

THE BEST THINGS GOING WEEKS 1-4

DAILY THOUGHTS AND SMALL GROUP GUIDE
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The Best Things Going
Week 1
Day 1

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Luke 2:11-15

This week we are starting a new series called "The Best Things Going." Every Christmas there is a scramble for the hot toy of that particular year. Whether it's a Tickle Me Elmo, an iPod, or a Cabbage Patch Doll, every year there is a gift that is the best thing going that year. Yet, when we get right down to it, these hot gifts don't really make much of a difference in our lives. This Christmas we want to be sure that we don't miss out on the very best things going, those things made available to us through Jesus. Over the next four weeks we'll be taking time to notice what Jesus' birth means for our lives.

It's important that we don't forget Christmas is about a real baby being born about two thousand years ago. We can sometimes sentimentalize Christmas and Jesus in such a way that we forget his coming to earth changes everything. The world is not the same place since the birth of Jesus. Jesus has the ability to change our lives too, if we let him.

Don't let this Christmas pass by without taking a series look at the things we have access to because of Jesus. Don't trade in 'the best things going' for the things that merely glitter and shine but don't have any real worth. Don't let this become only an intellectual exercise but use this as a time of honest evaluation of your life. And maybe when Christmas comes this year we'll all have more of 'the best things going' in our lives. Over the next four weeks we will be doing the same thing the shepherds did those thousands of years ago, taking a closer look at this thing we have heard about: the birth of Jesus.

Through the journey and exploration maybe we can become more and more the people God wants us to be.

What are some distractions that happen during the Christmas season that pull your attention away from 'the best things going.'

The Best Things Going
Week 1
Day 2

*"Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
Mark 10: 43-45*

One of the 'best things going' might not be what you think. At first glance it doesn't even look like a good thing, much less one of the best things. The first thing we are looking at is humility.

This word humility can cause a lot of confusion. We tend to think of it in two different ways. We generally think it's good to be humble, to have an attitude that isn't arrogant or conceited. But, we don't want to be *too* humble. Humility is something we often admire, but that we don't really want for ourselves, not completely.

Part of this is because it's a bad thing to be humiliated. We might like the idea of humility and sometimes choose to be humble, but we normally can not stand to be forced into a place of humility. When we are told to be humble or when we are put in a place of humility we rebel against it. Perhaps this is why many of us get a little uncomfortable about this topic of humility.

We need to have a better understanding of what humility means. Humility is not self-abasing or self-criticism. It is not a matter of downplaying our abilities or pretending that we're worse than we really are. Humility, in it's truest form, expresses itself in relationships. The real image of humility is not putting yourself down as much as it's an image of lifting others up. Humility is when we lift others up by serving them.

We see this form of humility in Jesus. Jesus came to earth not to be served but to be the servant of all people. Jesus tells his followers they should not be like the people around them, those who chase after what is in their own best interests, trying to be the one served. Jesus tells all of us that if we want true greatness we must learn to be a great servant. That is humility. But Jesus didn't just talk about it, he lived it out and humbled himself to be a servant himself.

In what ways do you desire humility? In what ways does humility make you uncomfortable?

he Best Things Going
Week 1
Day 3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
John 1:1-5, 10-11, 14*

There is one thing that the people of Jesus' day would have never called God; humble. The word for humble was not a compliment during the first century. In the Greco-Roman world the greatest virtues were those tied to status and control; courage, justice, self-control, and wisdom. The Roman senator and philosopher Seneca expressed this ideal perfectly:

Know, therefore, that a perfect man, full of virtues human and divine, can lose nothing ... The walls which guard the wise man are safe both from flame and assault, they provide no means of entrance---are lofty, impregnable, godlike.

However, the word humility referred to those people so low that they had no status or control. The word in Greek literally means something that is on the ground and it is clear that in Jesus' day there was nothing positive about the term, much less anything divine. Yet, this is exactly how Jesus is described, as humble.

In these passages from the Bible book of John, we see a view of Jesus' birth we normally don't think of when Christmas rolls around. Jesus, God's son, is called the Word of God and he existed from the beginning very beginning of time. Jesus is called the creator, the maker of all things. He is the light of all people that shines in the darkness. The Word of God, the creator, the light of all people, becomes flesh. This is the birth of Jesus.

The son of God, becomes the son of a scared, young girl. The creator of all things becomes a part of creation. The perfecter of all things, the one who shares perfect communion with God, the one who was before all time began and will be after all time ends, wore a diaper. And cried. He needed to be fed and burped. The God who's very word created the world couldn't talk. The God who held the galaxies in his hand had no motor skills at all. The God who set the earth spinning in its orbit couldn't even turn his

own small body over. Jesus' birth is the height of humility. Within the story of Jesus' coming to earth we see the most extreme case of humility ever. God descends to earth in Jesus, he 'con-descends' himself in Jesus. Jesus lowers himself for us in humility and love.

In what ways can you relate to the idea that the best virtues are associated with status and control? How does humility go counter to this idea?

The Best Things Going
Week 1
Day 4

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!
Philippines 2:5-8

One of the greatest ironies about humility is that our own pride leads us to desire and seek praise, glory, and recognition. In short, we desire to occupy the position of God. Yet, the Bible tells us that Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead, Jesus lowered himself to being a servant. The only human ever born with a right to praise and glory turned it all away and became a servant.

During all of our own self-serving and self-seeking we are moving in the opposite direction of Jesus. The example that Jesus gave us is that of servanthood. If there is one great enemy of humility it is pride. And if there is one great enemy of pride, it is servanthood. Servanthood gives us a chance to set ourselves aside. Servanthood gives us an opportunity to put others before ourselves. Servanthood creates chances to be humble.

Yet, even more than just being a servant, Jesus humbled himself even further and allowed himself to die on a cross. It was through this humility of Jesus that we are saved. Jesus' ultimate act of humility is what gives us access to salvation. A life of servanthood is a way of acknowledging that sacrifice. When we serve others, we find that we are truly

alive the way God intended. If you struggle with pride, if humility is just another word that makes you feel angry or guilty, perhaps you need to adopt an attitude of servanthood.

In what ways do you see servant hood and humility tied together? How do you see each in your life?

The Best Things Going
Week 1
Day 5

He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.
Psalm 25:9

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
Matthew 11:28-30

There is something strangely attractive about humility. We are often inspired by people who exemplify humility. When someone is talented, gifted, or blessed in some way, and yet they live their life with humility, we are drawn to them. Jesus understood this well and he calls us to have just such a life. Jesus tells us that one of the reasons to follow him is because his burden is light. If we learn from Jesus and work with him, Jesus tells us that we will find rest and peace. This is because Jesus is gentle and humble in heart.

We read in the Bible that God guides those who are humble, that God teaches them his way. Jesus is humble in heart, he knows the ways of God, and he invites us to follow him. Yet, always remember the path Jesus walks is on the road of humility. The way of Jesus is a path that leads to self-denial, to putting others first, to killing the pride in our lives. The road we must walk to follow after Jesus might not always feel like an easy road, but it is the best road.

Something happens in our lives when we follow this road of humility, something that we might not expect. When we set aside our pride and our need to feel important, we are more able to focus on the things that really matter. When we walk the road of humility we are much less likely to live our lives trying to keep up with the people around us.

When we walk the road of humility we are more willing to forgive other people. When we walk the road of humility we can more and more kill the pride that lives inside of us.

When we walk the road of humility we are walking the road that Jesus walked. Humility is truly one of the best things going.

Do you walk on the road of humility? How might you begin walking on this road this week?

**The Best Things Going
Small Group Guide
Week 1**

1. When you first meet people, what character traits are you most drawn to? Why?
2. Who are some of the most arrogant people in the world? The most humble?
3. In what ways do you feel the pull of wanting attention, praise, or recognition?
4. In what ways do you see servanthood and humility tied together?

Read *Philippines 2:5-8*,

5. We often act like we want to be God, but the Bible tells us that Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. In what ways does Jesus live out this idea in his life?
6. How do pride and servanthood compete in your life? What can you do this week to let humility grow more in your life?
7. Jesus is the ultimate picture of servanthood, even to the point of death. In what ways can you become more of a servant? What will it cost you to do this?

The Best Things Going
Week 2
Day 1

*"I, even I, am he who blots out
your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more."*

Isaiah 43:25

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his
disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."*

*Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of
you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness
of sins."*

Matthew 26:26-28

We are in the second week of a series called "The Best Things Going," where we have been looking at some of the amazing things we have access to because Jesus came to earth. During the Christmas season we can sometimes forget there's a lot more going on than evergreen trees, presents, and, of course, traffic.

But when Jesus came to earth, things changed (ok, maybe not the traffic).

One of the very central things that we have access to because of Jesus is forgiveness. I know what you might be thinking. It just sounds so trite, doesn't it? I mean, we've been hearing this kind of stuff from the big haired, plaster-faced preachers on TV for ages. Forgiveness from God has an almost hollow sound to our sometimes-cynical ears.

It's hard to get an image of what forgiveness means in our lives. God seems to know we have this trouble, and so the Bible gives us an abundance of pictures to grasp. In one Bible passage, God says he will personally blot out our sins, just like we blot out stains in our clothing. In another passage, God says he will separate us from our sins as far as the east is from the west. In yet another, God says that he will sink our sins into the deepest depths of the ocean.

Yet, perhaps the greatest image God gives of forgiveness is communion. Jesus breaks bread, pours wine, and tells his followers to eat in while remembering him. Jesus says that these items represent exactly what our forgiveness costs; his body and his blood. His body, which was given freely for us, and his blood, spilled for the forgiveness of our sins, are seen in these simple items. If you're having trouble picturing what God's forgiveness looks like in your life, remember the bread and the wine. Remember the body and the blood of Jesus.

To what degree do you have trouble picturing God's forgiveness? What images might help you remember God's great forgiveness?

The Best Things Going
Week 2
Day 2

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.
Genesis 3:8-10, 21

Forgiveness is a central theme of the Bible. All throughout the Bible we read about the redemptive work of God to rescue his creation. In a world that so often hates and destroys, God loves and forgives. In the very beginning of the Bible, the first man and woman come face to face with a God who loves and forgives.

Adam and Eve deliberately disobey God's one restriction. All at once, things change. The first people now hide from God instead of seeking him out. They are embarrassed at who they are and how they were made. In response, Adam and Eve cover themselves with leaves out of shame.

God walks into the garden looking for Adam and Eve. God knows that they have disobeyed him, but he gives them a chance to come before him openly. Adam and Eve, instead, both try to place the blame on someone else, shifting the responsibility of the sin. It's not a terribly encouraging story and it might not sound like a story of forgiveness, but you must notice what God does in response to Adam and Eve's actions.

God comes into the garden, seeking Adam and Eve, but they were hiding. When they finally came into the light of day, they are wearing leaves to cover their nakedness. It

grieves God that they have disobeyed him. Yet, even in the midst of their defiance, God makes a provision to meet their needs. The very first animal to die in all of creation was at the hands of God when he made clothing out of skins for Adam and Eve.

There is an immediate consequence to Adam and Eve's sin, a consequence that has nothing to do with forgiveness or resentment. The punishment of the first sin, the first time people strayed from what God desired for them, was not a matter of whether there was forgiveness or not. When there is sin, there are natural consequences. Forgiveness doesn't take away consequences of our actions but it allows us to have a whole and right relationship once more with God.

God will meet us where we are, and will provide for us where we are. Why? Because God longs to have a whole and right relationship with us. There is an idea that a perfect God can't be near us because of our imperfection. Yet, over and over again in the Bible we see God get right down in the grim and dirt of the world for people who completely blow it. God longs to have us come to him for forgiveness. God has gone more than halfway in meeting us. He has come all the way.

How has God provided for your needs right where you are? How has God entered into your sins to give forgiveness?

The Best Things Going
Week 2
Day 3

For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Romans 7:11, 24-25

In order to fully understand forgiveness we must first grasp our need for forgiveness. After all, forgiveness is only important to those who know their deep need for it. It is because of our sin that we deeply need the forgiveness of God.

The word 'sin' has become church jargon which, for many, has lost all sense of meaning. To many people 'sin' has come to mean pretty much anything we think is wrong or bad,

like when you break the law or sleep through church or don't finish all your veggies. This concept of sin is strangely attractive because as long as sin is just a list of 'really bad things,' than I'm in pretty good shape. I may have messed up, but it's not like we're mass murderers or anything. It's not like we walk around kicking puppies and tripping old ladies. All and all, we're decent enough people, right?

The Bible talks about sin differently. The New Testament portion of the Bible was originally written in Greek and the word for sin is *hamartano* (pronounced ha-mar-tane-o). This word *hamartano* is a military term that means to miss the mark or to wander off the path. *Hamartano* means that our hearts and minds are not in line with the heart and mind of God.

One of the things that Jesus made really clear is that sin is not just a list keeping mentality. Sin is not just about doing the right things or saying the right things. It's about something more: about the mind and heart of God.

This *hamartano*, this sin, has infected all of us like a plague. It's inside us all. Forgiveness, then, is something we all need. The forgiveness that can come only from God.

How do you normally think about sin? How might this effect your concept of forgiveness?

**The Best Things Going
Week 2
Day 4**

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Colossians 1:13-14

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John 3:16-17

Forgiveness. I think this is normally easier to hear than it is to believe. I mean, I want to believe that God has forgiven me, but it's hard, because I know me. I know my messes

and I know my heart. Yet, the Bible tells us this was the great purpose of God in sending Jesus to earth. Forgiveness was the reason Jesus was born and it's the reason that he died.

Jesus came to show us the greatness of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness that is greater than our sins. God's forgiveness is about new beginnings, and new life.

So what does this mean for us? For some, this might be the first time you are really investigating the love and forgiveness of God. Maybe what this means that you sit down with your Bible and read more about how God's forgiveness is bigger than our sins. If you're looking for a place to start, read the Bible book of John, which gives an account of Jesus' life.

Maybe it's time to start some really serious conversations about what God's forgiveness means for you. Maybe it's time to talk about what the next step is to grow closer to God. Perhaps you've never embraced this forgiveness in your life before.

Take some time today to pray to God, asking that his forgiveness become real in your life. If there is a conversation that you need to have, engage in that conversation this week.

The Best Things Going
Week 2
Day 5

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

Jesus told a story to his followers about a man who borrowed an obscene amount of money from a king. I mean a ton, more than he could ever repay. The king brings in this man and tells him to pay back all of his debts, but of course, he can't. It would be like one of us having to pay off the national debt. It just ain't going to happen. He begs the king to have mercy on him, and the king relents. The king forgives the man all of his debt, even though the amount was unbelievable.

This newly forgiven man walks out of the palace and soon runs into one of his servants. This servant owed the forgiven man just a little bit of money, no more than a week's salary, which he couldn't pay. He begged the newly forgiven man to have mercy on him, but no mercy is given. The amount was hardly anything compared to the national-debt-

sized-loan of the first man, but there is no forgiveness. He takes the servant and throws him in prison.

The king gets wind of this:

"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'"

It can be so easy to hold onto bitterness, pain, and anger when what we are called to respond to God's forgiveness with forgiveness ourselves. We are called by God to forgive others just as God has forgiven us. The sins in my life and your life cost more to forgive than we will ever know. It is a debt that is extreme. It is a debt that is larger than we can imagine. It is a debt that we can never repay. But it is a debt that God gladly pays.

Theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back -- in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

When we withhold our forgiveness then we do not get to enjoy the vast forgiveness of God. Our response to God's divine forgiveness should be to forgive one another.

Do you need to give forgiveness to someone this week?

The Best Things Going
Week 2
Small Group Guide

1. What is something you did as a child that you had to apologize for?
2. What are some of the most memorable public apologies you can think of?

3. How do you normally think about the forgiveness of God? What shapes this impression?
4. Do you tend to hold grudges or do you tend to forgive easily?

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

5. What is your reaction to the story that Jesus told?
6. Who are you in this story? What character can you relate to most?
7. Is there someone you need to forgive this week? What are you going to do in response to God's forgiveness?



The Best Things Going
Week 3
Day 1

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 14:27

We are in the middle of a series called “The Best Things Going” where we’ve been looking at some of the amazing things we have access to because of Jesus. This week we will look at how the coming of Jesus can bring us peace.

It doesn't take long for life to spin into chaos. We often find ourselves in the midst of a whirlwind of activity, stress, and disarray. If there's one thing this world is running short of, it's peace. Whether its wars on the other side of the world or the wars that rage inside each of us, we all could use more peace.

Jesus offers us peace. It's not peace as the world gives, or as the world understands it. Peace as the world gives is a peace that is coercive, enforced under threat of retaliation or punishment. Peace as the world understands it is external, fleeting, and superficial. The peace of this world always teeters on the edge, needing nothing more than a small push to send it spiraling away from us. But the peace Jesus offers is something more.

Jesus gives a peace that is deep, real, and lasting. It's a peace that penetrates into our very souls so we don't have to pretend, but we can truly live our lives without fear, without worry, and without anxiousness. We are assured that no matter what happens around us, and no matter what happens in our lives, we have access to the peace of God. The peace that Jesus gives endures, no matter what storms rages around us.

As we approach Christmas, remember that with Jesus we have true peace that fights back fear and anxiousness. May we always remember that Jesus came to earth to give us peace: peace with each other, peace within ourselves, and peace with God.

How does the peace of the world differ from the peace of God?

The Best Things Going
Week 3
Day 2

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you.
James 4: 7-8

We are talking this week about peace, one of the best things going. If we want to know the peace of God we need to understand that God is near us.

Long distance relationships. There is a reason why not many people attempt such interactions. Most of us know someone who has tried to have a long distance relationship, and often these connections seem to break down. What is it about distance that makes it so hard to maintain a close and intimate relationship? Is being near to someone a magic tonic to ensure a healthy relationship? Surely not. But there are some things that nearness affords that distance does not.

It is hard to communicate sincerely, earnestly, and genuinely from a distance. We are bombarded everyday with the cold and calculated ‘sincerity’ of the world to the point that we can become numb to what it means to be real. At a distance it’s hard to really express true and sincere regret. It’s hard to display our remorse from afar. It’s also hard to feel forgiveness from a distance.

There is something so essential about being near another person. Whether it’s a handshake, a pat of the back or a warm embrace; life is best lived with closeness. It’s in these interactions that we often find it easiest to apologize and to forgive.

People can be in the same room and still have an awful distance between them. With arms folded over their chests, people can ensure no one is ever near them. There are people who will never truly know peace.

There are other people whose arms are strangely long, reaching distances that seem impossible. There are people who create peace.

The same is true of our relationship with God. It’s hard to ask forgiveness, to be remorseful when we hold God at a distance. It’s hard to receive the forgiveness of God when we are far off. It’s hard to know God’s peace from a distance. But God has amazingly long arms and wants to embrace each and every one of us. God wants to be near. God never folds his arms over his chest, never creates distance, and is always waiting to bridge the gap between us. God always want to give us peace.

In what ways does the closeness of God give us access to peace?

The Best Things Going
Week 3
Day 3

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

1 John 4:8-10, 18

God sent his son into the world to save us, to bring peace between God and man. I wonder if we sometimes overlook how amazing this really is. There are times when we are moving just too fast to notice what this means for us. God, through his son, came to bring us peace.

He didn't have to. God didn't have to come to earth. He didn't have to save us at all, at least not the way we think about 'having to.' There was no mandate that said God must save us. There is no mandate that says God must do anything. There was no obligation on God's part. He simply didn't have to save us.

I wonder sometimes if God had to bring us peace the way he did. Its conceivable salvation might have come some other way, through some other means. God's nearness to us could have at least been more abstract, like the nearness of a cloud in the sky or the horizon at the edge of vision. I wonder if God had to draw near to us to bring us peace.

Maybe God did have to bring us peace this way. I don't mean there are some rules or laws that state what God must and must not do. Such thoughts are foolish. Maybe God had to be true to who he is. God is love. It's who he is. This isn't just something God does. Love is part of who God is. It's a core part of who God is and so it's part of everything that God does. And so maybe God did have to save us, to bring us peace. Not because of who we are or because we deserve to be saved, but because it is the very nature of God to save. It's the very nature of God to bring peace.

As we celebrate Christmas, remember that it's because of the birth of Jesus that we have peace with God. Maybe God had to draw near to us as a person so that we might be able to have his peace.

What's clear is God did come near to us to bring us peace. God choose out of his love to save us. God did send his son, Jesus, to set things right again, to make peace.

How does God's love drive out fear and give us peace?

The Best Things Going
Week 3
Day 4

The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.

Psalm 145: 17-19

The child was lost. He had not started out that way, but he wandered off and now was completely and totally lost. There were other people around, he was actually surrounded. But he was also alone. The painful acid of panic began to rise in his throat. His heart pounded and his eyes welled with tears. He was lost and he knew it.

Where had it gone wrong, he thought wildly. Did he take a wrong turn? Did he move too far ahead or linger too far behind? His head spun as he looked to the left and right in a frantic attempt to find what he was searching for. And what he was searching for was his father.

Here, alone and scared, this young boy felt vulnerable and exposed. He could feel his muscles quake and was soon he was overcome with sobs. Everyone that passed by didn't even give a sideward glance. No one seemed to notice his plight, no one seemed to care that he was alone. Swallowing back his tears, his breath stuttering, the child began to search for his missing father.

At first his search was erratic, his small feet stumbling to and fro as he dodged between the pressing mass of people. His small body did not give him the ability to see very far and so he simply ran back and forth during his frantic search. But he was small and grew weary. His small muscles were tired and he ached with fatigue. His lungs burned and left him panting. His feet were blistered. His entire body was exhausted. Abandoning his search, he lowered himself to the ground to rest.

Looking around from his lower vantage point the boy began to take notice of the other people moving around him. He noticed others resting on the ground nearby.

"I'm lost," the boy said timidly to a nearby man who reclined against a wall. "I don't know where my father is," the boy concluded.

"I was lost once," the man said almost absentmindedly. "That was so long ago I'd almost forgotten." The man spoke rather cheerfully, as if remembering something pleasant.

“Really,” the boy said, hope revived in his heart. “How did you find your way home?”

“Never did. Just found a comfortable spot here and made myself at home.”

“What are you telling that boy?” another man broke into the conversation. “You know there’s no such thing as ‘lost or found,’ only what you make for yourself. You listen to me boy,” the second man said sagely, “there is no father, there is no home, and there is no being found. There is no peace. Just make your way here the best you can.”

“But there is a father, there is a home,” the boy said. “I was there not long ago but I’ve lost my way.” The boy was once more close to hysterics. “I just want to go home.”

In what ways have you been like the lost child in this story?

The Best Things Going
Week 3
Day 5

You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears to my cry for relief." You came near when I called you, and you said, "Do not fear." O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life.

Lamentations 3:56-58

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Luke 19:9-10

The boy remained lost and alone on the streets for a long time. There were times he suspected what the men on the street told him was false. A part of him despaired at what they had told him. A part of him despaired because he was afraid that maybe they were

right. Maybe it was only wishful thinking. Maybe home was just a fantasy and maybe he was a fool to dream about it. But he did dream about it. He did dream about home.

But, he stopped searching for it. Somewhere in the core of his being he knew there was more to life than the dusty street and his own lonely thoughts. Yet, he stopped searching for the father he once considered lost. Instead he focused on surviving in this new place that he found himself. He carved out a place on the street to call home and resigned to live his days beside the huddled, isolated people around him.

Days turned to months and the thoughts of home became even more distant. Months turned to years and the only remnant of his home was a pale ghostly image, half remembered and fully doubted. His own busy tasks of survival pushed all other thoughts from him. There was no peace. There was no joy. All of life had become survival. And time passed.

One day a new person came down the street the boy (now a young man) called home. There was nothing remarkable about the way the man looked, in fact he looked as poor and destitute as anyone else on the dirty road. Yet, he didn't talk like the others. He didn't simply concede to the streets and make a home wherever he could find one.

"I have come to bring you home," this new man said to those living in the streets. "I have come from the father and will bring you back to him. I have come to bring you peace."

Many on the street simply mocked and ignored him. The young man heard him and felt once more like the child he was, lost and frantic to find his way back home. It was when he heard this man talking that he remembered his own longing for home, for a place to belong and for someone to watch over him. He remembered his desire to be loved and for peace.

"Where is this home?" the young man asked hesitantly.

"Follow me and I will show you," this new man said. "I have been seeking you. I have come to bring you back with me to my father's house."

"I . . . I," the young man began, stuttering over his own fear and excitement. "I don't know where it is, this home I've lost. I don't even know how I lost my way."

"I will lead you there. Follow me, and I will give you peace. "

This is the invitation that all of us receive from Jesus, this different man on the road of our lives. Each of us has found ourselves lost along the way, lost and alone in a place we didn't plan or expect to be. We all have found ourselves too comfortable in a world that is not our home. Jesus came to seek those who are lost (which is all of us). Jesus came to bring us back to the home of the father (we're all invited). And Jesus comes offering peace as he walks with us on the road of our lives.

How does Jesus' birth give us peace? In what ways do you need this peace?

**The Best Things Going
Week 3
Small Group Guide**

1. During the holiday season, what causes you the most stress?
2. What do you think of when you hear the word 'peace'?

3. What does a life look like that is marked by peace?
4. How do you define peace?

Read: *John 14:27; 1 John 4:8-10, 18*

5. How does the peace of God differ from the peace of this world?
6. What fears in your life do you need God's peace to drive away?
7. How does Jesus' birth give us access to peace (between each other, within ourselves, and between us and God)? In what ways do you need this peace?



The Best Things Going
Week 4
Day 1

Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.
Psalm 31:24

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.
Psalm 62:5

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.
Proverbs 13:12

We are in the last week of a series called “The Best Things Going” where we’ve been looking at the most important things we have access to with the coming of Jesus. Christmas is a time of excitement, with parties, gifts, and other festivities. Yet, this series is about why Christmas really matters. It is about the deep things that Christmas brings. This week we will be looking at one of the most important things the coming of Jesus gives. Hope.

Hope is essential to life. This might seem like an overstatement, but I really think it’s a fact. Imagine what our lives would look like without hope. Imagine a marriage beginning without the hope it will last. Imagine a child being born without the hope they will have a life worth living. Imagine waking up without the hope of a new day.

Marriages without hope.
Children without hope.
Every new endeavor without hope.
People living without hope.

There are countless people who live in this reality. When people lose hope, life becomes a practice of futility. Everyday is the same. Every dawn rises to same failures. Every sunset falls over a world of pointlessness.

People live in this hell everyday. I mean hell literally: a place where God is not. It’s a sort of half-life, a half existence, and it’s an impossible place to be for long. The amazing thing isn’t that hope is such an important thing in our lives; I think we can all agree on that point. The amazing thing is God takes so much effort to be sure we have access to hope. God sends his son Jesus to earth to give us hope. That’s what we celebrate with Christmas, the breaking of hope into our world.

When we have the hope of God we truly are able to find rest. We are able to be strong. We will have an existence like a tree of life. That is the hope of God.

Is there a part of your life that can use more hope? In what ways do you need to remember the great hope of God?

**The Best Things Going
Week 4
Day 2**

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!
Romans 7: 21-25

For some of us, hope seems distant because of the sins in our lives. The Bible tells us everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. Yet, we're also told sin doesn't have the final word. Some of us lose hope because we wallow in our sins.

Sometimes we stand in the middle of the messes we make. It's almost as if we enjoy loitering in our own disasters. We might even forget how much they bothered us at first and become resigned to the idea this is how life is, we just have to live and sleep in our own mess. Sometimes we wallow in our sins. We get mired down. After a while we even lose the will to get out of the mess of our sins, partly because we have lost the hope we ever can.

We weren't meant to simply live in our sins. All of us long, deep in ourselves, to be released of this mess. We long to be released of the wretchedness of ourselves. We long to have a new beginning and to become new people. We all have a longing for forgiveness. It's the bedrock of our hope. We are not locked into being who we are now. We have access to forgiveness that is deeper than our sins.

“What a wretched person I am, who will rescue me . . .”

This verse from the Bible really speaks to the heart of what we all understand in our own lives. At one time or another we all have uttered a statement such as this in our hearts. Sin has a way of creeping in and twisting us into wretched people. Yet, it's not the end of the story. It's actually not even the end of the verse. The writer of this verse, Paul, knows something that makes all the difference. The something Paul knows is not really a something at all but a someone. Paul knows the person of Jesus. The reason Jesus came to earth was so that we can have the full forgiveness of God. With the forgiveness of God we have hope.

How is forgiveness and hope tied together in your life? What does it mean for you to have access to such hope?

The Best Things Going
Week 4
Day 3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1: 1-5,10-14

This time of year, even with all of its celebrations, can be the most hopeless. The hours of daylight grow slim. It feels like it gets dark at noon. More and more of our time is spent in darkness. Yet, there is another kind of darkness that has nothing to do with when the sun sets. It's the darkness of desperation. It's the gloom of despair. It's the shadow of living without hope. Some people know what it's like to live in the shadow of hopelessness.

Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Jesus, God in flesh. Jesus came to earth to be the Light of the World and to free us from hopelessness. On the day we remember the birth of Jesus Christ, we are reminded of the hope we have in him. We are not left to wallow in desperation but we have a bright hope for tomorrow. We are not abandoned in hopelessness but have the great anticipation of the promises of God.

With the coming of Jesus we have hope.

It's a hope paid for on a cross. Jesus came to earth and lived a perfect life so that we might have the hope of salvation and the hope of becoming children of God. This is what we remember every week we gather together at CCC by celebrating Communion. Every week we eat a piece of bread and remember the body of Jesus that was nailed to a cross. Every week we drink a cup of juice and remember the blood that was shed by Jesus. It was this body and blood that saves us from the darkness of our sins and ushers us into a new hope. With the birth of Jesus a new hope enters the world. With the death of Jesus we have access to that hope. With the resurrection of Jesus we have the hope of new life.

How are Christmas (remembering Jesus' birth) and Communion (remembering Jesus' death) linked together? In what ways does this give hope to your life?

The Best Things Going
Week 4
Day 4

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.
Revelation 21:4

C.S. Lewis once wrote a collection of children's books called the Chronicles of Narnia. This collection has gained quite a bit of steam in recent years because movies are being made once again about the fantastic world of Narnia. The collection is about a far off and magical land where four children find themselves experiencing the adventures of their lives.

The very last book in the collection is titled The Last Battle. In the final paragraph of this final book in the classic Narnia series, C. S. Lewis phrases so well a picture of hope that we find in the Bible.

“The things that happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world had only been the cover and the title page – now at last – now at last – they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read – which goes on for ever – in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

The reason we have hope is because death is not the end. Death is only the beginning chapter of the Great Story, which goes on forever.

And nothing can separate us from the one who created us. Nothing can separate us from our gracious loving God. Paul writes in the Bible in the book of Romans: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

That is a promise worth hanging on to. There is nothing any one can do that is beyond the reach of God. He longs to be with us forever. That is our great hope. It’s a hope that can overcome anything, even death.

What is your reaction to the idea that even death cannot destroy our hope in God?

The Best Things Going
Week 4
Day 5

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 5:1-5

We all put our hopes into something. It's part of what it means to be human, I think, to place our hopes on something that is not yet fully realized. When we look at our futures we normally have something we forward to.

Some people put all their hope in a career, in their ability to make money and secure their future. Some people put all their hope in a marriage, hoping the relationship with a spouse will fulfill the deep needs of their heart. Some people put their hope in entertainment, though they might not say so directly. They live jumping from one activity to another, always hoping they can find satisfaction.

The list goes on. There are so many things we put our hopes in, but these things ultimately cannot handle the weight of such hopes. They are like bridges built out of straw. When anything of significance moves over it, they crumble under the weight. These are not bad things, but they just aren't strong enough to support all of our hopes.

There is only one place we can put our hopes that doesn't disappoint: in God. I know it sounds like the Sunday School answer, but it's part of the reality of our lives. We were built to have our hope and trust in God. God is big enough for our grandest hopes. God is strong enough for our most extravagant dreams. Turn to God and he will draw near to you.

Even our struggles are intended to give us hope. Even during the difficult times of our lives God longs for us to develop a deep hope in Him. Put your hope in God. It is a hope that does not disappoint.

What are you putting your hope in most? What is one way this week you can put your hope more fully in God?

The Best Things Going
Week 4
Small Group Guide

1. How would you define hope? What does it mean to have hope?
2. What are some things that you hope for in your life?

3. Do you tend to be a hopeful person or a pessimist?
4. How would you describe a life without hope?

Read Psalm 62:5, Romans 5:1-5, and Romans 8:38-39

5. When you look at your life, what are some things that you put your hope in?
6. In what ways have you been disappointed by the things you've put your hope in?
7. What is one way this week you can put your hope more fully in God?

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