



ADVENT
for the
Rest of Us

A Simple Advent
Reflection Guide

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A Resource of Aspen Soul Care

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Preparation: Making Room for Advent

It's the most wonderful time of the year! And I'm not talking about Christmas, I'm talking about Advent. Somehow, the anticipation seems even more thrilling than the actual day of Christmas for me. Maybe I'm just weird like that? Or maybe it has something to do with the traditions I've been building into my life around Advent that I've come to cherish.

Because the hustle that accompanies Christmas can feel so overwhelming, I find that it's even more important to have spaces of quiet and reflection that help me enjoy and savor the season that this is. Because the practices of Advent have transformed my experience of the weeks leading up to Christmas in such a dramatic way, I wanted to share the things I do that help me open wide my heart and prepare Him room so that you might rekindle the joy of the season as well.

Every year I choose to engage Advent in three main ways:

1. I choose an Advent devotional.
2. I make a simple Advent wreath -- no crafty genes necessary, I promise!
3. And I create a homemade Advent countdown calendar for the kids -- again, no crafty genes required!

But before I dive into these, I have a big secret to share with you. It's the key upon which all the Advent activities and rituals rest and find room:

I do all my Christmas shopping before Thanksgiving!

Well, at least, that's what I aim for. It doesn't always happen completely, but I'm usually easily around 90% done by Black Friday. I also make sure I order my Christmas cards during the week of Thanksgiving.

Now I realize I might be losing some of the Thanksgiving purists. Before you slam the laptop shut or drag this PDF to the trash, consider the benefits of this method. It isn't at all my intention to desecrate or minimize Thanksgiving, but to engage the season of Advent more deeply and with more peace. I still practice gratitude and celebrate with my family the blessings we've been given. We do not just skip over this holiday.

But the benefits of doing all the shopping before Thanksgiving is that it eliminates one of the biggest headaches and pressures of the season. Think about it. The three weeks between Halloween and Thanksgiving are ripe for this. There's not a lot going on, the weather is changing so there's not as much to do. Why not get a step ahead during these weeks so you can enjoy the holidays when they arrive? Shopping before

Thanksgiving eliminates the pressure and rush and when Advent begins, that looming task is already (or mostly) checked off your list! Now, there is margin, time, and energy available to make room for the things that matter most. If you try this, I promise you, you will engage and enjoy the Advent season in a whole new way!

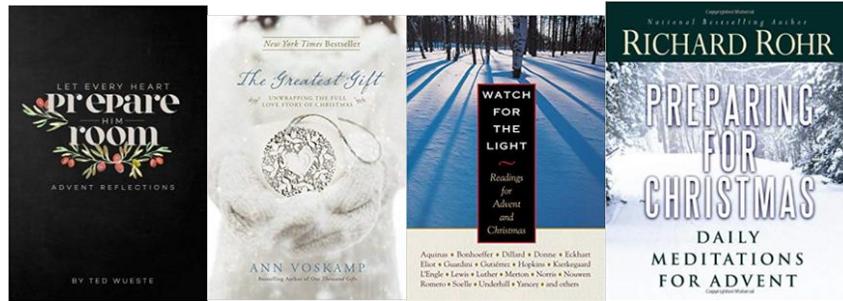
Okay, now that my dirty little secret is out of the way, we can get down to it. In the pages that follow you'll find simple, step by step instructions for:

1. Choosing an Advent devotional.
2. Making a simple Advent wreath -- no crafty genes necessary, I promise!
3. And creating a homemade Advent countdown calendar for the kids -- again, no crafty genes required!

And finally, I've also included four reflections on the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. Each word corresponds with a week in Advent and are assigned to the candles in the order I've listed. On the first Sunday of Advent (or the fourth Sunday before Christmas), you'll light the hope candle. On the second Sunday, the peace candle, and so on. If a daily devotional feels like a little too much for you at this point, then consider these reflections as a bite-sized initiation into the world of Advent.

These weekly devotionals will still enable you to celebrate the main themes of the season around the Advent wreath without requiring you to do acrobatics with your normal pre-Christmas routine. If Advent is something new to you, rather than trying all the things and getting overwhelmed and discouraged when it just all feels like too much, this would be the perfect way to dip your toes in. Perhaps next year, when you get more of your Christmas shopping done early (wink!), you can add a little more.

Choosing an Advent Devotional



These are a list of Advent devotionals I have used in the past or will be trying out this year. My one caveat is that you realistically assess what you can do. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Remember that a slow, reflective reading can have far greater benefits than a flash through the whole thing.

Choose a devotional that will fit in well with your season of life. When my kids were very little, trying to get through a long or meaty devotional everyday was more a practice in patience than an avenue for connecting with my heart and Jesus.

This is why I have also attached weekly reflections at the end of this guide. It may be that a weekly devotional is all that is realistically possible at this time in your life and that is just fine. God knows your circumstances and where you are at and none of this is meant to be burdensome, but an invitation. Choose accordingly.

- [Readings from the Book of Common Prayer](#) -- This is not a devotional, but a reading plan. Readings are chosen from the OT, NT, Psalms, and the Gospels. You may choose to do the daily or the weekly readings, or as many as you can get to. Remember, slow, thoughtful reading is preferred over quantity.
- [The Greatest Gift by Ann Voskamp](#) -- Ann's reflections follow the family tree of Jesus, focusing on the characters and events that foreshadowed the coming of Christ. These are short, powerful reflections with some suggested questions and exercises. I used this for myself when my kids were little and it was perfect!
- [Watch for the Light by various authors, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Annie Dillard, Henri Nouwen](#) -- To be honest, this one was a bit over my head when I bought it several years ago. The author selection is fantastic though, so if you're up for some challenging reading, give this a go.

- [Preparing for Christmas by Richard Rohr](#) -- My husband just ordered this one. He's been receiving the daily meditations from Rohr for the past several weeks and has been really inspired.
- [Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room by Ted Wueste](#) -- Ted is one of the faculty of my spiritual direction program and gifted our cohort with his book. It follows the themes of hope, peace, joy, and love of the Advent season. I'm looking forward to digging into this one.

Making an Advent Wreath



This does not have to be Martha Stewart worthy to work, or even be pretty. Also, you can shop for a pre-assembled Advent wreath which will work just fine too.

To make your wreath:

1. Find a large base to hold the candles and clippings. Every year, I use a gold square platter I picked up at Target.
2. Gather foliage. I gather evergreen branches from around my neighborhood. If these are not as accessible for you, here's a tip: Go to Home Depot or Lowe's, around where they sell Christmas trees, and ask them for any extra clippings they have lying around. I've heard they will give them to you for free! You're welcome!
3. Buy four purple or blue candles and one white candle. I usually opt for pillar candles in deep red or purple. The colors for the Advent season are royal blue or purple, but because I love using the color red whenever I can around the Christmas season, I opt for a deep red. That almost counts as purple. You can also buy the long skinny candle sticks if you have candle holders, but these don't last as long. If you're planning to use them every day, buy extras.
4. Arrange the four purple/red candles on the perimeter of your base. Put the white candle in the middle. Arrange the foliage in between and around your base. Ta-da! You have made your Advent wreath.
5. Use your Advent wreath during your readings. Light only one purple candle for the entire first week. Add the second, the third, and the fourth on each successive week. On Christmas, light all four purple plus the white Christ candle.

Making a Countdown Advent Calendar



Once again, only minimal craftiness is required. If you know how to use scissors, you're good to go. I use this as an activity calendar also, but over time, I have learned to only plan activities that will be easy for me to do, or already on the calendar.

1. Get some twine or string, thicker than yarn and some tacks. Stretch the twine taut across a wall, giving yourself 2-3 feet, and tack into the wall.
2. Find some pretty stationary paper, Michael's is where I find mine, and cut up into 25 small squares.
3. With a pretty marker or Sharpie write the number for each day on one side of the square. On the other side, that you'll put to the wall, write easy, manageable activities that will be fun and festive for you. You can add in activities and plans you already have on the calendar. An alternative is to add Christmas Scriptures you can read with the kids on that day.
4. Use clips to attach the paper squares to the string. Michael's has some really cute holiday mini clothespins that we use.
5. Pick a consistent time of day to let your kids unclip the corresponding date. Be sure to choose a time that will allow the activities to be done. Breakfast has been a good time for us.

I hope I've inspired you with some simple ideas to infuse the season of Advent with a little more meaning and purpose. If you are just starting out, perhaps start with one piece of this and slowly add in more traditions over time. The very last thing I want to do is add another item on your to do list. What I do hope for you is that you are drawn ever closer to the grace and love of Jesus this season.

Grace and love,
Kate



Advent Reflections

One for each Sunday

Advent Week 1: Hope

Hope. The word has found itself a bit overused, its meaning and significance minimized.

"I hope we can go on vacation this year."

"I hope the baby takes a good nap."

"I hope I get that thing I really want for Christmas."

These surface level hopes are real to be sure, but often overshadow and drain the meaning from the word. When I come across "hope" in the Scriptures I often casually glance over it, missing the depths of my heart it wants to touch.

On the other hand, when churches cordon off hope to primarily refer to the hope of "being with Jesus in heaven someday," it doesn't often touch my heart or land with any sense of reality in my life. While I agree that it is good to hope for the day we will be with Christ, a day when all things will be made new. If Christ doesn't actually seem beautiful or attractive to me, if I haven't tasted his goodness in this life, that hope doesn't really touch my soul either.

When I pause to think about the meaning of the word hope in my life with God, I find myself awakened to much deeper hopes in my soul that I walk around mostly unaware of. To hope with God awakens longings in me that feel a little bit scary to touch, let alone acknowledge. It feels almost selfish, like tinkering with Pandora's box and yet, God calls us to hope for these very things.

Because when I think about it, what I really hope for and long for, is to live in a place of beauty and freedom. I hope to not feel so unworthy anymore. I hope to feel more loved, adored, cherished, secure. I hope to enjoy my life and live fully in it. I hope for peace within my soul, and out in the world among my family, in the politics of our country, and in the world.

When I awaken the deepest hopes of my soul, something in me wants to quickly slam the door shut before all hell breaks loose. It's easier to keep my hopes tucked away in the back room of my soul than let them see the light of day and tear me to pieces in the process. Living numb then, doesn't seem so bad. At least I can live a life in which I'm getting by okay. Hope provokes, hope disturbs, hope arouses desire, hope reminds us of all the lack we see and feel inside and out.

And still Jesus knocks. He wants to open the door to our hope. He says, "Don't be afraid. I want to fulfill your hopes!" Not just for the theological truths that you confess, but for the very deepest longings in your soul. I want to bring you that abundant life that you hope for but dismiss as selfish and foolish. I want to stir up your hopes, longings, and dreams so that you can see that I truly am here to bring them to fulfillment. I want you to entrust them to me. In fact, I put them there in the first place!

The hope for Jesus' return isn't disconnected from the hopes that live deep inside the soul. They are inextricably linked. But when we water down the hope of the gospel to theological jargon we completely miss the point.

This Advent lets dare to live in the tension of the already-not yet paradox of the kingdom of God. That while our longings still linger and sigh, not yet fully realized, indeed we have hope, because somehow they have already been realized in Jesus Christ, who brings not only hope in the afterlife, but for our right-now lives as well. While it is true that some hopes will not, cannot be filled in this life, there is still so much healing Christ wants to bring to you right now. Let's hold the hope for Christ's someday return in one hand, and allow ourselves to also hope for a fresh birthing of Christ in our hearts, lives, and world.

What are you hoping for this Christmas? Get beneath the surface to the deeper hopes of your soul. What is it that you want? Write it out as a prayer. Dare to trust Jesus with it.

Scripture Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

Prayer

We seek the mighty God
in the most unlikely places
as a child in a stable,
and in an empty tomb.
May God hear these prayers,
which come from the unlikely corners of our lives.
Give us ears to hear, O God,
and eyes to watch,
that we may know your presence in our midst
during this holy season of joy
as we anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent Week 2: Finding Peace in Unexpected Places

When I begin to allow my heart to hope with Jesus in this season, an ache for peace bubbles to the surface. It's tragically ironic that Jesus Christ came to bring peace and yet the month leading up to the celebration of his birth is a time when peace seems hardest to come by.

As I sit down to write this reflection about peace, I'm keenly aware that I've been in a pretty severe struggle with anxiety these past few weeks. Peace feels slippery and elusive to me. I hardly feel qualified to write about peace when I'm experiencing very little of it.

Almost every day for the past two weeks I've experienced some form of this vicious cycle: make plans → plans go awry → heart pounds → mind races → scramble to fix and control. Rinse and repeat.

It's easy to blame the season with all the traditions, pressures, and expectations. But deep down I know this lack of peace isn't anything new in my life. I've run on this hamster wheel too many times. Perhaps the season only illuminates the true state of my soul. There is no peace without because there is no peace within.

I don't know when I decided to add a hamster wheel to the furnishings of my soul. It's been there for as long as I can remember. It must have promised some use to me. I run on it all the time, sometimes with very little awareness. Sometimes, despite how tired I feel, I keep running, willing the fatigue away, deluding myself into thinking that once I reach my destination, then I'll be able to rest. There are days, I desperately do want to stop, but feel like I don't know how.

In the last few years, I've become aware of how much life this hamster wheel drains from me. I hear God's invitation to trust, to rest, to be still. But I hold back, afraid to let go. Why is it that the things we most need, are the very things we most resist?

I shared all this with my spiritual director awhile back when I was especially feeling the pull of the hamster wheel. What he said to me took me by surprise. He said,

“Instead of trying to will yourself off the hamster wheel, simply become aware that God is with you, even as you run. He is still smiling at you and he’ll be there with arms wide open when you’re ready to get off.”

The peace of God doesn’t wait for me to get my act together. The peace of God is not something I even have to feel. The peace of God just is. It is always available.

As I’ve practiced simply noticing the presence of God as I run, I’ve been struck by the fact that my spiritual director was absolutely right. God is always there, with a look of compassion in his eyes, unbothered by my obstinacy. He’s not in a hurry. He waits for me, happy to give me his peace when I am ready.

This noticing, it’s a practice. A practice that has sown trust in my soul. I’m learning to believe his love isn’t dependent on my behavior, neither how much I try, or how much I fail. Once or twice I’ve even found myself letting go, falling off the hamster wheel, trusting him to catch me. I’m learning that the more I experience his peace, the more I will learn to enter it.

What we need to remember is this: that receiving his peace is not something we strive to do, rather it is more of a letting go, a falling back, a surrender to trust. As we simply become aware of God’s love for us, even as we scramble and control and fix, even then we can let love carry us into the Father’s arms of peace.

Where are you experiencing a lack of peace in your life? Instead of trying to fix it, become aware of Jesus' presence with you there. What do you notice about him?

Scripture Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Prayer

God of hope,
you call us from the exile of our sin
with the good news of restoration;
you build a highway through the wilderness;
you come to us and bring us home.
Comfort us with the expectation of your saving power,
made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Advent Week 3: The Winding Road to Joy

When we grapple with the reality of what hope, peace, and joy truly promise, it can be terrifying to open our hearts to them and let them speak to us. It's easier to keep them on a theological or sentimental plane, where our hearts are kept safe from their terrorizing promises. These words rip open our hearts and make us stand bare before Christ in all our vulnerability.

To be honest, joy is the most frightening word for me to touch. My experience with the Christian life has led me to believe that any feelings of joy or happiness were probably an indicator of sin in my life. If I feel happy, then I'm probably not following God. Perhaps what is bringing me happiness is an idol and I had better Shut. It. Down. I have equated following Jesus with piety, seriousness, and sacrifice. Thus, I have shoved down any hope of joy for this life, and my heart with it, diligently seeking the "good" Christian way of contrition, brokenness, and guilt: Remember your sin. Don't dabble in joy, it will only lead you to more sin.

To awaken joy feels dangerous. Joy is messy. It unleashes desires beyond our control, revealing our sin sick hearts. And yet, I'm coming to realize that following the desire for joy may be the only true path to Christ. We come naked, exposed, and vulnerable, and surprisingly he exchanges our sin for his joy. But his path to joy isn't an easy road. In fact, sometimes it breaks our hearts beyond what we thought we could ever bear.

There was a time when I thought that motherhood would make me happy. I couldn't wait to become a mom. I happily savored each day of my first pregnancy, devouring any information I could get my hands on that illuminated the miracle occurring inside me. I thought becoming a mom would finally bring me the joy and fulfillment I was seeking.

To my horror, I discovered how utterly wrong I was, only a few weeks into new motherhood. Motherhood broke me. The postpartum depression that accompanied it devastated me for the next five years. There were days where all I wanted was to return to the pre-kid days of my life. Other days I wished my life would just end. I thought babies brought joy, I mostly felt despair. It's not that I didn't love my son, but I did blame him for opening up a gaping wound inside my heart that I couldn't seem to fix. I felt intolerable guilt for this too. My dreams for motherhood were shattered and I could not

turn back the clock. I felt stuck in a life I didn't want. Don't get me wrong, there were days that were better than others, and when I finally received some medication, much of my suffering was alleviated. I managed to go on, but I still didn't feel much joy.

But God (don't you love those two words?), when I least expected it, began to dawn joy in my life. There was no miraculous change to my personality to suddenly love being a mom. But he began to reveal himself in new and surprising ways. First, His presence came to me in my despair, assuring me that He was with me, despite how bad I felt, despite how ugly I acted. At first this wasn't very comforting. I wanted to feel better. Yesterday. But his gentle faithfulness pried my tightly grasped fingers away from my life. He began to reveal Himself in new ways to me, showing me his trustworthy love and care so that I could surrender to Him, and find true and lasting joy as He restored me and brought me joy in his way, in his time.

The thing is, in this broken world, there can be no real joy before there is mourning. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) These aren't very comforting words, yet this is the way in the kingdom.

In Jesus's last words to his disciples before his death, he promised them joy, but warned them that first they would mourn.

"Then fix this firmly in your minds: You're going to be in deep mourning while the godless world throws a party. You'll be sad, very sad, but your sadness will develop into gladness. When a woman gives birth, she has a hard time, there's no getting around it. But when the baby is born, there is joy in the birth. This new life in the world wipes out memory of the pain. The sadness you have right now is similar to that pain, but the coming joy is also similar. When I see you again, you'll be full of joy, and it will be a joy no one can rob from you."

– John 16:20 – 23 (MSG)

But if so much pain is necessary to get to joy, why bother at all? It sounds much easier to stay numb and keep our expectations low. Larry Crabb, in his book *Shattered Dreams*, says,

“We Christians are often practicing Buddhists. We kill desire in an effort to escape pain, then wonder why we don’t enjoy God.”

Many Christians have mistakenly thought that the pain of shattered dreams must mean that our desires were bad to begin with and so must be abandoned. They did not have the courage to journey to the other side where God pours out his joy on us. And so we are left with a diluted version of happiness that never seems to last, and a deflated religion where joy has been relegated to the next life.

This has led to an imbalanced view of God circulating in churches today. It tells us we aren’t working hard enough, we aren’t praying enough, giving enough, serving enough and we better feel guilty about it so we can get to work. There is no joy in this view of God, only disappointment and maybe even some simmering anger. The Christian life is about toil, struggle, taking God seriously. There is no room for childish play, for joy, for laughter. Jesus invites us to a wedding, and we are dressed for a funeral.

This Advent, let’s recover our long-buried desire for joy. Let’s seek it. Even as we chase lesser joys, even as our dreams shatter, let’s trust that God will do his work, “that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete.” (John 15:11) That God will bring about true and lasting joy in our lives in his time, in his way.

Scripture Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Prayer

Merciful God of peace,
your work, spoken by the prophets,
restores your people's life and hope.
Fill our hearts with the joy of your saving grace,
that we may hold fast to your great goodness
and in our lives proclaim your justice in all the world. Amen.

Advent Week 4: Worthy of Love & Belonging

The season of Advent invites us to practice waiting. While on the surface we wait for gifts, or the return to a normal routine, I hope you see by now that Advent invites us to actively wait for hope, peace, joy, love, and ultimately, Christ himself.

"Let every heart prepare him room..."

Advent invites us to open the chasm of our hearts wide to make room for him. The stretching and widening is painful, yes, but in faith, we trust He will come. He will fill us. He will be born in us.

The ache of waiting for love can be the most unbearable. The desire for love pokes our deepest wounds. We may not recognize a desire for love within ourselves at first. Sometimes it is disguised as a desire for success, for money, for happiness, for acceptance, for more. But if we dig down below these seemingly pressing desires, we will find there a desire for love.

When we face the pain where love has overlooked us, the shame can be overwhelming. Fill it in, close it up, we do whatever we need to do to not face that pain. But Advent invites us to trust, to suffer, to wait, to ache.

From the beginning of Christ's life on earth, at the very nativity, the love of Christ was proclaimed to be for all people. Not just for Israel, or the highly religious, or the Christians, but for all people. And he demonstrated the universality of his love by being born in a stable, revealed first to the lowly shepherds, reaching out to the most unlovable among us.

To prepare Him room means that I must first recognize the lowly state of my soul. If I think of it as anything better than it is, if I try to justify it, spray perfume on it, fix it up, or fill it up, there will be no room for the Christ child to be born in me. But when I open the raw places of my soul, those poor, damp, dark, even smelly places, then the Christ will come. He won't clean me up right away, but he will pour out the glory of his love on all that is decrepit in me. Yes, even my filth stained rags shall receive his love. Only then can I be transformed.

In his book, *Surrender to Love*, David Benner says this about the love of God:

"The key to spiritual transformation is meeting God... in vulnerability. Our natural inclination is to bring the most presentable parts of our self to the encounter with God. But God wants us to bring our whole self to the divine encounter. He wants us to trust him enough to meet Perfect Love in the vulnerability of our shame, weakness, and sin."

Brene Brown has devoted much of her social work career to researching the dynamics of shame and vulnerability. Her TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, has become one of the most important talks of my life and I return to it at least once a year. I cry every time I watch. It is so powerful. If you don't have time to watch the whole thing, at the very least, just watch one minute: 6:30 - 7:30. Then come back and read the rest of the devotional.

Brene Brown: The Power of Vulnerability



The most important take away is this:

*“The people who have a strong sense of love and belonging **believe they are worthy** of love and belonging. That’s it.”*

Christ has given us the basis with which we can believe that we are worthy of love and belonging. He has proved it by his love. But in order to believe it so that it rings true down in our bones, we need to experience it. And we can only experience it by letting Christ into our dirty, broken down places.

Which is why the invitation of Advent to wait in the mess of our longings is so important for us to engage. The church will not be the church until we get this one critical point of the gospel: We love God **because** He first loved us. We cannot love well, without first receiving the love of God for us. If we only let the love of God in on an intellectual level, then we will only love well on an intellectual level. If we only let the love of God in for our surface sins, we will only love well on the surface. But if we dare to dive down deep into the miry dark of our sin sick hearts, then a love for others will spring so deep from us that it will penetrate into the darkness of others and we will be able to love then, like Jesus.

Christmas is almost here. Today, let’s prepare Him room. Spend some time opening the dark caverns of your soul to Him. While pain may last for a night, I promise you the joy will come in the morning. Merry Christmas, everyone!

Scripture Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:46b-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Prayer

Ever faithful God,
through prophets and angels,
you promised to raise up a holy child
who would establish a household of peace and justice.
Open our hearts to receive your Son,
that we may open our doors
to welcome all people as sisters and brothers,
and establish your household in our time. Amen.

Thank you for walking with me this Advent season. This concludes the Advent series. I wish for you and yours a very Merry Christmas.

"My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God."

Ephesians 3:14-19 (MSG)