

*Lively*  
**STARTS  
HERE**

***A 5-DAY DEVOTIONAL***



**MISSION HILLS CHURCH**  
REAL. MESSY. NEW.

DAY 1

**BIBLE READING**

# joy **WHEN** **PLANS CHANGE**

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:

23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

**Matthew 1:18-25**

## DAY 1

### **DEVOTIONAL**

Even if you're not an obsessive planner with every area of your life, you probably know the frustration that comes when a plan doesn't turn out the way you thought it would.

I think Joseph knew something about that, too. He definitely had a plan: **working his trade, building a home, engaged to get married.**

Then came the discovery that demolished his plans: Mary was "*found to be pregnant.*" Those words skim over some pretty deep and disruptive waters. At first, Joseph thought it was Mary who had ruined his plans. Of course, later, he discovered it was God, but regardless of who had done the disrupting, the end result was that his plan fell apart.

**So he made another plan: divorce her quietly and get on with his life.**

Then God stepped in and ruined that plan, too. An angel appeared in a dream and told Joseph that this pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit, that the baby would save his people from their sins, and that God's plan was for Joseph to take Mary as his wife and name the child "**Jesus.**" (*By the way, Jewish men often had plans for what to name their first child, so that was yet another plan in the trash can.*)

None of this was on Joseph's five-year vision board, but that doesn't mean there wasn't great joy on his horizon.

## DAY 1

### *DEVOTIONAL*

In spite of not understanding everything God was doing, or why his plans had to be so radically disrupted, Joseph did the most important thing he could do: he trusted God and took a step of obedience. He “*did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.*”

Joy doesn't usually show up at the front end of a disrupted plan. What shows up first is confusion, disappointment, and maybe even anger. But so often, our disrupted plans are soil in which true joy grows, and it's our obedience that walks us into that joy.

You may not have asked for the circumstances you're in right now: the relationship you lost; the job that ended; the move you didn't want; the crisis you never saw coming. And those unasked-for circumstances may have disrupted some plans you were counting on to bring you joy.

**But the same God who interrupted Joseph's plans is present in your life. You don't have to understand everything to obey the next thing.**

Joy doesn't come from having your plan back; it comes from trusting that God has a better one.

# DAY 1

## REFLECTION

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### Reflect:

1. Where has a plan you cared about recently changed or fallen apart?
2. In that place, what would “doing what the Lord commanded” look like for you right now—even if you still feel confused?

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### Pray:

“Father, You see the plans that didn’t work out the way I expected. I confess the frustration and disappointment I’ve been carrying. Help me trust that You are not surprised and that You are still good. Show me the next step of obedience, and give me the courage to take it.”

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### Practice:

Write down one plan that changed this year. Under it, write: “*God, I trust that You have a better plan.*” Keep it where you’ll see it this week.

## DAY 2

### BIBLE READING

# joy WHEN YOU FEEL UNSEEN

*1 This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:*

*2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,*

*3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram,*

*4 Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon,*

*5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse,*

*6 and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,*

*7 Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa,*

*8 Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah,*

*9 Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,*

*10 Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah,*

*11 and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon.*

*12 After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel,*

*13 Zerubbabel the father of Abihud, Abihud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor,*

*14 Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Elihud,*

*15 Elihud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob,*

*16 and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah.*

**Matthew 1:1-16**

## DAY 2

### DEVOTIONAL

Matthew's announcement that "*Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah*" skips over a lot of details, but we can fill in the blanks, can't we?

She was a young woman in a small town, engaged but not yet married, now carrying a child. To everyone around her, this didn't sound like the road to the long-awaited Messiah...**it sounded like a mess.**

Which is precisely why Matthew's surprisingly brief announcement appears where it does: in a genealogy that we're all tempted to skip. Let's be honest: *once you realized what the Bible passage above was, you skimmed it, didn't you?*

If you felt that temptation...and if you gave into it... there's a word for you: normal. **So don't feel bad.**

But go back and read that passage more carefully, because buried in that list of names is a critical reminder: God looks with love on the people everyone else looks with scorn. Matthew mentions Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "*the wife of Uriah*" (Bathsheba), and finally Mary. All women with complicated stories. People who knew what it felt like to be judged...both fairly and unfairly. People who knew what it was like to be misunderstood, held in contempt and pushed to the margins.

## DAY 2

### **DEVOTIONAL**

But God took people everyone else wanted to write off and He wrote them in to a bigger story than anyone could have imagined.

In **Luke 1:46-47**, Mary expresses her joy: “*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*”

Where did that joy come from? It certainly didn't come from public applause. It didn't come from a spotless reputation that led to everyone's respect.

**No, it came from being seen and chosen by God to be part of a story others wouldn't fully understand.** She carried the Messiah in a body that would get side-eyed glances in the marketplace. But her joy in being part of God's story – in spite of the stories others might tell about her – gave her the strength to choose quiet, costly obedience.

Maybe you know what it feels like to be unseen—or seen, but mislabeled. You serve behind the scenes. You carry a burden no one else seems to notice. You walk into rooms where no one really asks how you're actually doing.

**The Christmas story should remind you that God sees you.** The One who chose Mary and wove her into His plan sees your faithfulness in the ordinary and your tears in the dark. *Joy is not always loud.* Sometimes it's the settled confidence that you are fully known, fully loved, and folded into God's story whether anyone else recognizes it or not.

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#### Reflect:

1. Where do you feel most unseen or misunderstood right now?
2. How does it change things to remember that God not only sees but redeems people that everyone else either overlooks or deliberately look away from?

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#### Pray:

“Lord, thank You that You see me fully. You see the parts others don’t notice or don’t understand. You don’t look away from the parts that make everyone else uncomfortable. Where others see a problem, you see potential. When I feel invisible, remind me that I am known and chosen by You. Let my joy be rooted not in human recognition or acceptance, but in Your constant attention and love.”

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#### Practice:

Do one hidden act of faithfulness today—***serve someone in a way they might never trace back to you***—and let it be an act of worship to the God who sees.

DAY 3

**BIBLE READING**

# joy **WHEN YOU FEEL SMALL**

*1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”*

*3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.*

*5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> “’But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ “*

**Matthew 2:1-6**

## DAY 3

### **DEVOTIONAL**

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking about the birth of the Jewish King, the religious leaders went where they should have gone for an answer: to the Scriptures. And they found their answer: *Bethlehem*.

Which is interesting, because Bethlehem wasn't an impressive place. It was a small town overshadowed by nearby Jerusalem with its temple, priests, and political power. If you were picking a strategic birthplace for King of the Jews, let alone the Savior of the world, Bethlehem probably wouldn't even make the list of options.

**But God loves to launch big things in small places.**

In God's kingdom, *small doesn't mean insignificant*. Underwhelming doesn't mean unusable. Bethlehem is a reminder that the size of your platform, paycheck, house, or follower count doesn't determine the impact you can have when you're in God's hands.

*And that can – and should – be the source of great joy.*

## DAY 3

### DEVOTIONAL

Remember what the angel said to the shepherds in Bethlehem? *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”* **(Lk. 2:10)**

Maybe you feel “*small*” right now, or you feel like you’re doing “*small things*”. You’re changing diapers. You’re caring for aging parents. You’re faithful at a job no one celebrates. You’re “*just*” taking classes or going to work. You’re doing what you can, giving what you can, serving where you can...but it doesn’t feel like much.

Here’s some good news: the Christmas story reminds us that our “*not much*” is one of God’s favorite starting points for “*more than we can imagine.*”

You are, “*by no means least*”.

Joy isn’t found in becoming bigger; it’s found in realizing that God is willing to show up right where you are. **The King of kings chose a manger in a small town.**

If He can fill Bethlehem with glory, He can fill your “*small*” life with power, Presence and purpose that will spill out and impact the world more than you can imagine.

## DAY 3

### REFLECTION

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#### Reflect:

1. Where do you feel “small” or unimportant in this season?
2. How might God be inviting you to see yourself as a Bethlehem, a small space He wants to fill with more than you’re expecting?

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#### Pray:

“Jesus, thank You for choosing Bethlehem, a small and ordinary place, to step into our world. Help me believe that You can work through my ordinary life too. Fill my ‘Bethlehem’ with Your power, Presence and purpose. Let that truth give me joy today.”

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#### Practice:

Pick one “*small*” responsibility you have (**a task at home, at work, or in your relationships**). Before you do it today, briefly pray: “*Lord, I’m doing this with You and for You.*” Then do it as an act of worship.

DAY 4

**BIBLE READING**

# joy **IN THE** **DARK PLACE**

*13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

*16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*

*17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18 “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

**Matthew 2:13-18**

## DAY 4

### DEVOTIONAL

The Christmas story is not all bright lights, tender moments and joyful carols. Almost immediately after the visit of the Magi, the tone shifts dramatically. An angel warned Joseph that Herod was coming for the child. And, in spite of what Herod told the Magi, he wasn't coming to worship him, he was coming to wipe him out. So the moment Joseph woke up, he, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt under cover of darkness.

It would have been nice if this was the end of Herod's part in the story, but in the wake of their escape, Herod unleashed an almost unimaginable violence on Bethlehem and the surrounding region. It's one of the hardest scenes in the New Testament. *Endless tears. Profound grief. Real evil.*

**And yet, God was still at work.**

Matthew tells us this fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "*Out of Egypt I called my son*". Of course this doesn't mean God forced or endorsed Herod's evil, but it does mean he wasn't derailed by it either. **He was weaving even the darkest chapters into the story of redemption.**

## DAY 4

### *DEVOTIONAL*

**Joy doesn't require denial.** It doesn't mean pretending everything is fine. It's the deep, lasting...maybe even stubborn...confidence that God's presence and His purposes aren't derailed or defeated by pain.

You may be in one of those dark chapters right now. You've been forced into a place you never wanted to go. You're dealing with loss, injustice, and pain. You're consumed by fear. **If Christmas feels heavy this year, you're actually closer to the original story than you might think.**

The good news is that the darkness didn't get the last word in Bethlehem, and it won't get the last word in your story either. The child who escaped the darkness would one day defeat it. The empty crib – abandoned in a panicked flight of desperation – would give way to an empty tomb.

**Joy doesn't require that you pretend you aren't hurting, it requires that you remember that this chapter is not the whole story.**

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### Reflect:

1. Where does life feel darkest or most confusing for you right now?
2. What would it look like to trust that God is still present and at work even in this moment?

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### Pray:

“Lord, You know the dark places I’m walking through. I don’t understand everything You’re allowing, I don’t understand everything You’re doing, but I choose to believe that You are with me and that You are still in control. Hold me when I can’t see the way forward. Bring light, healing, and hope. Help me cling to the deeper joy that comes from knowing this is not the end of the story.”

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### Practice:

Share honestly with one trusted person about a “*dark place*” you’re experiencing and ask them to pray with you this week. **Let someone else carry the weight with you.**

DAY 5

**BIBLE READING**

# joy **THAT LASTS** **BEYOND CHRISTMAS**

*7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”*

*9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

*10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

*11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

**Matthew 2:7-12**

## DAY 4

### DEVOTIONAL

The way we usually tell the story and set up our nativity scenes makes it seem like the Magi were there on Christmas morning. But they weren't. They were actually pretty late to the party.

The fact that Herod found out from them the “*exact time the star had appeared*” and then later murdered all the boys in Bethlehem under two years of age suggests that the Magi arrived long after the manger had been returned to its original purpose. Instead of “*baby Jesus*”, it's more likely they presented their gifts to “*toddler Jesus*.” Rather than an infant in swaddling clothes, it's likely the Magi found Jesus speaking his first words and learning to take his first steps.

Rather than finding a family whose ears were still ringing with angel choruses, the Magi probably found a family figuring out the new “*normal*.”

Yet for the Magi, nothing about that moment was normal. The big event might have wrapped up, but for the Magi, this moment was no less satisfying, no less special, no less sacred. Because they hadn't come for the show that surrounded Jesus' birth, they had come for One who had been born.

And that's why the joy of Christmas is so powerful: because **Christmas may be an event, but Christ is a person.**

## DAY 4

### DEVOTIONAL

The decorations come down, the music fades, the calendar page turns...but Jesus doesn't pack up and leave. He sticks around with you in the "normal." He's there with you in January, with you in your workplace, with you at school, with you in your living room.

**Lasting joy is not the emotional high of a holiday; it's the settled joy of walking daily with the King who has come to do life with us,** the King who says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"*.

The King who says, *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."*

As Christmas passes and "normal life" returns, the invitation is the same: keep following the One you celebrated. Let joy become a current that carries you through "normal" life, not a moment that interrupts it.

## DAY 4

### REFLECTION

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#### Reflect:

1. What part of your “normal” life feels most disconnected from the joy of Christmas once the holiday is over?
2. How could you intentionally invite Jesus into that space in the coming week?

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#### Pray:

“Jesus, thank you that you are not just the ‘reason for the season’ but the joy in every season. As the event of Christmas ends, and normal life begins, help me keep my eyes on you. Teach me to find joy in walking with you in my ordinary routines and responsibilities. Show me how to respond with worship and generosity, like the magi did, not just on special occasions, but every day. Amen.”

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#### Practice:

**Choose one simple, ongoing rhythm to carry the joy of Christ into the new year**—reading a short passage daily, praying on your commute, serving in a ministry, or practicing weekly generosity. Write it down and tell someone, “*This is how I’m going to keep following Jesus after Christmas.*”

## DECEMBER 27 + 28

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