.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

2 Cor. 4:3-6

Do you feel prepared to change?

What excites you most about some of the changes you are about to specifically make?



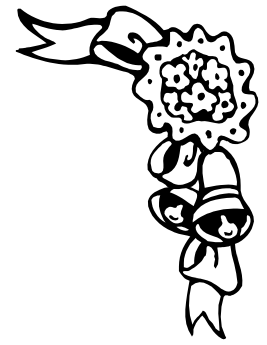
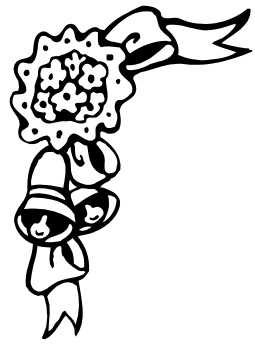
Saturday, January 7
“Finish Just Like You Started”

We start out in our walk with God depending on him for everything. Do you remember praying for seemingly tiny details pertaining to overcoming just about anything in your life? Some examples that come to mind are things like parking spaces, help on tests, and just about every small step we took in life. However, along the way we can lose that childlike heart and simple dependence on God. Somewhere along the path of life we can go on a detour and begin to rely on our own human effort again, rather than the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We begin with the Power of The Spirit and then end up trusting more in our own flesh.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? – Galatians 3: 1–5

Thought Questions:

- Why do we start out our Christian lives so radically dependent on God?
- What can happen along the way to make us begin to depend upon ourselves again?
- What happens to us when we do that?
- Have you allowed yourself to lose faith, lose heart, or lose confidence because of this?
- Note that Paul says the Galatians were “bewitched” into their self-dependency. Who do you think is the source of the bewitching that pulls us away from our source of spiritual strength?
- How can we get back to a simple dependence on the power of God?



Sunday, January 8
“Shameless Persistence – Never Quit!”

Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

– “Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! – Luke 11: 5–13

Thought Questions:

- Why do we sometimes hesitate to go knocking on God’s door?
- Why do you think God values “shameless persistence”? (See Luke 18:1–8)
- Jesus compares our relationship to God with that of our relationship with our own children. What is his point? How does this help you be more persistent and confident?
- Name some of the promises in the above passage.
- Do you believe God is both able and willing to help you and give good gifts to you?
- Do you believe Jesus desires and is able to work in your life to do “more than you can ask or imagine” (Eph. 3:20) in 2012”?

List some of your “dream” or “impossible dream” prayers for 2012, knowing that with God, all things are possible!

