



ADVENT 2015

PRAYER GUIDE



Stand alongside Syrian refugees

World Vision®



This Christmas, dare to step into the margins.

Advent is a time of preparation. It's a time for seeking the presence of God in our world and watching for the "renewal of all things" (Matthew 19:28).

Two thousand years ago, God's presence came in the form of a tiny, helpless baby. As followers of Jesus, we believe this child was the Messiah, and that He will come again to reign over a restored earth. During Advent, we turn our hearts and minds to the first and second comings of our King. We ponder the mystery of His advent and what it means for how we live here and now, in the "in-between" time.

As we meditate on Advent, a powerful truth emerges: Christ does not save from a distance. He walked among us. He dwelled with us. He went to the margins. God became flesh (John 1:14). He became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). He identified with the oppressed and the excluded.

And He calls us to do likewise.

We cannot love from a distance. Christ calls us to follow Him into the margins. Over the next four weeks, we'll reflect on some of the traditional themes of Advent: hope, faith, joy, and peace. But we'll look for them in unexpected places—in the darker corners of our world, where the poor and the oppressed, the broken and the lonely dwell.

Because that's where Christ Himself dwells.

May you hear His call this Advent, and follow where He goes.

Prayer

Almighty God,
who took on flesh and went to the margins:
open our hearts during this season of Advent
that we may hear Your call,
and love others as You have loved both them and us.
Help us to follow You to the margins,
and to join with You and others in bringing heaven to earth
by the power of Your Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Hope is hidden in the margins.

Sunday | November 29

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
“therefore I will hope in him.”

—Lamentations 3:22-24 (ESV)

What does hope look like to families in Syria, who have fled their homes because of violence?
What did it look like for those who were displaced by the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.?

Most who survived the siege of Jerusalem became refugees, exiled to faraway Babylon. Others were left to eke out an existence amid the charred rubble of a once-great city. To refugees and castaways such as these, Jeremiah's words must have seemed to ring hollow: *His mercies are new every morning.*

What mercies?

But Jeremiah was not living in denial. He was not painting a rosy picture in defiance of reality. His words appear in the middle of Lamentations—a book of mourning for the loss of Jerusalem.

For Jeremiah, hope was steeped in heartbreak.

Jeremiah's God did not always lift people out of hardship, but He always *entered into it*. God could be found among His people in exile (Jeremiah 29:10-14). Centuries later, He entered into hardship with us in an even more profound way: He took on flesh and blood and became one of us (John 1:10-14). Near the end of His time on earth, Jesus told His followers He would be found among the least, the lost, and the last (see Matthew 25:31-46). The question today is: do we take Him at His word?

God is with the poor. He is with the brokenhearted and the refugees in the midst of their lament. He dwells with the oppressed, showing them new mercies each morning and demonstrating His steadfast love.

Wherever God goes, He calls us to follow, offering hope in the midst of heartbreak.



Hope still grows at the borders

For many kids, sleeping outside is an adventure. But for 5-year-old Abdul and his 6-year old sister, Noor, it's a necessity. After fleeing Syria with their parents and making an exhausting trek through Europe, they've been sleeping on the ground near the border between Serbia and Hungary. The border closed while they slept last night. Time will tell whether they'll be allowed to enter Hungary.

What draws them forward is the hope of a new life, in Germany or Sweden perhaps. The children's mother, Teasadi, was a teacher in Daraa, Syria before the war. But death and destruction drove them from home—and bar the way back.

Though Teasadi's mind is weighed down with worry, the children's vitality is a welcome sight. Noor and Abdul make

a lively game of cracking walnuts they've gathered, stomping them, crushing them with rocks, and carrying the shelled ones in a plastic bag like trophies. Even though the family has so little, 6-year-old Noor offers some of her hard-won nuts to World Vision staff nearby.

Tonight, at least, the family has obtained a couple of tents so they won't have to sleep in the open again. Five-year-old Abdul carefully removes his tennis shoes before stepping in; he knows this small piece of cloth is precious, and for right now, it's home.

Noor and Abdul are old enough to know that their circumstances are dire. But they haven't lost hope for a better life, and that's what keeps them going.

Prayer

Merciful God,
who enters into our hardship,
give us a heart for the displaced and the distressed,
especially the 12 million Syrians driven from their homes by conflict
and the many other refugees searching for a better life.
Grant us the will to serve in the hard places,
to acknowledge, not ignore, the heartbreak around us,
and to offer hope to the broken and the lonely.

Amen.

Weekly prayer focus:

Refugees and displaced families

More than 7.6 million people have been displaced within Syria, in addition to the 4 million Syrians who have fled to other countries. This year, thousands have made the treacherous voyage across the Mediterranean Sea on flimsy and dangerous boats. Many have lost their lives doing so. This week, ask God to protect those who have left everything behind in search of safety. Pray that God will move the nations of the world to provide compassionate solutions for Syria's refugees and displaced families.



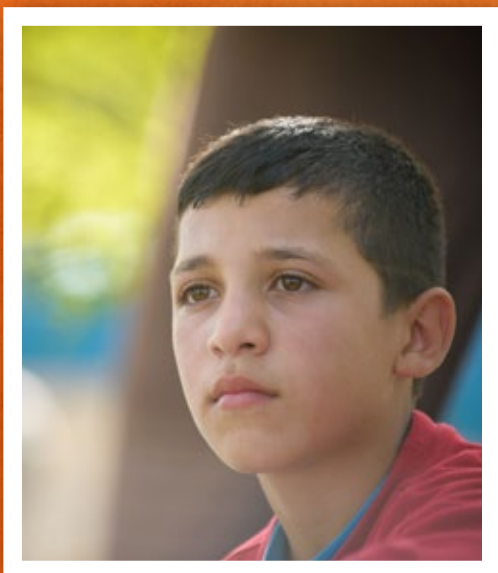
The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them . . .”

—Exodus 3:7-8 (NIV)

See. Hear. Act.

The advent of Christ was not the first time God had come down from heaven. At the burning bush, God told Moses that the oppression of His people had stirred His heart. He did not remain in heaven, watching from afar. He *came down* to rescue them. He went with them through the waters of the Red Sea. He dwelled with them in the desert. He led them into a brighter future.

God’s heart is broken by oppression and poverty—and as beings made in His image, our hearts should break too. But it is not enough to be brokenhearted. To offer hope, we must enter into people’s suffering. Concern that does not lead to compassion changes nothing. But if we see and hear the cries of our world, *and then act*—we as the people of God can bring hope and transformation to people in the harshest places in our world.



Prayer

Compassionate God,
who saw the suffering of Your people in Egypt,
heard their cries, and came down from heaven,
send us into the world to bring hope and transformation,
to answer the greatest challenges of our day in Your name,
and help children in need to find fullness of life.

Amen.

The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble . . .
. . . God will never forget the needy;
the hope of the afflicted will never perish.

—Psalm 9:9, 18 (NIV)

The Lord is a refuge in times of trouble. The Lord gives hope to the needy.

It's difficult to tell that to children who have endured the traumatizing effects of war, especially those who have known nothing but conflict their entire lives.

Sometimes it feels as though God has forgotten the needy. The people of Israel toiled 400 years in slavery before God rescued them. Generations were born and died before the promised Messiah came.

God operates according to His own timetable. And sometimes, He's just waiting for His hands and feet (that's us) to catch up to Him. If you're looking around wondering how God is going to respond to the Syrian crisis—12 million displaced and over 1 million injured—look in a mirror, and look around your congregation. The answer might be right in front of your eyes.



Prayer

Loving God,
who promises refuge to the oppressed
and hope to the afflicted,
help me to offer that refuge for others.
Help me to extend that hope.
Help me to be Your hands and feet,
through the power of Your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

“Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the LORD.
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”
And the words of the LORD are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold refined seven times.
You, LORD, will keep the needy safe . . .

—Psalm 12:5-7 (NIV)

From Exodus to Psalms, it's clear that nothing stirs God to action like injustice.

It is contrary to His nature to look the other way when “the poor are plundered.” Over the endless chatter and meaningless talk of our world (see verses 3-4) come the words of the Lord, silencing every other word, declaring that people in need are under His protection.

What stirs your heart? What sparks your sense of outrage? What motivates you to act? Is it the same thing that stirs God to action—providing hope to the oppressed?



Prayer

God,
every word You speak is perfect,
and Your Word declares that You stand with the oppressed,
protecting them from injustice.
Help us to be stirred by the same things that stir Your heart.
Silence our chatter so we may hear Your Word
and follow Your call.

Amen.

Thursday | December 3

“The poor and needy search for water,
but there is none;
their tongues are parched with thirst.
But I the LORD will answer them;
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,
and the parched ground into springs.”

—Isaiah 41:17-18 (NIV)

Isaiah's prophecy was more than just metaphor. After all, God had a habit of bringing water from dry ground. He did so for Hagar and her son Ishmael when Abraham sent them away (Genesis 21:8-21). He provided water from a rock for His people as they wandered in the Sinai wilderness (Exodus 17:1-7). Sometimes the Lord provides hope—like water for those who thirst—through miraculous means.

And sometimes His means are far more . . . ordinary.
Like you and me, for instance.

When Jesus' disciples expressed concern about the needs of a hungry crowd, Jesus turned the challenge back on them. “You give them something to eat,” He said (Matthew 14:16). Every day, God feeds the hungry and satisfies those who thirst—often through the obedient actions of ordinary people like us.



Prayer

Generous God,
who heard Hagar's cry in the desert,
who quenched Israel's thirst in the wilderness,
and who called His followers to give bread to the hungry
and water to the thirsty:
enlarge our imaginations,
so that we might see how, through simple obedience,
we, too, can make rivers flow on barren heights,
and cause springs to burst forth in dry valleys.

Amen.

Friday | December 4

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward them for what they have done.

—Proverbs 19:17 (NIV)

When Jesus told the disciples, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40), he might have been thinking of this proverb. It’s a popular verse to drive home the virtue of giving to those in need, but its more startling implication is often overlooked:

God dwells among the poor.

To give to people in need is to give to God Himself, because God is found in the margins, among the poor and oppressed. When we join Him there, we share in the transformation that takes place—because serving the poor doesn’t just change their circumstances; it changes us.

If you want to draw near to God, draw near to the poor.



Prayer

Incarnate God,
who dwells among the poor, oppressed, and marginalized,
help us to find You there.

Help us to see You in the face of every person in need—
in particular the child refugee from Syria.

Be with us as we are with people in the margins.

Amen.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

—Luke 4:16-21 (NIV)

Why did Jesus come?

There are many answers to that question: to save us from our sins, to bear witness to the truth, to show the way to God. But He also came to bring hope, especially to families in the margins. The poor. The oppressed. Refugees and prisoners. The impaired.

These were not metaphors for Jesus. They were His audience. They're what He saw when He looked upon the crowd packed into that tiny synagogue. A gospel that does not speak to the needs of the poor is an incomplete gospel. Christ's advent brings hope and deliverance—not just for the next life, but for this one.



Prayer

Hope-giving God,
who sent Your Son to proclaim good news for the poor,
send us out to proclaim that same hope.
Guide our steps into the margins.
Let freedom and joy take root in the harshest places in our world
as we love and serve others in Your name.
Amen.

Faith takes us to the margins.

Sunday | December 6

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

—James 2:14-17 (NIV)

The apostle James addressed these words to the first-century church, where poverty and affluence existed side by side in a way few of us today can appreciate. In many of our churches in the West, socioeconomic classes don't readily mix. Most of us have never seen someone clothed in literal rags or on the brink of real starvation set foot in our sanctuaries. But while we may not see firsthand the kind of need James describes, it is no less real—and we are no less obligated to do something about it.

People who live in the margins today are our neighbors, whether they're just down the street or half a world away. The religious expert who interrogated Jesus about his moral responsibility wanted to define *neighbor* as narrowly as possible, thus limiting who he was obligated to care for (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus wouldn't have it. He went to the other extreme, revealing that there is no one on earth who is not our neighbor.

True faith is not passive in the face of need. It does not look away. It does not merely wish for something better; it becomes part of the answer. True faith follows the example of Christ, who came into our world not as a conquering king but as an impoverished child from Nazareth. He spent part of His childhood as a refugee (Matthew 2:13-18). As an adult, He walked among the poor. He did not just preach generosity; He fed the hungry and healed the sick with His own hands.

Active faith is the only kind that does any good—for us or for anyone else.



Seeing through a refugee's eyes

"I hated being a refugee," recalls Aida Sunje, a World Vision emergency communications officer in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "I felt like my whole identity was put into that one sad word."

Aida was 8 years old when she boarded the last convoy of women and children escaping her hometown. During the Bosnian War in the mid-1990s, her city came under heavy shelling. Aida's mom was pregnant at the time; she gave birth just a few days after they fled. That first night in a Croatian city far from home, Aida feared they would have to sleep in a park.

Two decades later, she stands in another park—this one in Belgrade, Serbia. It is packed with Syrian refugees. Aida can appreciate their plight in a way that few others can. Her childhood memories have led her back to the margins, determined to help children like 4-year-old Yusef and his 11-year-old brother Almuseneh.

The two boys and their family walked all the way through Greece and Macedonia before reaching Serbia. Their shoes were completely worn out; Yusef's feet were covered in blisters. They spent nights sleeping in the park without even a blanket to cover themselves. In makeshift camps like this one, World Vision distributes baby packs, hygiene kits, and other essential items to aid refugees.

Aida will never forget the families she has met in Belgrade. "I saw physics professors, farmers, dentists, students, engineers, retirees, women, men, and children escaping the horrors of war. And all I wanted to do was to hug all of them and tell them everything will be all right, because I know too well how they were feeling."

Aida is determined to be part of the answer—to put faith into action and bring hope to those fleeing war—because she remembers what it was like to be in their shoes.

Prayer

God of mercy,
who taught that true faith consists of loving God *and* loving our neighbor,
let us not settle for hollow words in the face of injustice.
Afflict us when we are too comfortable,
convict us of our apathy,
and move us to demonstrate our faith with our deeds—
for the sake of all who are marginalized.

Amen.

Weekly prayer focus:

War-affected families

More than 240,000 lives have been lost since the conflict began in Syria over five years ago. More than 1 million have sustained injuries. This week, pray for all those affected by violence—people who have lost loved ones, people who have been injured, and people whose homes, businesses, and schools have been destroyed. Ask God to remember them in their suffering and to come to their aid.



“Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.”

—Exodus 29:45-46 (NIV)

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us . . .” (John 1:14, NIV). That’s the greatest mystery of Advent—that God would dwell with us. And yet we see Him do it over and over again throughout the Bible’s narrative.

Before humanity’s fall, God dwelled with Adam and Eve in the garden (see Genesis 3:8). In the book of Exodus, He didn’t just rescue the Hebrews from slavery; He journeyed with them as they stepped into the unknown—quite literally a forbidding wilderness.

We are called to follow God’s example.

Faith demands more than the occasional act of charity. Christ calls us to reorient our lives around Him and His kingdom. If we are bold enough not just to believe Jesus but to follow Him, we will find ourselves among the poor and the oppressed—listening to them, learning from them, and carrying their burdens. To believe is to act.



Prayer

Ever-present God,
who walked in the garden with Adam and Eve,
who went with the Israelites into the wilderness,
who took on flesh and dwelled among us,
help us to embody Your incarnation—
to be a tangible presence among children and families in need.
Help us to give not just of our resources but of ourselves,
that we might learn to love others as You love us.

Amen.

Tuesday | December 8

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever . . .
He turned the desert into pools of water
and the parched ground into flowing springs;
there he brought the hungry to live,
and they founded a city where they could settle.

—Psalm 107:1, 35-36 (NIV)

The psalmist's vision is brought to life every time a new well is dug, providing safe, clean water to a village that once had only a filthy, stagnant pond. It bursts forth every time a community is equipped with the tools, knowledge, and seeds for sustainable farming so they can transform arid wastelands into verdant, life-giving fields.

These inspiring images have been replicated thousands of times over in World Vision's work across the globe. But miracles do not come easily in places that are being torn apart by conflict—places like Syria. Nevertheless, we do not lose heart.

As followers of Jesus, we press on in faith, knowing that transformation can emerge from tragedy.

We see the biblical illustrations painted by the psalmist echoed in the present day. We see it in the refugees searching for “a city where they [can] settle.” May this psalm serve as a reminder that God journeys with people through the harshest and most desolate places, and that He can transform them into places of abundant life.



Prayer

Life-giving God,
who makes all things new,
breathe Your Spirit into the margins of our world—
with every well dug,
with every child educated,
with every prayer answered.
Transform every barren field
and refresh every weary heart.

Amen.

Wednesday | December 9

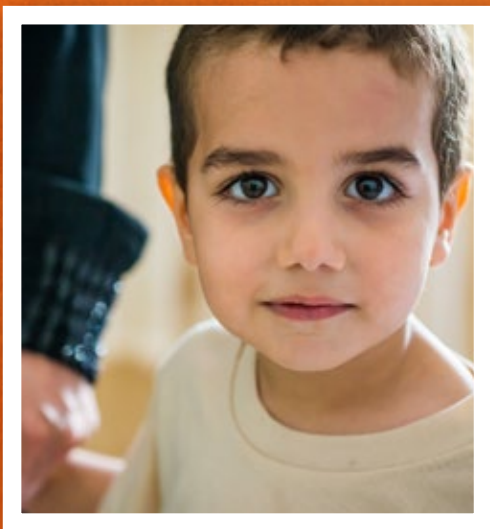
The generous will themselves be blessed,
for they share their food with the poor.

—Proverbs 22:9 (NIV)

The author of this proverb does not say *how* you will be blessed when you serve the poor, simply that you *will* be blessed. It's common to hear those who give of themselves say they never realized how much they would get back—not in terms of money or material goods, but something far less tangible, and far more valuable.

Whether it's the connection forged with a sponsored child, the insight that comes from looking at the world from another's point of view, or simply the fulfillment found in being part of God's kingdom coming to earth—

you cannot help but be transformed
when you serve others.



Prayer

Giver of every good thing,
You have blessed us that we might bless others.
Help us use what we have to love, to serve,
and to bring Your abundant life to the margins of Your world.
Give us the privilege of offering help to people in need,
that we might be transformed along with them.

Amen.

Thursday | December 10

You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat . . .

—Isaiah 25:4 (NIV)

The prophet Isaiah praises God for His “perfect faithfulness” (verse 1), which includes—among other things—being a refuge for the poor and needy. Being a refuge for someone else requires presence. It demands intentionality.

You don’t necessarily have to travel to a remote village to be present with people in the margins. You can forge a relationship with one child through sponsorship. Or you can learn about the challenges faced by refugees in war-torn countries, and commit to supporting smart, effective ways of helping displaced families survive and thrive.

You can cross oceans with your love. You can be a refuge for the poor with your presence.



Prayer

God, our Refuge and Shelter,
You are ever present among us.
And You are ever present among the poor,
with whom Your heart dwells.
Guide us as we seek to follow Your example
by giving of ourselves,
that we too might be present among people in need.
Amen.

“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

—Jeremiah 29:7 (NIV)

The people of Israel spent seven decades as refugees after Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Though their home had been destroyed, they still had a mission to fulfill. From the beginning, God called Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6), a light to the surrounding nations. Even in exile, they could still be that light—by seeking the prosperity of others.

As followers of Christ, we too live in an exile of sorts.

We are sojourners in a world that doesn't quite feel like home. Yet we are called not to remove ourselves from the world, but to transform it. The church does not exist for its own blessing but rather for the benefit of the most vulnerable in our world. We are called to give ourselves with abandon to the great needs of our time—to pave the way for every child in need to experience the fullness of life that Jesus offers.



Prayer

Gracious God,
You have called Your people to seek the prosperity and well-being of everyone around us.
Give us the strength to go into the world and transform it.
Help us to remember that Your church exists first for the benefit of others—
above all, the lost and the vulnerable.
Bless those affected by poverty and oppression as we share our abundance with them.

Amen.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field . . . When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

—Luke 10:2, 8-9 (NIV)

In Luke 10, Jesus sent His followers ahead of Him to every town and village on the way to Jerusalem. After the resurrection, He sent them even farther afield. Geographically, they were to go to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). More importantly, they were sent to the margins of society, to people written off as “unworthy” or “unimportant.”

Far and near, the message is the same: God’s kingdom is coming. And wherever that kingdom appears, the sick are cared for. The hungry are fed. New relationships are forged. Old inequalities are cast aside. The advent of the kingdom transforms and renews.

Faith takes us to the margins,
but the margins also come to us.

Those who were once kept out are brought near. God’s kingdom creates a new humanity where old dividing walls disappear, where we stand alongside people everywhere—as equals.



Prayer

Gracious God,
who sends us out to proclaim good news to the world,
let Your kingdom come.

Make all things new.

Help us share Your kingdom with all,
that those who are far away may be brought near,
and that together Your people may be restored.

In the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Joy will come to the margins.

Sunday | December 13

Even though I walk
 through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
 for you are with me . . .

—Psalm 23:4 (NIV)

It's easy to believe that God is with us when life is good.

Every year, the people of Israel observed the Festival of Tabernacles, which doubled as a commemoration of their sojourn in the wilderness and as a celebration of the annual harvest—neither of which would have been possible without God's provision.

It would have been one thing to celebrate if you had collected a bumper harvest. But imagine how difficult it would have been if, like the psalmist, you were in the middle of “the darkest valley”—if your crops had failed or if you had been driven from your home, for example.

Yet God insisted that His provision—and His joy—were to be shared by everyone. According to Deuteronomy 16:13-14, everyone was to be included in the feast. Everyone was to benefit—not just established landowning families, but their servants and those at the margins of society: refugees, orphans, widows.

In some ways, the Festival of Tabernacles was a foreshadowing of Advent, when—as John notes in the introduction to his gospel—Christ came and dwelt among us (1:14). The Greek word John used can also be translated “*tabernacled*.” Christ came to live among us and to bring joy for everyone, especially the poor and the oppressed.

God is with them in their darkest valley, and that's where we should be, too—because joy comes to the margins when we share God's abundant provision with all.



Searching for joy in a refugee tent

Samer*, 14, dreams of one thing: joy. Not for himself, but for his mom.

"All I want is for my mother to be happy," he explains.

Samer shares a 13-by-13-foot tent with his brother, his mother, and another Syrian family of six. They are refugees from Syria, part of an informal settlement in neighboring Lebanon. They've gone without a proper home for two years now.

Samer's father died when he was young, and he is very protective of his mother. Since being displaced by war, Samer has been forced to choose bread over books, employment over education.

With permission from his landlord, Samer collects and sells leftover vegetables from a nearby field. "Whatever I make is better than nothing," he explains. "[My mother] is always sick, and I will not accept that she begs on the streets."

Every child ought to have an education, even those walking through the darkest valley. That's why World Vision offers life-skills training to Samer and other refugee children through an educational center. "I know it's not a school, but I learned so much," Samer says. "I love learning. I wish I [could] live in a school." When he missed the bus to the center on the third day of class, he scraped up enough taxi fare to get halfway there, and walked the rest of the way in a heavy downpour to arrive on time.

Joy seems like a distant dream for Samer and his family. Yet Samer refuses to give up, pursuing his education in the hope that he might live to see a future free from conflict.

** Name changed to protect his identity*

Prayer

God of all joy,
You share Your provision with the poor.
Give us the strength to work for a world
where everyone can thrive,
where refugees, orphans, and widows can celebrate abundant life,
and where everyone can taste joy.

Amen.



WEEK THREE

Weekly prayer focus:

Syria's children

Many school-aged children in Syria are unable to attend class because they've had to flee or because their schools have been destroyed. In some cases, teachers and schoolchildren have been killed. Even those who escape to relative safety in other countries find it difficult to continue their education in an unfamiliar language. This week, pray for children affected by conflict, that they might be able to resume their studies in peace and safety. Ask God to help those who are struggling to keep up with their education under difficult circumstances.



You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.

You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy,
that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!

—Psalm 30:11-12 (NLT)

Rescuing the oppressed from slavery. Giving children to those well past childbearing age. Sending rain on a parched land. Bringing the dead back to life.

Throughout the biblical story, we see God taking delight in transforming mourning into joy.

While He does not prevent sadness, He does not let it have the final word. Perhaps one reason God allows us to experience difficult circumstances is so that we might know the joy of being delivered from them. The psalmist writes of his inability to keep silent about his own transformative experience—spreading the knowledge of God's ability to bring joy.

God turns our hardship into joy so that we might share the same transformation with others. As Jesus said, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8, NIV).



Prayer

God of all comfort,
who turns our sadness into joy,
bringing life and hope where there was none—
fill us with Your joy, that we might radiate it to others,
especially those who suffer oppression and injustice.
Clothe us with joy, that we might clothe others with it as well.
In the name of Christ.

Amen.



WEEK THREE

Tuesday | December 15

God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.

—Psalm 47:5-7 (NIV)

God is king of the earth. Every corner, every sliver, every margin belongs to him. This, according to the psalmist, is cause for joy—a response so overwhelming people cannot help bursting into song.

But the reign of God will only bring this kind of joy if we show what kind of king God is—by how we love and serve others (see 1 John 4:11). God's kingdom spreads as we stand with people who have been oppressed by the kingdoms of this world. His kingdom spreads as we help provide lasting solutions to the root causes of poverty. God's kingdom spreads as marginalized people discover they are remembered and loved.

And as God's kingdom spreads, joy follows.



Prayer

Ruler of the earth,
we give thanks to You, our King.
We shout for joy and praise Your name.
Help us to spread the good news of Your kingdom—
through both word and deed—
that others, too, might know Your joy.

Amen.

Praise the LORD.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD
or fully declare his praise?

Blessed are those who act justly,
who always do what is right.

Remember me, LORD, when you show favor to
your people,
come to my aid when you save them,

that I may enjoy the prosperity of your
chosen ones,
that I may share in the joy of your nation
and join your inheritance in giving praise.

—Psalm 106:1-5 (NIV)

In the Old Testament, God chose a particular family, in a particular corner of the world, to bless. That family grew into a nation—chosen by God “out of all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 7:6, NIV). To be God’s “chosen one” is certainly cause for joy. But it’s cause for something else, too.

Israel was not chosen purely for their own benefit—and neither are we.

They were chosen to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6) and a “light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6). They were to extend God’s love to others, especially to the marginalized: the poor, the foreigner, the fatherless, the widow. This is what it means to “act justly,” to “always do what is right.” It is to share the prosperity and joy we have so that others might join in God’s inheritance.



Prayer

God of Abraham,
who chose one family to bless the world,
choose us to be Your means of blessing others.
Fill us with Your Spirit,
that we might share Your inheritance—life in all its fullness—
with those in need.
Help us to act justly and to always do what is right.
Amen.



WEEK THREE

Thursday | December 17

Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

—Psalm 126:5-6 (NIV)

Metaphors in the Bible are rarely just metaphors. True, reaping with “songs of joy” can refer to the spiritual fulfillment God provides. But the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures were especially concerned with the everyday affairs of this life. When you’re only one harvest away from starvation, sorrow and joy are tangible things. The difference between them is the difference between a failed harvest and a bumper crop.

We can help those who have “sowed with tears”
to “reap with songs of joy.”

And we don’t need to wait for the hereafter. We can, and must, do so in the here and now.



Prayer

God of comfort,
there are so many in our world
who sow with tears—the broken and the lonely,
the oppressed and the sick.
Remember them, Lord.
Help us to stand with our neighbors in need,
and make it possible for them to reap with songs of joy.
Amen.



WEEK THREE

Friday | December 18

We were with child, we writhed in labor,
but we gave birth to wind.
We have not brought salvation to the earth,
and the people of the world have not
come to life.

But your dead will live, LORD;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy—

your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.

—Isaiah 26:18-19 (NIV)

As Isaiah looked out on Judah, it must have seemed like a failed experiment. The southern kingdom of Israel was in decline. Its people had not kept their covenant with God; they had not lived up to their original purpose. Namely, they had “not brought salvation to the earth.”

The people of the earth had not come to life as God intended. It was as if they were all dead, and the future was no more. There is a lesson for us in Israel's story:

If we are not bringing life to others, we are not truly
alive ourselves.

But there is hope. Even when we were spiritually dead, God breathed new life into us (Ephesians 2:5). And now we can return to our original purpose: to bring hope and blessing to others (Ephesians 2:10).



Prayer

God of resurrection,
thank You for new life.

We pray for the resolve to bring Your salvation to the earth,
that those who live in the shadow of death may come to life,
and that we might live together as You intended.

Amen.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

—Luke 2:10 (NIV)

“All the people.”

At first the shepherds must have thought the angels meant all the people of Israel. After all, Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David, the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation.

Well, He was all of that—and more.

As the story continued in Luke’s second volume, Acts, things took a startling turn. Suddenly, “all the people” included Gentiles. Outsiders. Those in the margins. Anyone formerly dismissed as “unclean” or otherwise deemed unfit for membership in God’s kingdom. Suddenly, there were no more “outsiders.” There were no places beyond the reach of Christ’s good news for the poor (Luke 4:18-19).

The great joy of Jesus’ advent is for all people, everywhere. No exceptions.



Prayer

Lord Jesus, who came
bringing good news of great joy for all,
come into our hearts again.
Help us to bring Your joy to all—
to see no one as unloved or unworthy,
to see no one as outside your reach or concern.
Empower us through Your Spirit
to proclaim good news for the poor
and freedom for all who are oppressed.

Amen.

Peace will reign in the margins.

Sunday | December 20

“The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.”

—Numbers 6:24-26 (NIV)

This was the blessing that the priests of Israel were instructed to give the people. The peace they pronounced was more than just an inward sense of well-being. It was the all-encompassing *shalom* of God. It meant safety, security, welfare, and harmony with God and with one another.

It must have seemed like such an elusive vision then, as it does now. But this is what God's people do: we speak an impossible blessing to a peace-starved world. And we don't just speak this blessing with our lips. We pronounce it—we bring it into being—through our actions.

Centuries after this blessing was first uttered, angels appeared outside Bethlehem announcing the birth of a child who would bring peace. It must have sounded just as implausible then as it does now. But that has never stopped followers of Christ from proclaiming peace in His name.

A few decades after Christ's birth, Paul wrote about peace in his letter to the Philippians, promising it would guard those who follow Christ (4:7). But he also taught that in order to receive God's peace, we have to give it away. “Let your gentleness be evident to all,” Paul wrote just a few lines before one of the most popular verses in his epistles (verse 5). *Then the peace of God will guard your hearts.*

What does it look like to pronounce peace in the war-torn regions of our world?
What does it look like to embody the blessing of Numbers 6 in places like Syria?

To be a follower of Jesus is to wage peace in the margins, no matter how impossible it may seem.



Risking everything for peace

"It's an interesting job," Eyad says, "no routine whatsoever. I can be in one place in the morning fixing a pump, and by the end of the day be in a totally different area installing latrines or digging a borehole."

Eyad is remarkably understated about the nature of his job. He works for World Vision in Syria, providing basic water and sanitation services for families displaced by conflict.

Originally an automotive engineer from Aleppo, Eyad was displaced by the fighting as well. Instead of focusing on his own situation, he works tirelessly on behalf of his fellow Syrians. "You have no idea how hard it is for me to see my people living in tents," he says.

Eyad and his team are at constant risk. They try to avoid air strikes by working during times of day when attacks are less likely to

occur. Still, he has had some close calls. "One day my team and I were driving out of Azaz [in northwestern Syria] after fixing a borehole, and while we were on the road, a missile from an aircraft landed about 500 meters away. I felt lucky that day."

Yet Eyad is undeterred. He continues to work with local organizations to identify the most urgent needs and to complete vital water and sanitation projects under unimaginable conditions.

Eyad keeps going in the hope that someday there will be peace. "World Vision has given me a chance to help my people," he explains. "This is what gives me hope—seeing people from all over the world caring enough to help. There is still goodness in this world."

Prayer

God of peace,
spread Your *shalom* across our war-torn world.
Be present in the refugee camps and burned-out cities.
Speak peace to those who have known conflict.
Give us the strength to turn swords into plowshares
and to repay evil with kindness.
Amen.

Prayer focus:

Peace in Syria

The conflict in Syria is now in its fifth year, with no end in sight. This week, pray for an end to violence. Pray for a peaceful solution, that children and families in Syria might resume their daily lives in safety. Ask God to stir the hearts of Christians in America and around the world, that we will pursue peace and justice for all those affected by conflict. Most of all, pray that the vision of Isaiah 2 might come to pass, that nations will “beat their swords into plowshares.”



Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.

—Psalm 37:37 (NIV)

It's easy to despair at the violence in our world, from the crime in our own country to unrest in the Middle East and elsewhere. It seems that of the making of war, there is no end.

But Scripture reveals an important truth: there is no future in violence. As Jesus told Peter on the night He was arrested, "All who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matthew 26:52, NIV). Those who seek peace have a future, perhaps because they use their God-given energies to create a future rather than destroy it.

To be a Christian is to work for peace.

To be a peacemaker is to work for a future.

When we promote peace over conflict, we create a hope-filled future for both ourselves and others.



Prayer

God of our future,
guide us as we seek peace in the face of seemingly endless conflict.
Give us wisdom and gentleness.
Help us to turn away wrath with love.
Give us the courage to imagine a future where peace reigns
and then to work for it.

Amen.

Too long have I lived
among those who hate peace.
I am for peace;
but when I speak, they are for war.

—Psalm 120:6-7 (NIV)

This passage doesn't make it onto most people's lists of favorite Bible verses. The psalmist is weary of war, much like the millions of refugees and internally displaced families from Syria. Those who make war may promise peace, but somehow they never seem to deliver.

As troubling as passages like this may be, we need to hear the psalmist's cry.

It's the cry of everyone who has been displaced by war.

Most of us have only seen war from a distance; we have not lived through its brutal reality or consequences.

May the cries of people in the war-torn margins compel us to listen . . . and to work for peace.



Prayer

God of peace,
You do not hide your face from the hardest places in our world,
where conflict reigns and violence is a part of life.
When others stir up conflict,
make us a voice for peace.
Cause us to remember and care for any
who have been displaced by war,
and help us all to work for a better, more peaceful future.
Amen.

Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on
his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the greatness of his government
and peace there will be no end . . .

—Isaiah 9:5-7 (NIV)

Jesus came to bring peace in every sense of the word: peace between us and God, as well as peace between us and our neighbors.

The instruments of war—every war—are destined for the fire.

While this vision will not be fully realized until Christ's second advent, it began with His first. During His earthly ministry, Jesus called peacemakers "God's children." He taught His followers to subvert the violence of the world with compassion (Matthew 5:9, 38-48).

When Christ returns, He will bring peace to the war-torn margins. All conflict will cease. The question is: will He find His followers already working for peace, or standing in the way?



Prayer

Mighty God,
use Your power to bring peace to our world.
Help us to be the peacemakers Your Son calls us to be—
in our families,
in our communities,
and in the margins of our world.
Of the greatness of Your reign and Your peace,
let there be no end.
Amen.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

—Luke 2:13-14 (NIV)

The popular Christmas refrain “peace on earth, goodwill toward men” is more accurately rendered “peace to those on whom His favor rests.” Which begs the question:

Where does God's favor rest?

Luke's narrative offers a few clues. An impoverished teenage girl was God's chosen vessel to bring the Prince of Peace into the world. The unremarkable town of Bethlehem was His chosen setting for the Messiah's advent (see Micah 5:2). The heavenly proclamation was made not to the religious elite or the nobles of Jerusalem but to shepherds (Luke 2:8-9).

It is clear that God's favor rests on the poor and oppressed, on the broken and the lonely. Peace is their inheritance—the all-encompassing *shalom* of God that brings safety, health, and fullness of life.



Prayer

Incarnate God,
who came to dwell among us,
let Your peace reign in the margins
and in every corner of our lives.
As we celebrate the gift of Your Son,
help us to dedicate ourselves anew
to making Your fullness of life possible
for every child in need.

Amen.

Give joy by sharing big dreams.

Over these four weeks of Advent, we've looked for God's presence in the margins. We've found hope among the poor and oppressed. We've been challenged to let our faith take us to the least, the last, and the lost. We've dared to dream of a world where joy and peace thrive among people living in the hardest places on earth.

These are big dreams. But we can share them—and we can help bring them to pass.

The birth of Christ, which we celebrate at the culmination of Advent, inaugurated a brand-new reality—one that offers good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. There are many ways you can spread that good news this Christmas, and one of them is by offering tangible support for refugee children and families. Your gift can share God's love and show these families they are not forgotten.

Learn more at worldvision.org/helprefugees





World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision serves all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.