

When  
the Holidays  
Are Hard

*Biblical Wisdom for  
Navigating Relationships  
in This Season*

*a 9-day holiday series  
from Hosanna Revival*



## *A Holiday Email Series*

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This devotional series features trusted writers from *WHEN, Hosanna Revival's* blog that brings life's wild and weighty questions into the light of Scripture. We have seen these authors write for *WHEN* with both grace and truth, navigating difficult topics with care. We pray their contributions to this series will offer the same kind of practical insight and encouragement, meeting you wherever you find yourself this season.

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*Introduction*

# When the Holidays Are Hard

*Malory Smith*

It's that time of year again. Christmas lights are being strung on houses, draped over bushes, and of course, wrapped around pine trees in our living rooms. Whether it's the clean elegance of white lights or the charm of chunky, multicolored bulbs, the warm glow of the lights seeks to bring a sense of peace and wonder. Yet as the world begins to light up, it can feel like a sharp contrast to the darkness we may be facing within.

While many seem filled with holiday cheer, you may be overwhelmed by the challenges of the coming season. If all you see is darkness ahead, take heart: this is the season when we emphasize the coming of the Light of the World to free us from the darkness—the Light that cannot be extinguished.

In a prophecy about the coming Messiah, Isaiah writes, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone” (Isaiah 9:2 ESV).

Jesus tells us that he is this light, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12 ESV).

God's plan of redemption doesn't stop there. He not only gives his light to people in darkness, he actually makes us to be light. When we believe in the name of Jesus, we become children of God, and therefore children of light (John 1:12; Ephesians 5:8).

Christ calls us to be light by saying,

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

*Matthew 5:14–16 ESV*

This means we don't have to be stuck in the patterns of darkness we're used to falling into. We do not have to let anger rule over us. We do not have to succumb to slandering others to be a part of the conversation. We do not have to fall into the schemes of consumerism, boasting of our possessions. Although we are still subject to sin, it no longer reigns in us (Romans 6:12–13).

As children of light, we are to be imitators of our Father in heaven and produce the fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:1).

This season, you're invited into this space—a space where we can name our grief and anxieties, then focus together on the Light of the World. As we interact with others this season, may we embody the fruit of Light, which is all that is good and right and true (Ephesians 5:9).

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*About the Author*

## Malory Smith

Malory is the Director of Publishing at *Hosanna Revival*. She lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband and two sons. She loves a good story, lots of sugar in her coffee, dancing, and book recommendations. She views herself as an extroverted-introvert. Malory is passionate about biblical literacy for women and is always trying to grow in her understanding of the Bible and God's character. Read her articles on *WHEN* [here](#).



*Day One*

# The Holiday Tradition of Gossip

*Alicia Hamilton on Gossip*

The holidays bring us together with people we haven't seen in a while. We see old friends and dear family, people from both our past and present lives, as we travel and celebrate. This, of course, means a lot of "catching up."

"How is that one friend you always talk about?"

"What are your siblings up to these days?"

"Is there anything new in your life?"

These conversations can be a delight as we share what God is doing in our lives, hear how everyone is, and keep up-to-date on the latest family and friend-group happenings.

But there can be a dark underbelly to all this chatter: gossip.

"Have you heard . . .?"

"Can you believe . . .?"

"So-and-so told so-and-so who told me . . ."

Proverbs 18:8 says, "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts" (NIV). The ESV translates the first part of this verse, "The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels."

And it is delicious. We take twisted delight in the drama of others. Is it because gossip makes us feel better about ourselves? Is it because the surprise of a "plot twist" in someone else's life is darkly entertaining? Is it the urge to be

the one who “knows things,” to be the first to “spill the tea”? Whatever our reasons, the gossip of the holidays takes something that should be good—catching up with friends and family—and turns it into evil. The more we cultivate the darkness of gossip in our lives, the less we experience the beauty of relationships with others as they were meant to be: God-honoring, encouraging, and selfless.

Proverbs tells us, “A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret” (11:13 NIV), and “A perverse person stirs up conflict, and a gossip separates close friends” (16:28 NIV). Are we trustworthy, or are we gossips? Do we cherish healthy relationships, or do we stir up conflict and separate close friends?

Gossip not only hurts others—it hurts you.

Jesus says,

“Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”

*Matthew 15:16-20 ESV*

Please don't read these verses and beat yourself up, trying to weed out gossip through fear or sheer willpower. Let what comes out of your mouth be a reminder to turn to God, confess, and ask him to reveal and rip out the deeper sin at the root. Why are you participating in gossip? Why are these things coming out of your mouth? The passage in Matthew shows us that what comes out of the mouth isn't an accident or an isolated occurrence of sin. What comes out of our mouths shows us what is in our hearts.

Not only can the Holy Spirit reveal the deep sin in your heart, but it is his job to help you overcome it. “And I am sure of this,” writes Paul, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6 ESV). He will finish this work in you, dear friend. You are not on your own.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation,” we read in 2 Corinthians 5:17. “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (ESV).

If you are in Christ, you are a new creation! And the book of James reminds us that as new creations, we are to live in the light. Gossip harms others. Gossip harms us. And cultivating gossip is not the way a child of God lives.

James 3:7-12 says,

For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

*James 3:7-12 ESV*

This season, let’s take Paul’s advice in Ephesians 4:29 to “not let any unwholesome talk come out of [our] mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (NIV).

What if, instead of using the holidays as a crockpot for dark gossip, we opened the window and let the light in? What if, when we gather with friends we haven’t seen since last year, we recount the good, true, and beautiful things around us instead of feeding off the pain and mistakes of others for entertainment?

As we celebrate Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12), let’s let the light in. Dust the cobwebs of gossip off your holiday gatherings. Open the blinds. Turn your face toward the warm winter sun. And experience the beauty of full life. Jesus tells us, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10 NIV).



## Reflect

*Questions to ask God when you are tempted to gossip:*

- What sin do I need to confess to you?
- What motives did I have in saying that?
- What am I not believing about you that feeds those motives?
- Where have I misplaced my hope and joy?

*Questions to ask your friends and family  
to turn your conversations toward the light:*

- What is God doing in your life right now?
- What is a favorite memory from this past year?
- Is there anything that has surprised and delighted you recently?
- What is your favorite thing about the season you're in?

*Verses for further study:*

- Psalm 141:3
- Proverbs 20:19
- Proverbs 21:23
- Philippians 4:8

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*Meet the Author*

### Alicia Hamilton

Alicia Hamilton and her husband, Jack, are planted in beautiful New Hampshire where she spends her days ministering to college, high school, and middle school students. She is passionate about discipleship in the local church, biblical literacy, and chai lattes. Alicia writes about God's beauty, Scripture's intricacy, and Jesus's care in suffering at [AliciaHamilton.Substack.com](http://AliciaHamilton.Substack.com) and on Instagram [@Alicia.Lynn.Hamilton](https://www.instagram.com/Alicia.Lynn.Hamilton). Read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).



*Day Two*

# The Art of Restful Giving and Receiving

*Kelly O'Donohoe on Gifting*

Whether it's a Red Ryder BB gun, your two front teeth, or a magical toy train with a direct route to the North Pole, we all have an idea of what makes the perfect holiday gift. It could be the item you've wanted all year but couldn't afford yourself. Or the thing you've been hinting at for weeks, and receiving it would mean that someone is finally listening to you. Maybe it's a sentimental gift that could only come from someone who loves you and is thinking about you. Or maybe it's the limited edition fill-in-the-blank that seems impossible to find.

For some of us, the perfect gift is the one we give someone else. The one that elicits excited squeals from your children as they tear open presents under the tree. Or the one that finally achieves a satisfied smile from your impossible-to-buy-for in-laws. Maybe it's the item you know your bestie will love. Or the surprise for your significant other.

The truth is, gifts come with expectations, whether you're on the giving or receiving side. It can take no time at all for those expectations to hijack what was meant to be a celebration of the incarnation of God. Our good intentions get swallowed by our insecurities as we overthink, overspend, and overanalyze those brown paper packages tied up with string.

During a season that is all about the coming of Jesus, his own words can feel impossible to believe: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28 CSB). What's restful about giving and receiving gifts at Christmas? Are Jesus's words even relevant while we're celebrating his birth?

While Jesus wasn't speaking about holiday stress, his words to the crowd in Matthew 11 still apply to us at Christmas. He proclaimed that the burdens they bore didn't have to be crushing, but they could be easy and light (Matthew 11:30). He was inviting them to reject the oppressive yoke of slavery that false religious and cultural leaders would have them carry, and let him do the heavy lifting instead (Matthew 11:29). He was not promising them a life that was stress-free or devoid of pain and suffering. If you know the rest of the story, you know that Jesus's closest friends experienced the exact opposite of that—they watched their friend be taken, tortured, and killed. In fact, many of them went on to experience persecution of their own. But not even suffering could rob them of the soul-rest available in Christ Jesus.

The same is true for us today. While we still live in a broken world filled with grief and pain, for the Christian, our greatest burdens are being carried by another. Once separated by our sin, we have now been reconciled to God (Isaiah 59:1-2; Romans 5:10). Once destined for death, we have now been given new life in Christ (Romans 6:23). As the psalmist proclaimed, "How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (Psalm 32:1 CSB). Because we don't have to work and toil to please God or secure our own future, we can be assured that we don't have to work and toil to please others or secure our own needs, either.

What does this mean in the context of gift-giving? We can find our love and acceptance in Christ rather than in what we can offer to others; we can find our love and acceptance in Christ whether or not our efforts are appreciated or reciprocated. We don't have to score this year's hot-pick toy to prove our worth to our kids (and the internet). We don't have to make the scrapbook of all scrapbooks to be accepted by our parents. We can give the most thoughtful gift to a friend and not feel unloved by the generic gift card we get in return. We can plan, shop, wrap, and deliver in freedom because we have first put on the easy yoke of Jesus.

And this easy yoke of Jesus is first and foremost one of receiving—receiving grace, receiving love, receiving forgiveness. When we take off our own oppressive yokes of what we have been told is required to accept these gifts—or who deserves them—we can finally enjoy the soul-rest that Jesus is offering. The false religious and cultural leaders of our day tell us that grace is partial, love is conditional, and forgiveness can be earned by enough good deeds (unless, of course, society deems you unworthy). But Jesus gives these good gifts—grace, love, and forgiveness—based on his work and not our own. God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NASB).

He hands grace, love, and forgiveness out freely to all those who believe in his authority to offer them. When we believe that Jesus is the Savior and Sustainer of our life, we are free to give our own good gifts without needing anything in return. Our needs have been met in Christ!

How can we shed these old yokes? By drawing near to Christ himself. Remember Jesus's words: "Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." As Chad Bird *said*, Jesus was inviting them "not to a what, but to a who." And he's inviting us to himself, too. We are invited to come to Jesus over and over, again and again. It is in him that we find our rest, and it is in him that we are given the abundant life that sets us free (John 10:10).

### *Ways to Draw Near to Jesus in Your Gifting*

*What might it look like for you to draw near to Jesus today?*

*Tomorrow? On Black Friday? It could be:*

- Committing to an Advent study or a holiday devotional to keep your eyes fixed on Christ this season. (I enjoyed *Unwrapping the Names of Jesus: An Advent Devotional* by Asheritah Ciuciu with my family last year.)
- Spending daily time with God thanking him for the good gifts he's already given you before you make your holiday wish list.
- Praying over the gifts you're giving this year while you wrap them and asking the Lord to bless their recipients.
- Memorizing Matthew 11:28-30 and asking the Spirit to help you believe it.

Whatever it might look like for you, when we enter the Most Wonderful Time of the Year from a place of supernatural rest, giving and receiving gifts can become an extension of our worship rather than evidence of our worth.

We can give with joy and receive with thanksgiving when we spend our holidays resting in the nearness of God. The gifts of our time, energy, and money can come from a place of abundance rather than depletion. And we can receive the presents and presence of others with compassion and gratitude knowing that our souls find rest in Jesus, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

*Meet the Author*

## Kelly O'Donohoe

Kelly is a follower of Jesus, wife to Scott, mom of 5, keeper of plants, and lover of both stories and spreadsheets. She leads women's discipleship at her local church in Hamilton, Ohio alongside some of her favorite people. Kelly's natural curiosity makes her an eager learner, and she's passionate about sharing the truth of the Scriptures with others. When she's not working, studying biblical Hebrew, or volunteering for her kids' school, you can probably find Kelly eating chips and watching reruns of *Frasier*. Read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).



*Day Three*

# Holy Boundaries in the Hustle and Bustle

*Hannah Jessen Conway on Boundaries*

As wonderful as the holiday season is, Christmas can blur boundaries. Our calendars fill with parties and pageants, gift shopping and cookie baking, family visits and church services. It's the most wonderful time of the year, sure, but it can also become one of the most stressful times.

Even the Christmas story itself can be used to reinforce the theme of hospitality at all costs. Though Scripture never specifically mentions an innkeeper, people have read between the lines and assumed that someone must have turned Mary and Joseph away the night Jesus was born, leading Mary to give birth in a stable (Luke 2:6-7). Whether or not this infamous innkeeper existed, he has become a cautionary tale for Christians.

Be it a blog, a radio announcer, or even a sermon, we're warned not to be like the innkeeper but rather to "make room!" This seemingly harmless catchphrase can pressure us to say yes to every commitment, putting us at risk of burnout and bitterness heading into a new year.

Yet the very reason Jesus came wasn't for us to merely survive the holidays. He came, as John 10:10 tells us, that we might have abundant life. So, how can we experience abundant life even during a busy season? Here are three areas where we can make space for Christ this Christmas, even as we make room for others.

## 1

### *Create Physical Space*

*Christmas Vacation* is one of my favorite Christmas movies. Though ridiculous, I bet many of us relate to Clark Griswold's struggle to accommodate every family member—and dog—who wants to stay in their house. While there is something beautiful about families coming together to celebrate the birth of our Savior, we still need to make time for holy moments amidst our hospitality. One way is by protecting our physical boundaries.

Boundaries and hospitality don't have to be at odds. If anything, boundaries enhance our capacity to be generous and hospitable. Jesus's life demonstrated this. He understood what it was like to be surrounded by crowds of people, constantly in demand—I imagine healing people was a bit more high-stakes than making your dad's favorite pumpkin pie. Multiple times in the Gospels, we see Jesus intentionally retreat to solitary places to pray. Personally, my favorite example is Matthew 13:2 when he literally gets in a boat to escape the crowds.

Here's the freedom in that: if our Savior didn't feel beholden to be physically present every time someone needed him, neither should we. Those moments of solitude did not make Jesus any less compassionate or kind. He recharged in those moments by meeting with God so he could be even more present with others. Likewise, sometimes the best thing we can do is create physical space so we can love others from a place of healthy strength, not depleted obligation.

#### PAUSE & PONDER

What is your "boat" this season? Maybe it's waking up just ten minutes earlier to sit in the winter stillness and pray. Maybe it's taking extra-long showers with some worship music on (try *Maverick City's Christmas album* to start!). Maybe it's choosing one night for a solo neighborhood stroll, enjoying the beautiful Christmas lights and chilly air. Spend some time brainstorming where you can create physical space—and be creative!

## 2

### *Protect Emotional Space*

Christmas is a beautiful season, but it can also be a sensitive one. Countless emotional triggers surface during the holidays—grief, financial strife, and

broken relationships to name a few. That's why experiencing abundance requires us to protect our emotional boundaries as well as our physical ones.

For some reason, around the holidays, we become willing to compromise the emotional boundaries we set during the rest of the year. We endure the conversations we normally would ignore or decline, we let the attitudes and anxieties of others dictate our own, we feel guilty when Christmas doesn't go as seamlessly as we want it to, and if we aren't careful, we sacrifice our emotional well-being in the name of people-pleasing. I'm probably not the only parent who has had a breakdown on Christmas Eve because some task wasn't completed, some gift didn't arrive, or some appetizer was burned.

Here's the biggest thing to remember about protecting our emotional space during the holidays: Christmas will go on without us because Christmas is not ultimately about us. In our attempts to curate a perfect Christmas for others, we overshadow the reason we're celebrating in the first place. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give is to surrender the pretense of perfection and instead gaze upon the Perfecter of our faith who came to be with us. God doesn't expect us to engineer a perfect Christmas for others; he wants us to experience a holy Christmas with him.

*PAUSE & PONDER*

What emotions are you feeling as we head into the holiday season? How can you intentionally release the pressure of people-pleasing? Try journaling your expectations and then pray through them, asking the Lord if there is anything you should let go of.

3

*Embrace Spiritual Space*

While this is probably the most significant of the three recommendations, I don't have much more to add. I believe if we intentionally create physical space and protect our emotional space, we will become more aware of the Lord's presence during this sacred season. The wonderful thing about Christmas is that it's about Jesus coming to us, not us making our way to him. All we have to do is receive him.

I realize not everyone's Christmas looks the same. Maybe you have to work over the holiday, maybe you have family members with nowhere else to go, maybe you have small children to care for. But if the innkeeper's story teaches us anything, it's that Jesus meets us wherever we are. If Jesus can



come to us in a stable, he can come to us in our weakness, our tiredness, and our busyness. He didn't say "never mind" when there wasn't room for him in the inn. He came anyway.

We can declare joy to the world *because* the Lord has come. And he's coming for you this holiday season. Let us receive our King. And let our hearts prepare him room by making space.

*P A U S E & P O N D E R*

Where do you need God to meet you this season? What unnecessary burdens are you carrying? Spend a few moments asking God to meet you right where you are. Reflect on John 10:7-10 and ask God to help you experience abundant life, even in the holiday hustle and bustle.

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*Meet the Author*

## Hannah Jessen Conway

Hannah Jessen Conway intentionally pursues themes of faith, motherhood, and mental health in her writing. She works in nonprofit marketing and published her first children's book in the fall of 2024, inspired by the birth of her deaf son. She's a Jesus follower, wife to her college sweetheart, and mama of two boys. You can usually find her cheering on the Tar Heels, enjoying the North Carolina sunshine, or writing in a local coffee shop. Read more of her work at [HJConway.com](https://HJConway.com). Read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).



*Day Four*

## Feeling Isolated During the Holidays

*Kayla Carthel on Loneliness*

The holiday season is often portrayed as a time of joy, family gatherings, and festive celebrations. Images of cheerful faces, twinkling lights, and heartwarming reunions flood our screens and social media feeds, creating a picture-perfect narrative of togetherness and happiness. Yet, for many, the reality of the holidays is starkly different. Feelings of isolation, loneliness, and even despair can overshadow the festivities, leaving some to wonder where they fit into the seemingly universal celebration of joy.

But amid this loneliness, there is hope. The Bible speaks to the heart of our struggles, offering comfort and reminding us of God's ever-present love and care, especially when we feel most alone.

### *The Empty Seat at the Table*

*Coping with the Loss of Loved Ones*

The holidays can be a poignant reminder of those who are no longer with us. The empty seat at the table, once filled by a beloved family member or friend, can evoke deep feelings of grief and sadness. The pressure to be joyful can feel overwhelming when you're dealing with the pain of loss. Grief doesn't have a timeline, and the holidays may bring these emotions to the surface in unexpected ways. Allow yourself to feel the sadness, and remember that it's okay to mourn, even in the midst of celebration.

But loss doesn't only come in the form of death. Divorce, breakups, and estrangement can leave a similar emptiness. The end of a significant relationship is a deep personal loss. The empty seat at the table becomes

symbolic not just of a physical absence but of shattered dreams and expectations.

These kinds of losses can be deeply isolating. You may feel like your pain is invisible to others, especially when the world around you is focused on celebration and togetherness. Yet, it's important to remember that God sees and understands every kind of loss you experience. The Bible reminds us that God is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18). In moments of profound loneliness, God's love remains steadfast, offering comfort and hope in the face of grief.

### *Feeling Alone at the Table*

#### *The Pain of Family Conflict*

The holidays can sometimes magnify family tensions, turning what should be a time of joy into a source of stress and isolation. When conflicts arise—whether from long-standing issues, differing opinions, or unresolved hurts—sitting down at the family table can feel more like enduring a storm than sharing a meal. You might find yourself surrounded by loved ones yet feel profoundly alone, disconnected from the very people who are supposed to bring comfort and joy. The strain of maintaining peace or navigating difficult conversations can leave you feeling isolated, misunderstood, and emotionally drained.

In these challenging moments, it's crucial to remember that Jesus himself experienced rejection and misunderstanding, even by those closest to him; he understands the pain of feeling alone. God calls us to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), but this doesn't mean ignoring our feelings or avoiding conflict at all costs. Instead, it's about seeking God's wisdom and strength to respond gracefully, setting healthy boundaries, and finding your identity in his love rather than the approval of others. Even when family dynamics are difficult, God's presence offers assurance that you are never truly alone, and his peace can help you navigate these situations with compassion and resilience (Psalm 27:10).

### *The Cluttered Table*

#### *Navigating Mental Health Challenges During the Holidays*

For those struggling with mental health challenges, the holiday season can feel overwhelming, like a table cluttered with too many expectations, emotions, and social pressures. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues can make it difficult to engage in the festivities, leading to

feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and exhaustion. The pressure to appear cheerful can exacerbate these symptoms, making the holidays feel like an insurmountable hurdle.

Mental health struggles can distort how we perceive the world around us, making it hard to see beyond the fog of our own minds. The table might be full of food and laughter, but it can feel like a barrier rather than a place of comfort. The weight of these challenges can lead to withdrawal, making it harder to connect with others and increasing the sense of loneliness.

In these moments, it's important to remember that God sees us in our struggles. He is not distant or indifferent to our pain but is deeply compassionate and understanding of it. The Bible tells us to cast all our anxieties on him because he cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). God invites us to bring our burdens to him, promising rest for our weary souls (Matthew 11:28-30).

## *Jesus*

### *God's Response to Human Loneliness*

The ultimate expression of God's response to our loneliness is found in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, Emmanuel, meaning "God with us," entered into our human experience, fully understanding the depths of human loneliness and suffering. He experienced rejection, betrayal, and abandonment, even by his closest friends. On the cross, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 NIV), expressing his profound isolation at that moment.

Yet, through his suffering and resurrection, Jesus bridged the gap between humanity and God, ensuring that we would never be truly alone. Jesus's promise to his followers was clear: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20 NIV). This promise remains true for us. No matter how isolated we feel, Jesus is present with us, offering his love, comfort, and peace.

## *Practical Steps to Embrace God's Presence*

*Despite knowing God is with us and provides comfort, it can still be challenging to navigate feelings of loneliness during the holidays. Here are some practical steps to help you embrace God's presence and find solace during this time:*

### 1

#### REACH OUT FOR CONNECTION

Even when you feel like withdrawing, make an effort to connect with others. Scripture encourages us to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and reminds us that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is present (Matthew 18:20).

### 2

#### ENGAGE IN ACTS OF SERVICE

Helping others can be a powerful way to combat feelings of isolation. Consider the words of Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35 NIV). Serving others can shift your focus from your pain to the needs of those around you, bringing healing and connection.

### 3

#### CREATE NEW TRADITIONS

If old traditions are too painful, try creating new ones that bring comfort and joy. Isaiah 43:19 NIV says, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" God can bring new life and meaning to your holidays, even amid loss.

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*Meet the Author*

## Kayla Carthel

Kayla Carthel is a dog mom, future counselor, lover of all iced coffees, and devoted daughter of God. You can typically find her twirling in flowy dresses, listening to true crime documentaries, belting the *Hamilton* soundtrack, and redecorating the house for the millionth time (much to the consternation of her husband). Read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).



*Day Five*

# A Survival Guide for Controversy at Christmas

*Amanda Devlin on Conflict*

Picture it: Christmas Eve at 7:00 p.m. You're with family and close friends, crowded together in a cozy living room surrounded by delicious food and beautiful decorations. Coming to the end of a busy season, you're ready to relax and enjoy making beautiful memories with the ones you love.

And then, in walks Auntie Edna. You were hoping she wasn't coming this year, but there she is. Auntie Edna always has something critical to say about everyone. The food is never cooked to her standards, your clothes are not very flattering for your skin tone, and if anyone had a major accomplishment this year, she's there to one-up them.

As you watch Auntie Edna spread negativity to everyone, your blood begins to boil. She's ruining the evening. She spreads her dark cloud over every conversation she's involved in. And then, Auntie Edna corners you and begins to discuss an argument she had with Uncle Frank twenty years ago. They're still not speaking.

Auntie Edna is a fictional character, but you probably can picture someone you know in her place. Engaging with this person can be exhausting. As followers of Jesus Christ, what are we supposed to do? What does God call us to do? How do we respond emotionally and verbally when the cantankerous "Auntie Edna" in our family causes conflict during the most joyous time of the year?

We need a simple answer, and Jesus gives us one: love the Lord our God and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39). That's wonderful advice, and it's a way to summarize everything Jesus asks of us. But, for

more clarity, let's look at what Paul says about living out this love in Romans 12:9-21.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. Love one another deeply as brothers and sisters. Take the lead in honoring one another. Do not lack diligence in zeal; be fervent in the Spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head. Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

*Romans 12:9-21 CSB*

The apostle Paul has a wonderful way of planting a truth into our minds and rooting it in practical advice. Paul says to "detest what is evil." When we see injustice or poor behavior, we are supposed to detest it. Being a Christian doesn't mean being a doormat to bad behavior. Immediately following the admonition to "detest what is evil," Paul says to cling to what is good, and later he encourages us to love one another and take the lead in honoring one another.

Paul is changing the focus. Our priority is not on “fixing” someone or giving them a piece of our mind. He says later that vengeance belongs to the Lord. Our response to poor behavior is to “cling to what is good.” We are to “love one another deeply . . . be fervent in the Spirit . . . be persistent in prayer.” We are called to cling to Jesus no matter who we encounter. Paul knows that the only way we can respond to bad behavior as Christ would is to be filled with God’s Holy Spirit. How would the world be different if we all loved one another as deeply as Paul describes?

When you see Auntie Edna walk through the door, start praying. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your every action. Seek the Lord even as you’re in conversation with her. Our God is a “refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble” (Psalm 46:1 CSB). When she criticizes a relative, return that criticism with a compliment. For every negative comment she makes, respond to her with love. It may seem awkward in conversation, but it will shift the atmosphere as you practice it. Language is a gift that God has given us, and we can use that gift to speak light and love in dark places.

Romans 12:21 sums it up beautifully: “Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.” As followers of Jesus, our lives are not to be ruled by hate. Instead, we should be ruled by God’s deep love for us and his love for others, even among the most challenging personalities.

### *Application*

Ask God to search your heart. If you sense bitterness or anger toward others, confess that to him, and he will supernaturally change your heart. As the big holiday events draw near, pray for those challenging friends and family members. Pray for unresolved hurts that may be separating them from Jesus. Drawing near to God will provide you with comfort and wisdom even in the most difficult conflicts this season.

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#### *Meet the Author*

### Amanda Devlin

Amanda is a professional cellist and writer living in sunny California. She has three beautiful kids and is blessed to be married to her best friend. You can find her most days chauffeuring her kids around town, meeting with friends for coffee, or visiting her favorite place: the beach. Read her *WHEN* article [\*here\*](#).





*Day Six*

## The Hospitality of Jesus and HGTV

*Candace Echols on Hospitality*

It seems HGTV has cornered the market on making a home hospitable. Sometimes the aesthetic presented is one of minimalistic living where the floors are empty and the lines are clean. Other times, a farmhouse aesthetic is the goal, with the host cultivating natural elements like shiplap and stone. Throw a little holiday nostalgia into either vibe and you get a festively decorated mantle alongside multiple Christmas trees, each with its own theme. The ideas of peace, home, and festivity are all close to the heart of God, but when it comes to biblical hospitality, none of these quite hit the mark.

The word “hospitality” is strikingly similar to the word “hospital.” Though not exactly the same in meaning, both words share a common development in English. I’ve noticed that when HGTV discusses people’s homes, they rarely encourage the audience to make them a place where guests experience refreshment and healing, like a hospital might. Maybe God is calling his children more to the posture of a nurse than an interior designer. Nurses open the doors of a hospital to sick or wounded patients as they prepare a space in which the doctor can do the good work of healing, insofar as he or she is able. As we make choices about how to design these important spaces we inhabit, it’s worth considering how they might serve our friends and family (and even the occasional wayfaring stranger) with the hospital-like welcome the Bible calls us to. These verses offer a strong framework as we think through this very thing:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has

received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

*1 Peter 4:8-11 ESV*

### *Steward the Gifts*

God has given each of us different amounts of money, time, talent, creativity, and energy with which to cultivate our unique homes. First Peter 4:10 says we are called to be “good stewards of God’s varied grace” (CSB). When we think about home as a backdrop for God’s healing to take place, what feels like comfort to each of our five senses?

Some people like to ask their guests to remove their shoes at the door. At first, it may feel odd or awkward to see someone’s socks or bare toes. But there’s an unspoken message here that hints at an invitation to be authentic throughout the visit. Creating cozy spaces with a lit candle and soft textures that are anything-but-perfect sends a vibe of comfort to a guest. In nearly every culture, food is a big part of both healing and hospitality. Rarely are we ready to share our souls with another when our bellies are rumbling in the background. Having a loaf of bread in the freezer, ready to pop in the oven when a friend stops by unannounced is a good idea.

The heart of hospitality, however, is found in a home where the host will sit and listen. This is perhaps the most difficult part of all. Focused attention has always been appreciated, but in this era, it is priceless because so few of us are able to maintain it. The ability to commune together requires us to focus on what our guests are sharing. If the Holy Spirit lives in us as followers of Jesus, and we ask him in prayer to use our lives for his glory in service to our friends, then sitting down to pay attention to the people Jesus died for is a nonnegotiable.

### *Stop the Grumbling*

This may seem wildly obvious, but not all guests are a total, nonstop delight to be around. Some guests, even our friends and family, can have jagged

edges as part of their personalities. They may have different habits or tastes from our own. Guests can sometimes be difficult to live with for more than a day or two, especially when we are considering those who need rest or those who are in pursuit of ever-elusive holiday nostalgia.

One thing that can become like a green slime seeping through even a well-intentioned heart is grumbling. It is shockingly easy to complain about ways our visitors are getting on our nerves. From the annoying sounds they make when they chew their food to how loudly they walk in the mornings, it takes almost nothing to get under our skin, and that “almost nothing” can produce some serious grumbling. Complaining is foreign to the heart of God. As we seek to reflect his mercy and grace in our homes, we are called to leave complaining and grumbling in the dust and find other ways to deal with our hosting frustrations.

Going for a walk, getting good sleep, talking to God, and creating physical space where it’s needed are all very practical ways to press the release valve when guests feel like too much. Also, setting wise and appropriate boundaries is totally okay with God. Even he sets boundaries, which is why we don’t know all that he knows. His ways are not our ways, and that’s a fence between his mind and ours. A kindly communicated, grace-filled boundary can create all sorts of peace, and it can also help protect both host and guest from a spirit of grumbling later.

### *Share the Grace*

Before anyone arrives, it’s important to acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s presence within us as believers. While we can invite him to fill our homes, we should also seek to deepen our awareness of his presence in our hearts. In doing so, we can speak words of wisdom, kindness, and truth to our guests and serve them wholeheartedly with the strength that God provides.

Our Father is keenly aware of how hard it is to host human beings. He created a perfect world, slam-packed with good things that appeal to all five of our senses, and humanity has been difficult since the start. God has been dealing with rebellious, annoying, downright rude guests ever since he invited us to dwell with him in Eden. So he has great sympathy for the worn-out host. He offers strength to do the work only he can do: convey grace and mercy to those who fill our homes. And that includes both those who are delightful and those who are draining.

So, as we think through the ways we live and move within our homes when we welcome friends and strangers, it’s worth contemplating our call to be

hospitable. It's good to ask the Lord to give his wisdom and presence when guests walk through the door, making us ever ready to welcome others in his name, even when doing so is inconvenient.

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*Meet the Author*

## Candace Echols

Candace and her husband Jim enjoy raising their five children in Tennessee. Candace also writes a weekly column for the *Daily Memphian* and for publications like *The Gospel Coalition* and *Risen Motherhood*. She dreams of having her own writing cottage in Oxford someday (England is the dream, but Mississippi's not bad either). You can find Candace on Instagram [@CandaceEcholsWrites](#) or on her website at [CandaceEchols.com](#). Read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).



*Day Seven*

## Walking with the Grieving This Holiday Season

*Leah Jolly on Grief*

The Christmas tree is decorated and your calendar is full. As you think about the weeks ahead, your mind drifts to the friend who’s grieving a miscarriage, the coworker who lost a parent to cancer, and the church member walking through a messy divorce. This time of year may be joyful for you, but what about those whose holiday season is overshadowed by immense sorrow? Christ not only grieved, but he entered into others’ grief. As we look to him, his example and his compassion aid us as we walk alongside the grieving this holiday season.

Scripture provides a glimpse of Christ’s own grief. Hebrews 5:7 reminds us, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death” (ESV). In Isaiah 53:4, we’re told Jesus “has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” even to the cross (Philippians 2:8). When Jesus arrived at the tomb of his dear friend Lazarus, he wept (John 11:34–35). In the garden of Gethsemane, just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus’s sweat was like drops of blood (Luke 22:44), and he was “very sorrowful, even to death” (Mark 14:34). He cried out to God on the cross (Matthew 27:46). Jesus’s suffering made him a “merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17), perfectly able to sympathize with us (Hebrews 4:14–16).

Scripture also describes how Christ walked with the grieving. When Lazarus died, Jesus comforted Mary and Martha, reminding them of his identity as the “resurrection and the life” (John 11:17–27). While Jesus is no longer physically here on earth to comfort the grieving, he does so through his Holy Spirit—the great Comforter—his Word, and his church (John 14:26).

He promised that those who mourn would be comforted (Matthew 5:4) and receive rest for their heavy-laden souls (Matthew 11:28–30). Jesus welcomes the laments of the grieving, who may ask, “Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction?” (Psalm 44:23–24), or “O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:13–14).

We must anchor the comfort we administer to the grieving in the eternal hope offered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. More than any other portion of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15 speaks to the Christian’s hope, especially as they grieve the death of loved ones who have died in Christ. Paul writes, “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead” (1 Corinthians 15:20–21). Because Christ conquered death and defeated it forever, it no longer has the victory or lasting sting over his people (1 Corinthians 15:57–58). For those grieving the loss of a relationship, job, or other important part of their life, Scripture promises that nothing in creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38–39). As earthly circumstances separate the grieving from people and situations they loved or were accustomed to, they will never be removed from God’s loving, fatherly care (Isaiah 54:10).

Even in the most incomprehensible, impossible circumstances, the hope of the grieving is not grounded in their ability to fix their situation or in the right coping mechanisms, but in the sovereign will and plan of God himself—even if God’s plan isn’t clearly revealed in the moment (or ever) (Romans 8:18–28).

Whether the one you love is grieving a death, relationship, job, or another part of their life, Revelation 21 speaks to the ultimate, final end to grief: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3–5a). Praise God that the believers’ hope in sorrow is not in a different set of circumstances but in the death and resurrection of the Son!

As you consider Christ and the joy-filled weeks ahead, let’s explore a few practical ways you be attentive to the grieving and “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). Learn from the example of Jesus Christ and be prayerful in considering how you might enter into the grief of others through prayer, listening, giving, or inviting. The Lord sees the grieving and knows your desire to walk alongside them—trust him to guide you and comfort your loved ones this holiday season. As with any advice you receive, take what is helpful, leave behind what isn’t, and apply it according to the nuances

and uniqueness of each situation you encounter. The Lord sees the grieving and knows your desire to walk alongside them—trust him to guide you and comfort your loved one this holiday season.

### *Practical Ways to Walk with the Grieving*

#### *P R A Y*

This holiday season, commit to regularly praying with and for the grieving in your life, whether it's one person or five. Be consistent in following up via text or phone call, and remind them of your prayers. Enter into their pain and grief by lamenting with them—praying the Psalms together is a great way to do this.

#### *L I S T E N*

If you're especially close to a grieving person, be sure to communicate with them your willingness to sit, listen to them, and help them process their grief or questions. These conversations shouldn't replace helping your friend pursue licensed mental health support. However, being a willing, listening ear is a practical way to lovingly support a grieving friend.

#### *G I V E*

If you're close to a grieving person, consider giving them a gift as a way of either remembering someone they lost, or helping them find joy and encouragement during the holidays. This could be a gift card to their favorite store, a book they might enjoy, or a piece of jewelry to remember the one(s) they lost.

#### *I N V I T E*

For many people, the holidays are a fresh reminder of the grief they feel, whether it's a grandparent missing from the table at Christmas dinner, being far away from family, or navigating holiday celebrations with divorced parents. Extend a warm welcome to your grieving friend by offering them a seat at your dinner table or by asking them to join you for a fun activity. Many people appreciate having a neutral place where they can celebrate the holiday without the distraction of grief. You could invite them to share a favorite holiday tradition, dessert, or memory with you and your family.

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*Meet the Author*

## Leah Jolly

Leah Jolly is a graduate of Wheaton College where she studied international relations and Spanish. She lives in the Grand Rapids area with her husband, Logan, and is pursuing her MDiv at Calvin Theological Seminary. She attends Harvest OPC in Wyoming, Michigan. You can connect with Leah on [Substack](#) or read her *WHEN* articles [here](#).





*Day Eight*

## Celebration over Comparison

*Ela Alvarado  
on Comparison*

The warm, inviting aroma of freshly baked gingerbread cookies filled the air and the familiar carols played in the background. I found my favorite spot on the couch, a steaming mug of hot chocolate in hand, and my mind drifted to the possibilities of the new holiday season. Everything around me spoke of the gospel's hope—the hope of a newborn King!

Yet my mind couldn't help but also linger on the hopelessness attached to this time of the year. My loved ones were making all the progress I'd been praying for. Even strangers seemed to be getting what I so desperately desired. I wondered how many holiday seasons would pass before I saw my desires fulfilled. It may be a season of hope, but my hope waned alongside my unmet dreams and desires.

Do you ever feel like those thoughts are the strongest this time of year?

When you enter the season of comfort and joy with deferred desires, seeing others get what you want feels like adding insult to injury. It intensifies the comparison game in your mind.

While the holidays make it especially hard to see others rejoice in the blessings you so desire, there's always hope found in our Savior.

In Philippians 2, we find a picture of unwavering faithfulness. Jesus knew his part in the Father's plan of redemption, and his obedience knew no limits—not even death. Not even the most shameful, excruciating form of

death would keep our Messiah from stepping into the role of the Savior we so desperately needed.

Each member of the Trinity plays a vital role in our salvation; no one is more important than the other. While the Father initiated the plan for salvation and the Spirit applied it, Jesus is most glorified as our Lord, who accomplished our salvation. The most glorious place Jesus could be is right at the center of the Father's will.

When tempted to look at other people's blessings, we can look to Jesus instead. We can look to his contentment as a servant of the Father. We can look to his obedience, which would cost him divine privileges, his place next to the Father, and ultimately, death on the cross.

While his obedience cost him everything, Jesus was the most content within the Father's will. We too can find contentment at the Father's feet since serving him is the highest place we can be—the place where mourning turns into joy, shame into freedom, sin into service.

Even when we don't have what we are praying for, our greatest need is answered in Jesus. Because Jesus humbled himself as a servant, we can choose to serve the one to whom all glory and honor is due.

Wherever we are, we have the privilege to serve God, and that's the greatest joy we can experience this holiday season. A servant's heart aligns us with the character of Christ and brings us closer to the Father, even as we wait for and trust him with our other desires. Serving puts the focus back on Jesus and fills our hearts with what we crave most: *the fullness of God*.

As we walk in our servitude, we can also choose celebration over comparison. We are free to love those around us with encouraging words (Ephesians 4:29) because this is what glorifies God, our first and true Encourager.

Encouraging others when we hear of the blessings in their lives increases the glory due to God's name in our lives and theirs. The more we rejoice with those who rejoice, as Paul exhorts the church in Rome (Romans 12:15), the more confident we will be in God's goodness working all around us.

After seeing Elizabeth battle infertility in all of her child-bearing years, Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives could celebrate Elizabeth's pregnancy in her old age because they saw God's merciful hand at work (Luke 1:58). They saw God's character shine through her life, and that was enough reason to rejoice. They saw an opportunity to make a fellow sister stronger through encouragement, and they took it.

Ecclesiastes 7:14 tells us, “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him” (ESV).

The same God who authored the good day of prosperity in other people’s lives is the same God who is sovereign over our adversities. Even though we may not know whether each day holds adversity or prosperity, we can trust the God who holds all our days in his loving grasp.

When our friend gets engaged after we’ve been earnestly praying for a husband, we can celebrate God’s sovereignty over her life. When our neighbor just got her dream job and we are still relentlessly putting in applications, we can rejoice and point her to God’s goodness.

Other people’s blessings are proof of a living and faithful God. When we feel exhausted and discontent from waiting, rejoicing with others can actually encourage us to keep the faith.

When the burden of comparison feels too heavy for your shoulders, our gracious Savior is ready to give you rest. As you pursue service and look at God’s good, sovereign hand in other people’s circumstances, he will guide you to deeper contentment.

The gospel takes our gaze off what we don’t have and puts it on our greatest gift: Jesus. If we have Jesus, we can trust that our circumstances are under his control. We can have peace, trusting that he loves us as we consider his sacrifice and grace. We can look beyond ourselves to the greatest commandment, knowing that God is being glorified as we build one another up.

He is still the God of abundant goodness, and you can trust that this season is not all there is. Friend, wait on the Lord and take heart, for good things are yet to come.

## Application

1

Take a moment to thank God for being sovereign over your prosperity and adversity. Write a prayer asking him to give you a service-minded perspective when you are struggling with comparison. Ask him to provide you with a lens of encouragement as you look at the lives of others.

2

Who is a friend you can encourage this season? Pray that God gives you the words to celebrate them, asking for a fresh wave of faith to come over you as you write.

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*Meet the Author*

### Ela Alvarado

Long before Ela knew storytelling could be a vehicle for gospel-fueled transformation, she was crafting stories with hopeful endings. Her journey took a drastic turn when she went to Taylor University and encountered hope in God. He was the ultimate hope she was searching for amidst her stories. With that knowledge came new layers of storytelling—photography, baking, videography, and more. She now enjoys studying the Word of her personal God and *sharing* what he is teaching her through the art of writing. Read her *WHEN* articles [\*here\*](#).



*Day Nine*

# How Christ's Love Compels Us to Love When It's Hard

*Lauren Bowerman on Love*

You gather the wrapping paper and ribbons to wrap the gifts you've thoughtfully purchased. You sit beneath the glow of the tree, grinning as Christmas music plays in the background and the smell of evergreen mingles with the scent of the logs on the fire.

But then your stomach drops. Your mind strays as you remember last year's Christmas celebration. You recall the pang in your chest when your brother rolled his eyes at your desire to pray over the family meal. You remember the drop in your stomach when *that* coworker asked you that question at the Christmas party, bringing up a host of grievous memories. Your body recalls the physical sensation of anxiety as the conversation grew heated before the pies had even reached the table.

The holidays can bring a host of emotions as you prepare to gather with family and friends, especially some of whom it might be painful to be around. During this season, it can be a tremendous joy to celebrate with loved ones, but the levity can be tainted by the dread of encountering those who may make these gatherings difficult.

## *Hard to Love*

Maybe there are certain people that come off to you as abrasive or rude. Maybe there are those relatives with whom you have an uncomfortable history. Maybe it's simply the general difficulty of being around your family—those

who know you best, have seen your worst, and seem to bring out a different, uglier side of you.

Or maybe the answer hits a little closer to home. Sometimes someone acts as a mirror, reminding us of our own faults and weaknesses—the areas we are most ashamed of. Sometimes a personality simply rubs us wrong, the friction of our encounter leaving us feeling raw or bruised. It could be ignorance or it could be intentional rudeness, but our interactions with people—especially during the heightened holiday season—can leave us wounded.

### *Our Weaknesses Revealed*

Added to the particular difficulties of certain family members, friends, or acquaintances is the fact that as much as we desire to love others, our flesh and our heart are so weak. We're imperfect, we mess up, our words come out wrong; simply put, we're sinners interacting with sinners, and that can make interactions difficult.

And yet Scripture articulates such a high calling when it comes to loving others. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor (Mark 12:31). He tells us that “love is from God” and that “[a]nyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8 ESV).

On one hand our flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41), while on the other we have the power of the indwelling Spirit residing in us. Scripture tells us that we “are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in [us]” (Romans 8:9 ESV). We are empowered by the very love of God, who enables us to love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19), and yet it can still feel impossibly hard to meet the standard of love to which we are called.

As much as we strive to love others through the power of the Spirit, there is also grace when we fall short. When we fail again and again to love others the way Christ does, we can pray and ask forgiveness.

### *Then How Do We Do It?*

Thankfully, there is also much we can do to prepare our hearts and minds for difficult interactions during the holidays.

## *How to Prepare Your Heart*

### *1*

#### *PRAY FOR THE STRENGTH TO LOVE OTHERS*

The Lord calls us to love others as we have been loved (John 13:34), but he also knows that we cannot do this apart from the strength he supplies through his Spirit in us. We are dependent beings, and one of the ways we express this is by casting ourselves on the Lord in prayer in the midst of difficult situations. He delights in coming to our aid when we call out to him in prayer.

### *2*

#### *PREPARE YOUR MIND WITH SCRIPTURE*

If you struggle with anger when you gather with family, explore that feeling with curiosity. Sometimes anger is justified, and other times it might be helpful to understand why your heart is so quick to lean toward exasperation. Find Scriptures that help you when you find your heart in this place. Or maybe you find your pride pricked when you attend another corporate party. What is it about this environment that creates that feeling? Is it rooted in insecurity or fear? Search the Scriptures for verses you can memorize to remind yourself of truth.

### *3*

#### *SET YOUR MIND*

As Christians, in the midst of our struggles and sin, we can choose to set our minds on the things that are true and lovely (Philippians 4:8). As you find yourself grappling with how to interact kindly or show joy toward someone, seek to draw out the good and honorable things in them. They, too, are a brother or sister made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), so cast your thoughts and your conversation toward things that are beautiful and uplifting.

### *4*

#### *TAKE BREAKS AS NEEDED*

As much as you can prepare your mind and your heart to interact with difficult people this holiday season, sometimes you might just need a break from the noise. If you find yourself at your end, it is perfectly reasonable to

step away, take a breath, take a walk, and spend some time alone to recenter yourself before reconvening with the rest.

5

*REMEMBER CHRIST'S LOVE FOR YOU*

Consider the enormity of Christ's love for you. Consider how seemingly irrational it is that Christ loved you when you were dead in your sin (Ephesians 2:5), in the midst of your trespasses (Colossians 2:13), while you were still a sinner (Romans 5:8). Remember this truth: the Lord's love doesn't depend on how well you interact with people this holiday season. But you can choose to allow the surety of Christ's love for you compel you to love those who are difficult, making God known in that love (John 13:35; 1 Corinthians 5:14).

*The Good News*

As Christians we know that our disposition need not be dependent on our circumstances—or even on the amiability of those around us. Scripture reminds us that we can have a Spirit-supplied joy, peace, and reasonableness in all things because of who we are in Christ (Philippians 4:4–9). By God's grace, our joy is not dependent on the warm fuzzies that come and go with the Christmas season; rather, our joy is anchored in the eternal reality that has been secured for us in Christ. Bless the Lord!

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*Meet the Author*

**Lauren Bowerman**

Lauren Bowerman is a writer, the wife of Matthew, and the mother of Charlotte and a baby boy on the way. She has been privileged to call many cities, states, and countries home, and it is this nomadic lifestyle that cultivated in her a love for people, cultures, and missions. She has received her Masters in Christian and Intercultural Studies from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She is particularly passionate about writing on the intersection between suffering and faith, specifically in her experiences with depression, doubt, and infertility. Read her work on [Substack](#) and our blog [WHEN](#).





## *A Prayer for Your Holiday Season*

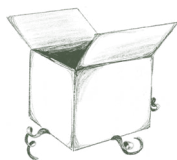
Father, conflict and pain is no surprise to you. You sent your son Jesus to the earth to die for our sins, and in doing so he experienced every feeling of pain we have ever and will ever feel. Because of this we can confidently believe this truth: Jesus understands us.

We pray that as these we walk through the holiday season ahead, we will walk with a new confidence that outweighs any pain, lies, discouragement, isolation, grief, or any other negative emotion we will face. May we walk knowing that Jesus has died that we may go in peace, joy, love, and freedom. Would you be with us, directing each of our steps, letting your Holy Spirit guide our conversations, thoughts, and actions. May we experience a new level of joy this season that is not reliant on the circumstances that come but reliant on walking in the truth that you have set us free and blessed us with the ability to love fully and walk in light. We pray that on the hard days we would know you are meeting us here, wiping our tears, understanding our anger, yet working it all together for our good.

Thank you for your steadfast love. Thank you for being unchanging—a firm foundation. Thank you that when we experience shifting grounds during this time, you uphold us and make us strong. Because you have chosen to make us your holy dwelling place, we have the ability to partner with you in loving the people around us with your true love. Help us do this well.

As we step into this day ahead, let us remember that you say, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

*Amen.*



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