

## Reading Plan

December 7th-December 31st

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### FRIDAY, DECEMBER 7

Take a few moments to process what was talked about at MomLife yesterday... what was the one way to LOVE this SEASON that was discussed that you most want to implement this year.

Journal some thoughts about what you are processing at this point about how you can LOVE this holiday season this year.

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#### *With your Family:*

**Attend Grace's Family Movie Night tonight at 5:30pm** as we present the movie "The Star: The Story of the First Christmas". This movie will be a great springboard for family discussion around the reason we celebrate Christmas and will provide a fun family experience to kick off your holiday season!

You can find a short 5 day devotional based on the movie at  
<https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/9243-the-star-courage-at-the-first-christmas>

You can also find a Family Discussion Guide based on the movie at:  
[http://origin-flash.sonyictures.com/ist/thestar\\_resources/thestar\\_wellplannedguide.pdf](http://origin-flash.sonyictures.com/ist/thestar_resources/thestar_wellplannedguide.pdf)

### SATURDAY, DECEMBER 8

We are using December to review the verses that we have focused on memorizing so far this year. So spend some time this weekend reviewing these verses and processing them in light of how to incorporate them into the upcoming holidays.

*"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ."*

*Colossians 3:12-14 (ESV)*

### *Family Activity:*

Write out Colossians 3:12-14 as a family and post it in a visible place in your home. Have each family member write out a different section (or let them decorate the page for younger ones) Say the verses aloud together and ask, "What does it look like for us to "PUT ON LOVE" this Christmas as a family?"

Make a commitment to PUT ON LOVE as a family this Christmas. Pray over the coming weeks that your family can approach this season with a spirit of JOY, HOPE, PEACE & LOVE.

## **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9 - HAVE A HOLIDAY FAMILY MEETING**

*Holiday Family Meeting:* Set aside some time to gather around the table & set realistic expectations for the next few weeks. Be sure to have the calendar handy! Get everyone on the same page about holiday plans, gift giving strategies, calendars and expectations.

- Ask each child which of your current holiday traditions are their favorites (have them just pick 1 or 2). Go ahead and mark a date & time on the calendar to do those specific things. Be sure to consider if the tradition is still meaningful to your family & don't do it "just because you always have"
- Important Reminder: Keep as much open space as possible to enjoy quality time together as a family. Be intentional about NOT filling all the open spaces on the calendar! Make people priority over to-do lists.
- If the calendar already stresses you out, have an honest conversation on what things can be taken off the calendar this December to focus on enjoying the season.

## **WEEK ONE - HOPE & LOVE**

*(This week's content was adapted from the book "Loving My Actual Christmas" by Alexandra Kuykendall)*

### **HOPE - MONDAY, DECEMBER 10-WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12**

Read: Matthew 1, Luke 2:10-11, Psalm 96, I Peter 1:13

**HOPE.** It is a word of anticipation, of belief that something good is possible. It seems fitting to be in a place of hope as we enter this Christmas season imagining that good can happen. We know hope is not a guarantee; otherwise it would be a contract. However, hope believes that what we want can come true. It is a possibility.

This first week of Advent is centered on hope. In some churches, the first Sunday in Advent is expressed as expectation, a word that means "waiting with hope." Expectation reminds us of our hunger and anticipation of a Messiah, just as Mary and Joseph were anticipating in Matthew 1. When a new life is born, it is the embodiment of hope.

But there's a difference in these words expectation and hope. When I expect something, I'm nearly certain it will arrive. When I hope for something, I am less sure about it. My expectations around the season are tactical, what will happen, where and when. My hopes go deeper. Perhaps expectations are

how we want things to happen and hopes are the desired lasting effects for relationships, memories, and growth.

How does one experiment with hope? How does one try to believe in something desired? It must begin with honesty. What do I truly want? When it's time to pack up the decorations, what do I hope we will all remember? How do I hope my loved ones and I will feel? What legacy will this Christmas carry forward?

When we peel back the layers of what we think we are hoping for, we can discover what our heart truly desires—a relaxing season, a debt-free holiday, memories with those we love. Then we can make a plan and move forward.

As I enter this season, I realize that I won't be able to meet everyone's needs. That feels scary. The way things have gone down in the past left me pulled in a million directions, so I must face my heart and these conversations head-on. Here at the beginning of the season is the best time to have them, rather than arguing about unmet expectations while driving to church on Christmas Eve (hypothetically speaking, of course).

During these few days, do an inventory of what your hopes are for this Christmas and what those around you expect. Make a plan to prioritize the elements that are most important to all of your family.

A week of focusing on what you hope for and what you and others expect of this season can set up this year with an honesty that is refreshing. Having these conversations—with yourself, with others, and with God—might not change the circumstances, but acknowledging everyone's desires better prepares you for how to approach the holiday. Hopefully, this will allow us to love each other to the best of our abilities within our constraints. You can feel better prepared to face the season with a true sense of anticipation when you have right-sized expectations. You have freedom to look for where God is working right here in the midst of your *actual* Christmas.

*What would you like to remember about this Christmas season a year from now? Ten years from now?*

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### *With your kids and/or spouse*

Make a Holiday FUN Jar: Have each child write down on a slip of paper or a popsicle stick fun holiday ideas and put them in a jar. Be sure to include ways to serve others and activities that bring JOY to those outside of our home as well like baking cookies for a neighbor, making blessing bags for the homeless, volunteer a day at the animal shelter, donating pantry items to Manna Cafe. Let the kids decorate the jar, make it fun & simple. Over the next few weeks, pull an activity or two from the jar to accomplish together as a family.

Need some free or low cost ideas for holiday fun? Check out  
[www.andthenwesaved.com/christmas-activities/](http://www.andthenwesaved.com/christmas-activities/)

## LOVE - THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13 - SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15

*(This week's content was adapted from the book "Loving My Actual Christmas" by Alexandra Kuykendall)*

Read | John 4:8, John 3:16, Luke 1:26-56, Romans 8:38-39

**LOVE.** Reading Luke 1:26-56, we see Mary filled with such love as she is lifting up her praise in the midst of uncertainty and doubt. Yet sometimes we equate loving Christmas with experiencing the best Christmas ever. But as we've come off of the last few days dealing with the reality of hope and expectation, we recognize those thoughts of what it looks like to LOVE our actual Christmas and they don't always match up. We have to realize that loving our actual Christmas has to more to do with celebrating in the midst of possible grief, maybe a tighter budget, or perhaps circumstances we wouldn't hope for.

Love as a noun can be described as strong affection or liking, as something that elicits enthusiasm, as God's affection for humanity. If I view this season through the lens of love, I should have more affection and more enthusiasm. Although, I maybe won't get quite as much done on my to-do list-and that is okay.

We read in 1 John that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). He defines it. He holds it. And the most famous Bible verse of all, John 3:16: For God so loved the world . . . he sent a baby. When I held my babies for the first time, I knew I was experiencing the tangible miracle of new life. But this baby was different. He was God himself wrapped in the clothes of skin and bone.

And yet in the throes of the Christmas shopping, baking, and driving, my enthusiasm for Christmas gets tarnished. My "strong affection or liking" for this holiday begins to disappear. People I love are all around me and are driving me crazy. So I will take my cue for what love looks like from the other definitions my dictionary offers: To show affection to the people right in front of me. To experience God's love for me. To stay more focused on enjoying the season than getting the to-do list done.

I do not want to resent what I cannot have. I want to focus on how God has shown me love through the gifts he has already provided. I resolve to celebrate what I am grateful for, to celebrate the Person who is Christmas. My relationship with the baby in the manger is a love story that I can cling to. And when I do, I may just love all of the hoopla that surrounds this huge annual birthday party a little more too.

*Think back to what Melanie shared at MomLife about loving those who are hard to love this season...What if you got nothing done on your to-do list this week except for loving people? How would your stress level feel? How would your spirit feel?*

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*Who might need some practical actions of love this holiday season right around you? How could you show this person or people a love that indicates you notice them? How does the Christmas story remind us of how God's love meets our needs?*

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## **WEEK TWO - December 17-23 - PEACE & JOY**

*(This week's content was adapted from the book "Loving My Actual Christmas" by Alexandra Kuykendall)*

### **PEACE- MONDAY, DECEMBER 17 - WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19**

Read Isaiah 9:1-7, Psalm 29:11, Philippians 4:7

It's usually the week before Christmas when I give in and decide I'm in survival mode. I'm going to need to blow the budget, to not sleep, and to eat cookies for dinner because I have to power through. But I'm determined to end this kind of thinking- to right-size my expectations, live in the circumstances in front of me, and fully embrace peace.

Peace is a sense of calm, harmony, and a freedom from war. When I'm up until midnight on Christmas Eve frantically wrapping gifts, I must remember that a sense of calm, harmony, and freedom from war is my aim. I can't resign myself to be stressed and also live in peace. There will always be more bows to tie, more cleaning and cooking and decorating that could be done. If I don't add some intentionality here, the monster that is the Christmas to-do list will take over and I will buckle under its pressure.

Scheduling, taking care of my (and my family's) physical needs, and eliminating responsibilities that add to my stress are all practical ways I can add peace to this season. I must also remember to be grateful for the literal peace in my community and home and to be mindful of those around me who are searching for internal and external peace. Then I can ask, "How can I work to be more of a peacemaker in my immediate circle and the larger world?"

I come to the 25th with an intensified thirst for the Prince of Peace to reign in my life. But nothing settles this frenzied Christmas heart like remembering the story. The setting, the characters, the plot and its twists. When I do, my own Christmas story, the one I'm living out in real time, has a different purpose. The written word, music, sight and sound, color and texture all come together to make this tale more alive and real. It's when I'm placed in the middle of this scene that the world makes a little more sense. My soul recalibrates, and I'm able to face the current chaos that is my life, my heart, and my world—even as I know the Prince of Peace more deeply.

What adds to your stress the last week before Christmas?

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What's one thing you could do to replace that stress with a greater sense of peace?

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How can you find peace in the middle of the last-minute chaos?

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## **JOY - THURSDAY, DECEMBER 20 - SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22**

Read John 15:11, Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 2:10

When I hear the word joy this time of year, the song “Joy to the world, the Lord has come” starts to play in my head. This familiar Christmas carol is the one where the horns come out. Where you almost shout the words because it is a proclamation that something has just happened. But are we approaching this season like a celebration full of laughter?

Perhaps the stress of our schedule, or the circumstances of what this Christmas looks like in comparison to our expectations, is getting in our way. But joy is found in a deeper place than happiness. So how does one add joy to a season that may feel painful?

I know I can't force feelings to come on their own, but I can do my part to create an environment that works toward them. I can do my best to set the table figuratively for joy, and literally for people to gather and celebrate. To “enjoy” is to be in joy. This does not mean avoiding my actual life, the grief, or the stress, but acknowledging my circumstances and actively choosing to invite joy in. This is not so much a feeling as it is a posture of celebrating the good that is in my actual circumstances and remembering my story is one of redemption.

In the book of John, Jesus tells his disciples to remain in his love and to love one another. Sandwiched between those two commands he says, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11). It turns out joy is centered in accepting God's love and then turning around and loving others. In this context of giving and receiving love, joy is grown.

Jesus continues, “Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy” (John 16:20). If ever there was a message of hope for the lonely and the brokenhearted this Christmas, it's this. While the rest of the world seems to be throwing a party that we can't embrace or get behind because of the hurt of our life, Jesus promises it won't always be so. It's this intentionality of naming our expectations combined with the intentionality of abiding in God's love and loving those around me that produces a sense of deep-seated pleasure—joy. I may not automatically feel it, but knowing the promise that joy is on the way is the first step. *Joy is more than*

*the fleeting “happy” that I’m constantly trying to re-create; it is the satisfying knowledge of the unchanging, life-altering story of Christmas.*

What are the pains or hurts you carry this Christmas season?

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How do you think the Christmas story points to a larger story of joy for the world? For your life?

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What is a part of the Christmas story brings you joy?

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*With your kids and/or spouse*

Make plans to attend one of Grace’s THREE Christmas Eve services, they will be at 2:00, 3:30 and 5:00pm. This will be a family service with lots of songs, candlelight and a shorter message.

## **WEEK THREE - December 24-31 - BE PRESENT & SOAK IT IN**

(This week’s content was adapted from the book “Loving My Actual Christmas” by Alexandra Kuykendall)

### **BE PRESENT with YOUR PEOPLE**

Read Matthew 2, Luke 2:22-52, Romans 15:13

#### **Christmastide: Carrying Christmas with Us**

Did you know that the church calendar has an extended Christmas season built into it? We call this stretch of days Christmastide. This period begins on Christmas morning and goes for twelve days, ending on January 6 with Epiphany and the arrival of the magi to the Baby Jesus.

Not coming from a highly liturgical background, I have never recognized these days as part of Christmas. But what if I used these twelve days for the intended purpose of Christmastide? What if I let my heart dwell on this miracle that started this season in the first place?

My hope is to use this stretch of days to recenter my heart- a spiritual renewal time of quiet in my schedule that can prepare me for the next twelve months.

I don't want to let these days disappear like they have in years past. I want to add some intentionality, to actively participate in this Christmastide—be a relisher, rather than a passive bystander. I declare that Christmas is this entire season, and since I'm in charge of my family's schedule, I have some control over how we spend it.

We will have downtime. We won't rush. We will keep the Christmas decorations up. We will feast, since many liturgical traditions refer to this time as a "feast" anyway. It's a celebration. So we will eat and revel. We will let the themes we just left behind of hope, love, joy, and peace be our mantra for this time.

As I step out of Christmas and into the rest of the year, I remember that Christmas is not the beginning of the story—God existed before Jesus was born—but it is a crucial part. God entered his own creation in a humble, powerful move. He stepped onto earth in the way all of us have, that he might love us in the way no one else could.

I want us to dwell on this story. Soak it in. Remember that this is a message for our entire year, January through December. Remember our faith that hinges on the cross first needed a baby in the flesh. What a hopeful, joyful, peaceful, love-filled season indeed!

What is usually your predominant feeling when Christmas Day is over?

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What can you do to wrap up Christmas well from a practical standpoint?

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How can you carry Christmas with you into the rest of the year and use this downtime to focus on entering a new year?

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*With your kids and/or spouse:* Use this downtime to have some in-depth conversations about wins from 2018 & goals for 2019 for your family. I've found this Dream Guide to be a helpful resource: [www.jennieallen.com/2018-dream-guide](http://www.jennieallen.com/2018-dream-guide)