

December 15-19, 2025 Edition

The Year_(s) *Following* Of Jesus Part 206

Finding Hope and Joy in Christmas

By: Aniela Humphries

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that. If they help you, great. If not, sorry.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

**** Also you can also get these devotionals on Riverside's website (EagleRiverside.com) by going to the resource section and choosing "Reflections Download".

**** Also Jesus is awesome.

Monday Reflection:

Christmas is only 10 days away. What are you hoping for this Christmas? Let's talk about hope for a sec, shall we? Hope is looking forward to something you don't have yet. For the Jewish people, it was a long time of hoping. Hoping for a savior - a Messiah to come and save them from oppression. That hope included a 400-year stint between the Old Testament and Jesus' arrival. A time with no prophecy or word from God. It would be easy to fall into hopelessness. But they continued to hope. The kind of hope that might fall under the category of "cautiously optimistic." While God may have been quiet during those years, the Jewish people had His words to carry them through. The Old Testament - which was all the Israelites had to work with at that point - had over 300 Messianic prophesies. Here's one of many from Isaiah:

"On that day they will say, "See! This is our God! We waited for him to save us. This is Adonai; we put our hope in him. We are full of joy, so glad he saved us!""
Isaiah 25:9 CJB

Hope and joy in one person. That's the focus of our devotionals this week. A long wait - and a big return.

Father, as we count down the days to Christmas, help us to carry the weight of the wait. Help us to long for Jesus with hope and joy. Amen.

Tuesday Reflection:

Yesterday, we talked about the long wait - the long period of hope for the Messiah. Today, let's talk about what to do in the wait - in the hoping. One way to carry through in a time when we're waiting for and dreaming of something better is to appreciate what we have now. A sense of contentment and peace. We get that through a practice of gratitude. And no need to wait - we're going to practice that together right now.

Without moving from the spot where you currently are, look around and find three things you can be grateful for. Need some inspiration? Okay, I'll start. A warm cup of coffee. A fuzzy blanket in my lap. And a puffy vest. (It's really cold as I write this, hence all the gratitude around things that keep me warm.) Okay, your turn.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

That's a great start! Can you commit to finding something to be grateful for every day? It's what draws us closer to Jesus.

“Whatever happens, always be thankful. This is how God wants you to live in Christ Jesus.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 ERV

Jesus, we want to be more like You. We want to be closer to You. Help us to see all the blessings You surround us with. Amen.

Still having trouble? That's okay. Life's like that sometimes. Tomorrow, we'll dig into what happens when it's hard. Meanwhile, enjoy this music video. Perhaps it will spark some ideas of gratitude.

https://youtu.be/mBZGzze_D1M?si=gNZFepXcgUYKCSc4

Wednesday Reflection:

We've discussed hope and gratitude so far this week. But what happens if you can't find either? When you're in a place of hopelessness. When you've given up trying to look forward to things being better. When you've prayed, when you've cried, when you've tried - and nothing seems to change. For some, the timing of Christmas can feel like a slap in the face, a kick while you're already down. People around you seem happy and blessed, and you feel down and depressed. It can feel utterly hopeless. I get that. And so does God. While you can flip through the Bible and find hundreds of scriptures about finding hope and joy in God, you can also find stories of despair and hopelessness. Times when people cry out and ask if God is even listening. And, weird as it may seem, that's the kind of thing that brings me hope. It helps to know I'm not alone in my suffering. Major figures in the Bible - the people who seem like they have it all together - were down on their knees, crying out and asking God if it would ever get better.

In Proverbs, the writer talks about how hard it is to feel hopeless:

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but desire fulfilled is a tree of life.”

Proverbs 13:12 CJB

So, what do you do when you're living the first half of that verse? When hope is deferred? When your heart is sick? You be honest. With yourself - not trying to pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. With others, when they ask how you are. If you need help. You tell them the truth. And with God, you give it to him straight. I'd argue that he knows how you're feeling, and trying to lie to the creator of the universe probably won't get you very far.

I saw this graphic about grieving during the holidays. It offers a list of don'ts. A way to provide some self-care. Grief comes in many forms. It's not just death. It's the loss of what you had hoped for. Lean into that support today. Imagine for a moment what could be if you allowed yourself a moment of being honest with God, with your friends, and with yourself. The path to healing starts with feeling.

A December don't list for grievers



don't miss quiet moments with Jesus



don't force traditions that hurt



don't avoid warm memories



don't isolate



don't lose sight of the hope of Christmas



don't try to do it all



don't apologize for tears



don't compare



don't be afraid to try something new

@LisaAppelo

Holy Spirit, I need You to fill me up. Sometimes, I feel consumed by despair and hopelessness. I need You to fill me with the love of Jesus. Help me be real about my feelings with those who are safe to confide in. Help me heal. Amen.

Thursday Reflection:

How are you holding up after yesterday's devotional? It can feel overwhelming to allow ourselves to be honest about what we're really feeling. One of the biggest struggles with hopelessness is the isolation. We pull away from those around us. And we just feel worse. Today, we're going to learn about doing the opposite. Today, we focus on community.

You may have heard Pastor Ed teach about how there's no such thing as a lone wolf Christian. We are pack animals. We need each other. We need to be seen by those around us - and we need to see those in our midst.

We find the hope and joy of Christmas by looking up.

"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage.

Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand."

Philippians 2:1-4 MSG

What would it look like for you to embrace community today? Want some ideas? Oh, I'm so glad you asked. Text a friend and ask how they are. Call a family member you haven't spoken to in a while and check in. Knock on your neighbors door and compliment their Christmas decorations. Give an over the top tip to the person who makes your coffee. Smile at the person you see at the grocery store. What did I miss? Maybe add your own idea here.

Father, thank You for surrounding us with community. Remind us that we have people we can count on. And that others can count on us, too. Help us to lift our eyes to those around us. And help us lift our eyes to You. Thank You. Amen.

Friday Reflection:

I've got joy joy joy joy down in my heart. WHERE? Down in my heart! You're welcome. That song is essentially the Christian version of being Rick-rolled.

Finding joy in Jesus often starts in the heart. This week, we've discussed searching for hope, being grateful, maintaining honesty in our suffering, and seeking community. Now, we set our hearts on Him. We embrace the joy of Jesus.

The verse below isn't about Christmas - but it could be.

“Then he said to them, “Go, eat rich food, drink sweet drinks, and send portions to those who can’t provide for themselves; for today is consecrated to our Lord. Don’t be sad, because the joy of Adonai is your strength.””

Nechemyah (Neh) 8:10 CJB

Instead of just taking this verse out of context, let me give you some background. The verse in Nehemiah is about how Ezra the priest had read the book of the law - the Torah - to the people. It was the first time they’d heard it since returning from exile in Babylon. And when they heard it, they wept. Maybe tears of joy. Maybe some tears of how far they’d gone off course. Either way, they were - and we are - reminded that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Where do we find joy? In Jesus. In six short days, we celebrate the. birth of our savior. We count down to Jesus walking among us. To joy bubbling in our hearts. There’s so much to embrace on Christmas Day. What is bringing you joy as you picture it?

Jesus, we’re looking forward to Your birth. To celebrating Your birthday and the start of You work here on earth. Remind us to turn our hearts toward You today and every day. In Your name we pray, Amen.