

Christmas 2021 Reading Guide

Historically, the church has celebrated Christmas as a season rather than a single day marking the birth of Christ. In fact, the notion of the Twelve Days of Christmas comes not from a song filled with strange and grandiose gifts but from the twelve days from December 25 to January 5 marked by feasting and culminating in the celebration of Epiphany of January 6. Epiphany is the celebration of the traditional arrival of the Magi to offer their gifts to the young Messiah.

While few of us would be ready to forsake our Christmas morning traditions, we offered that bit of history to encourage you to think of Christmas as just that, a season. We are all likely conditioned to shift gears once December 26 arrives and begin planning for New Year's Eve celebrations or thinking of the projects that wait for us on the other side of the holiday festivities. But just as we have been waiting in anticipation during the Advent season these weeks leading up to Christmas, it would be of great benefit to our hearts and minds to spend more than a hectic day filled with wrapping paper and baked meat celebrating Christ's birth.

What if we committed to intentionally celebrating, even if only in small ways, the Christmas season for the week following December 25? At all of our congregations, this Christmas Eve, we spent time considering the invitation of Jesus in Matthew 11 to come and find rest for our souls as we yoke ourselves to him. What if we practiced this rest with measured consistency over these next few days?

Below you'll find several items. There are specific passages that we would encourage you to spend time reading and prayerfully meditating on this next week. There are some practical suggestions for ways that you can practice the soul-deep rest that Jesus offers. For many of us, these will feel like disciplines. They are that. But we believe that the payoff for quieting our minds and lives during this season will be tremendous, especially as we transition into a brand new year.

This is not a to-do list. There is no set schedule for reading these passages or engaging in these practices. It may be one verse or multiple passages each day, one practice, or several. But we would encourage you to write down answers to the questions that are asked below and invite others to participate with you in the various practices you hope to implement. The rest that Jesus offers us far outstrips a nap or a quiet moment with a cup of coffee (as wonderful and necessary as those items often are). Because of that, our hope is that this Guide will help you come to Jesus and experience the true rest that only He affords.

28 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

2 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.

3 You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

4 For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2-7

1 Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

2 I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.”

3 As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.

4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.

5 The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

7 I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

8 I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.

10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalms 16

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

3 He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,

for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") 16 For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

John 1:1-18

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 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 21:1-4

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you. 13 Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, 14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 15 For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. 16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

A few questions for reflection:

1. How am I currently doing (spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally)?
2. How would I honestly evaluate the current state of the relationships I hold most dear?
3. What did 2021 reveal about the spiritual disciplines and values of my life?
4. What fears, anxieties, hurts, frustrations, or discouragements (if any) am I still holding onto as this year comes to a close?
5. What are some things I can thank God for as I look back over this past year?
6. Even if 2022 looks a lot like 2021, what should my priorities be and what am I doing now to intentionally prepare my heart and mind to maintain those priorities?
7. What am I praying for, moving into this new year, that is consistent with the will of God and that only God could do?

A few practices to pursue intentional rest over the next seven days:

1. Take a week off from all social media.
2. Set aside some time to look back over each month of the year. As you do so, write down defining things from that month (good, bad, difficult, painful, heartbreaking, joyful, etc) on the left side of a page. Then, on the right side of the page, reflect on the ways God was present, helpful, and faithful, and write those items down, as well.
3. Write out 5-10 specific things you would like to see God do in 2022. Place your list somewhere that will serve as a reminder throughout the upcoming year. Commit to praying for those things daily.
4. Map out the last seven days of this year to include intentional, creative ideas for rest, reflection, and thanksgiving.
5. Read a book like Gentle & Lowly or Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy.
6. Spend the last seven days of the year memorizing a passage of Scripture. We would encourage you to choose one verse (or several) from the suggested passages listed above.
7. Write handwritten notes to those who have influenced you toward greater growth and maturity in Christ.