



GOD *with* US

Week 4: Daily Advent Devotionals

THE *Vine* ^{ATX}

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Day 22

GOD *with* US

WHEN WE FEEL MISUNDERSTOOD.

Being misunderstood is one of the hardest things about being human. It's such a unique feeling: that pain and frustration and helplessness as you try different words over and over again; that isolating loneliness of realizing you are not seen rightly. It is a pain we are destined to feel in this life.

You can't be understood by explaining better. You can't understand someone else by listening harder. You can only understand them if you understand them. In order to feel understood we need a few things. We have to (1) know ourselves, (2) communicate ourselves, and (3) be heard by someone who can relate.

All of us ache for full and perfect understanding — not just someone who is able to re-articulate the things we are saying and grasp our meaning, but someone who is able to identify with the things we are saying.

In quiet places that we may not even acknowledge, we begin to wonder, can God who designed us not know how desperately we need this? Why does He ask us to go without? Does He not see? Does He not care?

Just because God says you may not be understood in this world doesn't mean He doesn't care about you being understood in this world. Enter stage right: Advent.

READ | MARK 9:30-39

- Who is Jesus talking to in this passage who doesn't understand?
- Why didn't they hearers ask for clarity?
- How do they react when Jesus asks them what they were talking about? Why do you think that is?
- In what ways was Jesus misunderstood in this passage?

REFLECT

- What are some relationships in your life where you have felt misunderstood?
- What are some qualities or personality traits you have that have been misunderstood in your life?
- Tell Jesus what this has felt like.

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Jesus was misunderstood by his parents, his friends, his followers, and His leaders. Don't just think about what that might have felt like, ask him to tell you:

- Sit with Jesus and ask him to tell you about all the different people in his life who misunderstood him. If you want to hear more stories, explore John 8:21-27 | Mark 8:14-21 | Luke 2:48-50 | Luke 18:31-34.
- Ask him how it felt to be tempted to try to explain more clearly or differently so he could be understood.
- Ask him to show you one or two ways you might be misunderstanding him.

God has been in a divine conspiracy since eternity past not just to understand us, but for us to feel understood. We were understood before we existed. But we needed more. It takes Advent for us to experience being understood.

Our Father foreknew us, he shaped all our days. God knows what we feel and think. The Spirit searches our hearts and reveals what is in them and communicates what we feel and think. But we needed Emmanuel to come and share in the human experience so God could relate to what we feel and think.

Jesus who never needed to be misunderstood, who could illuminate every mind to the truth, let himself be misunderstood so that when we utter the words "I feel misunderstood," he would know exactly what that feels like.

Day 23

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WHEN WE CRAVE UNITY.

The word “unity” may sound lame and churchy to you. Too often we talk about it as a lack of disagreement or absence of gossip. But to want true unity is a desperate, wild feeling. It’s that gripping and grasping you feel when you’re looking at someone you love and feeling the fracture, the space growing between you. It’s that panic you feel in the face of death and loss and transition that makes you feel like half your soul has been ripped away. That is the ache for unity.

It is the ache for oneness that bridges time and space, that covers the damage of your mistakes, that overwhelms our rejections and preferences, and that cannibalizes even the separation of death.

The craving for unity is a craving to have nothing between us. Not just us and God but us and one another. No failure and no mistakes. No pain and no hurt. No space or distance. No death or disease. Nothing that robs us of access to one another.

This is the pain of being human in this broken world: experiencing the slow or sudden widening of the space between you and the people that you can feel deep in your soul that you were supposed to be one with. This is the pain of fractured unity.

READ | JOHN 17:11-23

- What degree does God want us to be one? What comparisons does he make (look for “even as” or “just as”)?
- Considering this passage, how important is this oneness to Jesus and to what degree does he want us to have it?

REFLECT

- Think through your relationships:
- Which relationships have space in them that is caused by brokenness or circumstance or death?
- Which relationships are not necessarily fractured, but you still crave more oneness and closeness than you currently have?
- In which relationships do you find yourself pushing away, not wanting oneness?
- Tell Jesus about each of these relationships.

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Shortly after Jesus prayed the words we read today, he would experience separation from his Father for the very first time in eternity.

- Ask Jesus about that day.
- Sit with him today and listen as he tells you of his life — a life with the kind of separation in it that you will never have to face.

Think back to that person you ache for unity with, and listen to Jesus as he tells you, “There is coming a day when there will be perfect unity. There is coming a day when I will set all things right, and there will be nothing - no confusion, misunderstanding or brokenness - between people.”

Lord, Let your kingdom come and let your will for unity be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

Day 24

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WHEN WE FEEL LIKE A MEANS TO AN END.

We come into the world as the central character. Caregivers gather around and for one shining moment, all of the attention in the universe feels focused on us.

As we grow, we learn that everything doesn't revolve around us. We go to church and hear about a God whose glory is center stage.

We hear that God has a purpose in our pain: God will use our tragedy to help someone else. These often well-intentioned words can land like lashes: is our pain a tool? Are we a means to an end? A teaching tool or prop for God to use?

How could God understand this fear? God, whose purposes never fail – God who actually IS the center of the universe?

READ | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:18-21

- Make a list of any outcomes and then the way those outcomes have been brought about.
- According to this passage, why did God make Jesus “to be sin”? Who did he do that for?
- Summarize these verses in your own words.

REFLECT

Take a few minutes to think through:

- What resistance do you notice to the idea that God sees you specifically and is working all things for YOUR good?
- What experiences make that hard to believe?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Now listen as Jesus tells you what it felt like for him on earth.

- Ask him what it felt like to table his own dreams and hopes, knowing that the Father had given him a mission that meant singleness, homelessness, and early death — all on your behalf.
- Ask Jesus if he was tempted to feel like a tool, a means to an end.

Keep in mind, Jesus was fully secure in His place with the Father, and yet, that didn't keep Him from the human experience of being tempted to feel like a means to an end. Because He was tempted in this way He is able to sympathize with your weakness.

And, while He understands why you feel like a means to an end, He also wants to tell you that you are not. God's promises are always true, and they are for you. You are never a casualty or a tool in God's purposes.

Spend some time practicing wrapping that truth around you like a blanket as you listen to Jesus: God's promises are always true, and they are for you. You are never a casualty or a means to an end.

Look at the evidence of that reality displayed in this Christmas story. Jesus subjected himself to human suffering for the purpose of being able to comfort you. Jesus takes every twist, every turn, every pain, every stoplight, and every cloudy sky and puts them beneath the feet of the plans he has for you.

Day 25

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WHEN YOU FEEL ASHAMED.

There are two kinds of feelings that often get tangled.

One is the sense of responsibility and regret we feel when we've made a bad choice. It isn't about a fear of how others perceive us or fear of consequences or a desire to atone; it is just a sensation that gives us the information — you've done a thing that isn't in line with who you are.

It pushes us to take the healthy action of turning to God to be encouraged about who we truly are and leads us to avoid doing the same actions again.

The other is a sense of shame that lingers long after our behavior stops, infecting our relationships, and sinking into our souls. It whispers to us that we are worthless, somehow broken irrevocably.

READ | 1 PETER 2:24 | ROMANS 8:3 | GALATIANS 3:13 |
ISAIAH 53:11-12 | 2 COR 5:21 | HEBREWS 9:28 & 12:1-2

- Write down every reference to something Jesus bore or took.
- Write down every reference to Jesus becoming something or being made into something.
- In Hebrews 12:2, what are the two obstacles that Jesus had to endure for the joy set before him?

REFLECT

- How do these two feelings present in your life?
- What is a moment you have felt regret over a choice you've made, and how was that distinct (or was it) from the sensation of shame?
- How do these two things feel different (or how do you think they ought to feel different)? How are they triggered differently (or how do you think they ought to be triggered differently)?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

How can God understand either feeling? How could Jesus who is like us in every area except one – who has never err'd in thinking or feeling or acting – know how it feels to regret your choice? How could Jesus – who knows his worth fully – know the sensation of shame?

The incredible truth is, Jesus doesn't just know how it feels to make bad choices, he knows how your exact bad choices feel.

- Hear Jesus say — it is finished. Those choices are as far as the east is from the west. They are not yours to bear any longer.
- Hear him sing over you the truth your conviction indicates — these things are not who you are. Hear Jesus as he reminds you, even as you make mistakes again and again – if you are doing what you do not want, it isn't who you are.

Ask Jesus to affirm your identity - he believes who you are - and listen as he speaks over you the first truth that was ever told to creation: you are good.

Day 26

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WHEN IT FEELS WORTH IT.

You know the moments: the kids look at you just the right way, the project that you've been working on comes together perfectly, you and a companion hug after a terrible fight – and for a second, just for a second, the sun seems to burst through the clouds and everything seems worth it.

Not that we would weigh our pain against our joy, or take the same toil or suffering again – but that we can feel a kind of satisfaction that can only be born on the other side. And it is so sweet, so whole, so powerful that it can keep us going on the hardest of days.

READ | ISAIAH 53:11, in as many versions as you can find

- What stood out to you from the different translations?
- Which do you prefer and why?

REFLECT

- What are a few moments that you can remember feeling the sensation of “it’s all been worth it”?
- What did that sensation feel like in your body and soul?
- What came before that sensation? What was the labor or work or pain that produced the sense of satisfaction?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

God shares so many feelings with us – we are, after all image-bearers. God has felt joy and love and delight forever. But it took Emmanuel – God becoming one of us – for God to understand the kind of satisfaction that is born out of toil and obstacles and that finds us on the other side of healing.

- Ask Jesus why he endured the cross (and if it helps, read Hebrews 12:2)
- Ask Jesus to tell you about the joy and the satisfaction that is described in Hebrews and Isaiah.
- Imagine Jesus telling you about some of his hardest and most painful moments in the last day of his life. Imagine him telling you about the experience of looking out, looking forward to this conversation with you right now – and the thought of that keeping him going.
- Let his joy and satisfaction wash over you. This is his “it’s all worth it” moment. This conversation. This moment. With you.

Day 27

GOD *with* US

IN FAILURE.

Ah, the holidays. There's nothing like some good quality time with family and distant relations, and the wrapping up of a year in a family newsletter to make you feel like a failure. It's the reason some of us hate end-of-the-year goal-setting after a rough year: we don't want to face the sense that our time, our year, and our life hasn't been fruitful.

Be fruitful. He spoke it into us before any of this went wrong and we've been constantly striving after it ever since.

Unfortunately, we no longer have the Father walking with us in the cool of the day to guide us when we get confused about what fruitfulness truly is. Now, instead, we strive for whatever our present society has labeled 'success.'

But I'll tell you a thing you already know. As you go home this holiday season, as you reflect on the past year — you are not alone if you find places where you failed to succeed in the ways culture says you're supposed to. There is a God who is with you who has faced cultural failure on every level. And yet, He was the most fruitful human ever to live.

CONSIDER

Jesus' personal life success
(feel free to ask Google!):

- How many children did Jesus have?
- At what age was he married?

Jesus' professional success:

- What was Jesus' job? (Mark 6:3)
- Did he have a solid steady income? (Matthew 10:8-9)
- Did he have a nice house? (Luke 9:58)
- What did the disciples expect Jesus to do? (Acts 1:6)

Jesus' ministry success:

- How did the religious leaders view Jesus; how successful was he in the church? (Matthew 12:1-14)
- How 'successful' was his discipleship? (Mark 14:27 | Psalm 88:8 | Psalm 88:18 | John 16:32)

REFLECT

In a culture where bearing children and having a family wasn't just the "norm" – it was a way to fulfill God's commands – Jesus failed. In a culture where the people of God had waited and cried out for a political leader who would set things right, Jesus failed. In a culture where respect from religious leaders was essential and keeping the letter of the law was critical, Jesus failed.

- How do the cultures you're a part of measure success? Think about your church, your family, your friends, and your workplaces.

If we're honest, Jesus might not be considered successful in our culture either. A single guy? No steady job? Never entered into the political system? Hangs out with prostitutes (not just ex-prostitutes)? Only 12 guys show up in his small group and one of them betrays him while the others fail to do the right thing when it matters. Not only did Jesus' 'church' not multiply in His lifetime, it scattered to the wind.

- In what ways are you feeling successful in your cultural spaces? Try to put your finger on what makes you feel successful and consider how Jesus measured up to that standard of success.
- In what ways are you feeling unsuccessful or fruitless in your cultural spaces? Try to put your finger on what bar you have failed to clear, and consider how Jesus measured up to that bar of success.
- Tell Jesus about what you are processing.

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

- Let Jesus tell you about how he was tempted to feel like a failure in his life. Ask him about his singleness, his small group of disciples and their inability to stand up when the pressure came.
- Ask Jesus to show you ways that you too may think of him as a failure because he doesn't behave as you think he should.
- Now, ask him what he wants from you and for you. What does Jesus call success?

Jesus isn't just with us in our seeming failure; He also teaches us that maybe we're wrong about what indicates success. He saved the world, He won the cosmic war, but that "fruit" just didn't show up in His lifetime. It was eternal and epic, waiting in the resurrection.

Whatever corners of discouragement you are facing, know this: not only does Jesus know how it feels, he is the proof that if we look with human eyes we may miss the magnificent success of God's work in our lives. He is proof that if we trust him with the fruitfulness we are free to find our success in the glory of faithfulness.

Day 28

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WHEN GOD SAYS NO

When humans are around two years old they develop a will. Having a will is what sets us apart from other creatures. It enables us to have preferences and desires, gives us the right to human agency, and the ability to make choices for our lives.

It is a strange part of the human experience when we are forced to experience the boundaries of our agency, to navigate the borders of our dominion. At first, it is in small ways. We learn we can't force our parents to give us candy for dinner. But as we grow it becomes more painful. We learn that we cannot keep our bodies from decaying, cannot keep the people we love alive, and cannot keep our children safe.

READ | LUKE 22:39-44

- Jesus uses if/then structure when praying; write out those conditional clauses.
- Write down every time you see someone's will mentioned. Whose will is it?

As our sweet Jesus faithfully puts God's will above his own he reveals that his and God's wills were distinct in this moment. Jesus wanted another way.

REFLECT

- Take a few minutes to think through:
- What are the things you want? What are your dreams for your life? What do you want from and for your relationships? What do you want from and for yourself? What brokenness do you want to be made whole?
- What are some of the things you have wanted in the past that God has said no to?
- Tell Jesus what it feels like to face a "no" or to fear a "no"? What are you tempted to believe about God in those moments?

PRACTICE | LISTEN TO JESUS

Having a desire that is different from God's will is sometimes just a part of being human. As our sweet Jesus faithfully puts God's will above His own He reveals that His and God's wills were distinct in this moment. Jesus wanted another way.

Now listen as Jesus tells you what it felt like for him.

- Ask him how it felt that night. Ask him about the blood, and the sorrow, and the anxiety. Let him speak to you how strong his desire was for another way.
- Ask Jesus how it felt to lay his will down and trust God, knowing that his trust in God would lead to suffering. Ask him why he laid down his will.

If you listen, you will hear him whisper the answer in Psalm 18:19 and Ephesians 2:4, and John 3:16. Listen to him. Listen to him whisper the answer to the question of why he laid down his will that night in the garden: *Because I love you.*

GOD *with* US ON CHRISTMAS DAY.

Stop now.

Find a quiet place, tell your relatives you have to check on something in the kitchen, or the bedroom. Find yourself alone for just a minute – two minutes to be with Jesus this morning.

Let your senses become aware of the real world around you – the cosmic one. Listen to the great crowd of witnesses around you, singing the song of Advent.

- Ask Jesus about the love he has had for you since eternity past. Ask Jesus to tell you the story of why he was willing to hurt in this broken world in these limited bodies just to be with you.

Behold the King who has come to face all the pain this world has to give so that he could be your friend as well as your Savior.

The kind of love Jesus has for you? It will take a supernatural power in your inner being strengthening you – bracing you – to grasp how deep and how wide it is.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith — that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:19

Merry Christmas.

Be filled with the fullness of God