

Presence of Christmas Devotional Journal By Todd Mills



The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is often a blur and filled with so many “things to do”. Often it is an overwhelming multitude of

gatherings, shopping trips, expected visits and more. Wrap this into the normal everyday activities of work, family needs, activities, etc. and the season can be one of exasperation instead of expectation. The word Advent, the season before Christmas, is simply defined as that...waiting and expectation.

With each passing year of our existence or journey in this world we find ourselves moving from Christmas being a time of receiving presents with a small role played into the act/art of giving to a transformation where we spend a greater role of giving and a lesser role of receiving. Often this is where a huge amount of the stress and struggle of the season squeezes our excitement and expectation. Truth be told, for most we enjoy giving more than the receiving and our desires in receiving become quite changed along the way. I'd like to expand upon that idea in saying that our challenge of the season comes when we embrace the idea of giving/receiving Presence over presents.

In the next few short chapters, I'll flesh out this idea of "Presence" that can be found in the basic tenets that each of us long for in our lives...Hope, Love, Joy and Peace. These are the greatest desires of every person, and they are what bring real meaning to our existence and ensure that we have healthy lives. Webster's says that the definition of Presence is "the fact of being in a particular place, present, close to someone, something that is seen or noticed". This word is defined as a noun (person, place or thing) but I want us to see, feel and experience it as a verb (action) when pertaining to the words Hope, Love, Joy and Peace. This is at the heart of the season, the gift of Jesus Christ to the world, the simple notion that "Emanuel: God IS with us".

For the next several weeks you will spend time reflecting on in what way God might be moving you in your life. You'll answer questions that will focus on your own spiritual growth. You will end each devotional day with the PRAY guide to prayer: Praise, Repent, Ask and Yield (info during first devotional day). Remember first and foremost, this is an individual spiritual growth tool designed to encourage you to go deeper in your faith.

I'll share a short reflection to get you started and then you are to set aside time to connect with God in a way that is meaningful for you. My hope and

prayer for this time is that you'll make the time to do this for yourself, your family, your community and most importantly to grow closer with God. For this journey to be an enjoyable one you'll need three things: 1) Your Bible, 2) This Journal and 3) An open mind and heart.

If you do this study on your own, leave time to ponder the questions and listen to God speaking. Don't rush through the pieces like a 'to-do' list, rather reflect upon the fact that you are a precious child of God. Note that having your Bible on hand might be helpful and bring a familiarity to your study and journaling time.

Before we begin take a few moments and answer these few questions.
What is the greatest present you've ever received?

What is the greatest present you've ever given?

What is your greatest desire this Christmas?

Make sure to answer these now and then after completing the next 25 days go back and answer them again. Prayers for the journey.

Day 1: "The Presence of Hope"

It is said that you can live up to a week without food, 3 days without water, 8 minutes without air, but without hope you can't last another moment. What in your life has brought you hope, where have you given hope and who has offered you hope?

What occurrences in life have dashed your hope, who has shattered your hope, and when have you been left feeling hopeless?

The definition of Hope is to want something to happen or be true and think that it could happen/be true; to cherish a desire with anticipation; to expect with confidence.

From early on in our lives we are taught in many ways to have hope. Man, I sure hope it snows so that we'll miss school tomorrow. I hope that Santa brings me that new video game. I hope that my dad makes it to my game. I hope that my friend doesn't hate me. I hope Mom and Dad don't get a divorce. I hope that I can go to college. I hope she really loves me. I hope that I don't lose my job. I hope that the baby is perfectly healthy. I hope that he makes it through surgery. I hope that it's not cancer. I hope that I've done everything that I can to make sure that my family is cared for when I'm gone. I hope...Ok, you fill in the blank.

There's not a day that goes by that we don't hope for something is there? Even when we do get something that we hope for, there is always something else that will quickly come and take its place, isn't there? At the same time so much of what we hope for doesn't come to pass. Many of the things that were mentioned before don't come to be. We don't get what we want, those in our lives who love us hurt us and other outside forces that influence decisions and happenings in life leave us with our hope going unfulfilled.

In our lives we can easily find ourselves chasing after promises of Hope. There are things in this world that can lead us astray. We can get caught up in our own efforts and forget that it is not what we do that brings us hope. It is only by God's grace that we can have Real Hope. Because of God's great love for us, God sends us a Savior to comfort, heal and set us free. In Christ, God clothes us with goodness and salvation. But even when we know these things to be true there are still points in our lives that we have difficult situations that leave us with feelings of Hopelessness.

It was a few days after Christmas 2002 and my father's battle with cancer was ending. We'd spent the last few months hoping for a miracle, praying for a cure and enduring all the ugliness that a walk with cancer brings. At an appointment with his cancer doctor a few days before Thanksgiving he'd

made the decision to stop the radiation and cancer treatments and enjoy the time he had left. We made it through the holidays and Dad had seemed strong and plowed through, his one hope was to get past Christmas and share it with his family. Dad loved Christmas, the simple yet profound message of Emanuel, God with us. He'd endured so much during his life, made an impact on so many people's lives but remained quiet and humble. In those last few moments, the last few breaths, even amidst the broken heartedness there was a comforting presence of hope that surrounded us. Cancer is downright ugly, awful and it brought my father's journey in this world to a close, but it never stifled his hope.

Whatever it is that overwhelms and feels as though it is slowly destroying us, if we have faith in God and trust we will have a Hope that is greater and stronger than anything of this world. Our lives are filled with journeying through mountains and crawling through valleys. There will always be stumbling blocks and tragedy, days of celebration and triumph. God's heart's desire is for us to live out our lives under his care and power. In turning our lives over we will find hope to help us on this journey. May the Presence of Hope surround and sustain you for the journey.

Day 2: (1st Samuel 9:11-21)

Like us Saul has been on a Long Journey. How do you feel about your journey in life so far?

What comes to mind?

Saul can't believe that he's been chosen. God wants each of us, where do you "doubt" in believing that God wants you?

What is it that you still hope for?

Praise:

Repent:

Ask:

Yield:

Day 3: (Psalm 25)

The path of following God can be difficult, what are you currently struggling with?

When has putting your full trust in God had overwhelming results?

What do you still need to trust God for?

PRAY

Day 4: (Romans 15:1-13)

How has unconditional acceptance of others brought you hope?

Who is God calling you to be Patient and Gracious with?

What parts of your life “overflow with hope”?

PRAY

Day 5: (Psalm 71)

God has brought us each through so much in our lives, take a moment to jot down those that come to mind.

What are you hoping for God to bring you through now?

What is Your Greatest Hope for this Christmas season?

PRAY

Day 6: (Hebrews 10:32-11:3)
When have you lived by faith?

What have you lost faith in?

God has given us so much, who can you offer Hope to this Christmas?
How?

PRAY

Day 7: (Makeup Day)
PRAY

Day 8: "The Presence of Peace"

We've all seen or heard the slogan...No Peace? Know Peace! This is referring to Jesus Christ as the only One who can bring us real Peace. It can be seen in many pieces of scripture, but its essence is found in the 14th chapter of John where Jesus is telling that the peace that he brings is not like the peace of this world. It also tells of how Jesus has been sent to ensure that we'll find our way to the "Father's House" in heaven. I've read this piece of scripture a few hundred times in my journey as a pastor. Like

the 23rd Psalm it brings a comforting “Peaceful Presence” to those who hear its words and are remembering and celebrating their loved one.

The definition of Peace is a state of tranquility or quiet; security or order within a community; harmony in personal relations; freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts or emotions.

If we take this definition and look at it from a worldly point of view plain and simply put, we will Never Know Peace or there’s No Peace for us. There’s always something to do, something that needs our attention, somewhere to be, etc. Or if we are alone for a moment, we are overwhelmed with thoughts of what needs to be done, what could go wrong, etc. It is a double-edged sword, and we can often feel ourselves exasperated and ready to just give up.

Many years ago, I remember being a parent of two very active young adults, with an amazing wife who has a very demanding career as a Nurse Practitioner and trying to juggle both family and career responsibilities, I can attest to feeling very much overwhelmed from time to time. With the kids constantly going in different directions and our need to give them more freedom and responsibility there’s still that desire as they head out the door to want to wrap them from head to toe in bubble wrap to ensure their safety. Or running from home to school to office to hospital or home visits to grocery and everywhere else wondering what I’m going to make for dinner, who has practice when, am I ready for that meeting and everything else that floods my mind. Then there are those moments of quiet reflection where I question my existence and whether what I’m doing really makes any difference and quickly negate everything that I’ve done, am doing or trying to do because it’s not that important.

Regardless of what point in life we’re at we all live at the corner of No Peace and Know Peace. It is a struggle, and it is at the heart of every situation, relationship and happening in our lives. We live at a hectic breakneck pace trying to accomplish all that we can while still having a “Peace-filled” existence. We look at other people thinking that they’ve got it all figured out when its reality we are all living on the same corner.

I'm sure that is why Jesus says to us "Hey my peace isn't of this world...it is OUT of this world!" It is coming to grips with the fact that the Presence of Peace is a sustaining gift for everyday but more importantly for Always. No matter where we are Jesus says that he will come and find us and bring us to God. In this world and the next we are not alone. God's gift of the Presence of Peace for you and me in this world is that even when we don't see it in the moment...Emanuel...God IS With Us!

This Christmas season as we near in great anticipation of celebrating the birth of Jesus...breathe deeply, pause and see the gift of God in your life. Embrace the Presence of Peace and let it envelop you.

PRAY

Day 9: (Psalm 23)

What is the first thing that comes to mind after reading this scripture?

When have you felt the closest to God?

What Peace do you want to be surrounded by this Christmas season?

PRAY

Day 10: (Isaiah 9:1-7)

Where do you still wish to walk out of the darkness and into the light to know God's peace?

Setting aside the royal titles how does the birth of Jesus bring you Peace?

Who do you need to share God's Peace with so their chains might be broken?

PRAY

Day 11: (Luke 2:1-14)

If angels suddenly appeared, would you "Feel Peaceful"? What would be your Reaction?

What does this "Good News" mean to you?

How do you share this News/Peace during Christmas?

PRAY

Day 12: (John 14:23-29)

When have you felt the Peace of the Holy Spirit surrounding you?

What is "peace of the world"?

What does Christ's "Gift of Peace" mean to you?

PRAY

Day 13: (Philippians 4:4-9)

The season of Christmas is extremely busy, how do you “Rejoice”/celebrate with Family and Friends?

When have you experienced God’s Peace beyond your human understanding?

What Peace are you still praying for this Christmas?

PRAY

Day 14: (Makeup Day)

PRAY

Day 15: “The Presence of Joy”

It is a little less than two weeks until Christmas is officially here, how are you doing? It really isn’t a loaded question. It is one that must be dealt with each year, and each year our answer can be drastically different. It has to do with our “Joy”. The definition of Joy is a feeling of happiness caused by well-being, success or good fortune by the process of possessing what one desires.

Well, we just went from a loaded question to a loaded definition. Possessing what one desires, if that isn’t loaded, I don’t know what is. This is one of the greatest struggles of our world, it has been since the beginning of time and probably will be long after each of us is gone. It is a real problem because the world’s definition of “possessing” is really “possession” as it is in and through our possessions that we find joy.

That’s what makes the Christmas season so difficult for us. We try to equate the Presence of Joy into the Joy of presents. There’s this ultimate

fantasy that the perfect present (possession) will bring joy. Christmas isn't about presents so much as it is "Presence". But nevertheless, we make a list of names, we try and figure out what we can give to that person to bring them joy.

It's at this point, right here, the countdown to Christmas that I admit to start feeling the pinch. That twinge of presents vs. Presence, joy vs. Joy, wanting to share with each person in my life something that will touch their heart, to show them a reflection of the value that I place on a relationship with them. In mind I try and process this into an equation that goes something like this: value of relationship + touching their heart x reflection of gift = \$\$\$. Well, at least something like that. All I know is that at this point I feel frustrated, overwhelmed, defeated and dejected. It makes me want to go take down all the decorations, buy a Grinch outfit and boycott Christmas altogether.

But I can't, I love Christmas too much. It was a gift inherited from my family. This simplistic but all too amazing realization that God loves us so much that Jesus is sent so that we'll never be alone again. Emanuel: God IS with us! The real and true gift of the season, the Presence of Joy! We hear it loud and clear in Mary's voice in Luke 1:46-47, "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Now that is Presence. That is the gift of the season that we're to wrap our arms around, never let go of and share with everyone in our lives and for the rest of our lives.

As children we wait in great anticipation for Christmas morning to open presents hoping that we've gotten everything from our list. Even as we age, we're still to have that great anticipation of Christmas but our gift is in remembering and rejoicing in the Presence of Joy that we've received from God in and through Jesus Christ. It is a gift that never goes out of style, never fades, never breaks, and in embracing it will always surround and sustain us.

While there is still much to do before Christmas day and all the celebrations with family and friends that are still to come, never forget that this Presence of Joy is always with us. Take some time right now to stop and give thanks for the Presence of Joy that fills your life. Think about how you can celebrate the gift each day and with whom you can share it. May the Spirit

of Christmas and gift that is brought overwhelm you with the Presence of Joy now and always. Blessings, Todd.

PRAY

Day 16: (Psalm 30)

What have been some of the lowest points of your life?

How did/has God brought joy to those places?

What are the most Joyful things in your life right now?

PRAY

Day 17: (Isaiah 55:6-13)

Where do you need to “Call on God” for help, healing and joy?

Where/How has God brought Joy to your life?

What does it mean for you to “Live in Joy and Peace”?

PRAY

Day 18: (Matthew 13:11-23)

When has your “Heart been Hardened” which in turn kept you from God’s Joy?

Where have you seen/heard/experienced Great Joy?
What do you need to let go of so that you can Fully Embrace God's Joy?

PRAY

Day 19: (Luke 1:39-56)
What's the greatest Joy you've experienced as a child?

When have been blessed/experience joy because you trusted God?

How could you share God's joy with someone else this Christmas season?

PRAY

Day 20: (James 1:2-18)
When has your faith been tested, and your endurance has grown from it?

What do you still need to ask God so that you "Know Joy"?

What are Good and Perfect Gifts?

PRAY

Day 21: (Makeup Day)
PRAY

Day 22: “The Presence of Love”

There are only a few days left until Christmas is officially here. Most of us have our lists nearly done and we’re making those last-minute preparations for celebrations. We’re each anxiously wanting to make the transition from craziness to coasting, trying to soak up all the moments with those that we love.

The definition of love is a strong affection for another that is born out of kinship and personal ties; unselfish and benevolent concern for the good, well-being of another. My personal definition of “Love” comes from the 13th chapter of Corinthians...Love is patient, love is kind, it doesn’t boast, it isn’t rude. It keeps no record of wrongs, it rejoices in the truth, love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, love never ends. That is the Presence of Love, an unconditional welcoming, celebrating, commitment that knows no boundaries.

That is the kind of love that God had/has for us and why the thought of being without us for eternity was not only troubling but heart breaking. In the gospel of John, we find two scriptures that outline the need of Jesus, the Living God, the Presence of Love.

John 3:16-17 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” The Presence of Love comes to us in the promise of God’s desire to redeem and restore us and the whole world.

John 10:9-11 “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life

for the sheep.” The Presence of Love comes to us in the promise of Jesus laying his life down for us AND the Presence of Love comes to us when we not only receive this gift but share it with the whole world; it’s not our gift to keep. Just as you have freely received, freely give.

As you gather with family and friends to celebrate, give thanks for the many treasures that are found in Christ our Lord. And may the eternal gifts that God promises to us be with you this Christmas and always. Blessings,
Todd.

PRAY

Day 23: (1st Corinthians 13)

What are the Greatest gifts of Love You’ve experienced so far on your journey?

Who do you still need to share Love with?

Love has so many attributes, means so many things AND it Never Ends...what does that mean for you?

PRAY

Days 24 & 25: Breathe, make the last-minute arrangements for family gatherings, etc. Catch-up in the journal and/or read back over if you have time. Remember this is supposed to be an enjoyable experience.

What are some last-minute ways that you can share the Presence of Christmas with someone else?

PRAY

Day 26: Christmas Eve “The Presence of Christ”

Over the past few weeks, we have been searching for the Gifts of Presence that come to us during the Christmas season and that are with us all year round. We have looked at the gifts of Hope, Joy, Peace, and Love. Today as we pack away this sermon series, I want to encourage you not to put away Christ as we tear down our decorations. It is a gift to treasure each day of our lives, the most important gift of all.

Hebrews 2:10-11

“God is the One who made all things, and all things are for his glory. He wanted to have many children share his glory, so he made the One who leads people to salvation perfect through suffering. Jesus, who makes people holy, and those who are made holy are from the same family. So, he is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.”

How many of you have spent family time together in the last few weeks with your extended family. I love my family, both sides are filled with wonderful folks who are each a special creation of God. But, at the same time sometimes I stop and ask myself...what in the world are they thinking? What in the world are they doing? Their lives would be so much easier if they would just stop all that nonsense and just do what's right! But I digress. I'm sure none of you in any way feel this way towards your brothers or sisters, or any other extended family...right?

Illustration: Now there was a four-year-old daughter with a busy father who had acquired a fascination for the story “The Three Little Pigs” and demanded that he read it to her night after night. The father decided to tape record it so that the little girl could listen to it anytime she wanted. This worked for a few days, but one evening the little girl pushed the storybook to her father. “Now honey, you know how to turn the recorder on by yourself.” “Yes, but I can't sit on its lap!”

Nothing can substitute for love. If we look back through the scriptures at the Judges and the stories of the people, and how they lived their lives what do we see happening? Things would be going well for a while, and then they would screw it up. Things would go OK for a little while and then,

they would screw it up again. And so on, and so on. We have the reversal of the child sitting on the parents' lap. God wants so much for us to climb up on his lap and to be with him.

Hebrews 2:13-14

“Jesus says, ‘I will trust in God.’ And he also says, ‘I am here, and with me are the children God has given me.’ Since these children are people with physical bodies, Jesus himself became like them. He did this so that, by dying, he could destroy the one who has the power of death.”

Most of us have heard, read or seen John 3:16 and are familiar with it: “For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” But we can't forget verse 17 which says, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.”

God didn't want to wait until it was too late for us. In sending Jesus, he gives to us a Savior, a brother, someone who we can look to and cling to. We are not alone, and we can trust in God who yearns for a relationship with us.

The Presence of Christ comes to Us in the Gift of Jesus becoming like us and overcoming death for us.

Hebrews 2:17-18

“For this reason, Jesus had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way so he could be their merciful and faithful high priest in service to God. Then Jesus could bring forgiveness for their sins. And now he can help those who are tempted, because he himself suffered and was tempted.”

Illustration: It was January of 1997 and I had been diagnosed with Graves' Disease. It was decided that I should have a procedure. So, I was thrown up on an examination table, they put 2 lead vests on me, and I swallowed some of the nastiest tasting stuff there ever was. I still remember the nurse saying, now take it slow and don't get sick or you'll have to start all over. Mariah wasn't even 3 months old at the time and the hardest part was for four days I was not allowed to hold or touch her in any way. If she cried, I

could only watch. If she needed food, diaper change whatever the need was I couldn't do anything to help her except watch her cry and struggle.

Now I can't even begin to fathom what God feels or thinks. But if you ask me if I think that God cries for us, I will tell you without a doubt "Yes". The shortest verse in the bible is that "Jesus wept" for his friend Lazarus. God sent Christ because his heart ached in seeing his children alone, hurting and in need of hope and help. In Christ, God knows all our struggles, all our pain, all of our temptations, everything that we go through. The Presence of Christ comes to Us in the Gift of Jesus leading us back to a right relationship with God.

And in this gift, we are welcomed and made whole in God's eyes. As we give thanks for the gift of Christmas, let's not make the mistake of putting it away with the other stuff. For the real gift of Christmas, is the gift of life. The gift of help for life today and the gift of hope for life eternal. And for these gifts of God's presence to us we should give thanks now and always. Amen.

PRAY

Day 27: Dec 25th Merry Christmas

Give thanks and be surrounded by the Love, Hope, Joy and Peace that come to us through the gift of Jesus Christ!

Congratulations on finishing "The Presence of Christmas" journal. You've just completed a journey which hopefully has strengthened your life as well as challenged you some for the future. It wasn't an easy journey for sure, but nothing worth doing is. So where do you go from here? My hope is that you'll spend a few days reflecting over your answers and praying a little bit more about where you've felt God nudging and calling you during this time. Remember that no challenge is too big for you to accomplish, you just need to take each one step at a time.

Also keep in mind that you can use this journal again in the future. It's set up to be used on more than one occasion. May you always know how much God loves you, that you are one of a kind and that God has gifted you to make great contributions to touch the lives of many and help change the world, one life at a time. Blessings, Todd

For three decades, Todd has worked with non-profit organizations and institutions redesigning and building programs, fundraising, and developing leaders. Along with a BA in Sociology and a Master of Divinity degree, Todd also has Certification



from the Tentmakers Nehemiah Leadership Institute, an Executive Certificate in Religious Fundraising from the Lilly School of Philanthropy and a Certificate in Spirituality, Health and Healing.

Todd's greatest joy comes with spending time with people as they navigate the mountains and valleys that life brings; and working with groups reassessing the vision and mission of their institution so that they can create a plan to get to where they want to be. You'll find in-depth but very affordable individual resources, stewardship and capital campaign programs for your organization. Check out the unique consulting offerings on Leadership Development and Personal Development coaching, Todd would love to work with you.

Learn more at intermountaincc.org.