



Our Advent series *beloved* is about focusing on the greatest love story ever told, the love of God for us, His creation. God loved us so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die on our behalf. Christmas is a celebration of the beginning of that story. The book Song of Songs captures the deep passion of those yoked in marriage, but it's also a metaphor for Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. Song of Songs 2:16 says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." That is how Jesus feels about us. God is coming over the hills to reach you, to save you, to bring you home...and to call you His *beloved*.

ALL IS FORGIVEN • Isa. 52:7-10; Col. 1:9-14 • Tim McConnell • Dec. 18, 2016

The Beloved comes. In this imaginative walk toward Christmas we call Advent, He's right around the corner now! And as our Lord draws near to us, we feel a little nervous, as we spoke about two weeks ago. Am I ready? Jesus is coming! We can tend to think we need to have everything in order before He arrives, like a bride preparing for a wedding. I hoped to lose that ten pounds. I hoped to change this or that. I wanted to be perfectly put together. Some of that anxiety is captured in the way we look at Santa Claus—"He's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out..." I have to admit, I've been terrorizing my own boys with that song this month! After a while all you have to do is look at them when they're misbehaving and start humming the tune! Jesus is coming. I'd love to be ready. But Jesus calls out, "Don't worry! All is forgiven!" Forgiveness. Jesus has won our forgiveness; Jesus has purchased our forgiveness. And I think it's a gift we leave behind sometimes. It's a gift we fail to open. And I'm not a guy to leave gifts unopened! I crawl around under the tree, behind the chair, down to the very bottom of the stocking...I don't want to leave a gift behind. Don't leave forgiveness behind. Sometimes we fail to receive the forgiveness won by Jesus Christ. Maybe sometimes it is a difficult gift to receive. But we need it.

At the end of the week, we will have a pretty big celebration. There will be lights and candles and bells and songs and fudge and presents and cookies and fudge...and fudge...all kinds of stuff. We will have all those things. But we don't celebrate those things. We don't celebrate the songs and the feelings and the sweets. We have those things in order to celebrate something else, and what we celebrate is very clear: "For he [God the Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loved [the Beloved], in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:13-14) You can let Jesus in; you can open the door to Him. You can allow the light of Christ to come closer to you than it has in the past. You can receive the gift—in Him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That's what Christmas is all about.

We need forgiveness. That's a point I'm not really going to argue. I think we all know that one. I think we know we need forgiveness. What I'm going to argue is that we are slow to receive forgiveness. We don't receive the gift of forgiveness. We leave it behind. Why? Because it is stuck in our heads that we have to get ourselves right first, then meet Jesus. We probably had bad parents singing "He's making a list and

checking it twice." Our friends in Georgia with kids at our same stage had a way of talking about Saturday night bath time. They called it "wash up for Jesus" night. We all started saying it, then starting thinking—maybe that's not the best thing! That's not a phrase we want our kids to absorb. It is already our tendency to stay away from God, to steer clear of Jesus, because we don't want Him to see the mess we're in. We think we need to wash up first. But Jesus is all about the mess.

Isaiah 52 foretells the coming of Jesus. I'll share the ESV translation: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' The voice of your watchmen—they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy; for eye to eye they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem." (Isaiah 52:7-9 ESV) The beautiful feet are the feet of Jesus – the feet the forgiven woman washed with her own tears and hair, the feet of good news, of one with authority to announce the reign of God, with authority to publish salvation. The watchmen have been watching and waiting to see these feet come over the hills and into the city. Then eye to eye, face to face, they see Jesus; they see the return of the Lord. And then what happens? "Break forth into singing, you waste places" the ESV says. Or as the NIV puts it here "Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem." (Isaiah 52:9)

"Jesus is coming," they might have thought. "Let's fix these ruins. We don't want Him to see the ruins, the waste places." But that's exactly what Jesus is coming to see. Here are the watchmen on the tower looking for the return of the Lord. Over the hill He comes, the beautiful feet of Him bearing good news. "Hey! Fix the ruins! He's coming! Shouldn't we fix the ruins?" "No. Just leave them." "These stones are a shame. These waste places are an embarrassment. Why don't we fix them now, quick!" "No." "Why not?" "Because that's exactly what He's coming to do." "I can't come to Jesus," we think. "I can't allow the light of Christ into my life. I can't start going to church or showing up at a missional community meeting or a small group. I can't go to MOPS or a Women's Bible Study on Tuesday morning." Why not? "Because my life's too ruinous and messy; filled with waste places. It's all too discombobulated. I'd be ashamed. I have to recombobulate it all first." No you don't. The mess is

exactly what Jesus is coming to see. The waste places are exactly where Jesus intends to bring healing. "Oh, I can't allow the light of Christ to shine on that." Yes you can. Yes, you must. He's the one come to put it all back together. Jesus came to enter your mess.

Just look at how God enters the world. If I were God sending my only-begotten Son into the world I had made to fix it, I might have done it differently. At the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London in 2012, James Bond went himself to Buckingham Palace to personally escort Queen Elizabeth. They hopped into a helicopter together and after a tour of the city of London with cheers in every quarter, the hovered over the stadium, and Bond and the Queen both jumped out to parachute in before 80,000 raucous attendees with almost a billion watching on TV around the world! I'm not sure she actually jumped... But an entry like that would make sense for the Son of God entering creation, don't you think?

How did God enter? How did Jesus come? "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given." God descended into the womb of Mary. God was born a child. The Eternal and Almighty God was cradled helplessly in the arms of Mary, born to Mary and Joseph, themselves in a helpless moment. Away from home, they were refugees –powerless, surviving on the haphazard kindness of strangers. Jesus' birth was announced by angels, not to a king, not to the Emperor of Rome or the Satraps of Persia, or even to the Chief Priests of Jerusalem, but to a group of shepherds in the fields. Randy Alcorn pointed out some years ago that although David himself was a shepherd before becoming king, by the time of Jesus' birth shepherds were outcasts: "In Christ's day, shepherds stood on the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder. They shared the same unenviable status as tax collectors and dung sweepers." Some rabbinical writings said shepherds were not to be trusted – if you buy something from them assume it's been stolen. There was no obligation to help a shepherd who fell into a pit. Here is Jesus – God's own Son, born to a humble couple in a manger, a feeding stall, a cave full of livestock, announced to shepherds. Jesus is determined to prove He is not afraid of the mess. Jesus wants us to know, we need not try to set all things straight. We need only let Him in. He intends to enter the mess.

We fail to receive forgiveness because we don't want Jesus to enter our mess. But it's from the ruins and the waste places we sing with joy. All of that was the first point. The second point is this: We also fail to

receive forgiveness because, even though Christ has forgiven us, we will not forgive ourselves. Paul and Timothy write to the church in Colossae, We pray for you, "since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you." (Colossians 1:9) They prayed that the church would have full knowledge, full wisdom, full understanding of what God has done. You see, as Pastor Tim Keller explains in his book, *Hidden Christmas*, the message of Christmas is good news, not good advice. "Advice is counsel about what you must do. News is a report about what has already been done... These Gospel narratives are telling you not what you should do but what God has done. The birth of the Son of God into the world is a gospel, good news, an announcement. You don't save yourself. God has come to save you" (pp. 21, 22-23). We pray, say Paul and Timothy, that you would know this, that you would believe this, that you would accept this. God has forgiven you in Christ, God has changed your status in Christ. You are not unacceptable, unqualified, unforgiven. You are redeemed. So, they say, we pray that you would let this sink in and give "...joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. 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 1:12-14) Why do they have to pray so hard for the people to understand this? Because no matter how many times we hear it, we don't believe it. We don't believe forgiveness is actually possible. We continue to damn ourselves with shame and condemnation instead of accepting and believing the forgiveness of God met in Jesus Christ.

Pastor of Hillsong Church, Brian Houston, writes: "One of the greatest obstacles to enjoying the blessings God grants us is the heavy weight of shame... Shame isolates us and weighs on us, burdening us with the past in ways that try to sabotage our glorious future... You can live thinking that you owe it to yourself to feel bad about things that have gone on before. And I'm not saying you should ever take your past sins lightly. What I am saying is that there's real hope in Jesus. Your focus should be on following Christ, not on looking over your shoulder and regretting what you can't change. Shame is a prison, but the door to your cell is open. Jesus calls you to follow him in the freedom of grace." (*Live, Love, Lead*, p. 95-97) Shall we continue to condemn ourselves when Christ has already won our forgiveness? Let's not leave this gift unopened.

We miss forgiveness because we don't want Jesus to see our mess. We miss forgiveness because we would rather condemn ourselves. Finally, third point, we fail to receive forgiveness because it is a hard gift to receive. Our pride stops us. Some gifts are hard to receive, because to receive them is to admit your need. Maybe you have been in a place of financial distress or debt. Someone helped you. It's hard to receive that gift. Our pride doesn't want to be in the position of receiving. It whispers in our ear, "Just a little more effort and we can clean this all up. Just a few more days and you'll find a way to fix the ruins, to repair the waste places. Don't say yes to Jesus. You can make it on your own. You can do this!" We are embarrassed to know that God had to intervene on our behalf. God is not embarrassed. Christ is not embarrassed. Jesus came to address the mess. Jesus came to administer amazing grace, to forgive you even where you condemn yourself. Jesus came to bring you home. There's no shame in where He found you. He knew where you were. He knew the ruins and the waste places of your life. That's how He knew where to go to find you! Jesus came to save us from our sins. It is not your sufficiency that will allow you to meet Christ, but your insufficiency that makes room for Him to come and stand in the ruins, plant His feet in the waste places and begin a song of eternal joy. The greatest adventure, the fullest life, begins with humble acceptance of the gift of forgiveness found in the Savior.

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STUDY GUIDE

"All Is Forgiven"

Isaiah 52:7-10; Colossians 1:9-14

Start It

- Literature gives us characters stuck in between this world and the next when they are unforgiven. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Jacob Marley is the first ghost to appear. He warns Ebenezer Scrooge to turn and repent. Marley is doomed to wander the earth never resting, dragging the weight of his sins behind him. This is not a biblical characterization of life after death, but it is an illustration of how we can get stuck in an unforgiven state. We can feel faded out, like ghosts, wondering why we can't feel the forgiveness we know Christ has won.

Study It

- Read Isaiah 52:7-10 (ESV—the NIV inexplicably made the pronoun in verse 7 plural). Whose feet are on the mountains bringing good news? What indications do you have in the passage to defend your claim? Who has authority to say the things this messenger says?
- Read Colossians 1:9-12. What do Paul and Timothy pray for these people? What do Paul and Timothy want for them? What effect does knowledge of God have on us according to this passage?
- Read Colossians 1:12-14. Where does our 'qualification' come from? What does that word mean, do you think? What has been done for us, and by Whom?
- Why did we need to be rescued (v. 13)? When did God rescue us and bring us from darkness into the Kingdom of the Son?
- How do we receive forgiveness? What can we do to receive it? Does God's forgiveness depend on our action? If we fail to feel forgiven, what should we do?

Pray It

God our Father in heaven, we give You joyful thanks. You have qualified us to share in the inheritance of Your people in the kingdom of light. You have rescued us from the tyranny of darkness and carried us into a new life. We have this life in Jesus Christ, your Beloved Son. Fill us today with all knowledge and wisdom from You, that we may know and believe, and truly feel, that we have been forgiven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Live It

Take time to journal, asking God about the places in your life where you feel unforgiven. Pray for God to grant you deeper knowledge of the grace met in Jesus Christ.